

Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

INTRODUCTION

In the sixteenth century in China, Mr. Liao-Fan Yuan wrote Liao-Fan's Four Lessons with the hope that it would teach his son, Tian-Qi Yuan, how to understand true face of destiny, tell good from bad, correct his faults and practice good deeds. It also provided living proof of the benefits from practicing good deeds and cultivating virtue and humility. In relating his own experience in changing destiny, Mr. Liao-Fan Yuan was an embodiment of his teachings.

The title of this book is Liao-Fan's Four Lessons. "Liao" means understanding and awakening. "Fan" means that if one is not a sage such as a Buddha, Bodhisattva or Arhat, then one is an ordinary person. So, "Liao-Fan" means to understand that it is not enough to be an ordinary person, we should be outstanding. When unvirtuous thoughts arise, we need to gradually eliminate them.

There are four lessons or chapters in this book. The first lesson shows how to create destiny. The second lesson explains the ways to reform. The third reveals the ways to cultivate goodness. And the fourth discloses the benefits of the virtue of humility.

This first lesson of learning to create destiny is a topic of interest to many people who believe that wealth or poverty, long life or short life, all is predestined. If someone had accomplished good deeds in his or her past lives, then naturally in this life he or she would live a wealthy and long life. On the other hand, if someone had been a bad person and committed bad deeds in his or her past life, then in this life he or she would live a poor and short life. However, there are exceptions. Destiny can be changed.

If we were originally destined to be rich with a long life, but had committed excessive offenses, then without having to wait until the next life to bear the consequences, we would become poor with a short life. On the other hand, if we were originally destined to be poor with a short life, but had accomplished exemplary deeds, then without having to wait until the next life, we would become wealthy with a long life. From ancient times until now, there have been many examples of this in history. Although everything that we are subjected to in this life is the result from our behavior in our past lives and has already been predestined; it is not necessarily constrained by destiny. We can still modify it with our current behavior.

Although Liao-Fan's Four Lessons is not a Buddhist sutra, we need to respect and praise it as one. In the early part of this century, Great Master Yin-Guang, the Thirteenth Patriarch of the Pure Land School dedicated his whole life to its promotion and oversaw the printing of millions of copies of it. Not only did he unceasingly advocate this book but he also studied it, practiced what it taught and lectured on it.

As Buddhists, we are taught to refrain from all that is bad and to do all that is good, to purify our minds. This is the Dharma Seal, the criteria we can use to determine the genuineness of Buddhist teachings or truths. Buddhist sutras, which speak of principles and reasoning, are spoken by five types of people: Buddhas, in this case Buddha Shakyamuni, his students, heavenly beings, immortals and manifested beings.

As long as what has been said has the same meaning and objectives as those of the Teachings of

the Buddhas and does not contradict them, the Buddhas with their great broad-mindedness would recognize them as sutras. Thus, we should regard and respect as a sutra, any work that conforms to the principles in Buddhism. And this is especially so for this book, which was certified and advocated by Great Master Yin-Guang. It can help to serve as our foundation in learning Buddhism. But even more important, it can also serve as a foundation for non-Buddhists in helping them to learn how to change their destiny.

There is much to learn about creating destiny, including principles and methods, all of which are contained within this book. Small in size, its impact can be far-reaching. Therefore, if we would like to create our destiny or to truly achieve attainment through the practice of Buddhism, we need to accord with the principles and methods contained within it.

THE FIRST LESSON: LEARNING TO CREATE DESTINY

In this lesson, Mr. Liao-Fan related to his son his own experiences and those of others in changing destiny. He wanted his son to put his best efforts into practicing goodness and ending his incorrect behavior. He also wanted his son to form his destiny and not be bound by it. For in forming destiny, we are not controlled by it; rather we control destiny. Therefore, the lesson of Learning to Create Destiny discusses the principles behind fate and the knowledge necessary to change it. For example, as Pure Land practitioners, if we are able to follow this method, we are assured of attaining a happy and fulfilling life 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. Studying medicine would enable one to have a skill that would provide a good living in addition to helping others.

It was very important to choose the right career. At that time, teachers did not charge a set 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 not important. And the same applied to doctors. Their goal was to save lives, to do their very best to make others well. The payment for this was left up to the patient. Both teachers and doctors were

dedicated to helping others. Consequently, in ancient China teachers and doctors were highly respected.

One day, I met an elderly but distinguished looking gentleman at the Compassionate Cloud Temple. He had a long beard and such a look of a sage that 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 tells of Mr. Liao-Fan's opportunity to learn how to change his destiny. It described his meeting with an elderly gentleman at the Compassionate Cloud Temple. This gentleman had a very handsome countenance, was tall and had an elegant celestial air. He simply did not look like an ordinary person. Thus, Mr. Liao-Fan naturally paid his respects to him.

Because the elderly gentleman could foretell the future, he immediately knew that Mr. Liao-Fan should have been studying and needed to do so as soon as possible. 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.

I asked the elderly gentleman his name and where he was from. He replied, "My last name is Kong. I came from Yunnan Province. I have inherited a most sacred text on astrology by Shao-Zi. It is called The Imperial Standard of Governing the World. Shao-Zi developed the art of prediction very well. By calculations I am supposed to pass it on to you and teach you how to use it."

Shao-Zi was a scholar from the Song Dynasty (approximately one thousand years ago). He was a well-known, highly respected intellectual of his time. The sacred text on astrology is a lengthy book that has been compiled with others into the Complete Library in Four Divisions. (This mammoth collection of fifteen hundred volumes covers four areas: classics and sutras, history, governmental management and literature).

The content of Shao-Zi's book is completely in accordance with the principles in I Ching, the Book of Changes and predicts the future through mathematical calculations. The predictions in the book covered extensive subjects and areas, including changes in countries and the world. The prosperity and decline of a dynasty, the good fortune and misfortune of an individual could all be completely extrapolated from mathematical calculations. This is a book of profound knowledge based on a precise science and is therefore both logical and believable.

Everybody, everything has a set destiny. Buddha Shakyamuni taught us that this is due to the Law of Cause and Effect. As long as we give rise to a cause, be it a thought, a word or an act, a result that is a set destiny will follow. Only when the mind is absent of thought can we transcend the predestination of the numbers.

Why are practitioners with high levels of achievement often able to transcend? Because they are

able to achieve deep concentration. And in this deep concentration, their minds do not give rise to any thoughts. Without thoughts, we will not be controlled by the predestination of the numbers. So, we know that as long as we have thoughts, we will be bound by the mathematics. A highly skilled person is able to predict our future in detail through these calculations.

The lives of we ordinary beings are predestined. Arhats or other sages with a higher level of spiritual enlightenment, who have already transcended the Six Realms of Reincarnation, are thus able to transcend their fate. Are the heavenly beings in the Form and Formless Heaven realms who have achieved the four meditation states and eight concentration levels able to transcend their fate? Yes, for in their state of deep concentration, the mathematics cannot effect them. But, this ineffectiveness is only temporary. Once they lose their state of deep concentration and again give rise to thoughts they are again bound by the mathematics. And this is why they have never been able to permanently transcend the Six Realms of Reincarnation.

If the strength of their concentration enabled them to transcend the Six Realms and advance to the ninth concentration level to become a non-regressive Arhat, then they would no longer be bound by the mathematics. Once we understand these principles and know that everything is predestined, we will look at this world with a nondiscriminatory mind. We will neither be pleased with favorable circumstances nor be displeased with unfavorable circumstances because everything is predestined.

Therefore, I invited Mr. Kong to my home and asked my mother about him. My mother asked me to treat him very well. We then tested Mr. Kong's ability at prediction. He was always correct whether it was for big events or for small everyday matters. Therefore, I became convinced of what he had said about my destiny and again began to think of studying for the examinations. I consulted with my cousin Chen Shen. He recommended a teacher Mr. Hai-Gu Yu, who was teaching at the home of a friend, Mr. You-Fu Shen. I thus became his student.

Mr. Liao-Fan invited Mr. Kong to his house and being a filial son told his mother about him. His mother asked him to take good care of Mr. Kong and to test his authenticity. When someone tells us something, we need to check its validity before believing it. Mr. Liao-Fan did so and found Mr. Kong's predictions to be accurate. Thus, he was convinced and naturally took Mr. Kong's advice.

In the past, schools were not common like they are today. Before the Qing Dynasty, the last dynasty in China, instructions took place at a private home school. Usually there was only one teacher instructing twenty to thirty students. There were no high schools, only public universities. Students studied very hard with a private tutor to be able to sit for the examination to attend a government-managed university.

At this time, Mr. Liao-Fan's cousin had a friend named Hai-Gu Yu who was teaching at You-Fu Shen's home. Perhaps, Mr. Shen was a wealthy individual who had several empty rooms in his house to be used as classrooms and who employed teachers to instruct his children as well as those of relatives and friends. So, Mr. Liao-Fan became a pupil of Mr. Yu and began his studies to prepare for the exami-

nation.

Mr. Kong then did some more calculations for me. He told me that as a scholar, I would place fourteenth in the county examination, seventy-first in the regional examination and ninth in the provincial examination. The following year, at the three examination places I placed exactly as Mr. Kong had predicted.

Mr. Kong predicted Mr. Liao-Fan's immediate destiny and told him that he would rise through several stages of examinations to become a scholar. Therefore, whether it was passing or failing an examination or what rank he would attain, everything was predestined. Thus, the results of the examinations in the second year were exactly as predicted. So again, everything was as expected.

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 (equivalent to a high school student), and the year that I would receive a promotion to become an imperial scholar (equivalent to a university student). And lastly, I would be appointed as magistrate in Sichuan Province.

After holding that position for three and a half years, I would retire and return home. I would die at the age of fifty-three, on August 14th around the hours of one to three am. Unfortunately, I would not have a son. I recorded everything that he said and carefully set it aside.

At that time in history, the government provided high school and university students with an allowance. Living expenses were supplemented by rice. Similar to a food ration, excessive rice could be sold. Every region had a set number of positions available. Only when there was a vacancy, could the position be filled.

From Mr. Kong's predictions for Mr. Liao-Fan, we can see that everything is destined. Everyday, every month, when and how we will live, when and how we will die, all is destined. No matter how we might try to scheme or plot, ordinary people cannot escape their destiny.

After that, 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 of rice when the Commissioner of Education, Mr. Tu, recommended me for a promotion. I secretly began to doubt Mr. Kong's predictions. Nevertheless, the prediction turned out to be correct after all, because Mr. Tu's replacement turned down the 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 Mr. Liao-Fan's salary reached seventy dan of rice, Mr. Tu approved his promotion. Mr. Liao-Fan started to doubt the predictions. However, after his approval either by promotion or transfer to another position, there was a substitute in Mr. Tu's place. And this person, not agreeing with Mr. Liao-Fan's promotion overruled it.

It was a few years later that an official, Mr. Yin, went through the papers that had failed the examination. These papers were kept and reread occasionally in the hope of finding overlooked talent. He read Mr. Liao-Fan's papers and was very impressed with them. He felt they were as well written as official reports to the emperor. These reports were similar to recommendations from government officials to the emperor, to be accepted or rejected by the court. It is thus evident that Mr. Liao-Fan was very knowledgeable and that his papers were extremely well written.

The 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 prearranged. I began to view everything in a detached manner and ceased to seek gain or profit.

Imperial students had all of their expenses paid by the government but were expected to work for the government once their schooling was completed. From this incident, we can see that Mr. Tu was not an ordinary person. He had wanted to promote Mr. Liao-Fan the instant he read his examination papers. However, his replacement overruled the promotion, two people with different opinions. Mr. Liao-Fan was obviously very talented. But although we may be very talented, we still need the appropriate conditions. Whether fate, time or cause and condition, everything is destined. Mr. Liao-Fan 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, Mr. Liao-Fan was awakened and truly understood. Our good or bad fortune, good or bad luck, wealth or poverty; everything is predestined. Ordinary people cannot change destiny. If we are not supposed to have something, no amount of trying to get it will succeed for long. But, if we are supposed to have it, we will naturally receive it. Understanding this, Mr. Liao-Fan no longer had any thoughts of demand, any thoughts of gain or loss. His mind was truly at peace.

We can say that at this point, as an ordinary person, he was perfect. Today, people do not even

meet this standard of being ordinary. Why? Our minds are not pure and we constantly have wandering thoughts. On the other hand, Mr. Liao-Fan did not have wandering thoughts since he already knew everything that was going to happen in his life.

Ancient sages said that, "a person of noble character and integrity is happy to be a noble person, but it is not worth the effort for a bad person to be bad". Why? Because a wise and virtuous person knows that "One sip or one bite, everything is destined." It is not worth the effort to be bad risking all in seeking self-satisfaction. Everything he or she has gained through scheming and plotting was something they were already meant to have. Thus, it is not worth the effort to use improper means to obtain it and then to suffer the consequences. Ordinary people are bound by their fate. At this time in his life, Mr. Liao-Fan only knew about destiny. He did not yet know that there was a variable, that destiny could be changed.

By practicing in accordance with true principles and methods, we can change our destinies. We will then be able to attain whatever we wish, as we ourselves become the masters of our own fates. In order to attain wealth we practice the giving of wealth. To attain intelligence and wisdom we practice the giving of teachings. To attain long lives and well-being we practice the giving of fearlessness. These are the correct ways to change our destiny. By following the correct principles and methods, we can attain whatever we want, even perfect complete enlightenment much less small worldly enjoyments 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 silently, without giving rise to a single thought. I lost interest in books and did not study at all.

Mr. Liao-Fan was now practicing meditation everyday in Beijing. From this, we can see how peaceful and quiet his mind had become. When the mind is quiet and at peace, wisdom will naturally arise. The wisdom of most people is non-functional because their minds are not pure. Mr. Liao-Fan was able to remain calm and serene because knowing his entire destiny. He knew that it was useless to even think about it. Without wandering thoughts, his mind naturally became settled.

Master Yun-Gu'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 at Nanjing, I paid a visit to Master Yun-Gu, a venerable Zen Master at Qixia Mountain. We sat in meditation face to face in the Zen hall for three days and three nights without sleep.

Master Yun-Gu said, "The reason why ordinary people cannot become sages is because they have too many wandering thoughts running through their minds. 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 all predestined. There was no use or need for me to think about it or to desire anything. The master smiled and replied, "I thought you were someone of remarkable capabilities! Now I realize you are just an average, ordinary person"!

Master Yun-Gu, was a well-known great Zen Master. Mr. Liao-Fan went to Qixia Mountain to visit him. They sat face to face in the meditation hall for three days. They neither slept nor became tired. Why? Because they did not have any wandering thoughts and thus they were able to conserve all of their energy. Master Yun-Gu thought him to be extremely young to achieve this difficult and rare level of cultivation.

Ordinary people are unable to become Arhats or attain higher levels of achievement because they have too many wandering thoughts. The Flower Adornment Sutra tells us that, "All sentient beings have the same wisdom and virtuous capabilities as the Buddha but because of wandering thoughts and attachments, are unable to uncover them". So, the root cause of not being able to become a sage is wandering thoughts.

Feeling confused by what Master Yun-Gu 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 their life is bound by chi, the energy of yin and yang as well as destiny. We cannot deny the fact that it exists, but only ordinary people are bound by it. Destiny cannot bind those who cultivate great kindness.

Nor can destiny bind those who have committed flagrant bad deeds. He told me that for the past twenty years, I had lived my life just as Mr. Kong had predicted and had done nothing to change it. Instead, I became bound by destiny. If I was not considered an ordinary person, who was.

Taken aback, I asked Master Yun-Gu if it was true that we can change our destiny. The Master answered, "We create our own destiny. We seek our own good fortune. It is the true teaching and says so in the Book of Songs and the Book of History".

Master Yun-Gu explained that if one has not yet attained the state where there is no single wandering thought then one is still bound by destiny, is still at the mercy of fate. Why? If a person were to reach the state of no thought then he or she would transcend the control of fate. Did Mr. Liao-Fan

reach this state of no thought? No! He simply did not wish to think about anything, realizing the futility of doing so. But he still had wandering thoughts. Still thought, "I do not need to think about anything. My whole destiny has been foretold thus I clearly know my whole life". Having yet to reach the state of no thought, we are still bound by our fate.

Profound deep concentration is not achievable by average people in our world. When the Zen Patriarch 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 entirety in which everything is visible without the slightest error. Using mathematics to deduce the future is achievable by ordinary people in this world. To be able to actually see the past, present and future is not. It requires deep concentration to reach the state of being able to see the future. This is only achievable by beings higher than the third stage of sagehood in Theravada Buddhism.

Master Yun-Gu told Mr. Liao-Fan that only ordinary people are bound by destiny. However, destiny cannot control those who have accomplished numerous exemplary deeds. Neither can it control those who have committed excessive flagrant offenses. Mr. Liao-Fan 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 has a set destiny but he or she has changed it. The same applies to those who have committed excessive offenses for they too will have changed their destiny. We can see that Mr. Liao-Fan did not cultivate either extremely good or bad deeds since his life accorded so completely with what had been predicted.

Can fate be changed? Can we escape it? Yes. To "escape" is to transcend. There are variables in the set numbers and the set numbers were what Mr. Kong had predicted. The variables are within our control, but this is either what Mr. Kong did not know or could not calculate. We can create our destiny. We can seek our own good fortune.

There are variables within the set numbers and this is what Mr. Liao-Fan did not know about. Did Zen Master Yun-Gu agree there were set numbers? Yes. "Before a person achieves the state of no thought, he or she is bound by destiny". Master Yun-Gu completely accepted the concept of predestination. However, we can change our own destiny and thus we create it. Buddhism is not about predestination. It is about recreating destiny. But, we can only depend on ourselves to do this, to become awakened. Nobody else can change our destiny for us.

"Destiny is created by ourselves," and "We seek our own good fortune". Since Mr. Liao-Fan was an intellectual, he knew much about the teachings of Confucius and so the master cited principles from the [Book of Songs](#) and the [Book of History](#) to enlighten him. Master Yun-Gu understood these teachings and confirmed them to be important and true.

In the Buddhist teachings, it is written that if we wish for and seek wealth, position, a son, a daughter, long life, we can attain them. Since lying is one of the greatest offenses in the Buddha's teachings, we can be assured that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have no reason to deceive us.

In Buddhism, it said that, "In seeking wealth, one will attain wealth. In seeking children, one will attain children". Even if we were not meant to have any children in this life, upon practicing good deeds we can have a child. "In seeking long life, one will attain long life". Mr. Liao-Fan was only meant to have a short life, was supposed to die at fifty-three. By cultivating according to the teachings whatever we seek, we will attain. Buddhism encourages us to create our own destinies rather than be constrained by them.

Living Buddha Master Zhang Jia said that, "In Buddhism, all our sincere pleas shall be answered". He elaborated further. Some people are unable to get what they want. Why? They did not accord with the teachings. If we understand the principles and methods, and have sought something in accordance with the teachings, then we are assured of receiving a response to our request. 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 karmic obstacles, we will be able to gain the desired results. As Master Zhang Jia said, there is nothing we cannot receive once we seek it properly.

Once we understand the fundamental principles, we will understand that "everything in this world and beyond arises from our minds and changes due 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 Flower Adornment Sutra tells us that, "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 our mind, is changed by our perception, our consciousness.

A most suitable and perfect method is the teachings of the Buddha. If we were to seek youth, health, eternal life in accordance with these teachings, can we attain them? Certainly! Master Yun-Gu only taught Mr. Liao-Fan some of the knowledge. Because Mr. Liao-Fan was not very ambitious and only sought worldly fame, wealth and prestige, the master only taught him this limited part.

The master told him that lying is one of the worst offenses in Buddhism. There are four fundamental precepts or rules: no killing, stealing, lying or sexual misconduct. Since, no lying is one of the fundamental precepts, how could the Buddha lie, how could he deceive us? Thus, it is the truth when the master told him that whether seeking children, wealth or long life, all could be obtained. As Mr. Liao-Fan had strictly practiced by following the master's guidance, he obtained what he sought.

I then said I had heard that Mencius once said "Whatever is sought can be attained. The seeking is in ourselves". This refers to inner qualities such as virtue, responsibility and kindness. These are all qualities 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 correct, but that I had misinterpreted his meaning.

Enhancing our inner qualities to become sages and virtuous people is within our control. But how do we seek fame, wealth and prestige? These are external commodities and are also attainable. What-

ever we do not have, such as fame or wealth, we can attain by seeking. So it would seem to be destined. Because if we are not destined to have something how could we seek it? This follows most people's 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. We do not yet know that there are variables within the constants, that the results will change with the addition of variables. Indeed fame, wealth, and prestige are attainable by us.

Master Yun-Gu said that Master Hui-Neng, 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 one wishes for". By seeking inside ourselves, we will not only attain the inner qualities of virtue, responsibility and kindness, but we can also attain wealth, fame and prestige. To be able to attain both on the inside and on the outside is beneficial to our reward.

Since ancient times in China, The Platform Sutra, the Diamond Sutra and the Surangama Sutra have been acknowledged as eminent literary works. The eloquent Platform Sutra was written by a Chinese Patriarch, thus to the Chinese it is particularly important. We cannot think of it as solely a sutra of the Zen School. It is an overview of Buddhism as a whole and also could be said to be Master Hui-Neng's report of what he had learned through his study and practice.

Whether attaining something outside of ourselves such as material objects or inside ourselves such as virtues, we still need to seek from inside, from the mind, not from the outside. It would be incorrect to seek from the outside. Why? The outside factor is a constant so it does not change. The mind is a variable so it is not constant, it changes.

For twenty years, Mr. Liao-Fan did not have wandering thoughts, thus, his mind could be considered as having been pure. Not knowing of the variables, his mind accorded completely with the constants. Thus, the twenty years of his life were exactly as Mr. Kong had predicted, everything occurred without the slightest deviation. This was because he did not understand the principle of variables.

Master Yun-Gu taught the principle that "the seeking is in ourselves". virtue, morality, kindness and responsibility are on the inside, they are the cultivation of virtuous conduct. Fame, wealth and prestige are on the outside, they are the enjoyments in life. To be able to receive both kinds of benefits is invaluable. As is said in the Flower Adornment Sutra, "Not to be hindered in the matter of existing things or reality principles", is the ultimate and perfect enjoyment, the great perfection of both the inside and the outside. It is when everything is going as we wish. It is when we are satisfied with everything. It is to be liberated. It is to do all that is benevolent, all that is noble as we wish. If we cannot attain such wonderful results then no one would want to practice Buddhism.

Buddhism is neither negative nor passive, it is eminently practical. Nowadays, there is nothing more practical than the practice of Buddhism for it addresses reality, addresses something truly attainable. It is crucial that we understand the importance of Buddhism to derive the benefits from it. The truth is that people have misunderstood Buddhism and thus have missed these benefits. If we are able

to personally experience them then we will know that of all teachings, Buddhism is a most remarkable and beneficial education. It is definitely not outdated and is as appropriate now as it was three thousand years ago. It is fitting for all people whether in the east or in the west.

Master Yun-Gu then told me that if one cannot reflect inside one's own heart but instead blindly seeks fame, fortune and long life from outside sources, although one may pursue them by using intelligence, one can only attain at most what destiny had entitled one to. To do otherwise, one might lose both inner purity and what one was predestined to have. Then this seeking will have been in vain.

This is pertinent for our world today. Can everyone attain what they are seeking? No. If we attain something it is because we were destined to have it. Only when we receive what we were not destined to have, can it be said that we have gained what we sought. It does not count when we receive what we were supposed to have for we would have attained it without having intentionally sought it.

For example, someone tells us that investing in the stock market is very profitable because they made millions of dollars a year in it. This person simply gained what he or she was supposed to gain. Others who are not destined to make money will simply lose it in the stock market. Not everyone profits from it. If every investor profits, then who loses? Likewise, money won from gambling is something the gambler was meant to have. Even the thief was meant to have what was stolen. If it had not been destined, then he would not have been successful in stealing it.

The ancients understood this, thus they said that, "A person of noble character and integrity is happy to be a noble person, but it is not worth the effort for a bad person to be bad". Why? They will not be able to escape destiny, the constant. If we could just really understand the principles then all of us would be content with what we have. In this way, we will enjoy a fulfilling life, society will be stable, the world will be peaceful and there will be no more conflicts, no more wars.

Buddhism teaches us to seek for something not destined in our lives, not within the constant. What we are able to attain from seeking comes from the variable. How do we seek? From inside. This is crucial in our world today. Today, we are unable to seek awakening and to develop great virtue from the inside. Why? We do not yet understand. We seek from the outside. We plan and scheme everyday. But in seeking, we need to follow the right path. For even if we have the method, the plan, the means then what? In attaining, we merely attained what we were supposed to attain. Very simple. If we were not supposed to have it, we would not get it. All that we have attained was destined, was the constant. Mr. Liao-Fan understood there was a constant so he did not worry, he did not use various improper ways to seek. He knew his own destiny. He knew that to give rise to wandering thoughts, or to use whatever means possible was doomed to fail if it was not supposed to be.

"To be at a loss, inside and outside". What is the inside? The impure mind. How would we not give rise to afflictions, when our seeking on the outside is frustrated? For twenty years Mr. Liao-Fan conformed to Mr. Kong's predictions. Consequently, he did not lose the inside, he lost the outside. Because he did not think of anything, did not seek anything from the inside but maintained a state of con-

tentment and purity of mind. Everything on the outside is controlled by fate. Everything on the inside is controlled by us.

Average people who fought tooth and nail to seek things from the outside would find that their knowledge and experience were incomparable to those of Mr. Liao-Fan. He had achieved perfect peace of mind. Ordinary people end up with afflicted and unsettled minds. Whatever they attained was something they were destined to have, thus they lost both inside and outside. For if one does not gain, one loses, thus ending up worse off than before. And then there is no benefit at all.

The Ways of Changing Destiny

A. To Acknowledge our Faults

Master Yun-Gu then asked what were Mr. Kong's predictions regarding my entire life. I honestly told him the whole story. He then asked if I felt that I deserved imperial appointments or a son. I reflected upon my previous deeds and attitudes in the past for a long time. Then I answered him that no, I did not feel that I deserved an imperial appointment or a son. Those who received imperial appointments all had the appearance of good fortune and I did not. I did not work towards accumulating virtues to build up my good fortune, either. I was very impatient and narrow-minded. Sometimes, I would show off my intelligence and talent in putting down others. I also behaved arbitrarily and spoke without any sense of restraint. These were all signs of scant good fortune and virtue. How could I possibly receive an imperial appointment?

Master Yun-Gu did not directly answer the question, rather he asked Mr. Liao-Fan a question to teach him to reflect within to find the root cause of his faults and suffering, to determine whether he deserved an imperial appointment or not. Whether he deserved to have a son. The discussion between Master Yun-Gu and Mr. Liao-Fan did not only include these two questions, but to Mr. Liao-Fan these two were the most important and the ones he was most concerned about. Thus, there was no need to mention the rest. Mr. Liao-Fan thought for a long time about what Master Yun-Gu had asked. He then honestly answered that no, he deserved neither an imperial appointment nor a son.

On his honesty, Mr. Xi-Yin Yu in his commentary on [Liao-Fan'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 be protective and guide us on the right path. On the other hand, if we were dishonest and arrogant, they will smile but they will not seriously teach us.

Mr. Liao-Fan deeply regretted his faults and this became the key to changing his destiny. He told Master Yun-Gu that he did not deserve an imperial appointment because he did not have the appear-

ance of good fortune. It is necessary for government officials to have good fortune or else the citizens will suffer. When they do have good fortune, people will benefit. Upon examination of ancient social systems, we see that educated and logical people did not have disputes. Also, some emperors were very wise and enlightened.

For example, Tai Zong of the Tang Dynasty (over one thousand years ago) was extremely learned and broad-minded and was thus admired by the people. He said, "What is so good about being an emperor? To be one is a grave responsibility. If you want to be one you can take my place". He did not personally enjoy being an emperor, did not intimidate others, but served the people, created happiness for them and found capable scholars to work on behalf of the empire.

All caring government officials have the appearance or sign of good fortune. Mr. Liao-Fan 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. So at this time he was not adequate to serve and to lead.

Next Mr. Liao-Fan explained that he was very impatient, intolerant and undisciplined, three serious faults. Being impatient and bad-tempered gives us the appearance of scant good fortune. A narrow-minded person is unable to tolerate others. These bad qualities would render a person unable to properly choose and supervise or lead people, unable to justly serve others.

Also, he frankly admitted that he was self-indulgent and liked to show off his intelligence. He did whatever he wanted. 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 us misfortune rather than good fortune.

People who truly have good fortune are kind-hearted and honest, broad-minded and tolerant of others. They are calm and dignified in speech and manner. Confucius said, "One does not inspire respect when one is not dignified". Only with dignity and the ability to inspire respect are we able to convince people, to effectively interact with them. Mr. Liao-Fan admitted that when he was young, he simply was not calm and dignified enough 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, "Life springs from the dirt of the earth. Clear water often harbors no fish". The first reason why I felt that I did not deserve a son was that I was overly attached to cleanliness. The second reason was that harmony is the cultivator of all life. But I was quick tempered and easily became angry. The third reason was based on the principle that loving-kindness is the root of reproduction and harshness is the root of sterility. I overly guarded my own reputation and could not sacrifice anything for the sake of others.

The fourth reason was that I talked too much, which wasted a lot of chi or energy. The fifth reason was that I indulged in drinking. The sixth reason that I did not have a son was my habit of staying up nights, not knowing how to conserve my en-

ergy. Aside from these, I had many other faults that were too numerous to mention.

A proverb tells us that when the ground is not clean, it will grow things. But, when the water is too clear, it will have no fish. Why? Fish know that, in clear water, fishermen will easily catch them. So, they do not swim in clear water. It could also be said that when the ground is too clean, without dirt, nothing could grow.

Mr. Liao-Fan had an exaggerated fear of things not being clean. Being clean and neat is a good quality, however to be overly so becomes a problem, an obsession. It is not good to be unable to tolerate even the slightest bit of grime. This is the first reason he did not deserve a son.

Harmony can help a family to prosper. As is said, "Friendliness is conducive to wealth". The fact that Mr. Liao-Fan is not wealthy is partially due to his bad temper. Since he was not wealthy, this placed his family in a precarious financial situation. Also, he often became angry at the least provocation. He could not tolerate anything displeasing. To behave in this manner results in a lack of good fortune and is the second reason he did not deserve a son.

Loving-kindness is benevolence and consideration for others. Mr. Liao-Fan understood these principles, but was unable to achieve them. Why? Because he was a very unkind person. In other words, he overvalued his reputation and was unwilling to help others, which is another reason why he did not deserve a son. The fourth reason is that he talked too much, which frankly wasted a lot of energy.

From his introspection, Mr. Liao-Fan came up with six major reasons why he did not have children, the first three, being overly concerned with cleanliness, being quick tempered and lacking loving-kindness were from the aspect of intention, the mind. The next three, talking too much, drinking and staying up all night were from the aspect of behavior, the body. He liked to talk and criticize others. He indulged in gossip about other's faults and liked winning arguments with others. These harm the body and exhaust our energy. He also liked to drink excessively which harms the mind and exhausts our spirit. Last, he said he did not deserve a son because he spent the night chatting with friends, drinking, having a good time and not bothering to take good care of his health.

By realizing that he had so many bad habits and faults, Mr. Liao-Fan honestly admitted and felt remorse for all his erroneous behavior. To acknowledge all his offenses without concealing any secrets 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 realized these erroneous ways and rectified them. Since most people are not yet aware of their faults, they are not yet truly cultivating. Cultivation is to correct our own erroneous ways, to correct our deviated thoughts and behavior. Therefore, the first step in correcting our false ways is to recognize them and to be able to turn over to a new leaf. Mr. Liao-Fan was so amazing, because once Master Yun-Gu questioned him, he was able to carefully and completely consider, to discover all his faults one by one and this is the basic cause of how he was able to change his destiny from that point on.

How was he able to change his destiny? And why are we unable to do so? We are completely ignorant of our own faults. So, we are unable to correct them. He was able to reflect within, to uncover and change each of his faults one by one. In so doing, he attained what he sought; on the inside, vir-

tuous and caring conduct and on the outside, wealth and children. Mr. Liao-Fan did not seek from the outside, we did not see him bowing and burning incense in front of Great Compassion Bodhisattva, seeking children, fame, wealth and prestige. But nowadays, people seek by merely going through the formalities of blindly worshipping. They do not understand the principles. They seek what they desire, but this is the wrong way to do so. They will not be able to attain what they seek in this way.

From day to night we see countless people going to temples, burning candles and incense while asking for wealth and children, attaining what their destiny had already entitled them to have what they would have attained without having to plead for them. In their ignorance, they think what they received was granted by the grace of deities. Buddhist practitioners need to understand the truth, to seek what we desire in accordance with the teachings. As Master Yun-Gu said, "to gain both on the inside and on the outside". In this way, there is nothing that we cannot attain.

Master Yun-Gu then said, "According to you then, there are many things in life you do not deserve, not only fame and a son! Those who have millions of dollars in this life must have cultivated the good fortune worthy of that amount in the past. Those who have thousands of dollars must also have good fortune, which is worthy of generating that sum. Those, who die of starvation were in fact were meant to die in that manner. The karmic result today is simply the fruit of their deeds. Heavenly beings do not have any intentions for us".

This advice from Master Yun-Gu is most important and must not be regarded as mere superstition! For to do so is to be deluded and thus to be unable to believe the words of sages, to believe the true reality. Master Yun-Gu taught Mr. Liao-Fan to honestly reflect within and to be self-critical. This enabled him to recognize his many faults. Thus, the greatest virtuous deed is for us to recognize and change our erroneous ways.

Making offerings to infinite sages is a great virtuous deed. But, we learn from the [Infinite Life Sutra](#) that it is even better to turn back from delusion and to earnestly and diligently cultivate. To do so is to turn over a new leaf, what ancient sages described as the great virtue of regretting and reforming.

Master Yun-Gu told Mr. Liao-Fan, 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 rely on the cultivation and accumulation of merit from our past lives. "Those who have millions of dollars in this life" talks about wealth and social position for which we also need the right destiny. They are not randomly attained. In Buddhism, it is said that for us to possess immense wealth in this life, we need to have extensively practiced the giving of wealth in our past lives. Can we force nature to grant us wealth? Impossible. To try to do so will bring disaster and misfortune. "Neither misfortunes nor good fortune come with out reasons and conditions, we incur them".

The ancient Chinese who created Chinese characters had great wisdom. The two characters for "fortune" and "misfortune" are very similar, differing only the slightest bit. Thus, a small discrepancy

leads to a great error. All this helps us to understand cause and effect. To understand that 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 upper or middle class wealth. Those who were meant to starve to death have committed numerous evil offenses in their past lives. They did not practice giving, but instead were stingy and miserly. Unfortunately, there are many people like this in the world today. They are unwilling to do even the slightest of good deeds or to give even a penny. They encourage others to give, but do not follow their own advice. We know they will undergo the consequence of being poor in their next life. We all undergo the consequences from our causes. They are not imposed on us by an outside power that is controlling our lives.

The master said that the heavens do nothing more than punish those who are bad with the suffering they have coming and reward those who are kind with the good fortune they are worthy of. Some people in this world assume that everything is arranged by the will of heavenly beings. But, this is not so. The true cause of everything that happens to us is our own behavior. Heavenly beings do not have any intentions for us. Only the great sages with true wisdom are able to see clearly the truth of reality. Whether to be wealthy with a good social position or to be poor with none is all within our destiny.

For example, if a person has accumulated enough merits and virtues for a hundred generations, then he or she will have descendants to last a hundred generations. One who accumulates enough merits and virtues to last ten generations will then have ten generations of descendants to live out that good fortune. The same goes for three generations or two generations. For those who have no descendants at all, it is because they have not accumulated enough good merits and virtues.

This talks about the destiny in 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 Yin-Guang often praised Confucius, who cultivated the “Virtue of a Hundred Generations”. Confucius constantly thought of benefiting the country and people, without the slightest thought of self. He dedicated his whole life to education and passed on his ideals and aspirations 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. De-Cheng Kong, is still respected by people around the world. Not only the Chinese, but others such as Americans are particularly courteous and respectful, warmly welcoming him upon hearing that he is the descendant of Confucius. It becomes very evident that by planting good seeds or causes, we reap good harvests or results.

In Liao-Fan's Four Lessons we read that when we accumulate enough merits and virtues for ten generations we will have ten generations of descendants to live out that good fortune. In Chinese history, emperors would try to establish dynasties that were able to reign for many generations like the

Qing Dynasty, which 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 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 own virtuous conduct from our past lives will result in having similar virtuous people being born into our family. Thus, its continuation is assured.

For instance, for how many generations will a family business last? In Taiwan, there is a chain of medical stores called the "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 from one generation to the next.

Compassionate ancestors, whose driving goal was to be able to keep the store going so they could help to save lives, began it. Unconcerned about profits, they only wanted to make enough to be able to live very simply. So, their goal has not been to make a profit or to enjoy a life of ease and comfort, but to benefit society and to help people 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 be able to continue forever. They will not be like others who lacking merits and virtues found their businesses going bankrupt after only a few years.

Some may only have enough merits and virtues to last for two or three generations of descendants. The Chinese have a saying that "There are three serious occurrences in being unfilial, with no future generations being the most critical". This is lacking in merit and virtue to the point of not being able to have any descendants. In the past, people were extremely concerned about this, but today things are very different. Many young couples do not even want to have children thinking them too much trouble. Also, our society is different from that of the past because we now have social welfare.

In many countries, who takes care of the elderly? The country does. With no need to rely on their children to provide for them when they become older, many couples have decided that they can do without children. They can retire at the age of sixty-five and collect social security every month from the government. This is even more filial than our own children are. This is possible because the current social welfare system is so much better than what transpired in the past. Before, the elderly could only rely on their children for support, whereas now the current trend is towards having the government to help take care of the elderly. However, the Law of Cause and Effect will not change.

"Just as one stores up grain against lean years, one raises children against old age" has been a commonly held idea. Mr. Yu in his commentary examined the teaching of transcending this world. He said, "Sages transcending this world consider the cultivation of ending desires and love, ridding themselves of delusion to obtain wisdom and transcending the ordinary to become a sage to be the utmost virtue and merit. Regretfully, 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 generate the heart to become monks and nuns, their parents, relatives and friends try their best to think of ways to stop them. They do not understand for they still think like before, that not having a next generation is their biggest concern. Buddhism looks into the three times of the past, present and future. It sees and understands the truth of life and the universe.

Ordinary people only see a tiny portion of this universe, not the whole. Of the entire universe, they have only witnessed the human realm. In the human realm, they only see the present, neither the past nor the future; therefore, they are unable to see as perfectly as do Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When someone in a family becomes a monk or nun, it is truly the most joyous occasion, the most outstanding pursuit.

However, we must practice earnestly in renouncing worldly life for if we do not achieve, while our families will not be harmed, we will fall into the Three Bad Realms. In Buddhism, it is often said, "One grain of rice from a donor is as great as Mt. Sumeru. Not transcending the cycle of birth and death in this lifetime, consigns us to put on animal skin and horn to pay back the debt". This is obviously very serious.

As Pure Land practitioners, we have to achieve a certain level of attainment and to transcend the Six Realms to be born into the Western Pure Land. Theravada practitioners need to at least reach the level of stream-enterer. This is achieved by severing various wrong views. It is the first of the four stages of sagehood in Theravada Buddhism. By attaining the fruit of non-returning, we will be considered a sage. At this point in achievement we will continue to be born into the heaven and human realms and in this way are assured of attaining the state of Arhat although it may take a long time to do so. But by not falling into the Three Bad Realms, we are considered to have achieved attainment.

According to this criterion, the minimum standard to achieve attainment in Mahayana Buddhism is to rid ourselves of a portion of our attachments, to sever the eighty-eight kinds of deviated thoughts and viewpoints. If we cannot rid ourselves of these eighty-eight kinds of deviated thoughts and viewpoints, then we have simply not achieved. In achieving this, in the perfect Mahayana teaching, we reach the initial belief stage. In the Theravada teaching, we reach the initial fruit of stream-enterer, attained by destroying various wrong views; the first of the four stages of sainthood.

Not accomplishing this will find us still reincarnating within the Six Realms, still paying back our debts. For monks and nuns this means we will have to pay back every single offering from the ten directions that were enjoyed during the time we were monks and nuns. These offerings were not given without expectation of a reward. We have to pay them back.

If we are able to achieve the levels of stream-enterer or to sever the eighty-eight kinds of improper thoughts and viewpoints, for Theravada and Mahayana practitioners, respectively, those who have made the offerings will receive the benefits of good fortune. Then there is no need for us to pay them back, because they have harvested from the fields of merit. Using these as the standard, it is not achievable by monks and nuns of this generation. Who has the ability to achieve this!

But, there is still another way, to seek birth into the Western Pure Land. Otherwise, achievement is not possible. If we cannot go to the Pure Land, we will have achieved nothing. Seeking birth into the Pure Land is actually much simpler than severing the eighty-eight kinds of improper thoughts and viewpoints. To be born into the Pure Land, it is not necessary to sever these improper thoughts and viewpoints, for we can carry our remaining karma with us to the Pure Land. As long as we have true unwavering belief, the vow and proper conduct, are honestly mindful of Buddha Amitabha, everyone will achieve attainment. We see this very clearly in the [Infinite Life Sutra](#) and the [Amitabha Sutra](#). There-

fore, when generating the heart to renounce worldly life and become monks and nuns, we must achieve attainment.

B. To Reform Faults Thoroughly

"Now that you recognize your own shortcomings, you need to put forth your utmost efforts into working to change and into reforming your misdeeds, which cause you not to have a child or become an imperial official."

This is the method that Master Yun-Gu taught Mr. Liao-Fan in changing his destiny, to take the right steps to correct his bad habits and shortcomings. Since he knew his shortcomings, the master taught him to "put his utmost efforts into changing his ways". Mr. Yu said in his commentary that, "Each of us has our own faults and weaknesses, but if we are able to calmly analyze ourselves and find them, one after another, then we will have a starting point". So, changing our ways and reforming is true cultivation. It is by no means just a formality of reciting sutras, prostrating before the Buddha or chanting mantras.

To cultivate our whole life and to still be mired in the Six Realms is to have simply gone through the formalities. Their purpose is to remind us of the teachings for others to see and to exemplify these teachings to bring forth awakening in others. For self-cultivation however, importance is not placed on the formalities but rather on discovering our own faults. This is awakening.

To correct our own faults is to achieve in our cultivation. Therefore, the most important point is for us to be perfectly calm, introspective and watchful over our own conduct as we search out our own bad habits and faults. By knowing our faults and bad habits we will know where to start, what to correct and how to proceed. We can then concentrate and use all of our energy to reform. The following are some examples of this from Mr. Yu's commentary.

"We can change from a miserly and greedy person to become one who generously gives to those in need". For example, if we are miserly, we are not willing to give what we have to others. If we are greedy, we are always trying to gain what we do not have. If we find that we are habitually doing this, we can change ourselves into generous people who give to those in need by using the practice of giving to modify our behavior. What I have and others do not, I can freely give to them upon request. Or, better yet when I see others who have an urgent need, I can take the initiative and simply give it to them. This is the cultivation of good fortune.

There are three types of giving; that of wealth, teaching and fearlessness. The giving of teaching is practiced when we help others by using our skill or wisdom to teach others. What others are not good at and we are, we can enthusiastically teach them to enable them to have this ability or to awaken their wisdom. This is the giving of teaching. The giving of fearlessness is helping others to be calm and serene in both body and mind. It is to help relieve their uneasiness, their fears. For example, if someone is afraid to walk home alone at night and we are able, we can accompany him or her so they will no longer be apprehensive.

Today, many young people need to serve in the military. This is another form of the giving of fearlessness. Why? Soldiers protect a country and its people, and keep the peace by not allowing harm or invasion by foreign forces. We can see that the scope of these three kinds of giving is extensive. The

Buddha tells us that 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, we can see another form of the giving of fearlessness; that of freeing captured animals. However, we also see many improper practices, which have risen as a result of this giving. Because so many have wanted to free captured animals, some people have gone into the business of capturing more animals. Freeing animals in this way is not the giving of fearlessness but subjects them to harm. If we do not set them free, these people will not capture them. We would do well to understand so that our kind heart will not inadvertently lead us to commit bad deeds.

The proper way to practice this giving of fearlessness is to free animals that we find in the food market when we go shopping. We do so in the knowledge that they will be able to survive once they are freed. This is compassion and kindness for it is saving those beings that are suffering. However, many pet shops sell animals that were domestically raised and therefore would be unable to survive in the wild. If they were set free, they would die and our good intentions would be turned into transgressions.

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

The commentary talks about changing from an angry and agitated person to one who is calm and peaceful. This talks about our disposition. Easily giving in to anger, easily becoming irritated is a major fault. Mr. Liao-Fan had this fault, so the Master encouraged him to transform himself into being serene and tranquil, to being even-tempered. With a calm and peaceful mind, our disposition will naturally be gentle and warm.

Both Buddha Shakyamuni and Confucius stressed this important quality of our virtue. The students of Confucius praised his five virtues of gentility, kindness, respectfulness, thriftiness and humility. He was known for being gentle, kind, respectful, thrifty and discreet towards everyone and everything. Confucius did not live an extravagant life but rather one of simplicity. He was courteous and humble. He never argued and always accorded with others. Confucius was himself a model of moral excellence.

"To change from a person who exaggerates and is boastful to one who is modest and practical". When we know someone who exaggerates, we automatically doubt whatever he or she says. It is difficult for people like this to win the confidence of others because essentially he or she is dishonest. Therefore, we should never exaggerate or boast, but 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 and stable". We would do well to be composed and concentrated, to be poised and calm. In this way, we will attain purity of mind.

"To change from a person who is arrogant and insolent to one who is modest and courteous". There really is nothing to be arrogant about. Why? If we have accomplished something successfully, it is our duty, something we ought to do. If we did not accomplish it successfully then we should be criticized, corrected and told how to improve. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas respect everyone and everything

as did Confucius and Mencius. However, we are far behind them in achievement or understanding! Therefore, we need to treat others with respect, courtesy and humility. These are simply virtues of nature.

“To change from a person who is indolent and idle to one who is diligent and resolute”. Being lethargic and lazy are great afflictions. One who has these bad habits will not succeed in anything. Therefore, we would do well to be diligent, purposeful and energetic. One of Buddha Shakyamuni’s students, Anuruddha was known for his laziness. After being reproached by the Buddha, he resolved to go without rest or sleep for seven days and seven nights. Due to his enthusiastic diligence, he damaged his vision. The Buddha compassionately taught him the "Illuminating the Diamond of Delightful Observation Samadhi", a form of deep concentration, which enabled him to see far better than before. Consequently, he was able to see to the extent of one Buddhaland, which is comprised of one billion galaxies.

We too need to be inspired with enthusiasm and determination. When we are lazy, we accomplish nothing. Not only are we unable to achieve attainment in our practice and learning of Buddhism, but we will also fail to accomplish anything in our daily lives. Ancient times or today, in the east or in the west no one has become successful through laziness. Diligence is the only good root for Mahayana practitioners and Bodhisattvas.

“To change from a person who is merciless and cruel to one who is kind and compassionate. To change from a person who is cowardly and fearful to one who is brave and motivated”. To be cowardly and timorous is another serious fault. We would do well to overcome it and to work diligently and resolutely. Mr. Liao-Fan himself admitted to having all these faults. Again, each of us would do well to be like him, to examine and correct every single one of our faults. Next, Master Yun-Gu taught Mr. Liao-Fan several essential points for his cultivation.

“You need to cultivate virtue and tolerance and to treat others with compassion and harmony. Also, to care for your health and conserve your energy and spirit”.

First, Master Yun-Gu encouraged Mr. Liao-Fan to accumulate merit, by ending his erroneous ways and cultivating good deeds. This is a foundation for improvement whether in Buddhism or in worldly teachings. If we do not by earnestly accumulate merits and virtues by refraining from all evils and practicing all forms of kindness, how can we hope to be, “Those who have thousands of dollars” or “those who have accumulated enough merit and virtue for a hundred generations”? An entire country respected Confucius. An entire world respected Buddha Shakyamuni. The former accumulated great merits of this world. The latter accumulated great merits of the universe.

Second, we need to be tolerant of others, to broaden our minds and our hearts. If not, then we will be beset with more afflictions, which will present further obstacles to our cultivation. We cultivate awakening, proper thoughts and viewpoints, and purity of mind. If we cannot attain purity of mind, then we will not be awakened. This would result in deviated thoughts and viewpoints. Proper thoughts and viewpoints and great enlightened thoughts rely on the foundation of purity of mind. Therefore, we

need to be able to tolerate others.

There is no need to take things too seriously, no need to be critical of everything. As we learn in the Diamond Sutra, "everything is like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow". Nothing is real. As the ancients said, every phenomenon is "as transient as a fleeting cloud". There is nothing worthy of dispute. There is nothing worthy of anger. There is no point in dwelling on anything, for this will hinder our cultivation of purity of mind.

There is every point in being gentle, loving and peaceful. Being not so was Mr. Liao-Fan's biggest problem. We need to practice loving-kindness and compassion for everyone and everything. The Buddha taught that these are non-discriminatory, are equally held for all. Confucius taught of loving-kindness, which is close to that of the Buddha's. He explained that, "the benevolent person has no enemies". If we still have feelings of hostility towards others, then we are neither kind nor compassionate. Conflicts and hostility simply do not exist within the heart of loving-kindness. It is the same as the great compassion of the Buddhas. Different people, different words, same meaning. This is what we need to learn and practice, to truly benefit ourselves.

Pure Land sutras explain "One Mind Undisturbed". This state is unattainable if anything exists in conflict. To have conflict is to be of two minds, to have something that needs to be confronted, to be thought of. Master Hui-Neng said, "originally our true mind contained nothing". If the mind still clings to even one wandering thought, then it is not the true mind but a false mind. If the mind is pure, if the mind is at peace, then it will not have any conflicting thoughts. Without any conflicting thoughts, the true mind can be uncovered, purity of mind can arise and this is how we attain One Mind Undisturbed.

The states of One Mind Undisturbed and Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha start from here. In Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, initially the mind remembers the Buddha and does not forget. Then after prolonged cultivation, we constantly contemplate the Buddha. If we have been chanting the Buddha's name 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 no more obstacles, we will be able to achieve this state, which will assure us of achieving birth into the Pure Land. Regardless of the state of cultivation we have reached, we will know when we have achieved it. There is no need to ask another.

When we are born into the Pure Land through the state of Constant Mindfulness, we will be born into the Land where Both Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together. With the state of One Mind Undisturbed in Mindfulness, we will be born into the Land Where Everything is Temporary. With the state of One Mind Undisturbed in Enlightenment, we will be born into the Land of Real Reward. The level of achievement we attain will determine which land we will be born into.

There are also different levels in the state of constant mindfulness, thus there are nine levels of birth. People who are born into the higher three levels of birth are able to pass away whenever they wish, are able to decide when they will die. 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 into 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, when they will leave 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. Whichever it is, it is 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 into the Land Where Both Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, into the higher three levels of birth and to carry our remaining karma with us.

The Master told Mr. Liao-Fan that he should care for his health and conserve his energy and spirit. Because Mr. Liao-Fan liked to sit up all night and did not know how to take care of himself, he needed to pay special attention to preserving his health and energy.

“Live as though everything of the past dissolved yesterday and all of the 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 them or regret what happened. Because if we do, it is as if we have committed them again and this will only leave additional impressions in our Alaya Consciousness (our store consciousness, the thought database from all our past and present lives, good or bad). Therefore, let bygones be bygones and do not to think of them again. The important thing is to correct what is in the present, what will be in the future. Doubts and regrets are afflictions, which are conditions or causes of pain, distress and suffering which disturb the body and mind. These two above afflictions are two of the twenty-six afflictions stated in the Sastra on the Door to Understanding the Hundred Dharmas.

The Buddha taught us not to dwell on the past. It is stated in Mr. Xi-Yin Yu's commentary that this is the key to change destiny for the Perfect People. The Perfect People are those with higher levels of wisdom and those who are awakened. There are six points to accomplish this starting from the need to cultivate and accumulate merits and virtues to the point when we become a “person born anew, a person of virtue and sincerity”. These are the keys to changing destiny.

Mr. Yu said in his commentary that, “The first step in changing destiny is to correct our faults. To brush aside all the accumulated bad habits one by one and to pull out all roots of our problems one by one. At all times and at all places, to be constantly vigilant of our every thought, word and act. To be demanding of ourselves, to be restrained and disciplined. To protect the innocent and the virtuous as we would a newborn baby. The full responsibility for changing our destiny is in our own hands, not in the hands of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and heavenly beings. People of utmost virtue are no longer being bound by destiny”.

But, we need to be strict with ourselves, not constantly forgiving ourselves. If we do so then our future will be limited. We need to be strict and stern with ourselves, generous and lenient towards others. We need to overcome our faults and to correct our bad habits. We need to protect the pure, the virtuous, the innocent. What is innocence? It is to not have any thought arising. If we constantly give

rise to wandering thoughts, then we lose our innocence, our true mind, our pure mind. We need to be watchful over our wandering thoughts. To protect these like a mother lovingly takes care of a baby, wholeheartedly with full energy.

The responsibility for changing our destiny is completely up to us; it is not up to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas or the beings of heaven or earth. Once we understand the truth about being able to create our destiny, there will no longer be any need to ask psychics or fortunetellers what our future will be like. We would only need to carefully reflect upon our own destiny to know what it will be and how to change it. Also, others would not be able to deceive us.

Previously the Master told Mr. Liao-Fan about people who were of the utmost virtue. In the Pure Land sutras, we learn that the people of the utmost virtue live in the Pure Land. What kinds of people are of the utmost virtue? Those who are able to feel regret and remorse and thus are able to reform. The beings in the Western Pure Land reflect and reform daily, until there is nothing left that requires correction. Then they become Buddhas.

Even Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattvas, who are just one level below that of Buddhas, still have faults. What kind? They still have one degree of ignorance yet to be broken through, that is their shortcoming. They still need to correct their errors and start afresh. If Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattvas still need to regret and reform, we can imagine how much we need to do. From the above we can understand and attain awakening as to what we need to cultivate. From now on, we will generate the heart to regret and reform. Even upon reaching the level of Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattvas, we will still need to do this. For only when there is nothing left to reform, do we become Buddhas. We cannot attain complete enlightenment even if we still have just one remaining fault.

Bodhisattvas are called "enlightened sentient beings", for although they are still sentient beings, they are enlightened. Enlightenment is to know our faults and to correct them. On the other hand, we ordinary people are also sentient beings, but are not yet enlightened. Not being enlightened is not knowing our faults, not knowing that we need to correct them. It is believing that we are correct in every way. It is thinking, "Do I have any faults"? It is thinking for a long time and not finding any.

Therefore, it is often said that ordinary people do not have faults, but Bodhisattvas have many. Bodhisattvas constantly watch over their every thought, word and deed, knowing they have many shortcomings, continuously correcting them, doing so for three great aeons. When we think about how many faults there are, how we possibly think that as ordinary people we do not have any!

What is the difference between "enlightened" and "not enlightened". One who knows that they have many faults is an enlightened being, is a Bodhisattva. One who does not know that they have many faults is not enlightened, is an ordinary person. Bodhisattvas are not deities, but are those who know their own faults and constantly strive to correct them so they can reform. If we were to improve, not only to reform, but to generate the vows of Buddha Amitabha then 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 beginning step. The second step is to use the [Infinite Life Sutra](#) as a mirror, reflecting once with each recitation to make a comparison and to find our own faults. By looking at the reflections in the mirror, we can see what

parts are soiled and can then immediately clean them. To clean is to correct. We need to recite the sutra to find the pollution in our mind that we are not yet truly aware of. The sutra is like a mirror that sees and reflects what parts of our minds have faults so that we may correct them at once. Therefore, the first step is to become familiar with the sutra. The second step is to accord with the teachings within it.

In cultivation, first we generate the vows. We need to think carefully if we have generated the forty-eight vows of Buddha Amitabha. We need to adopt his forty-eight vows as our own, to be of one heart and vow with him, to be his true companion. It is to be the same, to become his manifestation. He is our role model. We follow this model to mold ourselves, to change ourselves to be completely the same as Buddha Amitabha. It is to be of one mind, one heart and one vow. How could we not be born into the Pure Land, when our heart and vow are the same as his? When this happens we will think the same, speak the same and act the same as him. So in every thought, word and deed we will remember as we interact with others, matters and affairs, not forgetting to encourage others to chant Namu Amittufo. This is to speak and act like Buddha Amitabha.

When our three karmas of body, speech and mind are the same as his, then we become a manifestation of him. We come again to this world to fulfill his original vows. This is more remarkable than being a person of virtue and sincerity. Originally, we were reincarnated into this world as a retribution body, to pay back karmic debts, but now we are Buddha Amitabha 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 the Master was talking of wandering thoughts and attachments. Our body really has nothing to do with destiny. What matters is our mind. Our body is influenced mainly by our mind. To be honest, the mind of ordinary people, is selfish, is governed by destiny. We also fall within the control of destiny if we use our conscious mind. We use our Eight Consciousnesses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, Mana and Alaya. Information from the sixth consciousness, which is the mind, is transmitted by the seventh consciousness, which is the Mana, to the eighth, which is the Alaya, our store consciousness).

Why are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas able to transcend? Because they have turned their Eight Consciousnesses into the Four Wisdoms (the Great Perfect Mirror-wisdom, the Wisdom of Equality, the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation and the Wisdom of Accomplishing What is to be Done). They do not use the Eight Consciousnesses, so they are not controlled by destiny. After we have awakened, we too will use our awakened mind. Currently, we are using deluded sentiments. If we use our enlightened wisdom, how would we not "evoke a response from heaven"!

In the commentary we learn that, "Utmost sincerity can split a stone of diamond, can evoke a response from heaven and can change destiny". Consider the well-known incident that happened to the famous General Guang Lee who lived during the Han Dynasty (approximately two thousand years ago).

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 at it 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 but failed to repeat his accomplishment. From this, we can see that the first shot resulted from the utmost sincerity, or having no wandering thought.

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 lift it again but failed. General Guang Lee 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 they perceived the tiger was actually a stone, the iron bowl was extraordinarily heavy; they were unable to repeat their previous accomplishments. Both initially acted from the mind of sincerity, which has 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 stated in the Flower Adornment Sutra, "There are no hindrances among matters or things". This is achieved when the mind reaches a certain degree of purity, when we have severed our wandering and discriminatory thoughts and attachments. If the mind is not pure, then all phenomena present obstacles. 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 that we need to let go of desire and not to be influenced by it. Utmost sincerity can change destiny. It is the true mind, as explained in the Visualization Sutra, it is the Bodhi mind, the mind of utmost sincerity, profundity, merit dedication and vow generation.

"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 own wrong deeds.'"

Tai Jia was an emperor during the Shang Dynasty, (almost four thousand years ago). During his early years, he engaged in immoral activities. After receiving guidance from the Great Sage Yi Yin, he amended his incorrect ways. The previous quote was his expression of gratitude to the great sage.

To say that we may run from the retribution of heaven means that although we have committed unkind deeds in former lifetimes, the retribution for them is changeable by our current cultivation and accumulation of merit and virtue in this lifetime. The retributions of heaven are destinies and are changeable.

"But one can never escape the retribution for one's own wrong deeds". These are the wrong deeds we commit in our current life. The retributions of heaven are meted out for the bad deeds that were committed in our past lives. The retributions that we are to receive in this life can be changed. Our very destiny can be changed. However, nothing can be done regarding the retribution for the bad

deeds that we commit in our present lifetime. And if we continue to commit bad deeds, then we will be unable to regret and reform, unable to change our destiny.

When bad causes created in the past, meet up with present adverse catalytic conditions, the retributions for these bad deeds will surely mature. On the other hand, although we have created bad causes in the past, but now in the present, we refrain from committing bad deeds we will suppress our bad conditions. The bad causes still exist but without the catalytic conditions, they will not mature. The principle in changing destiny is based on the condition aspect of the Law of Cause and Effect. Cause is what was created in the past. It is unchangeable. But, condition is changeable or controllable.

We reap what we sow. We can plant melon and bean seeds. These are causes. When we do so, we will grow melons and beans. These are results. However, we cannot grow beans from melon seeds or melons from bean seeds. Cause is fixed. Whether we will harvest melons or beans 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 catalytic conditions are required for it to happen. For example, for the melon or beans to grow well, the conditions needed for that to happen include the right combination of good soil, fertilizer, sun, air, water, etc. Even after the seed was planted and the cause was thus created we can prevent the condition from maturing if we do not want it to. We simply leave the melon seed in a cup for a hundred years. The melon will not grow. The result will not mature. Why? It does not have the right conditions.

Therefore, even though we have created bad causes in past lives, if we refrain from wrongdoings in this life, end our erroneous ways and cultivate kind deeds, we will not have the bad conditions for the bad causes to come into effect. Surely, we also created some good causes in our past lives. How could a person have only done bad deeds and not good ones? How could a person have only done good deeds and not bad ones? Such a person simply does not exist. Therefore, life after life all the deeds that we have committed 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 more of the bad 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, they too will blossom and mature. Therefore, it is crucial that we end our erroneous ways and cultivate kind deeds.

“It is also said in the Book of Songs, ‘To remind us to permanently accord with the mind of heaven and to seek the great good fortune by our own’”.

This reveals the real purpose of the morning and evening ceremonies. The purpose of the morning ceremony is to remind us of the vows of Buddha Amitabha. The purpose of the evening ceremony is to look back on the day to see if we followed the guidance of the sutra, to see if we have been watchful over our words and deeds. In so doing, it will be meaningful to participate in these two ceremonies.

In Buddha Shakyamuni’s time, the content of the morning and evening ceremonies was the Three

Refuges. The words in those ceremonies were from the "Chapter of Pure Conduct" from the Flower Adornment 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". It was the same for the morning and the evening.

Ancient virtuous people compiled our current recitation handbooks. The content was suitable to the people practicing together at that time. But is this recitation suitable for our own practice? If not, they need to be modified so they will allow us to continue to correct our faults and thus benefit from them. The same goes for repentance ceremonies. If we were to participate in these and did the many prostrations while our mind was still impure, not only would we not eradicate our karmic obstacles, we would increase them. This is similar to taking medicine when we become ill. If the medication proved to be ineffective then we would need to change prescriptions.

The purpose of sutra recitation and of repentance prostrations is to treat the illness in our minds to cure our afflictions. If they are ineffective, then we need to find a method that is effective. Therefore, the Jewel King Samadhi Repentance Ceremony compiled by Mr. Lian-Ju Xia is more suitable than other similar books for the problems of today's people. Upon careful reading, we will understand that many of its phrases talk of our present illnesses. Hence, we need to choose the morning and evening recitation based on our illnesses and our problems.

Now many Pure Land practitioners at the morning and evening ceremonies recite the Infinite Life Sutra. The purpose of this is to cultivate concentration. If we do not have enough time for it, then for the morning ceremony we can recite Chapter Six, which is comprised of the Forty-eight Vows. For the evening ceremony, we can recite Chapters Thirty-two to Thirty-seven. These six chapters talk of cause and effect, of learning how to change ourselves. Doing this we will permanently accord with the minds of heaven and seek the great good fortune on our own.

"The minds of heaven" means the self-nature, it does not literally mean heaven and earth and celestial beings. Rather, it means our own original nature. If we can accord with our true mind then we will achieve the basic virtue, to return to our self-nature.

The Master 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 still be changed. You only need to develop your virtue, diligently try to practice kind deeds and work to accumulate many hidden merits and virtues".

Master Yun-Gu told Mr. Liao-Fan that Mr. Kong's prediction that he would not receive an imperial appointment or have a son were the result of the accumulated negative karma in his previous lives. However, these are changeable. Destiny exists, but it is not fixed. It is not something that is immutable. What is from the past is a constant, what is done in the present is a variable.

Master Yun-Gu explained how we could change our own destiny. We do so by starting from our heart "to develop our virtue". From this, we can see that if we were to seek and change only on the outside, we will be "at a loss, inside and out". We have seen people who try to improve their environ-

ment by changing the placement of doors, windows, etc. all to be at a loss, inside and out. On appearance it seemed as if there was some 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 thoughts, from our heart, to refrain from wrongdoings and to cultivate only kind deeds. "Work to accumulate many hidden merits and virtues". These are our 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 it, then we have lost our reward for good deeds. To do what is good and then to lose the benefits from it at the same time will deter us from accumulating merits and virtues. It is much better to do good deeds without anybody knowing about them, even better if some people verbally reproach us, for this will help to reduce our negative karma. It would be best for us if our negative karma and retributions were to be reduced and even eradicated, while the good, the merits and virtues remained hidden.

Today, when we do good deeds and are subjected to criticism and slander, we feel it is undeserved. Why do we have negative results when we do good deeds? Actually, those are good rewards. If we did some good deeds and were immediately complimented by others, the merit and virtue would be immediately cancelled. Therefore, we must accumulate merit and virtue while hiding them, not letting others know of them. Only then is this a truly good deed.

These are your own transactions to create good fortune. How is it then possible that you will not get to enjoy them?"

We will be able to enjoy all of the good fortune that we have created in this life. The sutras tell us that "Cause and effect are joined through the three times of past, present and future". Both our rewards and our retributions in this life are the results of deeds in past lives. What is cultivated in this one, will be born by us in our future lives. If we cultivate very diligently, then without having to wait until our next life, we will see the results in the present one. Based on this principle, Mr. Liao-Fan 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 bring about good fortune and to avoid adversity. If everything is predestined with no room for change, then how can we improve upon our good fortune and avoid adversity?"

It could be said that I Ching, the Book of Changes was the earliest philosophy book in ancient China. It contains the most profound philosophy, which taught people to become sages and the virtuous. It accomplishes this through mathematical predestination. It contains sixty-four combinations. Each combination has six explanations or predictions, single and divided lines in eight groups of three lines. There are three hundred eighty four possible explanations. From within to deduce and develop the change in positive or softness and negative or hardness, able to know the happenings in past and future.

Changes as small as those that affect individuals to changes that affect countries to even those that affect the world can be deduced from these symbols. This is simply following the natural Law of Cause and Effect, something that can be calculated and deduced. However, what the Master knew enabled him to surpass mathematical calculations so Mr. Liao-Fan's destiny was changed.

What can be extrapolated is constant, what cannot be is variable. Their shared purpose is to teach people to "bring about good fortune and avoid adversity". The constants are a set number. I Ching, the Book of Changes knew the variables. One virtuous thought is a plus and one negative thought is a minus. So every day is simply a matter of calculating every plus, every minus, every multiplication, every division. If the margin of change is not too much then others can foretell our destiny with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

After having his destiny foretold by Mr. Kong, for twenty years Mr. Liao-Fan neither increased nor decreased his bad or good thoughts and deeds, but completely accorded with his destiny. For ordinary people usually there are some changes, one virtuous thought, one unkind deed, not like Mr. Liao-Fan who had no interest in doing good deeds or bad ones, but maintained a constancy throughout, thus, his destiny was remarkably accurate. If the good or bad deeds are changed enough then we would surpass the constant and, thus, "we can improve upon our good fortune and avoid adversity" and this is something we can strive for.

It is stated in the commentary, "Because all thoughts, viewpoints and behavior are ever-changing, so all the consequences of gain and loss, joy and pain seem flexible and changeable. These consequences can be added, subtracted, multiplied and divided, received and lost according with the behavior of each individual".

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

"The very first chapter of I Ching, The Book of Changes also said, 'Families who often perform kind deeds will have an excess of good fortune to pass on to the next generations.' Do you believe this"? I replied "Yes".

From this, we know that I Ching, The Book of Changes understood the constant, the cause, in this world, in the universe. However, it also knew that there is a variable, the condition within. By controlling this variable, on a smaller scale we can change our own destiny. On a larger scale, we can pursue lasting stability and peace for our country and 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. Guang-Xi Mei 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 I Ching, the Book of Changes being reduced to a book for telling fortunes! It is a sad reflection on our times. I Ching, the Book of Changes 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 Mr. Liao-Fan if he believed that a family, which practiced kind deeds would have so much good fortune that it would be passed on to the following generations. Mr. Liao-Fan replied "Yes".

So, the essential factor that enabled Mr. Liao-Fan to change his destiny was his ability to deeply and to perfectly believe what the Master taught him. It was the maturing of his good roots and good fortune that provided him with opportunity to meet Master Yun-Gu. As the Buddha told us, "Good roots, merits and virtues, and conditions" are the ultimate benefit. When Mr. Liao-Fan had all three, how could his destiny not change?

Mr. Yu told us in his commentary that, "One who is doubtful when he or she hears kind words of encouragement from sages may even slander them. They thus commit the offense of doubt". Kind words are the teachings of the sages of this world and beyond, later generations called these teachings sutras. The sutras tell us of the truths that never change. They surpass time and space. 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.

Upon reading this, we know that the writings and teachings of these sages, whether of our time or beyond, do not come from their personal experiences and opinions. If they did then they could be biased or inappropriate. History is accumulated experience. The sutras contain the truth, which arises from the true nature, the original nature. Thus, it is the absolute truth that surpasses time and space.

If we are able to believe, we will benefit and improve. If we do not believe, then we will miss these remarkable benefits. Thus, Buddhism talks of "doubt being the root of offense". And doubt is one of the six fundamental afflictions of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt and deviated viewpoints.

The commentary also stated that, "One who hears kind words of advice and gives rise to belief will have 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 all infinite good fortune and merit are generated from this. Mr. Liao-Fan is indeed a rare person, to deeply believe upon hearing Master Yun-Gu's advice.

To Surpass Destiny by Cultivating Good Fortune and Accumulating Virtue

I gratefully accepted his advice paid my respects to him by prostrating. Then I began to regret all my past wrongdoings, whether large or 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 ancestors, earth and heaven.

Here we see Mr. Liao-Fan's sincere act of honoring the teacher and revering his teachings. He did not casually say, "I believe and will do so accordingly" and then forget all about it after a while. He earnestly complied with them. What follows is Mr. Liao-Fan's own account of how he regretted each of his wrongdoings in front of the Buddha, without holding anything back. This is the expression of our own sincere repentance, asking the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to be our witness. The Jewel King Samadhi Repentance is very long, as was Mr. Liao-Fan's written confession, which lists all of his wrongdoings.

The commentary stated that, "A Family Lesson" by Zhu-Zi tells us that it is a serious error to fear that others will know our misdeeds". We need not be afraid of letting others know about our faults. If we are truly intelligent and wise, we will expose our faults and shortcomings to as many people as possible. Then when we are criticized and corrected, our karmic obstacles will be gradually eradicated. If we hide our faults, they will increase in number. The consequences from this would be inconceivable! Consequently, if others speak out about them, be grateful. Even if we have not done what they say, if we are innocent of the accusation.

To be wrongfully accused by others will also eradicate our karmic obstacles. There is no need to refute them or to defend ourselves. If we constantly defend ourselves, when we really do have faults others will not want to try to correct them, then that offense will become even more serious. Tai-Zong, a great emperor of the Tang Dynasty is remembered for being wise and accomplished. Why? He did not hide his shortcomings. Anyone could talk to him about them. Although he was the emperor, he did nothing to retaliate against them for doing so. Why? He knew the need to regret and reform. (Also, he knew that if he retaliated, no one would ever dare to advise him again.)

Mr. Liao-Fan vowed to pass the imperial examinations but Mr. Kong had not destined this for him. To gain what we wish for when it has not been destined to happen in this lifetime is truly to have sought and gained. He made the vow to complete three thousand meritorious deeds to show his gratitude towards ancestors, spirits of heaven and earth.

Upon hearing my vow, Master Yun-Gu showed me a merit-fault chart and taught me how to keep a daily record of all the kind and unkind acts I did. He told me that bad deeds would neutralize the good ones.

Master Yun-Gu presented Mr. Liao-Fan with a merit-fault chart. It provided for the entry of both virtuous merits as well as faults. This chart was very popular during the latter years of the Ming Dynasty. Scholars as well as Buddhists used it to cultivate their moral characters. Great Master Lian-Qi drew up a merit-fault chart called the "Self-reflection Record", which totally based its standards for good and bad behavior on Buddhism. It was thus especially helpful for Buddhists to use for ending erroneous ways and cultivating kind deeds. There are several versions of merit-fault charts that have been passed down over the years, which can be used for our reference.

Mr. Liao-Fan 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 them to fit our current society and how we can use them to accomplish our goals. Currently, no

one has come up with a merit-fault chart for modern people, but we need to know the spirit within.

The Master also taught me to recite the Zhun Ti Mantra. Only with a pure and concentrated mind could what I seek for come true.

In Esoteric Buddhism, Zhun Ti Bodhisattva is a manifestation of Guan Yin, Great Compassion Bodhisattva. Why did the Master teach Mr. Liao-Fan to chant a mantra incantation instead of reciting a sutra? The purpose of chanting a mantra is to uncover our pure mind, to eradicate our wandering thoughts.

Mantras are directly transliterated from Sanskrit. They have no meanings so we will not be tempted to think of them. Rather we will simply and continuously chant them. In so doing, over a long period of time, our minds will become pure. Thus, our goal will be attained. The goal remains the same whether we are reciting sutras, chanting mantras or a Buddha's name. But, it is important that we teach others the method that is most suitable for them. For example, if the Master had taught Mr. Liao-Fan to recite sutras, he would have been tempted to analyze their meaning. Thus, he was taught to chant a mantra. There is a saying in Buddhism that, "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". What is important is that all emphasize cultivation.

Today, we lack the fundamental education that our ancestors had. We are unable to follow the advice of ancient people, "It is not too late to mend the fold even after the sheep are lost". So for the first few years of our practice, we can concentrate on memorizing the Infinite Life Sutra. This is especially practical for young people. The best time to learn is during the golden years of learning, before the age of twenty. If we are able to memorize the sutra and recite it by heart, we will benefit from it our whole life.

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. It would enable them to remember their origins. Second, we would be able to understand the Chinese characters. Third, we would be well-versed in classical Chinese much more, which would provide us with the ability to read the Complete Library in Four Divisions. These books have been passed down through five thousand years of Chinese history. They contain the essence of the wisdom and experience of past sages and virtuous ancients to be absorbed as our own knowledge. Fourth, we would also have the ability to read Buddhist sutras as they serve as the foundation for practicing Buddhism.

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 kind deeds and cultivate purity of mind, then in due time whatever we seek will be attained.

Master Yun-Gu explained that it had been said by specialists in drawing talismanic figures, "Those who are considered experts in the art of drawing charms but who 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 start to finish. With this understanding,

start with the first stroke, which is called a good beginning.

In the process of drawing, one must let go of all wandering thoughts. Do not even give rise to a single thought of goodness. Only under these circumstances can a charm be effective.

Charms are a form of ancient magic in Taoism, similar to mantra chanting in Buddhism. If a supposed expert in the art of drawing symbols does not know how to properly draw one, then the spirits would laugh at him or her. There is a secret to drawing this symbol so that it is effective. The key is to not give rise to thoughts.

This same principle applies to chanting mantras. Some people are able to effectively chant mantras. For example, the Great Compassion Water, which is consecrated by the "Great Compassion Mantra" recitation, can be very effective for some, not at all effective for others. Why? 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 chant it effectively. Why? The vast majority of people have many wandering thoughts while they are chanting it. And it only takes one wandering thought to render our chanting ineffective.

It is the same with sutra recitation. If we recite one round of the Infinite Life Sutra without having any wandering thoughts, it would be outstanding! Without doubt, we would be in correspondence with all 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 to form a connection with them. But if we recite the sutra while having wandering thoughts, we will not receive a response.

From this, we know that the shorter the mantra the easier it will be for us to recite it and to concentrate on it. And chanting "Namo Amitufo" is even shorter. If we still think that even this is too long, Master Lian-Qi taught us to chant just "Amitufo". If we chant this without one single thought, then it will be effective. It would be just like sending a telegram to Buddha Amitabha and having him receive it. But, if we add a wandering thought, then Buddha Amitabha will not be able to receive the message and there will be no response.

Master Yun-Gu continued, "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 or considerations for our seeking to be effective. To achieve this, our minds need to be truly pure, without any wandering thoughts. This is the mind of sincerity, purity and respect. Only when we appeal to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas 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, when 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 grand ceremony. For example, some Chinese who officiated at the ceremony needed to fast and bathe for three days before the religious observation. For these three days, this person cultivated purity of mind by shutting themselves in a small room to try to let go of attachments. In Buddhism, this is called "Contemplation", a ceremony honoring the deity or ancestor as if they were present. In doing so at the time of the ceremony, the spirit of that ancestor will appear.

When we pay respect to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at way places, are they present? Not necessarily. The presence of the images does not mean they are there. If the practitioners at this way place, whether ordained or lay persons, are sincere and pure in mind, then Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will be present. If they are not, then more often than not there will be some demons impersonating Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This is explained in the [Surangama Sutra](#).

"Mencius discussed in 'Learning to Create Destiny' that, 'There is no difference between a long life and a short life.' At first glance, one would find this hard to understand. How can long life and short life be the same? In fact, when we do not give rise to thought there is no duality in short or long life".

Short life and long life are completely different, why say they are the same? Giving rise to wandering thoughts, discriminatory thoughts and attachments creates duality. Without discriminatory thoughts and attachments, there is no duality.

"When we do not give rise to thoughts, there is no duality in short and long life". It is evident that only when the mind is pure are we able to see non-duality. Short life and long life do not differ for nothing in the universe has duality. In Buddhism, this is called "entering the state of non-duality". As explained in the [Speech of Vaisali Sutra](#) the state of duality is called One Mind Undisturbed in the Pure Land School and One True Dharma Realm in the [Flower Adornment Sutra](#). It is the state of Buddhahood. Mencius also talked about the state of non-duality. Thus, it is evident that this is the state of mind of Bodhisattvas above the level of ground states.

"Separately analyze re-creating destiny. When there is no duality between wealth and poverty we will be able to create and form our own destiny".

We would do well to be content with things as they are, to settle down and get on with our work. There is a saying, "If the rich were content to be rich and the poor were content to be poor" society would be stable, the world would be peaceful and all would be joyful. What is being joyful? Not having any wandering thoughts, worries or afflictions. If a beggar were able to understand that his or her current condition was a matter of destiny, then he or she would also be very much at ease, very fortunate and happy.

There was a good example of this that happened in the early part of this century. At that time

there was a beggar in a village in Jiangsu Province who would beg for food during the day. At night, he would sleep in old deserted way places. In this way, he led a life of ease and joy. Then, his son, due to his success in business became rich and influential. However, the father was still begging for food. The son found himself being admonished. "How can you be such an unfilial son? You have such great wealth. How can you let your father still beg for his food!" The son felt ashamed after hearing this and sent out people to search everywhere for his father and bring him to his home, so he could take care of him. But after a month of living in his son's home, the father sneaked out to resume his life as a beggar.

People asked the father, "Wouldn't it 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. I can enjoy visiting beautiful scenery and can make any place my home at night. There is nothing more joyful than to live as freely as this. To have to remain at home is suffering for me!" He was content with his condition so he could let go and attain true liberation. He was not affected the slightest bit by the five desires of wealth, lust, fame, food or drink and sleep. Rather, he was happy and had purity of mind. He preferred to be on the sidelines, regarding this world as a play. 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 happiness and fulfillment are not necessarily synonymous with wealth or social status. Therefore, we need to understand about destiny, need to be able to adjust to "accord with sentient beings and be joyful over other's meritorious deeds". Only in this way will our lives be happy and fulfilling.

"When there is no duality between failure and success, then we can control the fate of prestige and lack of position. When there is no duality between short life and long life, then we can control the destiny of life and death. The most important concern for human beings is that of life and death. So talking about early death and longevity encompass all conditions, whether favorable or unfavorable, whether gain or loss".

"To live or die at will" includes according with all conditions. Regardless of favorable or unfavorable conditions, we will be completely at ease. 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 our actual efforts in practice. We can now clearly see that only an awakened person can settle their mind and create destiny. We can likewise clearly see that it is hopeless for the deluded to be immoral in behavior, becoming increasingly deluded. Thus, the Buddha often referred to the deluded as pitiful creatures.

"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, one needs to be aware of one's own faults and

resolve to correct them just as in curing a sickness”.

We cultivate, waiting for our destiny to change, to be created. Changing destiny is not something accomplished within a day or two, but over a long time. We need to confidently and diligently strive to improve. These relate to our own laziness and the need for diligence and awakening. We must be awakened and not deluded, proper and not deviated to strive diligently for improvement. In time, we will attain the desired result.

Cultivation is correcting the faults in the three karmas of improper thoughts, speech and behavior. We need to correct our improper viewpoints, bad intentions and improper conduct, to adopt whatever ways are necessary to remedy these faults.

“While waiting we should let go of the thought of desiring something that we are not supposed to have and the thought of wishing to receive a reward”.

It is wandering thoughts to strongly hope for an early harvest of reward for our good deeds. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking can create obstacles. It is said that we should, “Only ask about the reaping, not the harvest”. As long as we are diligent in our cultivation, the harvest will naturally follow, why bother to seek it everyday? This teaches us the true way of cultivation, of not seeking for anything.

We only need to concentrate on ending our improper ways and cultivating kind deeds. Then, in the end we will attain whatever we desire. There is no need to seek for everything will be attained. If we are seeking then what we can attain is limited. Most likely, we will receive only what we seek. When we do not seek, we attain everything. Everything is a manifestation of and in correspondence with our virtuous nature. Therefore, when we do not seek, everything can be attained. When we are seeking, cultivation of virtue is not in correspondence with our virtuous nature. This will limit what we will attain.

Actually, what Mr. Liao-Fan attained was cultivation of virtue. It was not yet virtuous nature, because he still sought. First he sought scholarly honor and official rank, then he sought children. Whatever he sought, he attained. If he did not have one thought of a request, if he solely cultivated and accumulated virtue, then everything would have turned out perfectly. He did not seek longevity and yet he lived longer than destined. He was supposed to only live to the age of fifty-three, but instead lived to seventy-four.

We need to cease our requesting and affinity seeking. Sensible wishes are ones in which we ask that our lives be smooth. That we have enough to eat, a safe place to live and adequate clothing. It would be enough to live comfortably in a small house with minimal expenses and to have a simple life. But most people want to have luxuries and to impress others, not knowing the price they have to pay for these extravagances. They lose more than they gain. But if instead we share our good fortune with others then our good fortune will become the accumulation of merit.

If we cultivate and accumulate enough virtue to last for a hundred generations, then our descendants would have inexhaustible enjoyment. If we were truly intelligent and wise people, we would share our excessive good fortune with others. Therefore, we need to be patient. Why seek for the early arri-

val of good fortune when it will come in good time?

“It would be quite an accomplishment in achieving these teachings to be able to reach the innate ‘State of No Thought’. It is the actual learning and practice of wisdom.”

Master Yun-Gu told me “I know that you are still unable to accomplish the ‘State of No Thought’, but you can practice reciting the Zhun Ti 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 give rise to wandering thoughts, the mantra will become effective and successful.”

Actual learning and practice is true knowledge. Reaching achievement is what Buddhists call “returning to the original state”. It is to reveal our original self-nature, which is not the state of an ordinary being. There is true happiness within. It is to be filled with the Dharma joy, to truly abandon suffering for happiness. This is what awakened people seek.

This method taught by Master Yun-Gu enables us to practice concurrently the Three Learnings of self-discipline or abiding by the precepts, deep concentration and wisdom. This type of method is called “perfect practice with perfect attainment” what the Flower Adornment Sutra explains as “One is all, all is one. To cultivate one method is to cultivate all methods.” The essence of the practice is still to do so without interruptions, without intermingling with other thoughts or other methods.

Is there a need to count the recitations? Master Yun-Gu did not tell him to do so, but rather to recite continuously. Many ancient sages required practitioners to start their practice of chanting by keeping track of the number of recitations. Why? Because like us, they were lazy and lacked diligence. Thus, it was helpful to have a goal for the practitioner to meet a required number of recitations a day. For example, to chant the Buddha’s name ten thousand times a day. Meeting this daily goal helped to counteract the bad habits of laziness and indolence. If we do not count, we may forget to practice.

For someone as honest and earnest as Mr. Liao-Fan, there was no need to keep track of the recitations, instead that would have served as intermingling. His cultivation was truly learned and diligent, thus he was able to practice without interruption, 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 long time. In the past, people generally practiced sutra recitation, but whether reciting sutras, chanting mantras or a Buddha's name, we all need to practice with the mind of purity, equality and respect. We all need to practice continuously to truly attain the effects from practice.

The state of “No thought” is essential. It is to not have any wandering thoughts, discriminatory thoughts or attachments. Although Mr. Liao-Fan had not given rise to any wandering thoughts for three days while he was meditating with Master Yun-Gu at the meditation hall, he had not yet reached the

state of "No thought". He had just used belief, not concentration, to suppress his afflictions. He believed that all was destined. He believed in Cause and Effect. Therefore, Master Yun-Gu taught him a way to move on to the next level, to cultivate concentration. To recite the Zhun Ti Mantra is to always cultivate concentration. In ridding ourselves of wandering thoughts and attachments, our true nature will thus be uncovered.

The Buddha spoke many times of "the original nature as it is". It is the same thing as One Mind Undisturbed in the Pure Land School. This is the goal of our practice and the true and perfect achievement. It is to reach the achievement of "to not recite when reciting and to recite when not reciting". This is often explained as "not being 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 a Buddha's name or reciting the sutra. Therefore, when we recite the Infinite Life Sutra without attachment, we can first achieve Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha and then One Mind Undisturbed. It is evident that although the methods may differ, the principles and the goal are all the same. When we reach the state of "No thought", when 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 lower level is Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, which is where our cultivation starts. Therefore, we cannot be proud when our achievement reaches a certain level for if we do so then we will be unable to advance further.

Reaching the upper level of Constant Mindfulness, we may have the ability to transcend this world at will, to leave anytime we wish. Whenever we want to go, Buddha Amitabha will come to escort us to the Western Pure Land. Although we have reached this level of achievement and are able to pass away with ease, it is best to stay longer in this world. Why? The Infinite life Sutra tells us that to practice in our World of Suffering for one day is the same as to practicing in the Pure Land for a hundred years. We can stay in this world to train our endurance. The second and even more important purpose of staying is to encourage more people to go to the Pure Land.

It is remarkable that we ourselves are able to go, but it would be even better if we could help others to go there as well! Thus, we can concentrate on helping, educating and encouraging others. When we ourselves cultivate and encourage others to cultivate as well, the merit is perfect. In so doing, we are able to pay back the great kindness that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have shown us. For the seeking to be effective, there must be a gain.

My name used to be Xue-Hai, which means "broad learning", but after receiving these teachings from Master Yun-Gu, I changed it to Liao-Fan, which means, "transcending the ordinary".

In the past, people had three sets of names (in China); their formal name, courtesy name and assumed name. Their parents gave the first one. This name could not be changed for to do so would have been unfilial. The names that parents gave expressed their aspirations for their children. If these were changed, it was tantamount to ignoring this aspiration, truly an unfilial act. Their assumed name

was sometimes used when one had a certain social status or prestige in society.

When people reached adulthood, others no longer called him or her by the name that had been given by the parents. Upon reaching age twenty, males underwent a ceremony to be initiated into adulthood. Before this ceremony, everyone could address him by his given name. Moreover, after this it was disrespectful for others to still address him by the name given by the parents.

Then how did others address him? During the ceremony, people of the same generation or older, siblings, schoolmates and friends would give the courtesy name. For the rest of his life, he was addressed by this name but not by the formal name. If in the future, he were to become a government official or even the emperor, people would address him by his courtesy name. (The same applied to females, although their age for reaching adulthood was sixteen years old.) If a person was addressed by his formal name, then most likely he had committed a crime, been sentenced and punished. We need to be clear on this general knowledge of how people were addressed.

If people wanted to be even more respectful, they would address an individual by an assumed name or by his or her birthplace. To address a person as such indicated that he was a respected important person from a particular place. To address a person by his birthplace was the most respected form of address.

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 Zhi Zhe was addressed as the great master of Tiantai because he lived on Tiantai Mountain. Another example is Master Kui Ji who was called Ci En because he was from the Ci En Temple.

Liao-Fan and Xue-Hai were Mr. Liao-Fan's assumed names, a very respectful way of addressing him. Only the parents and teacher used a person's formal name after that person reached adulthood. Even grandparents, uncles and emperors still addressed a person by the courtesy name. Thus, we see that society accorded the same gratitude and respect to teachers as it did to parents.

It signified my understanding of the fact that we could create our destiny and that I did not wish to be like ordinary people, who were controlled by their destiny. From then on, I began to be very cautious and careful in whatever I thought or did. Soon I felt quite different from before. In the past, I was careless and had no self-discipline at all. Now, I found myself being naturally cautious and conscientious.

This segment talks of Mr. Liao-Fan's determination and cultivation in correcting his errors and making a new start. First, he changed his assumed name to Liao-Fan from Xue-Hai. "Liao" means to clearly understand. "Fan" means ordinary. At that moment, he understood everything in regards to everyday matters. He was awakened. He truly knew that only we could change and create destiny. He understood the principles and methods, and knew that from then on he did not have to just follow the path of destiny because it was not fixed.

After his resolution to reform, his feeling in daily living changed. From that point on until the end of his life he was constantly aware of his thoughts and behavior, was always on the alert, no longer delud-

ed. In the past he had been unrestrained, doing things as he pleased, drifting aimlessly through each day. How did he live his life? He did not know. He had no direction, no goal. If we live this way, we will be bound by fate, unable to create our own bright future.

After reforming, he found himself being naturally cautious and careful in thought, speech and behavior. In other words, after turning over new leaf, his beliefs differed, his viewpoints regarding life and the universe changed dramatically. Before, he thought everything was bound by fate. But now he knew that he, we, each could create destiny. Thus, he was more positive, more determined and optimistic.

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

The reason why ordinary people cannot reform is that they do not understand this. Those who are more familiar with the Infinite Life Sutra will understand such situations and be even more careful with their thoughts, speech and behavior than Mr. Liao-Fan was. This is because the population of the Pure Land is beyond calculation. Even if we used every computer in the world, we still could not calculate the number of beings who live there. And yet every one of them possesses the same abilities as those of Buddha Amitabha. Each of them has the heavenly eye to see all, heavenly ears to hear all, the ability to know every thought of every being throughout the universe in the past, present and future. So, Buddha Amitabha, Great Compassion Bodhisattva, Great Strength Bodhisattva and all the beings in the Western Pure Land know our every thought, our every wrongdoing.

This talks of 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 want to seek birth into the Pure Land, want to achieve our virtuous conduct. If we continue to deceive ourselves, we will be unable to achieve. Confucius said, "A decent person is cautious even when alone". Even if we live alone, we can still discipline ourselves by not indulging ourselves without restrictions. In this way, we will truly be cultivating. Ordinary people constantly indulge themselves without any real discipline. When in public they may appear careful and self-restrained, but when alone will again indulge themselves.

For example, why is it that way places of the past had many practitioners sleeping in one room and did not allow anyone to have a single room? Because if there was only one person sleeping in a room, he or she would be unable to achieve in cultivation. To sleep in a room with others is to rely on the group. When there are over ten people sleeping in a room, they will behave well even while sleeping. The purpose of this was to force people to discipline themselves. Today's society is different from those of the past in that no one is willing to restrain himself or herself, but are intent on enjoying comfort. Fine! We can enjoy ourselves in this life and then we can leisurely enjoy ourselves in the Three Bad

Realms in the upcoming life, not succeeding on the path to enlightenment.

Living with a large group, everyone needs to work together. There are some single rooms at way places, but they are especially for those cultivators of advanced years who have mobility problems. Also, those who hold high position and who have many responsibilities, like abbots, or the leading monk also need to have a room of their own, for the convenience of overseeing matters at all hours without disturbing others.

Therefore, true cultivators practice "living together harmoniously", one of the Six Principles of Harmony. 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 this or that particular person". Then he or she will not be able to achieve the state of Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. Why? They have discriminatory and impure minds. The mind that still has dislikes and evasions. How would that person achieve? Then where and how do we cultivate? Wherever it is that we dislike the most. Wherever exists the most discriminatory environment to cultivate our purity, our non-discriminatory mind.

It is wrong for us to not be willing to live with or get along with someone. Mr. Liao-Fan had discovered his faults, mended his ways and sincerely corrected his errors. Now when we have this fault, instead of correcting it, we continuously nurture it. How can we hope to succeed in our cultivation?

Therefore, within a Sangha, a starting point for our cultivation is the Six Principles of Harmony, which are the basic guidelines to follow when living together in a large group. For individuals, everyone can abide by the Five Fundamental Precepts and Ten Good Conducts. In the past, way places used the Sami Precepts and guidelines for dignified behavior as the standard. It includes the Ten precepts and twenty-four kinds of dignified manners. Today, we do not need to be that strict. It would suffice for us to follow the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Conducts as the standard for both lay people and for monks and nuns. However, the standard cannot be lower than this.

To live in a group it is necessary to abide by the Six Principles of Harmony to correct our faults and bad habits and to learn to neither dislike nor detest others. Mr. Liao-Fan found that now he did not mind even when he encountered those who disliked or even slandered him. Rather, he found that he could patiently bear their insults with a peaceful mind and no longer felt compelled to quarrel with them. It was evident that his state of mind was calm and serene, 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 whether they are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas or even demons and ghosts, we need to find our inner peace and to hold on to it, regardless of the current environment or circumstances.

After the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Master Hui-Neng was enlightened, he found himself in the presence of and thus, attendant to a group of hunters. He witnessed their hunting, killing and committing many bad deeds daily. Also, he cooked their meat for them and took care of them. At that time, the hunters were his masters. He was their servant. He did this not for just a short time, but for fifteen years.

Could we have endured doing this? He not only endured but lived in ease in that environment, not giving rise to wandering thoughts, discriminatory thoughts and attachments. These were fifteen years

of his true cultivation. He reached enlightenment when he was in Huangmei, in the southern part of China. Having attained enlightenment, he then started to correct his bad habits. Whether under favorable or adverse circumstances, he cultivated his mind of purity, equality, great compassion and kindness. There is nothing more important than the cultivation of these four qualities.

Today, when we interact with people, matters and objects, are we cultivating our purity of mind under favorable or adverse conditions? If we are not cultivating our purity of mind, then we are not really cultivating and will not attain any benefit. If so, we are not properly practicing Buddhism, then we are studying it as an academic pursuit. Even if we spent everyday reading the sutras and were extremely articulate in explaining them, we would just be increasing our afflictions. In this way, we will be in the Three Bad Realms. This is absolutely wrong! True practitioners do not attach to the words, do not attach to what has been said, to what has been specified and thought, rather they use their intuition. They seek purity of mind, the non-discriminatory mind and the true mind, which is our original self-nature. They seek perfect complete enlightenment.

As Pure Land practitioners, this is also our goal, to attain Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. Constant mindfulness is the mind of purity and equality. Non-discrimination is one entirety. Purity is one entirety. There is no barrier within the true mind. In other words, if we still have discriminatory thoughts and attachments, then we are unable to achieve constant mindfulness. Departing from these discriminatory thoughts and attachments, we will be able to achieve constant mindfulness, to be truly cultivating. Although this is not a very high level of achievement, attaining it shows that Mr. Liao-Fan was proceeding correctly and had received a good response.

The year after I met Master Yun-Gu, I took the preliminary imperial examination in which Mr. Kong had predicted that I would come in third place. Amazingly, I came in 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!

Mr. Liao-Fan was destined to place third in the examination. But by cultivating kind deeds and accumulating merits and virtue, he was able to improve his placement from third to first. As Mr. Kong's predictions began to lose their accuracy Mr. Liao-Fan saw first hand that he was able to change destiny, saw first hand 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 of my 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 and not being eager enough to do it or having doubts when helping others in need.

Sometimes I forced myself to act kindly, but my speech was still untamed and offensive. I found I could contain myself when sober, but after a few drinks, I would lose self-discipline and act without restraint. Although I often practiced kind deeds and accumulated merits, my faults and offenses were so numerous, they seemed to outnumber my good deeds. A lot of my time was spent vainly and without value.

We would do well to pay attention to these several points. 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 are founded on traditional moral principles. They include those between husband and wife, parent and child, siblings, friends, political leaders and the public.

To practice what we ought to practice is a virtue of our nature. 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. We are naturally obligated to be so. All of us should be mutually caring, respectful and helpful with each other.

Mr. Liao-Fan understood this, although he did not yet practice them perfectly and purely, for these were still intermingled with personal advantages and disadvantages. If I were to help this person, it would be harmful to me. If we have these considerations, then our thoughts and actions are not pure and we will be unable to wholeheartedly put our efforts into helping others. From this, we know that although we do kind deeds, we still have not yet done enough.

Confucius taught of the virtue in "assisting others in achieving goodness". He taught that goodness is a virtue. When we encounter others doing good deeds, we would do well to help them to accomplish their goal. Why? A good deed can benefit the whole town, the whole society.

For example, when a road needs to be fixed and a person volunteers to repair it. We need to wholeheartedly put our efforts into assisting that person to accomplish this kind of good deed and to benefit the people or society needs assistance from all of us. Mr. Liao-Fan was able to go along in helping others, but he could not do so wholeheartedly. He was only a little bit willing. He still had doubts when helping others in need.

If others are in trouble, we need to help them. But many of us first question whether we should or should not. In today's society, we frequently encounter people asking for help. Some of these people are frauds asking for money. After receiving it, they go out and spend it on overindulging themselves in food, drinks, women and gambling. If so, then our kind deeds become transgressions. Thus, it is difficult indeed to do good deeds for it requires both compassion and wisdom. Compassion is the authentic driving force behind our helping. Wisdom will help us to examine and judge whether we should help or not. If the person does indeed need help, then we should do everything we can to assist. On the other hand, if they try to cheat and swindle us and we know what they are doing we need to guide them. If they are not really old or ill, but are healthy and strong then we can encourage and guide them to engage in a decent and proper job, not to be making a living using devious means.

Therefore, correcting errors to make a fresh start is not something readily accomplished, but requires time and continuous reformation. In the beginning stages, difficulties are unavoidable. To behave kindly and courteously in manner, while being careless and thoughtless in speech is a habit. Since ancient times, speech has been considered the source of both fortune and misfortune, so we need to be constantly aware in our speech.

Of Confucius' four studies, the first one is that of virtuous conduct, which is basic to how we conduct ourselves. Today we would call this moral education. However, this kind of education no longer exists in our society, as people today are less concerned about it. The second academic discipline is speech. Confucius was emphatic on the training of speech, that we should speak properly with respect and not harm others with our inconsiderate words.

We often carelessly harm others with our speech. When this happens, some may take offense and bear a grudge. Then in the future they will in turn seek revenge. Thus, much resentment and misunderstanding arises from this, creating many problems for us. "The speaker had no such intention, the listener interpreted it to be so". Thus, we need to be discreet, reserved and reticent in our speech. There really is no need to talk a lot. In talking less, we will commit fewer mistakes.

For our self-achievement while encouraging others to achieve as well, especially for practitioners cultivating purity of mind, one phrase of "Amitufo" will suffice. In this way, when we find ourselves subjected to hearing gossip, we would not respond with anything at all but "Amitufo". If they gossip more, then again say "Amitufo". Let them hear "Amitufo" several times. After they are finished talking, we will not have paid attention to anything they said. We will only have chanted "Amitufo" to them and forgotten whatever they were talking about. This will be good for it is best not to say much. Mr. Liao-Fan had the bad habit of talking too much.

The restriction on intoxicants is one of the five major precepts in Buddhism. We need to understand exactly why the Buddha prohibited alcohol intake. When intoxicated we act foolishly and recklessly. If we can drink a moderate amount of alcohol and not become intoxicated, then there is an exception to this precept. However, the precept is very clear on this, we are not even supposed to take one drop of alcohol. Why? There was the fear that we would be unable to control ourselves, which would lead to creating other problems, breaking other fundamental precepts.

In the past when I was studying in Taizhong, my late teacher, Mr. Bing-Nan Lee lectured on the Book of Rites. There was a commentary on the Book of Rites written by Mr. Kang-Cheng Zheng, a learned scholar who combined profundity with virtue during the East Han Dynasty (almost two thousand years ago). He was a student of Mr. Rong Ma who in his own time was also an exceptional scholar. However, being narrow-minded, Mr. Ma would become extremely displeased if any of his students' achievements surpassed his. Mr. Zheng's achievement did precisely this. Mr. Rong Ma could not only not resign himself to the fact, so he hired someone to kill Mr. Zheng! When Mr. Zheng was taking leave from his teacher, the latter took his students to a pavilion ten kilometers out of town to see Mr. Zheng off.

He implemented his ill-intentioned plan and began encouraging everyone to start drinking toasts. Eventually, Mr. Zheng drank three hundred toasts! Mr. Rong Ma had hoped to get Mr. Zheng drunk,

which would have made it much easier for the killer to succeed. He had no idea that alcohol had no effect on Mr. Zheng who maintained his demeanor of courtesy and propriety throughout. Mr. Lee said that if everyone were able to drink this much without being affected like Mr. Zheng, then Buddha Shakyamuni would never have needed to establish this precept.

We need to understand why Buddha Shakyamuni set up this as well as other precepts. When lay Buddhist practitioners are cooking, it is all right to use cooking wine, because we will not become intoxicated. It is therefore permissible to use it for flavoring. Alcohol can improve poor blood circulation, so it is permissible for the elderly to drink a glass at mealtimes. These are simply exceptions to the rule. They are not breaking the precepts.

Similarly, there are five pungent vegetables of onion, garlic, chives, green onions and leeks. Buddhists are discouraged from consuming these, especially garlic. Why did the Buddha prohibit us from eating 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 achievement, our intake of food and drink can adversely effect our mind. Once we have achieved a certain level and are master of our mind, able to change our environment according to our mind then there will be no hindrances. But until then, if the environment influences our mind so we are not in control of it, there will be obstacles.

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

Some lay persons have said, "If we cannot eat these five vegetables, then we are not interested in becoming vegetarian". We need to understand the purpose behind this prohibition. If these vegetables are used as seasonings, if we stir fry one or two cloves of garlic into a dish, 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 circumstance. Because it is an unimaginably rare opportunity for them to encounter the teachings, we can make use of the opportunity in introducing the teachings to others. During drinks and at mealtime, we can explain to them the great truths of Buddhism, to plant the good root. This is a rare educational opportunity 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 Mr. Liao-Fan had a post with the army that required constant travelling, he did not have a chance to dedicate the merits. It was not until the year after he fulfilled his pledge of three thousand

good deeds that he had the chance to do so. He engaged the services of several monks at a temple to dedicate the merits on his behalf after having completely fulfilled his pledge. When he had made his pledge he had written to gods or to spirits and 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 an obligation 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 Tian-Qi.

Mr. Liao-Fan had not been destined to have a son, but having wished for one, found his wish 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 had given birth to their first son Tian-Qi. From this, we can see that if we truly make the wish, it will come true. Of course, although he had gained a son before completing his pledge of the three thousand good deeds, he would honor it. It was the same as what had happened previously. He took the imperial examination, but before he could fulfill his pledge, he came in first when he had been destined to come in third. This is to be in correspondence and is 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 and make a red circle on the calendar for every good deed she did. Sometimes she gave food to the poor or bought living creatures from 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 red circles in one day!

Today if we have the heart to free captured living creatures, we need to be careful not to be deceived. Many people who wanted to set creatures free would go to pet stores to buy them. But these stores often captured the animals or birds and then sold them for us to set free. If we did not buy the animals, the stores would not try to capture more of them. The more we try to free, the more they will try to capture. This will not help animals but will put more of them at risk, causing more harm than good. Then, instead of accumulating merits and virtues, we accumulate offenses.

Therefore, when we want to free living creatures 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 seek an affinity. By happening to come upon one, we can determine if it will be able to survive on its own. Otherwise, it would be best not to buy it. It would be better to use the money to accomplish some other merits and virtues. Therefore, we need to be wise in our actions and not act impulsively or emotionally.

The meaning of freeing captured creatures does not just include setting animals or birds free. It al-

so 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 the Love of Life with its beautiful illustrations by Mr. Zi-Kai Feng, a famous Chinese painter. However, parts of this book are in classical Chinese. If someone could update it with colored illustrations and pronunciations for today's readers, it could help more children to nurture their love for living creatures. By doing so, we will truly achieve the essence of freeing living creatures. We need to understand the spirit, the profound meaning behind what we are taught not just follow something to the letter. As for the practice of giving, there are many kinds including the giving of wealth, teachings and fearlessness. Each has its own inconceivably vast and profound meanings.

Both Mr. Liao-Fan and his wife had refrained from wrongdoing and practiced good deeds. Obviously, they were accomplishing their goal much faster than before. In the past, they were sometimes unable to accomplish one good deed a day, but took several days to do so. Thus, it took ten years to complete the pledge of three thousand virtuous deeds. With three thousand six hundred and fifty days in ten years, it is evident that there were over six hundred days in which they failed to complete any. But now they were able to accomplish more than ten a day, a vast improvement over before. 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 the reason 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 in our home. On September thirteenth 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.

From 1580 to 1583, it only took Mr. Liao-Fan four years to complete the second pledge of three thousand good deeds, whereas it had taken over ten years to accomplish the first three thousand. This time he again engaged the services of a monk to make the dedication at his home.

He had not been destined to pass this particular examination. However, his destiny also had not included having a son but he had 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 had not been destined to pass it. Everything that Master Yun-Gu had taught him had 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, a position that had not been in his original destiny. Previously, he had been destined to be a mayor of a county in Sichuan County, in southwest China, far from Beijing. But now he was assigned to Baodi County, which was close to Beijing, the capital.

Then I prepared a small book to record my merits and faults and called it the Book of Cultivating the Mind. Every morning, when I started to 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 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, of his wish to create good fortune for all those he was responsible for. At this time, city or county mayors were chosen by the imperial government, not elected. Mr. Liao-Fan was a very good county mayor. He refrained from wrongdoing, cultivated good deeds and accumulated merits and virtues. At the beginning of his term of office, he prepared a blank notebook and named it the Book of Cultivating the Mind. He used it every day to record his good or bad deeds and thoughts, so that he could be watchful over them to see when he would be able to fulfill his pledge of ten thousand good deeds.

Everyday Mr. Liao-Fan 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.

At night, in the manner of Mr. Zhao, he then reported to the gods and spirits everything he had done throughout the day, not hiding anything. Many ancient people followed this practice. They would openly and honestly admit to everything that they had done to be pure in body and mind. 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 was able to help me in our accumulation of good deeds and we were able to complete three thousand meritorious deeds. Now, I had made a vow to complete ten thousand good deeds and 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, Mr. Liao-Fan was not as busy with work thus it was easy for his wife to assist him in doing good deeds. As a government official, they lived in a government residence. In the past, there was little contact between those in the official residence and the public, especially their family members. Therefore, she was no longer able to help him in cultivating and accumulating good deeds. She worried when they would be able to fulfill the pledge of ten thousand good deeds.

That night, after your mother spoke these words, I dreamed of a heavenly being and told him of my difficulty in completing the ten thousand good deeds. The heavenly being told me that when I became mayor, I had reduced the taxes on the farm-

lands. That was a great good deed and that deed itself was worth ten thousand merits. My vow was already fulfilled!

As it turned out, the farmers in Baodi County had to pay a very high tax and when I came to office, I reduced the taxes on the farmlands by nearly half. But still, I felt strange and bewildered. I still had doubts and wondered how a single deed could be worth ten thousand merits.

After he had become the county mayor, Mr. Liao-Fan had reduced the tax on farmlands by almost half. The amount of the decrease was substantial. Thus, all the farmers in the county benefited from his act. 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. First, how had the heavenly being known what he had done? Second, could this one act really be 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 merit and virtue". Average people usually do not get this kind of opportunity to cultivate such good fortune and merit. If Mr. Liao-Fan had not become a county mayor, how many years would it have taken him to complete the ten thousand good deeds? At that time, he had the opportunity to be able 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. For if a public policy did not benefit the populace, but proved to be harmful to them, then this act would have become ten thousands offenses. Good fortune or misfortune truly depends on our thoughts. The higher our position, the greater the possibilities for creating good fortune or misfortune. A leader of a country can implement one policy and this good deed will prove beneficial to all citizens and accomplish thousands, even millions of good deeds. On the other hand, if the leader implemented a policy that proved harmful to the public, then he or she would have committed thousands, even millions of bad deeds.

Average people do not have this kind of opportunity. There is a limit to the extent of good or bad we can do. If we hold the position and the status, and thus have the opportunity, we would do well to be cautious in our every action. By cultivating good deeds, we will have a bright future. To do otherwise will ensure that we will fall into the Three Bad Realms to suffer there. Why? The results from our actions are more extensive and inclusive compared to those of average citizens.

Coincidentally, the Zen Master Huan-Yu 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 Huan-Yu 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 from ten thousand good deeds. Besides, your act of reducing the taxes in this county benefits more than ten thousand people. "

Not long after he had his dream, by chance he met the Zen Master Huan-Yu from Wutai (Five Plat-

eau) Mountain and asked him about what had happened. He wanted to know if it was indeed possible. It would be wonderful if something like this was true, that the pledge of ten thousand good deeds was already completed! If it were not true then he would gradually work to accomplish these deeds. Master Huan-Yu then told him that yes, one deed done with the heart of sincerity can be worth the merits from ten thousand good deeds.

This principle, "To cultivate one is to cultivate all" was explained in the Flower Adornment Sutra. It is the learning and cultivation of "non-hindrance". Why? Everything arises from our self-nature. If the cultivation corresponded with the self-nature, then it can be regarded as cultivating all. If we do good deeds that are not from our self-nature but because we are seeking then we will only receive what we seek and nothing more. If we seek from the self-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 mind is pure, all of our deeds will be kind. Thus, we will accumulate far more than just ten thousand good deeds. "Amitabha" is a name of millions of virtues. As we gradually come to understand the true reality, we will realize that what Master Ou-Yi said was logical, that "Amitabha" encompasses all the infinite ways of practice. He said, "How would we know that if we were able to be mindful of Buddha Amitabha then we would understand all the wisdom of the Great Buddhist Canon. Also, we could 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 "Amitabha". Three thousand kinds of dignified manners, eighty thousand minute courtesies and three divisions of precepts are also within "Amitabha". All the precepts, all the Buddhist teachings, all worldly teachings are also included within "Amitabha". All methods, all 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 people who do not yet know the infinite advantages found in the name "Amitabha".

When we give rise to thoughts, all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and spirits of heaven and earth know them. This one thought arises from our true self-nature. The true mind has no limit, no boundary. When we do even the slightest good deed, if it corresponds with the true mind, then no matter how small, it is still infinite. Mr. Liao-Fan 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, then this deed can indeed be worth the merits of ten thousand. Master Huan-Yu told Mr. Liao-Fan that yes, his act of reducing the taxes in this county had relieved the suffering of heavy taxes on all the farmers and had benefited more than ten thousand people. However, Mr. Liao-Fan 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 self-nature, if he had cultivated from his true mind, then that one good deed would not have been worth just the merits of ten thousand good deeds but of innumerable good deeds.

If we see a beggar on the street and freely give him one dollar, then the merit of this accords with

our self-nature. Why? Because at that time we did not have discriminatory thoughts of others and we, of beggar and giver. We did not differentiate between receiver and giver. We were not attached. In this way, the merits from giving one dollar are infinite for they are the uncovering of our virtuous nature.

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 Consciousness Minds. This mind has discriminatory thoughts and attachments. It is limited and therefore, we are unable to break through this obstruction.

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 our minds. We as ordinary people are very narrow-minded, no matter how much good fortune or merit we cultivate, we will always be bound by our discriminatory thoughts and attachments. These thoughts and attachments 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. Mr. Liao-Fan 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 his words, I immediately gave all my savings for him to take back to the Wutai Mountain. I asked the Master 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 Mr. Liao-Fan who would, without having to think it over, give his savings to the Wutai Way Places to provide meals for ten thousand monks. Usually, when laypeople wished to be generous they would provide meals for one thousand monks or nuns, but Mr. Liao-Fan wanted to do so for ten thousand, to fulfill his great vow of ten thousand good deeds.

Buddhism flourished during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. There were several thousand monks and nuns who lived on the four great Buddhist mountains in China. The ten thousand who lived in Wutai (Five Plateau) Mountain was actually not an especially large number. (Wutai Mountain symbolizes Great Wisdom Bodhisattva.) The mountain with the most people was Putuo, (symbolizing Great Compassion Bodhisattva) with around thirty to forty thousand monks and nuns in residence. And there were over ten thousand monks and nuns living on Emei and Jiuhua (Nine Flower) Mountain, (symbolizing Great Conduct Bodhisattva and Earth Treasure Bodhisattva respectively).

Mr. Yu explained in his commentary that "Someone who makes such a quick decision to give generously, without the slightest thought of reluctance or miserliness, will gain infinite good fortune in return". This generous giving without the slightest doubt showed that Mr. Liao-Fan was an honest official, not at all corrupt. He gave all of his savings to provide food for ten thousand people. How much money could he have? He came from a poor but honest family. And he was very rare in that he deeply understood and believed in the Law of Cause and Effect. He would never have taken anything that was not his, something not readily achieved by most people. While we do good deeds, most of us will only do the minimum. In this case, we might give one hundred dollars to a good cause and feel very pleased with ourselves for having done so, unlike Mr. Liao-Fan, who gave everything he had. A very rare person.

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

Mr. Liao-Fan was destined to die at the age of fifty-three. It was an extremely accurate prediction. He would die in his home on August 14th between one to three o'clock in the morning. It was in this year that he would undergo a severe misfortune and not live through it.

Mr. Liao-Fan wrote his book at the age of sixty-nine. He had not sought to live beyond fifty-three. However, he passed the year in good health without encountering any severe misfortune. It is obvious that the issue of birth and death, of long life, is of utmost importance in our lives. If long life can be sought, what is there that we cannot seek? Without long life, it will 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 our mind and heart of utmost sincerity. In this way, there is nothing that cannot be attained.

If we were seek from the outside, then as Master Yun-Gu said, we would lose both inside and outside. There is nothing that cannot be attained, whether we are Buddhists seeking good fortune, wisdom and birth into the Pure Land or the Chinese seeking good fortune, long lives and children. Indeed, we can seek to attain more good fortune, an even longer life, more children and grandchildren. Nothing is unattainable. We have seen that Mr. Liao-Fan 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 that "Destiny exists but is difficult to be believed by most people because it is very changeable".

The Book of History is one of the Five Classics. It is China's oldest historical record of the systems of decrees and regulations in ancient times. Our destiny has been accurately foretold, falling within the calculation of the numbers. The constant, predestination, does exist, but it is very difficult to believe. Why? There are variables due to addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

Mr. Liao-Fan had refrained from committing wrongdoings and began to cultivate good deeds, thereby decreasing his bad deeds daily and gradually increasing his good ones. His act of reducing taxes became an act of multiplication, no longer one of simple addition. With this multiplication, 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 no longer one of simple 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 and it is these that create considerable variance. 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 very changeable. The Treatise on Response and Retribution further explains that "Neither misfortune nor good fortune will come without reasons and conditions, we incur them". In other words, they are the retributions and rewards from our past actions.

"Destiny is not set, but is only created and determined by ourselves". These are all true.

This is also from the Book of History and stresses the importance of virtuous cultivation, of how variables can surpass constants. The teachings of ancient sages and virtuous ones are the truth and therefore are unchangeable. Thus, then as now, we call them "sutras". When we apply the teachings to modern society, they are still true. If we do not believe in them and choose instead to continue to follow our own ideas and thus commit wrongdoings, we will only increase our offenses. Even if we were to gain some benefit at that moment, 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 attained. 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 would be the use of having all that wealth?

This world may be beset with disasters anytime. We may lose our lives any moment. Think about it, what would be the real value of having anything else? It would all be useless, even if we had owned them. It is clearly expressed in the "Chapter of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva's Conduct and Vows" from the Flower Adornment Sutra. At the moment of our last breath, we are unable to take anything with us to the next life, whether it is family members, friends, prestige, wealth, nothing! What we are able to take with us are the Ten Great Vows, to constantly keep them with us, never abandoning us, but guiding us to be born into the Pure Land.

It is also said in Buddhism that "Nothing can be carried over to the next life except our karma." These are very important words of caution. Since we know that our karma will follow us like a shadow, we need to be diligent in cultivating good deeds, not to carry our negative karma with us. For to do so will lead us to the Three Bad Realms. Good karma will lead us to be born into the Three Good Realms. And pure karma from Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha will lead us to be born into the Western Pure Land. From this, it should be clear what we need to do in this life. We need to broaden our perception, expand our thinking, instead of being concerned with trivialities or calculating the gains and losses in this life. Life is very short. It would be of tremendous merit, if in this life we were to do more good acts, 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 them unreliable fairy tales, this is due to our karmic obstacles. Because of them, we will miss this unsurpassable and outstanding opportunity.

To Teach Children to Know Their Faults,
Reform, Cultivate and Accumulate Merit

and Good Fortune

I came to understand that both good fortune and misfortune are incurred by our own actions. These are truly the words of sages and virtuous people! If one were to say that good fortune and adversity are all determined by the heavens, then I would consider that person to be ordinary.

These are Mr. Liao-Fan's true 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 talks about a constant. What Mr. Kong foretold of Mr. Liao-Fan's destiny was common theories. What Master Yun-Gu taught him for changing his destiny were the teachings of sages and virtuous people. Knowing this, why would we need to have our fortune told? Do we need to ask fortune-tellers how to situate our house? Of course not! We need to believe in the teachings of sages and virtuous people, know that our destiny is within our control and that we can create our own bright and magnificent future.

Tian-Qi, my son, I wonder how your life will be? In any case of destiny 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. And when you have enough food and clothing, be mindful of poverty.

Mr. Liao-Fan had his destiny accurately foretold. His son did not and thus did not know what would happen in his life. In actuality, there really was no need to know. Mr. Liao-Fan taught him that it was important to remember that even in times of prosperity, he was to act as if he was not prosperous. That even if he attained great wealth and social position, became a high ranking official with power and influence, he still needed to remember the times when he was not. Why was there a need to remember this? Because in the future, even if we become prosperous, we would do well to remain humble and courteous, not giving rise to arrogant thoughts or a haughty attitude that we have wealth and prestige while others do not. If we can remain humble then we will nurture true virtue and good fortune.

Even when everything is going very smoothly, we also need to remember when times were difficult. In this way, even when things are going our way we will remain cautious and not become careless. Ge-Liang Zhu was a famous Prime Minister (in the Shu Han Period of the Three Kingdoms, seventeen hundred years ago). He was able to remain successful throughout his life because he was careful and discreet.

Right now, even when we have more than enough food and clothing, we need to be thrifty. If we are able to constantly do this when we have wealth and prestige, then we will be able to improve in both moral conduct and benevolent behavior.

A good example in Chinese history was Mr. Zhong-Yan Fan. Mr. Fan was from a very poor family background. When he was young and studying at way places, he had little to eat. Everyday he would

cook a pot of porridge, divide it into four portions and eat one portion a meal. In this manner, he passed the days in a state of impoverishment. When he prospered later in life and became a Prime Minister (during the Song Dynasty, eight hundred years ago), he was under the 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 would think of those who were poverty-stricken and used his earnings to help them.

By reading his biography, we know that he supported over three hundred families. With the income of one person helping to provide for three hundred families, we know that he would also be living in impoverished conditions. If he had lived affluently, how would he have been able to provide for all those families?

He was truly one of China's great sages. The esteem that Master Yin-Guang had for him was second only to Confucius. Mr. Fan's descendants continued until the early part of this century. This is 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. Zhong-Yan Fan. Mr. Fan's family lineage remained strong through eight hundred years due to his exceptional cultivation and accumulation of merits.

Great good fortune is when we are able to share it with others for in this way our ensuing good fortune will become inexhaustible. The descendants of Mr. Fan continued this family tradition of helping others until the early part of this century. Throughout Chinese history, there were not many families who had accumulated this much great virtue. In his commentary, Master Yin-Guang told of another person, a Mr. Ye, the premier scholar of the Qing Dynasty. His family lineage remained strong for three hundred years, until the later years of the Qing Dynasty. It is thus obvious that the utmost priority of life is for us to refrain from wrongdoings, to cultivate good deeds and accumulate merits and virtues.

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

We would do well to avoid "Being overwhelmed by an unexpected favor". It is good for others to love and be protective towards us. However, we need to think, what is it about us that is worthy of this love and care? Is deserving of the respect of others? We need to be constantly apprehensive of the deficiencies in our virtuous abilities. It is good to think this way, to constantly reflect upon ourselves, to progress in our cultivation of virtue and not to disappoint the expectations of others.

Being humble and feeling that we are not knowledgeable enough are sufficient methods for eradicating our arrogance. Arrogance is one of the five major afflictions and is related to the other four afflictions of greed, anger, ignorance and doubt. Indeed, this was a very good place and a good way for him to start eradicating afflictions. In doing so completely, we will be able to uncover our virtuous nature, to truly achieve in our cultivation of merit.

When thinking of the past, we can advocate the virtues of our ancestors. When thinking of the present, we can conceal the faults of our own parents. When thinking of the country, we can think of how we can repay its kindness to us and when thinking of the family we can think of how to bring about our families' good fortune. When thinking of the outside, think of how to help those in need around us and when thinking of within think of how to prevent improper thoughts and actions from arising.

The following summarizes this chapter, which is very important for within it lies the key to creating destiny. What we are thinking inside will be the guidelines for increasing our virtue 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 to be constantly thinking far into the past, to honor and make known the virtues of our ancestors. If we were respected by society for our moral principles and ethics, knowledge and profession, we would honor our ancestors.

In today's society, what is the driving force behind hard work? Wealth, fame, prestige. Most people will do whatever is necessary to acquire these. Why? The attainment of wealth urges people, drives them forward. If there were no wealth to gain, who would be willing to work so hard? Very few! In the past, the driving force behind people's hard work was filial piety. In their mindfulness of their ancestors and parents, they did their best in cultivating and accumulating 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 is highly regarded, as it is the ultimate root and foundation of Chinese culture. If we are able to be filial towards parents and ancestors, able to remember our root, then we will naturally be able to think and conduct ourselves properly and to refrain from wrongdoings.

"When we are thinking of the present, we can conceal the faults of our own parents". (This discusses those who are) close to us. If the children are filial, have contributed to society then even if their parents have committed minor offenses, people will overlook and forget them. People will praise the parents for having raised such filial children.

"When thinking of the country, we can think of how we can repay its kindness to us". Above us, the country or government 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 should be loyal, patriotic and dedicate themselves to their country.

"When thinking of the family, we can think of how to bring about our families' good fortune". Below us is the family. Being mindful of the family does not just refer to the nuclear family, but to the extended family as it was thought of in the past, the immediate family as well as all relatives. As a mem-

ber, we need to be mindful in creating family good fortune for the whole, not just for the immediate part. Therefore, when one person achieves good fortune, the extended family can also benefit from it.

“When thinking of the outside, 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. In today’s society, the most urgent need is reviving and developing the education of morality and ethics.

“When thinking of within, think of how to prevent improper thoughts and actions from arising”. We need to prevent wandering and deviated thoughts from arising. We need to be mindful of what we are supposed to be doing and to let go of excessive ambitions. If all of us were able to do so, were able to fulfill our responsibilities, society would be fortunate and harmonious and the world would be at peace. Mencius explained that “If people of noble character and integrity can be loyal to their responsibility, then in this way the truth can be revealed”.

In Confucian teaching, this responsibility refers to the five human relationships including those between husband and wife, parent and child, siblings, friends, political leaders and the public. He also spoke of the Ten Moral Responsibilities. All this means that we need to fulfill our responsibilities towards society and others. Whatever we have responsibility for, we need to accomplish earnestly and diligently in order to create good fortune for our family and society.

One needs to be able to find one’s faults everyday and to correct them everyday. If one is unable to detect any faults in oneself then one will think that everything he or she does is all right. Then, they will be unable to correct their faults and improvement will be out of the question.

Awakening is being able to detect our faults daily. It is the perfect complete enlightenment. The beginning of enlightenment is to detect our faults daily. We start this process when we first bring forth our vow to become an Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattva. Once we discover our faults daily, we need to correct them. This is cultivation. It is to correct our thoughts and behavior daily. It is the true achievement in the cultivation of great sages and virtuous people.

This is the key to changing our destiny, to leaving suffering behind and to attaining happiness. When most people are unable to become virtuous and sages in one lifetime and are unable to achieve in their cultivation, they will find that the problem lies here. To know our own faults daily is to awaken daily. Once we discover a fault, we would do well to correct it. In this way, we will build our strength of cultivation to sincerely reform. We gain strength from our cultivation. We need not do much. If we were to find and correct just one fault a day then we would become a sage or a 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 Buddha Amitabha then in three years time we would achieve birth into either the high or middle birth levels of the Pure Land. This is the way to cultivate to become Buddhas. The question is whether we are willing to do so earnestly. We are deluded if we are unable to daily find one fault in ourselves. If we do not know them, then of course we cannot correct them. How can we hope to im-

prove in this way? When there is no improvement, there is regression. Naturally, we would then fall behind. To regard ourselves as infallible, to be convinced that everything we do is correct is the most horrible way for us to live.

There are many intelligent people in the world who cannot make improvements in cultivating morality and virtue. Nor can they make improvements in their work. Their failures in this life are owed to a single word. Laziness.

If we live for the present, are lethargic and lazy then we will be bound by our fate. How we are born and die, where we will go after we die all accords with our destinies. Master Yun-Gu addressed people like this as ordinary people, as philistines who completely follow what has been destined. They are what the Buddha called "pitiful creatures". These principles, which Mr. Liao-Fan taught his son are the principles for both worldly education as well as Buddhism and must not be ignored.

Tian-Qi, the teachings of Master Yun-Gu are truly the most worthy, profound, real and proper teachings, and I hope that you will be well-versed in them and practice them diligently. You must use your time wisely and not let it slip by in vain.

Mr. Liao-Fan 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. Mr. Liao-Fan 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 Yun-Gu's teachings, to ponder them deeply to carefully appreciate the meanings within. When we are constantly mindful of the teachings, we will savor them, then use them as the basis for our own behavior and practice them diligently. We should not waste this lifetime or allow it to pass pointlessly.

THE SECOND LESSON: WAYS TO REFORM

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

A Sign for all Good Fortune and Misfortune

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is the main principle. We must be sincere in all our actions towards others. We do not cheat others and we do not fool ourselves. The "Will of heaven" is what Buddhism calls the true nature. It is

the state of having no wandering thoughts and constantly maintaining only those thoughts that are virtuous. When we are absolutely honest and truthful, our hearts will be in agreement with the will of heaven. In other words, even if we are presently suffering from hardships, they will soon be over and an abundance of good fortune will soon be ours. Therefore, whether in this world or beyond we need to begin from the foundation of sincerity.

Confucianism speaks of learning and cultivation. Within the Eight Guidelines, "the sincere and virtuous heart" is the essence. We accomplish this by "severing our desires and uncovering our self-nature". If we do not do this, we will be unable to accomplish ultimate sincerity. When severing desires, what are we cutting off? The Six Dusts or polluting factors of (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought) and the Five Desires for wealth, lust, fame, food/drink and sleep. If these desires cannot be diminished, our hearts will be constantly affected by the external environment. How can such a heart hope to remain sincere?

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

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

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

Therefore, in order to receive, we must first let go. If we are reluctant to let go, then we will not be able to receive. The Chinese say "to give is to gain". This phrase comes from Buddhist sutras. We first give up something in order to receive something in return. If we do not give up then we will receive nothing. So, this lesson on reforming our destiny is all about letting go. What if we seek something? To seek also helps us to receive. But how do we do this? Just let go and we will receive everything we are seeking. First, we must let go of all our desires and wandering thoughts. Mr. Liao-Fan said, "When we are absolutely honest and truthful, our hearts will be in agreement with the will of

heaven". This advises us to discard from the root, to discard our selfishness, to completely extinguish any thoughts of benefiting the self. Instead, all our considerations should be of how to benefit society, humanity and all living beings. Once this is achieved, we will gain infinite good fortune.

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

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

The Basis of Reform:
A Perfect Awakening of Three Hearts

A Shameful Heart:

From Shame Comes Great Courage

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

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

Once we understand the principles, we then decide where to begin the process of reform. We have several effective methods. Each of us would like to attain good fortune, happiness and wisdom while

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

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

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 "being ashamed is similar to possessing courage". Confucius defined it as great wisdom, great kindness and great courage. What is great courage? It is knowing "shame". Only by so doing can we learn to regret and turn over a new leaf, to be impelled to improve ourselves. If we do not know shame there is no hope, no future for us. However, we do not want to use other people as the standard for our behavior. We should raise ours a little higher. How high? We can set our standards according to those held by Bodhisattvas. They are humans just like us. So, why is it that he or she can become a Bodhisattva with infinite life while we are still trapped in reincarnation of the Six Realms? This is a major humiliation!

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 tarnished and my reputation ruined like a cracked 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 driving force in changing our destiny. What is the force behind this motivation? It is an inconceivable and original ability. Today we can readily identify with what Mr. Liao-Fan is explaining here. There were several great Chinese sages during ancient times, Confucius, Mencius, Zhou Gung and Yi Yin. We can think "They were great men, well I'm great too! They were human. Well, I am human, too! If they can do it, then why can't I?" This is where and how we start to reflect.

Transcending our world, others have become Arhats, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. They have lived an infinite number of lifetimes. Well, so have we. Why is it that after countless lifetimes of practicing Buddhism, they have succeeded in becoming a Bodhisattva or a Buddha, whereas, we are still mired within the Six Realms of Reincarnation? This is the greatest shame! No other disgrace in this world can

match this one.

In this world or beyond, these sages have all become teachers of heavenly beings. One of the ten names for all Buddhas is "Teacher of Heavenly Beings and Humankind". 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 to examine our own behavior. Why have our names become tarnished and our reputations ruined? This describes how we would suffer for our offenses.

One of Mr. Liao-Fan's virtues is that he does not attempt to hide any of his faults. He does not talk about other's mistakes, only of 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 achievement.

We are unwilling to part with worldly desires.

Our first fault or ailment is that we are "unwilling to part with worldly desires". This means that we are still longing for, still clinging to something. The reason we feel such longing is that our naturally pure mind has become polluted. Worldly desires refer to the Five Desires or emotions and the Six Dusts. Since the word traditionally used to convey sense objects also means "dust", it carries the implication of pollution.

If we do not wipe the tables or the chairs we use everyday, they will doubtlessly become covered with dust. To wipe them daily is to rid them of dust or pollution. This is similar to our pure minds being polluted by desires and "dust". Wealth, lust, fame, food or drink and sleep are the desires, which give rise to the emotions of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt. These are the elements of pollution. This is why the Buddha called the external environment the Six Sense Objects or Six Dusts. These are impurities, which contaminate our pure minds and are the root of our illness.

If we wish to recover the pure mind of our self-nature, we must let go of clinging to these desires and dusts. To be able to let 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. There are fifty-one levels of Bodhisattva practice. Each level is based on the amount of emotions the Bodhisattva has been able to discard. Once we can let go of all fifty-one dusts and desires, then we will become Buddhas. If there is still just one degree left that has yet to be relinquished, then we are an Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattva. These dusts and desires are in effect, our karmic obstacles.

The Pure Land School often uses the phrase "Carrying our remaining karma to be born into the Pure Land". This means that before our death, if we have been unable to let go of all of our longings for worldly attractions, we will carry our remaining karma along with us to our next form of existence. Some people in the past believed that the Pure Land School does not practice the method of "To be reborn with remaining karma". They felt that the phrase should have been "To be reborn after eliminating all karma". This theory shocked Pure Land practitioners around the world. This interpretation of needing to eliminate all karma is incorrect for it does not correspond with the sutras.

Although we cannot locate the actual words "To be reborn with remaining karma" in any of the sutras, the meaning is very clear. If we believe that we can only be reborn when all of our karma has

been eliminated, then when we read the Infinite Life Sutra, we would not help but 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. A tiny fragment of karma remains. Thus, Bodhisattvas are called Enlightened Sentient-beings.

Strictly speaking, only one being exists with a pure mind, a Buddha. Aside from Buddhas, no other mind is truly pure. Even Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattvas still possess one degree of remaining karma, still have some of the Six Dusts. However, they do not have the desire for these emotions. This is why they are called Enlightened Sentient-beings. They are aware of emotion, are unlike we ordinary people who are still clinging to these worldly desires. We would do well to understand this.

The phrase "Carrying our remaining karma to be born into the Pure Land" was said by the patriarchs and is based on the sutras. It complies with the meanings in the sutras. This is especially so in the Pure Land School. We can be born into the Western Pure Land even if we still possess all of the afflictions. We have seen, both in the past and the present, numerous Pure Land practitioners who passed away to be born into the Pure Land. These are true accounts from reliable witnesses. Thus, we need to have the ability to realize the true reality and not be affected by deviated views. We need to accord with the teachings in the sutras, not with individual people for individuals can misinterpret the sutras.

I secretly do many improper things and think others will not know about them. I am shamelessly proud of myself. One day I will sink to the level of an animal without even realizing it.

"Improper" refers to things that we should not do, something illegal, illogical, against moral standards, human ethics or cultural customs. Mr. Liao-Fan secretly did things that he was not supposed to do and thought that others would not know about them. Frankly, some people would not know. What kind? Those, whose minds have been clouded by ignorance and who are totally deluded. On the other hand, those who possess proper thoughts, wisdom and a calm and composed mind will be able to tell. We cannot hide from these people. In addition, there are also the beings and spirits of the heavens and earth, who are present.

The heavenly beings and spirits have five paths of knowledge, which are rewarded, not achieved through practice. So, if the heavenly beings and spirits know; needless to say, the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas know. They are aware of every single thought that arises from beings within the Six Realms. After reading this in sutras and books written by the sages, we would tremble in fear to realize that there is absolutely nothing that we can hide from them. Is it not better to regret our wrongdoings on our own? Since they know everything even if we do not confess, it would make us feel a little less guilty if we voluntarily regretted and felt remorse.

Mr. Liao-Fan was shamelessly proud of himself. This pride is arrogance. It is a heart, which feels no shame. "Shameless" refers to someone who is totally "unfeeling", someone who feels no shame or remorse. In other words, one who is totally without a conscience. If we feel guilty after a wrongdoing,

we can still be considered a good person. Although we hide our offenses from others, we still feel a weight on our conscience. There is still hope for our turning back. However, if we feel absolutely nothing after a wrongdoing, then there is no hope for us. Only the person who can feel ashamed can be helped.

When we are shameless and arrogant, one day we will sink down to the animal realm. While presently in the human realm, as a result of or negative karma, we will eventually fall into the Three Bad Realms. Although we do not know this, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, beings and spirits of heaven and earth do know. When our luck is down, the bad spirits will come to harass us. These spirits do not just arbitrarily harass anyone. They select their target according to the person's behavior. They dare not bother those who will be born into the Three Good Realms and they are extremely respectful to people with kind hearts and compassionate behavior. On the other hand, they torment those who perform bad deeds. They will ridicule and bully such a person, be insolent and sarcastic because they know that this person will eventually fall into the Three Bad Realms.

True Buddhist practitioners understand these principles. Once we understand these, we will naturally be cautious and watchful over our every thought, word and deed. In this lifetime, not only do we not want to fall into the Three Bad Realms, but also we want to transcend the cycle of birth and death. If we truly wish to transcend reincarnation, there is only one path to take. It is to seek birth into the Western Pure Land. Therefore, we need to have firm and unshakable determination.

How do we attain birth into the Pure Land? It is attained through firm belief, the vow and mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha and our cultivation of purity of mind. It is attained by permanently letting go of worldly attachments. We do not need to completely let go of everything for if we were able to do this then we would become Buddhas. However, the more we let go the better off we will be. It would be best not to think about anything that does not have to be thought about. Instead, we can settle our mind on chanting "Amitufo". We can then transform our thoughts from those that only benefit our families and ourselves to those that benefit all other sentient beings. In so doing, our minds will become pure.

The difference between enlightened beings who are Buddhas or Bodhisattvas and sentient beings is that awakened beings think of sentient beings, not of themselves, while sentient beings, ordinary people, only think of themselves and not of others. Even if we did not deliberately try to sever our self-attachment, by constantly thinking of benefiting all sentient beings, our self-attachment would gradually diminish by itself. Once we no longer have self-attachment due to our achievements in Buddha Name Chanting, we will attain the level of One Mind Undisturbed in Mindfulness. We would then achieve a higher level of birth, into the Land Where Everything is Temporary. In this way, we are assured of being born into the Pure Land.

We need to start from here and practice earnestly, to set our sights far ahead, to not only consider our immediate future or even just this lifetime. Our immediate future and this lifetime are only illusions and impermanent. The sutra said it well, "whatever takes form is illusion". We need to know that nothing is permanent, that nothing is worthy of worry. As for the family members and relatives around us, we would do well to tell them the proper teachings and encourage them to practice accordingly.

A fellow practitioner who was very anxious about his child asked me for help. His child wanted to study abroad, which was very difficult to do. He himself lived in Paris and he asked me what to do? I taught him to let go of all wandering thoughts and to have the whole family recite the Infinite Life Sutra and chant "Amitufo". Then, there would be an answer. He said, "This won't do, I need to handle this properly before my mind can settle down to reciting sutras and chanting "Amitufo". I replied, "If you think this way, then there will be no hope for you in this lifetime". He asked why and I replied, "You are handling this wrong. The method you have thought of and tried to use is within the control of your karma. But, you do not have the strength from the help of the Triple Jewels".

We need to know how to use the strength from the Triple Jewels and to give up relying on just our own. We cannot achieve on our own. We need to use our pure mind in seeking help from the Triple Jewels. Then, we will attain inconceivable help from them. This is very important. As I said previously, we need to use the variable, not the constant. The constant is destined. The variable can be used to create our destiny.

In re-creating our destiny, we seek from within our mind. This mind is the true mind, not the false one. When our mind is constantly filled with wandering thoughts, we are using our false mind. It exists because of the constants, not the variables. If we use our true mind, then the constant changes. We can see this very clearly in the sutras and in Liao-Fan's Four Lessons.

How do we seek help from Buddhas and Bodhisattvas? We do not make deals with them, offering terms and conditions. We do not ask them to help us to become wealthy or to make millions of dollars saying that in return we will split the money with them. That we will share it fifty-fifty, five hundred thousand for us, five hundred thousand for them. This is not right! How can we imagine that they would agree to this? It is wrong for us to think of exploiting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to want to employ the strength from the Triple Jewels, to offer deals, to make wishes and attach conditions to them. There are no deals to make, no terms to negotiate.

The most basic principle and important point is for us to uncover our purity of mind. This is what Buddhism teaches us to do. "Why bother to seek the self-nature on the outside, when it is already complete within us and is already able to give rise to infinite things". This principle explains that everything already exists. If we seek within, there is nothing we cannot attain. When there is a sincere request, a response will follow. Because originally the self-nature is complete, it is able to give rise to infinite things.

The Triple Jewel does nothing more than act as a catalytic condition. We seek and attain something our self-nature originally had. If we did not already have it in our self-nature, even the Triple Jewels would not be able to help us. "In Buddhism, whatever is sought will be attained." If we totally believe without the slightest doubt, that whatever is sought will be attained, like the vow to become a Buddha, then certainly everything else can be attained, as well. Therefore, we need to understand the principle that by seeking, we will attain. As ordinary people, we do not know this. We use our worldly intelligence in learning and practicing Buddhism. We need to understand that in so doing, we are not attaining fame, wealth and prestige as we believed, but are actually committing offenses. Whatever is attained is still something we were destined to have. It would not be worthwhile to seek it. In the fu-

ture, we will suffer the consequences from the offenses we have committed.

Buddhism talks of the Ten Dharma Realms. Within each of the Ten Realms exists another Ten Dharma Realms, thus it is called "hundreds and thousands of realms as such". Currently, we exist in the human realm. Within this realm, Ten Dharma Realms exist. This moment, if we are single-mindedly mindful of Buddha Amitabha and seek birth into 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 effect.

In this moment, if we are being mindful of Bodhisattvas and of cultivating the Six Paramitas, then we are in the Bodhisattva realm. Similarly, if we are being mindful of virtue, morality and humanity, we are in the human realm. However, if we are greedy, constantly scheming to make money, to possess the materialistic enjoyments of this world, then we are in the hungry ghost realm. If we are confused and deluded in our thinking, drifting along through our 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 forms. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the spirits and gods of heaven and earth can see us very clearly as we are, whether we are a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, or another form of being. Therefore, there are Ten Dharma Realms within each Dharma Realm. Once we understand this principle, once we know the true reality, we will know how to choose. This choice ultimately rests in our own hands.

There is nothing else in the world, which calls for more shame and remorse than behavior such as this. Mencius once said, "Shame is the greatest and most important word in a person's lifetime." 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 cannot comprehend the word shame will be unrestrained and immoral and will be just like an animal. These are really key words to correcting our faults.

It is shameful for us to still be mired in the Six Realms of Reincarnation while others have become Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Nothing calls for greater shame than this. The word shame has a very close connection with humans. Why? By being ashamed, we can become virtuous, can become a sage. By being unashamed, we will doubtlessly fall into the Three Bad Realms. So we can see how close a connection this word shame has with our future. By knowing shame, we will tirelessly strive to wipe it away and replace it with the inspired enthusiasm to eventually become a sage or a virtuous person.

By not knowing shame, we will be dishonorable and false, engaging in immoral activities. In Buddhism, 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, naturally vanish.

To be perfectly frank, it is shameful to fall behind others in performing virtuous deeds and attaining good results. If we know shame, we will strive energetically to improve ourselves. We hope that those who have generated great aspiration will come together to form a "Sense of Shame Society" to promote the movement of knowing shame, to awaken people to join together in creating a society of peace and happiness for humankind.

A Fearful Heart:

From Fear Comes Sincerity and Respect

The second way to reform is to know fear. The celestial beings and earthly spirits all hover over our heads in observation. It is impossible 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. But, what are we fearful of? Above us, there are celestial beings who have supernatural abilities of clairvoyance. They are able to see very clearly our every movement. Below us, there are earthly spirits who also have the five supernatural abilities (clairvoyance, clairaudience, knowing their past lifetimes, physical abilities and knowing the minds of others). Although their abilities cannot compare with those of the celestial beings, their perceptions are much keener than ours. For example, they have greater abilities in sight and hearing. However, we exceed them in wisdom. It might be difficult for us to believe that even having these abilities they are not more clever and wise than we are.

Presently, scientists have proven that numerous animals possess unique senses. For example, a dog's sense of smell is keener than that of humans. Thus, they can detect scents that we are unable to. Dogs also have keener hearing than we do. But, they are not as intelligent as we are. Other animals also surpass us in various abilities. It should not be at all surprising that ghosts and spirits surpass us as well. Thus, it can be believed that spirits and ghosts have the five kinds of supernatural abilities. Why do they still suffer? They are not as wise as we are and most do not possess as much good fortune as we do. We need to constantly remember that above and below, there are spirits and ghosts that are perfectly aware of our every thought, every act.

Even when my wrongdoings are done in a concealed place, the beings and spirits of heaven and earth are just like a mirror, clearly reflecting all my faults. If my offense is serious, then all kinds of adversities will befall me. If my fault is minor, it will still deduct from my current good fortune. How can I not feel fear?

Even if we are committing minor faults in the most concealed place where nobody is around to witness them, the beings and spirits who are clairvoyant can see everything very clearly even through walls. This is appalling! But the capabilities of these beings are still not considered great, for their abilities are nothing compared to those of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Fortunately for us, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have great compassion and loving-kindness. Since they have purity of mind, when they witness our wrongdoings, they will not cause us trouble for they do not mind our offenses.

However, Dharma Protectors are ordinary beings who will cause trouble for those who have committed wrongdoings. Also, the spirits and ghosts are still ordinary beings. They get angry when they see us committing wrongdoings and will sometimes cause trouble for us. They are even more prone to punish us for our severe wrongdoings, thus adversities and calamities will befall us. If we truly understand this truth, how would we not be afraid?

Therefore, there are several passages in the Infinite Life Sutra that call for respect and fear. There are an infinite number of beings in the Western Pure Land, each has the Heavenly Eye, is clairvoyant, can see everything without any obstruction. Each has the Heavenly Ear, is clairaudient, 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, what is there that we can hide from the utmost virtuous people in the Western Pure Land? If we cannot deceive them, then how could we even think of deceiving Buddha Amitabha, Great Compassion Bodhisattva and Great Strength Bodhisattva? It is impossible!

Once we understand this and we deeply realize that we need to seek birth into the Pure Land, it is not important what form our merit dedication takes. All the beings there know our aspirations. There is no need for us to verbally say, "We seek birth into the Pure Land." They already know this. They knew it the instant that we first gave rise to the thought. The truth is that we need to honestly chant the Buddha's name. There is no need to say any unnecessary words. We just need to seek One Mind Undisturbed, to seek the highest level of birth into the Western Pure Land. In so doing, we will be foremost in wisdom, merits and virtues.

And there is more. Even when we are alone in our room, the beings and spirits watch over us very carefully and record everything. Even if we try to conceal or cover up our improper acts with clever speech, the spirits and celestial beings can see through to our hearts as clearly as seeing into our lungs or liver. Ultimately, we cannot deceive ourselves. If others were to see our behavior, we would find ourselves discredited. Therefore, how can we not be constantly cautious of our every action and be fearful of the consequences they might evoke?

Previously, we read about when we are outside, interacting with others. Here Mr. Liao-Fan wrote of when we are alone in our room. When we are alone behind closed doors, we can 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. Bing-Nan Lee told of an occurrence that happened almost two thousand years ago. Mr. Kang-Cheng Zheng 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. Finally, someone told him, "Think again". He replied, "I am thinking!" He thought for a long time. Then he remembered. One time, when he went to restroom, he forgot to put on his hat. This was his shortcoming. (In the past, it was a Chinese custom for a man to always leave his hat on, even at the time of death or it would have been a disgrace.)

It is obvious that in times long past, people were constantly watchful over their thoughts and behavior even when alone when their appearance would be as neat and orderly as if they had company. Nowadays, people would say "Why bother"? But this was how people used to behave. They were watchful over their behavior even when alone. In their minds, even if they were to hide themselves away, beings and spirits of heaven and earth could still see them. It would have been impolite to them if people were careless and behaved as they pleased. Even a concealed spot is still visible to the beings and spirits. Thus, our demeanor should always be respectful. We should never indulge ourselves even the slightest bit.

Even in our room, it should seem as if innumerable pairs of eyes were watching us, innumerable fingers were pointing at us. We should be as watchful and cautious of our deeds as if we were in public, not daring to behave as we please. Although we are extremely secretive in trying to conceal our behavior, or to cover up our faults with glib talk, actually, this cannot be accomplished. It is as if our internal organs were visible to all. This is how clearly the spirits can see us.

This is just an example to relate how even in a concealed room, in a bedroom, our every movement, our every thought is known to the spirits. There is simply nothing they do not know about. We may think that we have secrets, but we are only deceiving others and ourselves. In actuality, spirits of heaven and earth have already seen through all of this. Once seen through, we are worthless, our attempts to hide were useless. Once we have realized this, how could we not fear?

But there is more to it! As long as a person still has one breath left, then he or she has the chance to regret even the most serious wrongdoings and offenses.

When we are ashamed, we will have a respectful and fearful heart and this will enable us to reform and we will eradicate our offenses. Many Buddhists attend repentance ceremonies daily, doing so for their entire lifetime trying to repent and eradicate karmic obstacles. Not only do some fail to eradicate their karmic obstacles, the more ceremonies they attend, the more their obstacles increase. Why? They do not know how to sincerely regret, but conceal them 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 Conducts are bound for the hell realms. However, as long as they still have one remaining breath, are they able to be helped? Yes, if they are willing to regret and correct their erroneous ways. If so, then they are still able to turn over a new leaf. If they are truly ashamed, sincerely give rise to a respectful and apprehensive heart, deeply regret their ways, vow to be born into the Pure Land and chant "Amitufo" one time to ten times, then they are assured of being born there.

For example, during the Tang Dynasty (over one thousand years ago) a butcher named Shan-He Zhang, chanted "Amitufo" just ten times at the last moment before his death and was born into the Pure Land. The [Visualization Sutra](#) tells us that in ancient India, King Ajatasatru killed his father, egregiously mistreated his mother and caused dissension in the Sangha. There was no evil that he would

not commit. In the Ajatasatru Sutra, Buddha Shakyamuni told us of his cause and effect. At the last moment of his life, with still one breath left, the king truly regretted and attained single-mindedness of Buddha Amitabha as he sought birth into the Pure Land. He was born into the eighth level, truly inconceivable.

From this, we know that there are two ways to be born into the Pure Land. One way is to cultivate and accumulate merit and virtue daily, to follow the regular way of practice to seek birth into the Pure Land. The other way is for those who have committed great evil and who feel deep remorse at the last moments of their life. Therefore, we do not want to 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 will attain a higher level of birth than we will. This is very possible. It is said, "A prodigal who returns is more precious than gold". A reformed person is even better than an average practitioner. Average people are incomparable to them. Thus, we do not want to look down on those who have committed wrongdoings.

Once we understand this, we will not even consider counting on our luck, thinking we can commit transgressions and that as long as we feel regret in time before our last breath to still be born into the Pure Land. It would be wrong for us to think in this manner, for this way will guarantee our falling into the Three Bad Realms. It is extremely difficult to be able to regret at the last moment of life and to be born into the Pure Land. On appearance it would seem as though there was only one lifetime involved here, that one who was deluded has awakened at the last moment of life. But, for what appears to only involve our last minutes actually involves all of the good roots and good fortune accumulated throughout innumerable past lifetimes. We must possess deep-seated, solid good roots.

If we visit a hospital, we will understand. Look around. How many people are still clearheaded and alert in their last moments? Being rational and alert is the first criterion. If we are confused and unaware at that time, are unable to remember to feel remorse and if we forget that we need to chant, then we will fall into the Three Bad Realms. We need to know the true reality and not dare to think this way, not count on our luck. Why? It is unimaginably difficult to achieve in this way. It is rare to have one out of thousands of people remain clear-headed at the time of their death. This is the first criterion, without meeting this we will be unable to achieve. We have to ask whether we can guarantee ourselves that at the instant of our death, we will remain clearheaded and alert?

The second criterion is to encounter a benevolent teacher. And the third is to turn back immediately at that instant, to single-mindedly regret, to be mindful of Buddha Amitabha and to seek birth into the Pure Land. Can we guarantee all these conditions will exist at that precise critical moment? If not, then we need to honestly, sincerely and regularly cultivate daily to accumulate merits and virtues. This is our only truly reliable and safe way. If ten thousand people practice the Pure Land method accordingly then ten thousand will achieve. Mr. Yu 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." Obviously, the earlier we awaken the better. So please, make haste in turning back and do not commit any more wrongdoings.

Once, a person who behaved badly during his entire lifetime felt remorse just when he was about to die. He realized his past mistakes and regretted all the bad things that he had done. His mind came to a very kind thought and immediately afterwards, he peacefully passed away.

There are many examples of this, some of Buddhist practitioners, some not. In recent years, one that we personally witnessed was that of Mr. Guang-Da Zhou, a businessman who lived in Washington, DC 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 his last moments of life, chant "Amitufo" one to ten times and be born into the Pure Land.

Mr. Zhou did not encounter Buddhism until a kindhearted friend introduced him to the Pure Land teachings just three days before he passed away. He was joyful upon hearing of them and accepted without the slightest doubt. He made the vow to be born into the Pure Land and single-mindedly was mindful of Buddha Amitabha. This was the result of his good roots from past lifetimes. Once he had vowed to be born into the Pure Land, although he was ill, he no longer felt pain.

This is the reward or retribution for good or bad things done. Once the true mind is generated, the Triple Jewels help it. Although he was in critical condition, he was still spiritually uplifted. This was due to the strength from his vows and the joy of practicing Buddhism. It is similar to experiencing something good, which puts us into high spirits. His energy and strength came from within him and from Buddha Amitabha. Thus, Mr. Zhou was able to have the spirit to chant "Amitufo". After chanting for three days, he was able to see the three sages of the Western Pure Land descend from high in the clouds to escort him to the Pure Land. This happened recently, how can we not believe?

In our practice, the essence or what is in our heart and mind is important, not formalities. Mr. Zhou never listened to Buddhist lectures, nor had he previously read any sutras. He had not taken the Three Refuges or the Five Fundamental Precepts. He just had a kind friend who encouraged him to chant "Amitufo". Really! Buddha Amitabha and the sages came to escort him to the Pure Land. Thus, cultivation stresses the heart, the true mind.

The Yu commentary stated that, "It is never too early to begin practicing. It is never too late to regret. To pass away peacefully is a phenomenon of transcendence". It is still 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, born well. The fifth of the Five Chinese Good Fortunes is to pass away peacefully without suffering, assuring our being born into one of the Three Good Realms, of not falling into the Three Bad Realms.

This is to say that if a person can have an overwhelming and courageous kind thought at the most important moment, then it can cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated misdeeds. This is just 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 or if the offenses were newly made. He or she is an exceptional person as long as they are able to reform!

Both Buddhists and Confucian scholars have spoken this truth. It is the truth, not something false. We need to be brave and determined in regretting and reforming. Even if the offense is major or of long standing, it can be regretted and eradicated. Having an overwhelming and courageous kind thought at this most important moment is to truly and sincerely regret and eradicate karmic obstacles. In this way, it can indeed cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated misdeeds.

The book speaks of only needing one lamp to light a valley that has been dark for a thousand years. This is comparing the lamp and the brightness to our bravery and determination in reforming and in our ability to wash away long accumulated misdeeds. Thus, no matter how big or small, no matter from time long past or newly made, what is of utmost importance regarding offenses is that we reform. We must reform.

It is often said in Buddhism that, "true Dharma repositories are rare". If we are not true repositories, we will be unable to continue the lifeline of Buddhism. For example, a cup has to be cleaned very well, for the water it holds to be drinkable. If it is not clean, but is tainted with just a trace of poison and we fill it up with water and drink it, then we will be poisoned. Poison is the negative karma. To become true Dharma repositories, we first need to completely eliminate our afflictions for us to be capable of receiving the Buddha's teachings. And then we will be able to benefit not just ourselves but others as well.

We reform and cultivate good fortune. Why do we need to reform first before we make ourselves into a repository for the Dharma? So that we are able to receive all of the good fortune that Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, beings and spirits of heaven and earth bestow on us. This is true good fortune not that which deteriorates. If our repository is not clean, but is filled with afflictions and negative karma, then the good fortune given to us by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will turn into even deadlier poisons. How will we be able to withstand it? This is why we first need to start anew to cultivate good fortune.

If we do not reform our erroneous ways, then the good fortune we cultivate will serve to increase our faults to their fullest. Why? Without good fortune, we only commit small transgressions, since we do not have the opportunity to create bigger ones. However, with great good fortune, then the wrongs we commit will be even bigger. 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 create serious ones. Whereas, the ones that rich people create are more grave than those of average people.

We need to understand that we first need to reform to eradicate misfortunes before we cultivate good fortune. We do not want to seek good fortune first, but to rid ourselves of misfortunes. Then, the good fortune we cultivate will be genuine goodness. If we do not eradicate our accumulated habits before we cultivate good fortune, then as our good fortunes increase, it is most likely that we will create even worse offenses. In passing on knowledge, will a truly benevolent teacher teach this kind of students? No! Why not? He or she knows that it will harm the student. Buddhism would say that such a student is not a Dharma repository. If he or she is not, then the teacher cannot pass on the teachings.

This is not to say that only a very smart and wise person is a Dharma repository, no. If a person

has a pure mind, has a kind heart without greed, anger, ignorance and arrogance, then he or she is a Dharma repository, regardless of intelligence. We read in Master Tan Xu's memoirs, about a monk who took moldy candles outside to dry in the bright sunlight. He was very slow-witted, without even the slightest bit of wisdom. But his mind was pure, he was honest and he bore no ill will for anyone. The old Master took a liking to him. He was a Dharma repository so the Master taught him to prostrate to the relics of Buddha Shakyamuni at the King A Yu Temple, three thousand times a day. After three years of prostrations, he was awakened. And after awakening, he was able to compose poetry, verses, was extremely articulate. Eventually he even lectured on sutras and was widely welcomed. But although he had achieved attainment, he still lived thriftily, remained very humble and courteous towards others. To be able to do so is to be a Dharma repository. This is true good fortune.

By choosing a successor, a Master can either help a person achieve or can harm that person. Since the past, good teachers, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, have been selective in choosing their successors. The most important criterion for selection is virtuous conduct. Other qualities are not taken into account because they can be nurtured. Thus, we need to start by reforming if we really want to achieve, to be born into the Pure Land and to benefit ourselves and others. As Mr. Liao-Fan said, "It is of utmost value to be able to change."

Besides, we are living in a tumultuous and constantly changing world. Our body, made of flesh and blood, is extremely perishable. If our next breath does not come, then this body will no longer be part of us. Then, even if we did want to reform, it would be too late to do so.

These four sentences advise and encourage us to grab hold of the opportunity, to regret and reform while we still are able. This world is ever changing, is impermanent. The sutra stated that, "life is only a breath". If our next breath does not come, it is the next life and it will then be too late to think about regretting and reforming. Knowing that this is the utmost important matter in life, we need to treasure this opportunity, to not waste time but to reflect daily within ourselves and to earnestly regret and reform daily. Being able to do so is true cultivation.

However, many people think that cultivation is simply reciting sutras, prostrating to the Buddha, or chanting a Buddha's name daily. To do so in this manner has nothing to do with our own negative habits. It is simply a formality. It will change nothing. To cultivate is not simply reciting a sutra. Cultivation is to not give rise to wandering thoughts as we focus our attention on the sutra text during the time we recite a sutra. Nor should we analyze the meanings, because to do so is also wandering thoughts. Thus, the goal of cultivation is cultivating the pure mind, is halting our wandering thoughts. Reciting sutras, chanting mantras or chanting a Buddha's name, all share this goal to cultivate the mind. When the mind is pure, the body will be pure.

Throughout these years, we have truly taken to heart that with purity of mind, the body will become pure and not fall ill. Naturally, we still need to be careful with our daily intake of food and drink and with our manner of living. Although we are advancing in age, with a body that is pure, an environment that is pure, without worries, without afflictions, we would neither fall ill nor grow old. My late

teacher, Mr. Bing-Nan Lee, was a perfect example of this. Even in his nineties, every day was a rush of lectures, appointments, social engagements, etc. From this we can clearly see how a person who is advanced in years, can remain perfectly competent while living a healthy, long life, without falling ill. Many younger people cannot accomplish this. It was all due to the purity of his mind and thus, his body.

Therefore, when we commit a wrongdoing, our retribution in the physical world is a bad reputation, which will last for hundreds, even thousands of years. Even filial children and loving grandchildren cannot restore our honor. Then in our afterlife, we might end up in hell suffering immeasurable pain.

If we do not know to regret and to correct our wrongdoings, then we will be burdening future generations with our bad reputation. Even our filial children and virtuous grandchildren will not be able to wipe these away.

We are currently unable to see the hells with our own eyes. But, please be assured that our negative karma will lead us to the hell realms and they are truly terrifying. Sutras talk of the hells and there are many explanations of how long we will remain in them. The easiest to read and understand is the one Mr. Lee listed in the [Fourteen Lecture Outlines](#). They are very believable and accord with the sutras. One day in hell is equivalent to two thousand 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 ten thousand years! If we were to calculate their days to be three hundred sixty five in a year, that means a day in hell is equal to almost three thousand years in the human realm! We must understand the magnitude of this! The suffering is ceaseless, without a day of release. We will not be able to emerge for hundreds and thousands of aeons. And in this lifetime, it is very easy for us to create the cause of going to the hells. However, once we have fallen into the hells, it is unimaginably difficult to get out. Therefore, if we believe that the Buddha only tells us the truth, then how can we continue to act rashly and blindly commit any offense!

Even the sages, virtuous people, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot help us escape from the bad consequences. So how can we not be afraid?

Even the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with their great compassion and kindness, are unable to help us when we fall into the hell realms. Can Earth Treasure Bodhisattva who presides there help to us when we fall into them? No! 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. Then, they will truly regret and mend their ways to be able to transcend the hell realms. However, when we are suffering intense pain, it is virtually impossible to accept even 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 even more serious offenses, consequently making the transcendence from the hells even more difficult and this is why even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot help us.

What kind of people is Earth Treasure Bodhisattva able to help? Those who truly possess good roots and good fortunes. Because of one erroneous thought, these people fall into hell but are able to be helped. Earth Treasure 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 hells. Otherwise, there is no way to help them. Even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are helpless in this matter. After seeing how it is and considering all this, how could we not be afraid?

The second way to reform teaches us to have a fearful heart. We need to know that we cannot hide even the slightest faults from the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, much less from all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Therefore, even if we were in a dark room, we would do well not to give rise to deviated thoughts. And without deviated thoughts, we naturally will not commit any bad deeds. This is the simple truth! Therefore, when we regret and reform, we need to start from our hearts. When our hearts, our minds are virtuous and kind, naturally our speech and behavior will be likewise. When our hearts are not virtuous and kind, no matter how we try to pretend, our speech and behavior will be a lie.

A Determined and Courageous Heart:

From Courage Comes Inspiration

The third way to reform is that one must have "a determined and courageous heart".

We need to be brave in regretting and reforming. The first way talked about how being ashamed is close to being brave. Being ashamed is being awakened. Not being ashamed is being deluded. Therefore, being ashamed is a condition for awakening. Being courageous is a condition for its effort and accomplishment. Being ashamed is to awaken from within, for the mind to be truly awakened. Having a fearful heart is the external force that helps us to refrain from doing anything bad, which also reflects the extreme deep shame in our self-nature. Shame is the state of mind of being ashamed. Fear is the state of mind of being conscience-stricken. To feel ashamed and to be conscience-stricken are two virtuous states of mind.

There are eleven virtuous Dharmas in the Sastra on the Door to Understanding the Hundred Dharmas, one of which includes shame. If we can feel ashamed, then we are bound to achieve. Throughout his life, Master Yin-Guang said that he was "constantly shameful", that is, he would constantly bear in mind a shameful and fearful heart. He cultivated with this frame of mind, thus he was able to be diligent and brave in improving himself. In this way, he truly achieved in having a determined and courageous heart.

When we hesitate to reform our faults because we really do not want to change, we are content with what we can get away with. For a reform to take place, we must

use all of our efforts and resolve to change immediately. We should not doubt or postpone our resolve to change until tomorrow or the day after.

More often than not, we are drifting along day to day. Please be aware that if we are not advancing, we are regressing. We do not seek progress. We especially do not have the heart to keep progressing in our virtuous conduct. Today, people are also brave and diligent in trying to advance, but what they seek are the Five Desires, the Six Dusts and the Five Poisons. They do not know to fear the consequences. The sages of this world and beyond taught us to keep progressing in our morality, ethics and wisdom for they are higher than just academic attainment. The learning of ethics and morality is different from academic attainment. Learning is the wisdom that flows from our true nature, what Buddhists call our original, innate wisdom.

On the other hand, academic skills and learning are called worldly intelligence. Today, we advance bravely and diligently, but we are going in the wrong direction. We are going into the Six Realms of Reincarnation, into the Three Bad Realms. The sages of this world and beyond teach us that we need to transcend the Six Realms, to free ourselves forever from reincarnation, to catch up with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Therefore, as Mr. Liao-Fan said, to reform, we must use all of our efforts and resolve to change immediately. We should neither doubt nor wait to reform, nor postpone our resolve to change until sometime in the future. Once we have realized this, we must do all that we can to lift our spirits and diligently advance. We need to do it now, without any doubt, delay, hesitation. There is no need to wait any longer, say it and do it now.

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

When we have a thorn piercing our skin, it is very painful. We will do whatever we can to quickly extract it. But to bear a minor fault in our mind is even more painful. We need to become aware of it, for if we are not, it is as if we have no sense of feeling. As if we do not know that we have pain when something is piercing our body. Now, it is not our flesh that is unfeeling, it is our conscience.

A big fault is like a finger bitten by a poisonous snake. We must cut off that finger without hesitation to prevent the poison from spreading and taking our life. In I Ching, the Book of Changes, when we get the symbol of wind and thunder, it tells us that we have strong determination in reforming and are certain to succeed in doing so.

This is just an example to show us how determined we need to be to end all incorrect ways. When we are lethargic and listless every day, it is due to our karmic obstacles emerging. When we have numerous wandering thoughts, afflictions, worries, and find that nothing is going as we wish, it is due to our karmic obstacles emerging.

In Buddhism, we often speak of karmic obstacles. What are they? They arise when we have

nightmares at night. They arise when we do not have a regular pattern in our daily living habits. When this happens, we need to earnestly reflect, to be vigilant! If we are able to correct all our faults, then our karmic obstacles will be eradicated.

When we have fewer karmic obstacles, we will be filled with the Dharma joy. We will feel light in body and mind, without any burdens. To have fewer karmic obstacles means to have fewer afflictions. With fewer afflictions, our mind will naturally be pure and constantly give rise to wisdom. With wisdom, we will see and understand very clearly everything around us, whether affecting body or mind, whether regarding Buddhism or worldly matters. We need to have the determination, need to want to be able to examine our motives and feelings, to find our faults and courageously correct them. In no way should we be afraid of doing this.

I Ching, the Book of Changes contains sixty-four combinations, each combination has six explanations or predictions. The wind-thunder symbol represents benefit and is concerned with resolution and determination. If we are able to make the resolution and have the determination to correct our erroneous ways and to cultivate kindness, we need to do so for only then are we able to receive true benefits. If we can immediately reform without hesitation, then we have done as the wind-thunder symbol said we would.

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

In reforming ourselves, we need to have these three hearts of shame, fear and courageous determination. To have a shameful heart is self-awakening. To have a respectful and fearful heart is to be conscience-stricken. Only when we have both of these do we give rise to a courageous and determined heart. To regret and reform ourselves. So knowing this, why are we unable to correct our faults? We do not yet possess a shameful and fearful heart. We have thus, not generated the motivation to give rise to a courageous and determined heart. The courageous and determined heart arises from the shameful and fearful heart. If we do not know shame, then we are not afraid of being laughed at by others so there is no incentive for us to cultivate kindness.

How do we nurture these three hearts? Of all sutras, why do we choose the Infinite Life Sutra for everyone to practice? It is not that the rest of the sutras are not good, they just do not explain as perfectly as does the Infinite Life Sutra. It completely explains the matters, principles, causes and effects. 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 is especially compiled for fellow practitioners at the Amitabha Buddhist Societies. Ancient virtuous people originally edited the older version of the recitation book. So, their version was designed to cure the problems of the practitioners of that time. Thus it was, as expected, effective for them. However, our problems differ from theirs, thus 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 Buddha Amitabha.

For the evening ceremony, we recite chapters thirty-two through thirty-seven. These six chapters

explain the five offenses of killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying and consuming intoxicants. The essence of these six chapters consists of the Five Fundamental Precepts and the Ten Bad Conducts. They are causes. These chapters also talk of the Five Sufferings, which are the current sufferings we undergo and the Five Burnings, which include the retributions we bear after our current life, the consequences we undergo in the hells. As we recite these daily, they can help us to reflect, regret and reform. Reciting these six chapters is essentially the same as reciting the repentance verse. After reading it, we need to be vigilant, to be awakened, to sincerely mend our ways and to follow their guidance in understanding and cultivation. This way we will gain benefit from this kind of recitation practice. Therefore, it is important for us to have these three kinds of hearts.

Just as the sun's rays shine on a thin layer of ice in the springtime, there is no need to worry about its melting.

If we have these three hearts, we will immediately reform our faults. It is just like the ice in springtime. As the weather grows warmer, the ice grows thinner. When the sun comes out, the ice melts. It is the same with our wisdom. As it grows, our karmic obstacles melt away.

Three Methods of Practice to Reforming

Changing Through Behavior

There are also three methods of practice to help us reform. First is changing through behavior, second is changing through reasoning and third is changing from the heart. Since the degree of achievement varies, so do the results. For example, if I killed living beings in the past, I now vow not to kill again starting today. If I was angry and yelled at others in the past, I vow not to get angry starting today. This is how a person changes through behavior and refrains from repeating a wrongdoing by vowing not to do it again.

The commentary stated, "generating a shameful, fearful and determined heart as the cause of regretting and reforming, shows us the three paths of behavior, reasoning and heart. This details the methods of practice in reforming." Previously Mr. Liao-Fan spoke of principles. Now he tells us of the methods of practice. In total, there are three general kinds of methods. First, let us talk about "changing through behavior".

When we are angry, we lose our temper and yell at others. This encroaches upon using abusive language. We can change through our behavior and refrain from repeating a wrongdoing by vowing not to do it again. This is to totally change through behavior, to find each and every fault and reform them. At first, Mr. Liao-Fan also changed through behavior. We see him accomplishing his three thousand good deeds over ten years. Taking this long to accomplish this amount of good deeds is not that outstanding. The second time he took only four years to accomplish the next three thousand good deeds,

when he sought and attained a son. But the time spent was still fairly long. Truthfully speaking, the result attained was as sought, to change through behavior.

In Buddhism, to change through behavior is to abide by the precepts. There are eight schools in Mahayana Buddhism and two in Theravada Buddhism. However, both start their cultivation from "abiding by the precepts", in other words, cultivation through behavior. This is especially true for the Theravada precepts which emphasize behavior not the intention or thought.

This is different from the Mahayana precepts like those in the [Brahma Net Sutra](#). This particular sutra was not completely translated into Chinese. It is a somewhat lengthy sutra of which only the most important chapter, the "Mind Precept Chapter", which is comprised of two scrolls, was brought to China. The first explains the state of mind of a Bodhisattva. The second explains the Bodhisattva precepts and behavior. Truthfully speaking, what is important is the state of the mind. The first section emphasizes changing from the mind, to reform. The latter section emphasizes changing through behavior. Naturally, to change from the mind as well as through behavior would be the best way to reform ourselves.

However, it is a hundred times harder if we force ourselves not to do something than if we just stopped doing it naturally. If we do not uproot our faults, but merely suppress them, the faults will eventually resurface even if we have temporarily stopped committing them. Therefore, the method of changing through behavior cannot help us to permanently rid ourselves of 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 even if we have temporarily stopped committing them. Therefore, the method of changing through behavior is not permanent. It is not the best way for it only treats the symptom. It is treating the head when there is a headache, treating the foot when there is a foot pain. This leaves the root problem intact, not uprooted and eradicated. In other words, the behavior may seem all right but the mind is polluted. The outside seems all right but within is not.

Changing through Reasoning

We can try to reform by refraining from wrongdoings by understanding the reason and principle behind why we should not do something. In the instance of killing, we can reform through contemplating that loving all living things is a virtue of heaven. All living beings love life and are afraid to die. How can I be at peace with myself by taking another's life to nurture my own? At times, animals were even cooked alive, such as fish or crabs. They may not have been completely slaughtered before going into the cooking pot. Such pain and suffering reach down into the very bones, how can we be so cruel to them?

When we eat, we use all kinds of expensive and tasty things to nourish our bodies, enough to fill the whole dinner table! But once the meal is done, even the best deli-

cacies 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 stomach become a graveyard and reduce our good fortune through the violation of killing?

Here, Mr. Liao-Fan talks of changing through reasoning. We want to know the true reality, to think of its principles, its logic. Then, we will naturally no longer have the heart to eat the flesh of another sentient being. Before, we were not clear on the reasoning and tried to do something very grudgingly. Trying to force ourselves to do something is extremely difficult. We will not be happy or willing and can end up painfully, struggling with ourselves.

Once, we understand the principles, the logic, we can reconcile these problems. Thus, we need to constantly bear in mind that "loving all living things is a virtue of heaven". It is natural for us to do so. Especially now, even scientists are coming to gradually understand this. Today, we speak of the natural ecological balance. This is the same as "loving all living things is a virtue of heaven". Our ecological system is naturally balanced. If this balance is destroyed, all sentient beings in the world will experience the catastrophe. Therefore, those who are wise will do nothing that will result in destroying our ecological system.

Actually of all the animals, humankind is the worst for we are the most cruel, the most evil. Tigers and poisonous snakes only kill when they are hungry. After their hunger has been satisfied, they do not even pay attention when other animals walk back and forth near them. This shows that they killed from natural instinct. But it is different for humans, we have no need to kill, on the contrary, we slaughter at will. Few animals create negative karma. Think about it, the negative karma created by humans is unequaled by animals! When we consider this, we will realize that there is nothing in the Six Realms for us to be proud of. It is great suffering to fall into the animal realms. However, animals at least do not create negative karma. They are reducing theirs!

If we do not practice Buddhism when we have obtained this human form, then what is the good of having it? We commit wrongdoings daily. Animals reduce their karma. We create them. When their karma has been eliminated, they will emerge and be born into the Three Good Realms. On the other hand, our karma has increased and when it comes into fruition, we will fall into the Three Bad Realms. They prepare to emerge from, we prepare to go into. What is there for us to be proud of? Moreover, we need to remember that all sentient beings are mortally afraid of death. When we kill them, it is because they were unable to fight back. Talk about the weak being the prey of the strong! They had no way to resist. Unable to resist, were they willing? If not, then be assured that they will have resentment and hatred. How will we be able 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 things?" The practitioner asked, "But if the child was born deformed or retarded, would it not undergo much suffering? Would it not be better to abort it?" 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 not allowing the debt to be claimed, but also you have killed him or her. In other words, 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 us, they do not know of cause and effect of the next lifetime. Cause and effect are connected in the three times of 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 its first or second weeks of gestation." I said, "No, he comes upon inception, it has nothing to do with taking shape or not. Upon conception, it has found you. You have this affinity with it from the past, whether it is repaying a gratitude or a grievance, demanding payment of a debt, or repaying a debt. If the baby had come to repay gratitude and you killed it, you would be returning kindness with ingratitude. It would become your enemy in the future. Perhaps, it was a filial child and virtuous grandchild come to repay kindness, but by killing it you have turned the fetus into a mortal enemy. This is terrible! You are trying to accomplish a little merit by spending a small amount of money thinking you can transcend this baby by erecting a plaque? Nothing is this easy! You are only deceiving yourself. It is not the truth".

Therefore, if everyone could just see the past cause and the resultant effect, it would be terrifying! 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 to nurture ourselves. However, today, people regard this as perfectly normal. Some religions even think that animals were 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 had the virtue of loving all living things? This is wrong thinking, which leads us to commit so many transgressions. And we do not even know how very wrong we are. All sentient beings when killed and slaughtered cry out from their fear and their pain. When we listen to those terrified cries, how could anyone think they willingly submitted to their death.

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 you eat sixteen ounces of flesh, you will pay back sixteen ounces of flesh. A debt of money must be repaid in cash and a life owed must be repaid in kind. This is the immutability of the Law of Cause and Effect. Once we truly believe and accept this, we will never again have a thought of harming any sentient being. Why? We do not wish to pay back with our lives in the future.

Nor do we want to seek ill-gotten wealth. Why? Because we know if we do, in the future we will have to repay the debt. By understanding the true reality, we naturally will abide by the law, be content with what we have and be honest in all that we do. Be assured that this is neither passive nor regressive but is to do our best to create a beautiful and bright future for ourselves. It is to seek a good life, not only for this time, but for all of our future lifetimes as well. Without wisdom and without knowing the true reality, we will not be able to attain what we seek.

Mr. Liao-Fan was speaking of eating animal flesh. We see sentient beings being killed, witness their pain and suffering, which reach down into the bones. How could we bear to take their life to nurture our own? Besides, once we have finished eating, even the most delicious foods will become body waste. People long for delicacies, for food that tastes good. But, no matter how we cook it, the only thing that

will know and enjoy the taste is our tongue, nothing after that. Just for a few seconds of enjoyment we have killed countless sentient beings, committed innumerable transgressions!

Eating vegetarian food can be just as filling and nourishing. Some may say that vegetarian food is not nutritious. Actually, many vegetarians have lived long and healthy lives. Many monks and nuns who became vegetarians when they were little are strong and healthy. How can we say it is not healthy to be a vegetarian? All these are incorrect ideas. When we take the life of another sentient being and eat their flesh to nurture ourselves, we not only make enemies and incur their hatred for us, but we also reduce our own good fortune. A truly intelligent person would never do this willingly.

Think again of all the living beings with flesh and blood. Like us, they have a conscience since they possess self-awareness. They and we are one entity. We can cultivate virtue and allow these living beings to respect us and feel safe around us. How can we continue to harm them and make them hate us? If we think about it, we will naturally feel sorrow for these animals and be unable to swallow their flesh.

All living creatures not only possess life but have self-awareness. They are no different from us. Other than Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who understand the concept that all beings are one entity. From this segment of the text, it is logical to assume that Mr. Liao-Fan's family has become vegetarian, because he understood the reasoning and knew the true reality. Nowadays, there are still some people that have the wrong idea, thinking that adults can become vegetarians but children are too small to do so. Parents are afraid that they will be malnourished, so they still want them to eat more meat. This thinking is incorrect. Actually, this is akin to thinking that they might not have enough karmic obstacles, might have too few mortal enemies, so we should help them incur more karmic foes. This is what it amounts to. If we explain this to them, not only do they not believe us but they criticize us, saying that we are out of touch, that we are ignorant of science and nutrition.

In fact, this is not the case at all. They are mistaken. It is best to be awakened as early as possible; the younger children start becoming vegetarian the better off they will be. It will help them to build a solid foundation of good fortune and merit. As the Infinite Life Sutra and the Sutra of Good Fortunes and Misfortunes said, "the ancestors were ignorant". The ancestors here are the older generation. They have no wisdom, thus they lead us to unwittingly commit transgressions, creating much negative karma. This matter of our food and drink intake alone is appalling for the offense is indeed serious!

Another example of changing through reasoning is the person who often gets angry. They need to stop and think that everyone has his or her individual strengths and weaknesses. According to my reasoning, if I touched on someone else's weakness, I should feel sorry for that weakness and forgive any shortcomings. If someone offends me for no reason at all, then it is that person's problem and has nothing to do with me. There is no reason for me to get angry.

In the past, we tended to lose our tempers, to be filled with anger. We would do well to sincerely reflect within remembering that "we are only human, that we all have our faults". Other people have faults, so do we. If we cannot forgive them their shortcomings, how can we expect them to forgive ours? When we think about this, we will no longer condemn them but feel empathy for them. People only make mistakes due to their ignorance, their foolishness. They do not have the ability to distinguish between true and false, proper and deviated, harmful and beneficial, thus they cannot correct themselves, cannot end their erroneous ways and cultivate kindness. We should feel sorry for them and not reproach them. In so doing, we follow the Buddhas' and Bodhisattvas' way of interacting with people, matters and objects.

Mr. Liao-Fan said that when someone offends us for no reason at all, then it is their problem and not ours. If someone attacks us unfairly, it does not concern us. "There is no reason to become angry." Even if they attack us physically. This body is not us. Our purity of mind will never be hurt by attacks, as purity of mind originally contains nothing. It is a pity that we do not employ purity of mind when we interact with others or matters. What we use is our false mind, which is not the true self. What Buddhism seeks is our "original self before we were born to our parents". This original self is the true mind, the pure mind, which does not give rise to any wandering thoughts. The external environment will not affect the pure mind. Thus, it does not concern us, so why should we bother with it? Why should we be so attached to it? Once we sever all wandering thoughts, discriminatory thoughts and attachments, think about it, what is there to concern us? Nothing.

All these are observations from the aspect of reasoning, thus it is said "to have achieved perfect peace of mind through reasoning". By understanding the reasoning, our minds will be settled, no longer affected by external conditions. Regardless of what happens on the outside that which is within can remain calm. In the midst of favorable conditions, we do not give rise to the heart of greed. In the midst of unfavorable conditions, we do not give rise to the heart of anger. Regardless of the circumstances, we are able to maintain our mind of purity, equality and compassion to genuinely reform ourselves.

I also think that there is not a great person who thinks that he or she is always right. There is not a truly learned person who blames their faults on others. Therefore, 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 actually become a training ground to refine our character and to strengthen our abilities. Therefore, we should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism and teachings. What is there to be angry and complain about?

This teaches us to reform from the heart. And this is the best way to change. In the Flower Adornment Sutra, the purpose of the fifty-three visits of Sudhana was to practice and learn from experience. It is to cultivate and reform from the mind. Therefore, we need to earnestly reflect upon our-

selves.

In Buddhism, Buddhas are "great persons" and Bodhisattvas are heroes. They stand out among others and they do what others cannot. Thus, Buddhist main halls are called "Grand Hall of Great Heroes". What ordinary people are unable to do, to regret and reform, the Buddhas can. Buddhas are able to correct all errors, thus to be a great hero. Therefore, there is not a self-righteous Buddha or Bodhisattva. There is not a great sage or virtuous person who is not humble, who is not patient, conciliatory and agreeable. Humility and respect are a revelation of our virtuous nature.

A truly learned person would never blame others or the heavens. Knowledge and good conduct are wisdom. It is revealed from our true nature, whether it is Buddhism or Confucian teachings. 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, it flows from the sincere mind, it is wisdom, it is called knowledge and good conduct. Therefore, a learned and wise person never blames others or the heavens for their misfortunes. Therefore, one who complains about others is not a genuine learned person.

When we do not succeed in our undertakings, when in everyday life our speech and behavior are criticized or slandered by others and things are not going our way, we do not want to blame those who criticize us. Instead, we would do well to reflect within, to understand that it is because we have not yet achieved in our cultivation of morals and virtues. And this is why we are unable to touch them.

Therefore, we need to look within first and see if we have mistreated others. When people verbally abuse us, criticize us, slander us, we can accept it. Not only will we not have thoughts of vengeance, but also we will have a grateful heart. Why? They have provided us with invaluable assistance, which can help us to reflect within, to correct the mistakes if we have them, to guard against them if we do not. If we are not at fault, we do not blame them. If we are at fault, then we correct our mistakes immediately. Sudhana adopted this method when visiting his fifty-three spiritual guides to completely correct all of his faults and to eventually become a Buddha.

The fifty-three visits concern training the mind through experience. Experiences are the interactions we have with others and matters in our daily lives. Everything and everyone provides us with the means to reflect within. Using the external environment, no matter who the individual is we are to regard them as our teachers. We are to regard what they teach us as lessons taught to us by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. We need to earnestly reflect within, to learn and practice. There is only one student, us. Everyone else is our teacher, our benevolent advisor. All are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They do not have faults, only we do. This is how Sudhana became a Buddha.

When we read the Flower Adornment Sutra, Sudhana did not change into another body, he became a Buddha in his own body. He started as an ordinary person and continued to practice until he reached the ultimate perfect enlightenment in one lifetime. And if we learn this ability, this 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 everyone and everything else. Blame only ourselves. If other people are disagreeable to us, it is because our karmic obstacles have surfaced. All other people are Buddhas, are Bodhisattvas without the slightest faults. Whatever we see that incurs our dislike is our own karmic obstacle, our own fault.

The Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Hui-Neng, said it very well, "It is our own shortcoming if we see the faults of others, as we will fall back also". When we mind the faults of others, our karmic obstacles will surface and we will regress. He also said that, "A true practitioner does not see the faults of others". Sudhana was a true practitioner. He did not see any faults in others. He only saw 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. Thus, he saw everyone as virtuous people, as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In this way, he himself also became a Buddha, a Bodhisattva. If we still see the faults of others, it is our fault, our karmic obstacles materializing. So, in the eyes of the Buddha, everyone is a Buddha. In the eyes of ordinary beings, even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are ordinary beings. Therefore, the best way of reforming starts 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. We simply need to adopt this manner of acceptance. In this way, we will see that there is nothing to be angry about. Nothing to complain about. How can we be angry? How can we not accept? How can we give rise to the heart of revenge? This is too great an offense! They are our benefactors and yet we want to repay them with reprisals! This is a major offense.

When the Chinese speak of filial piety, we are reminded of Emperor Shun (who lived over four thousand years ago). In Chinese history, everyone recognizes him as the model of filial piety, 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 went along with her. Then, years later after his half-brother grew up and he also mistreated Shun. Consequently, not only did three people mistreat him but they even tried to kill him.

He did not change his gentle heart, but constantly reflected, "Why can I not make my parents and brother happy?" He regarded their actions as his own faults for he did not see the faults of others. Everyday he reflected on his faults, 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, did not 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 was able to influence his whole family, then he was able to influence the whole country.

In the sutras, we read of "Endurance Celestial Being". Who helped him to attain achievement? Kaliraja. Buddha Shakyamuni 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 tyrant, a self-indulgent ruler who is without principles. The celestial being was cultivating on a mountain. For no reason at all, Kaliraja lost his temper and put him to death by dismembering him. Endurance Celestial Being did not have the slightest trace of hatred. Indeed, he perfected the paramita of patience. He did not view any person or matter as evil. Think about it and 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 simply insensitive if we do not differentiate good from bad. Even with the Law of Cause and Effect laid out in front of us, our hearts are pure without any attachments. It is not that we do not understand what is happening around us, we are clear on everything, but we are without the slightest discriminatory thought or attachment. As for Endurance Celestial Being, his mind was pure because he had found the true reality. But because sentient beings have afflictions, it is necessary to explain to them the principles in a progression of ideas. For ourselves, we understand that the four attachments of self, others, phenomena and time are not real. Everything is equal, without the slightest difference. Differentiation is based on the principle of equality to help others. Therefore, differentiation is non-differentiation, because differentiation is not for ourselves, but for others to use.

Since sentient beings have not yet found their true nature, we should teach them to end their erroneous ways and cultivate good deeds. When we ourselves have attained this state, there will be no erroneous ways to be ended, no good deeds to be cultivated. This means our minds are in a state of purity and equality, the One True Dharma Realm, the state of non-cultivation, non-attainment. Within these, we still do whatever is needed for cultivation and attainment. In so doing, we are not attached to either extreme of emptiness or existence.

If we have achieved this state, but do not put into 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 logic, do not see into our original nature, then we fall into the extreme of "existence". We should neither attach to emptiness nor to existence. As Great Strength Bodhisattva explained, we are "to concentrate the six senses on uninterrupted pure thoughts". With concentration of the six senses, we do not fall into the extreme of existence. With uninterrupted pure thoughts, we do not fall into the extreme of emptiness. In so doing, our mind is pure and nondiscriminatory, with everything in accordance with the true nature. We chant "Amitufo" continuously, without interruption from dawn to dusk, without attaching to either existence or emptiness. This is what we need to learn.

Additionally, we should maintain the mind of stillness when we are slandered. Although the slanderous rumors and tale bearing spreads like a huge fire burning to the sky, eventually, like a torch it will burn itself out in space.

This not only tells us what we should do in principle, but in behavior as well. When others insult and slander us, if we remain calm and unaffected, then naturally everything will pass. When others verbally abuse us, we do not need to respond in kind. When they curse us, we just listen. 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. Because at that time, I was very caustic like Mr. Liao-Fan. I loved to ridicule people and play tricks on them. However, that classmate became my spiritual guide. I was overbearing towards him, even ridiculed him in public. But, he never responded in kind. It continued like this for an entire year and in the end, he got through to me. This person was truly amazing. He simply 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 increase the cultivation of our inner-self. As for accumulating good fortune, average people would praise us even more saying that we were truly good practitioners! If it were not for these people insulting and slandering us, then we would not have the opportunity to practice endurance. They have come to help us to succeed in our practice. Why would we not accept their help? If someone treats us like this at work and we can interact with them with a mind of purity, our supervisor will admire us, our co-workers will respect us and our opportunity for promotion will be greater than expected. This person has brought a great advantage to us. How could we not want it? If we respond to their verbal response in kind, then we would be sinking to their level.

When I was in school, if two students quarreled, usually the teacher would punish both by having them kneel on the ground. We would feel it was unfair! Obviously, I was right, so why did the teacher also punish me? It was not until later that I understood. In any arguments, any fights, both parties are at fault, 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 encounter this kind of situation, we can tell right away the high or low level of the individual's cultivation.

Thus, when we encounter these matters, we need to know that these individuals are our benefactors who have come to give us a gift. We cannot return their kindness with ingratitude. First, they have come to test our level of cultivation. Second, we will accumulate good fortune for we 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 wrong unjustly.

If we hear others slandering us, get angry and try to defend ourselves, it would be like the spring silkworm spinning its own cocoon tying itself in suffocation. Therefore, no benefit but rather harm is derived from getting angry.

What this passage teaches is not only important in worldly teachings, but also in Buddhism. There are two essential practices in the Six Paramitas of Bodhisattvas. The first is giving. When we practice giving, we cultivate good fortune. We cannot live without good fortune. This is even truer for Buddhas. We call the Buddha "Respected One with Perfect Wisdom and Good Fortune". He is unsurpassed in wisdom and good fortune. Thus, it is logical for us to seek good fortune and wisdom, as our self-nature is originally complete with them.

There are three kinds of giving. From the giving of wealth, we gain wealth, from the giving of teaching, we gain wisdom and from the giving of fearlessness, we gain health and long life. This is what all sentient beings seek. The Buddha taught us that by planting good causes, we are assured of harvesting good results.

The other Paramita is the practice of patience. This enables us to maintain the good fortune that we have already cultivated. If we only practice giving and gain good fortune, but do not practice patience, we will lose our good fortune. The Diamond Sutra tells us that "everything is attained through patience". We have no choice but to cultivate the Paramita of Patience to safeguard achievements, whether worldly or Buddhist. We often read in the sutras of "the fire burning our forest of merits". What is this fire? It is anger and hatred. If we lose our temper, then we lose our merits as well. Thus,

it is extremely difficult to cultivate and safeguard our merits. If we want to know how much merit we have cultivated and accumulated, think of the last time we gave way to anger. When we give rise to one angry thought, the fire burns our forest of merits.

If Pure Land practitioners were to get angry at their last moments of life, then all would be lost! This explains why the Buddha taught us not to touch the body of the deceased within eight hours of passing away. Although the person has breathed their last breath, the spirit has yet to leave the body. If we were to touch the deceased, it would cause great pain and possibly anger. If he or she were to become angry at this critical moment, they would lose all of their merits. Thus, merits are indeed difficult to cultivate and accumulate for they can be lost at any time. However, good fortune and virtue will remain intact.

What is merit? Merit is the pure mind, is concentration, is wisdom. Think about it, once we lose our temper, how would we have concentration and wisdom? We would not. As for good fortune, it is our wealth and intelligence. When our mind attains Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, One Mind Undisturbed, we can accumulate merits and virtues. But with just one outburst of temper, all is lost: no Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, much less One Mind Undisturbed. Therefore, we need to constantly bear in mind that merits are difficult to keep, so we want to maintain vigilance.

In our cultivation, on the path to awakening, our karmic creditors will often come to create trouble for us. 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 attained achievement, they will no longer have the opportunity for revenge. Thus, they will do all they can to obstruct us, to block us in our progress. And the way they hinder us is by making us destroy, 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 encounter unpleasant circumstances or personal problems, we become unhappy and lose our tempers. Once we do this, we burn our merits. Who makes us unhappy, so angry? Probably all those unfavorable conditions, enemies and people stirring up trouble. This is another 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, feeling uncomfortable and miserable. We may burst out in anger. We may manage some control and keep it inside. Which ever, our merit is gone.

Why would all of our merit 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. Not only is concentration the key to our cultivation in transcending the Six Realms, but is the key to worldly teachings as well. "To remain unmoved by slander" is deep concentration, is wisdom revealed. To get angry due to slander is a manifestation of karmic obstacles. We can chose whether to have our wisdom revealed or our karmic obstacles materialized. We need to be clear on this.

Are these encounters good for us? Where practitioners are concerned, yes! It is a good training ground for us to constantly have someone causing trouble for us, to not have things going as we wish. If we do not cultivate under such circumstances, then how would we achieve concentration? Therefore, the presence of adverse conditions and affinities provide just the right opportunities for us to discipline

ourselves and to practice the Paramita of Patience. We cannot be thankful enough for these opportunities much less complain about them. How can we get angry? This is instead just the right opportunity for us to train ourselves.

In the past, the method people used in helping a person to learn discipline was to teach them to practice the Paramita of Patience. If they regarded this person as having potential to be a Dharma repository they would not look at them with pleasant expressions. They would purposely pick on them at every opportunity, acting as if they disliked that person. This was to see whether they were able to be patient, able to endure the harassment. If the person was unable to endure and left, then they were forgotten! If we cannot endure or be patient, then we cannot attain achievement. Even if we are exceptional in all other areas, if we do not have the patience to endure, then there is a limit to our achievement.

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 the student but the student would not leave. 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 in a distant hallway of the way place. When the old monk lectured, he would listen outside the window, not letting the old monk see him.

After one year had passed, 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 the old monk would choose. The old monk asked those who were present to get the student who was listening outside the window and to bring him in so that he could pass on the teachings and position to him. Only then did everybody realize that for all those years, the old monk was purposely training him.

If we want to give up every time we encounter some small unpleasantness and are unwilling to be patient and accept the torment, we will not achieve, no matter how outstanding or excellent we may be in other areas. The key to success or failure in achievement lies in patience and endurance. If we can patiently endure, we will achieve deep concentration. And with deep concentration, we will uncover our true wisdom and not be affected by external conditions.

Sometimes we will see new people, with excellent qualities, at a way place. But after only a short time, they leave. The residents will smile thinking that it does not matter. If people do not have the patience to endure, they cannot achieve. It would not matter much whether one person more or less, who could not achieve, were to stay at the way place. Those who were 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, thus enabling Buddhism to remain in this world. Without deep concentration, we will not attain wisdom. And first, we have to have patience and endurance to achieve deep concentration. Without these, how would we succeed?

If we have the wisdom to recognize a true way place where we can learn from those who can help us on the path to enlightenment, then no matter how they mistreated us, we would not leave. If we

have not yet obtained the learning how would we be willing to leave? We would be willing to endure any kind of mistreatment. Why? Only when we had learned everything, would we be willing to leave and not before. Only by doing so are we truly seeking to learn the teachings. If we could not endure the slightest disagreeable circumstance and just left, then we would have been useless and it would have been pointless to keep us.

The words in this passage are very important for they are a wonderful way to end slander and disputes. We simply ignore them. Even the worst will fade. Therefore, when people slander us, do not dispute it or debate it or we will bind ourselves further. Thus, it is said, "No benefit, but rather harm is derived from getting angry". At work, a superior will not give an important job or a promotion to someone who easily becomes angered. When a superior tries to assess the efficiency of a subordinate, he or she will observe the way the individual interacts with others on a daily basis to decide whether or not this person is worth training, is a promising employee. When they observe that we are easily angered, then they will know that we are not worth training because our anger will only cause difficulties.

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

These two sentences are the highest principles underlying our ability to change. Mahayana Buddhists adopt this method as it is faster for us to achieve with it. Others change themselves through actions, which are minor details, like the branches and leaves of a tree. It is easy to repeat mistakes using the latter method because it is to change on the outside, action by action! Also, it is very painstaking and time consuming to gain a good result by this method for it is more difficult than changing through reasoning. It is much wiser to change through reasoning than through actions for the mind is the root and everything arises from the mind.

Changing from the Heart

What is meant by "changing from the heart"? Although we have thousands of different types of faults, they all stem from the heart, from the mind.

Positive and negative karma are created from our mind, as is the entire universe. The Buddha told us in the [Flower Adornment Sutra](#) that "The nature of the Dharma realms arises from our mind. Nature is essence. Essence is the mind". How do Mahayana Bodhisattvas enter the hell realms when they go to help the beings there? By understanding the principle that everything arises from our minds. We learn from the [Earth Treasure Sutra](#) to break through the doors of the hells. This is explained in the [Flower Adornment Sutra](#). What is Hell? A creation of our mind. Understanding this, we will learn that there are no gates to Hell, we can come and go freely.

So, we can correct our faults by starting to change from our minds and practicing good deeds. If we practice from our minds, then even a tiny good deed like freely giving a penny to a beggar, would be of infinite merit and virtue. Why? It comes from the great compassion that is brought forth from our

true nature. It is boundless broadmindedness. Because it arises from our mind, the good fortune from it is infinite for it 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? Through sincerity. We do so by cultivating from the mind, by wanting to correct our offenses, practicing good deeds and refraining from wrongdoings. When we correct from the mind, there is no such thing as should or should not. It is necessary to meet the requirements when reforming ourselves by reasoning and realizing the principles. 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 connect with our true nature. Knowing that everything arises from the mind, we would do well to correct our faults by starting 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 cancel the negative karma accumulated over infinite past aeons. How can we attain purity of mind, stillness of thought? Through the unmoved mind, which is deep concentration. This is called "One Mind Undisturbed" in the Buddha Name Chanting Method. Once we attain this state all of our negative karma will be eradicated. However, when a new wandering thought arises, our negative karma will again materialize.

For example, when we are watching TV and turn it off, there is no longer a picture, only a clear screen. When we again turn on the TV, the picture reappears. The karmic phenomena stored in the mind of sentient beings is 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 would do well to nurture purity of mind, the state of not giving rise to a single wandering thought. As Master Hui-Neng said, "The true mind originally contains nothing, collects no dust". We need to know that karmic obstacles exist in our false mind, not in our true mind. Originally, our true mind was pure. It still is pure.

An example is wearing eyeglasses. Originally, our eyes are pure. When our glasses are covered with dust, our vision is blurred. There is nothing wrong with our eyes, the problem is with the glasses. Where are our karmic obstacles? The dust on the glasses is the contamination. There is no obstacle within our eyes. When we completely eradicate the contamination, the dust, as well as the glasses we will have pure vision to see clearly. This is the same as uncovering our true nature to become Buddhas. If we wear glasses, there is still a barrier. Then we are ordinary people, sentient beings. Once we can rid ourselves of these obstacles, we are Buddhas.

What kind of mind are we now using? The deluded mind, not the true mind. There is no hindrance in the true mind. When we try to see everything with our naked eyes, it is like observing things with glasses of distortion, seeing the external environment through a layer of delusion. This delusion is the Eight Consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects, glasses that have been heavily contaminated. We then interact with the external environment through the Eight Consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects. Therefore, the environment has changed to that of the six dusts. If we do not apply these Con-

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. So, we would see the nature of form, listen to the nature of sound and transfer the six dusts or pollutants to the nature of our senses. This will purify the mind enabling it to be able to see our true nature, to become Buddhas.

Now the big problem is that we simply cannot rid ourselves of these glasses, of the Eight Consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects. The goal of Buddhist practice is to teach us to let go of these things, to transform consciousness into wisdom. Wisdom is the functioning of the true nature. Consciousness is the functioning of the deluded mind, the function 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, from the heart. Why? They do not know where their hearts are. We learned in the Surangama Sutra, that Venerable Ananda was very clever, but he did not know where his heart was. In the beginning of the Surangama assembly, Buddha Shakyamuni asked Venerable Ananda where his heart was. Ananda could not answer for he did not know what or where it was. How can we regret from our heart, if we do not even know what our true heart is?

For Mahayana Bodhisattvas in Truth Teaching, the level of Bodhisattvas above the First Dwelling in Perfect Teaching, forty-one Dharma Body Bodhisattvas described in the Flower Adornment Sutra that their way of regretting is to feel remorse and to reform themselves from the mind. We will better understand once we study the Flower Adornment Sutra, particularly Sudhana's visits to the fifty-three spiritual guides. How did Sudhana practice? These fifty-three spiritual advisers represent Bodhisattvas of Perfect Teaching from the level of First Dwelling to the highest, the level of Equal Enlightenment. They manifested as men and women, young and old, from all walks of life. How did they cultivate? The genuine practice of Buddhism is comprised of principle, examples and practical applications for us to follow. The forty-fascicle version of the Flower Adornment Sutra is peerless. Although we cannot study the complete Flower Adornment Sutra, the chapter on "Universal Worthy Bodhisattva's Conduct and Vow" is very important. We need to know how to apply this most outstanding Mahayana teaching so that modern people will incorporate it into their daily living. This is an excellent sutra for sincere cultivation and is worthy of being widely propagated.

Following this principle, ancient virtuous people have often provided us with guidance to help us "to generate the Bodhi Mind and be constantly mindful of Buddha Amitabha", regardless of the circumstances. Is this reasonable? To single-mindedly chant "Amitufo" all day and night to reduce all of our wandering thoughts into one thought of "Amitufo"? Is "Amitufo" good or bad? Neither. It is separate from the duality of good and bad and accords with our true nature. Good and bad is duality and this duality only exists in our conscious mind, not in our true mind. We will naturally attain enlightenment when we have been constantly mindful of "Amitufo" for a long time. Among eighty-four thousand methods, this method is unsurpassed.

If we cannot attain complete enlightenment due to our insufficient efforts, it is all right because we

can see Buddha Amitabha. And once we see Buddha Amitabha, we will uncover our true nature. This expedient and convenient way cannot be found in any other methods. In other methods, if we do not obtain enlightenment we will not be considered as having achieved. It is not necessary for us to be able to see the true nature when we practice mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. But, if we can see Buddha Amitabha, then we are considered as having achieved attainment. How do we cultivate the mind? We do so when we are constantly mindful of Buddha Amitabha. All our negative karma will be eliminated when we sincerely and single-mindedly chant "Amitufo". How could "Amitufo" have any negative karma? It is true and perfect goodness. It is not the goodness of good or bad. That kind of goodness is relative. True goodness is separate from duality. It is the absolute great goodness.

If our heart is rooted in faults such as desire, fame, profit or anger, we do not have to find ways to get rid of each fault.

This is just to give us some examples. We may have millions of faults. But we do not have to find each of them one by one. Those practitioners specializing in abiding by the precepts do so by disciplining their behavior. They think about what went wrong. They think about how many mistakes they have committed every day. They carefully think of each and every one and then correct them one by one. They not only reflect upon their behavior daily, but also keep a record of their merits and faults.

This method of record keeping may work well for some. Each of us has a different personality and character related to our habits accumulated over innumerable lifetimes. Mahayana practitioners however, do not practice in this way. On the other hand, Theravada practitioners are very happy to practice this method and benefit from it. Different people, different characters, thus different principles, different methods are used.

There are many practitioners in China (Tibet, Korea and Japan) who practice Mahayana Buddhism. However, in South Asia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka most practitioners are Theravada Buddhists and have been so for generations. They end their erroneous ways and practice kind deeds to change their behavior. Whereas, Mahayana practitioners refrain from wrongdoing and practice kind deeds through reasoning and an awakened heart.

All we need is a sincere, kind heart and the willingness to practice good deeds. As long as our heart is virtuous and kind, then naturally our mind will not generate any improper thoughts.

This is an excellent method, simple and clear. However, if we do not have true wisdom, we still cannot achieve. Why? Because of doubts. Because of wondering how it could be possible for us to eradicate all the offenses we have committed. We doubt, we do not believe, we cannot accept. When we hear that we are "to concentrate our mind on Buddha Amitabha and to seek birth into the Western Pure Land", we still think that since we have committed so many wrongdoings, how can we possibly go to the Pure Land. We would be ashamed to see Buddha Amitabha. Not only this, we would not even dare to pay our respects to his image in the way place, thinking that our offenses are too numerous and heavy. It would be embarrassing to see him. If we think in this way then it would be better to regret

and reform through behavior for at least if we corrected one fault when we discovered it, our minds would be more settled. Then it would be good.

Those who can accept the Pure Land method possess great good roots, good fortune, causes and conditions. If we did not already have the best root nature, it would be impossible for us to accept the Buddha Name Chanting Method. Once we do accept it and practice earnestly, then we can neutralize the transgressions accumulated over infinite lifetimes with the merit of our chanting. The Pure Land is a gathering place for the assembly of utmost virtuous people. Once we are born into it, we are a member of this assembly and are equal to such virtuous people as Universal Worthy Bodhisattva, Great Wisdom Bodhisattva, Great Compassion Bodhisattva and Great Strength Bodhisattva.

As Mr. Nian Zu Huang stated in his commentary on the Infinite Life Sutra, the Pure Land Method is for sentient beings of supreme root nature. Who are those with this utmost root nature? Those who can believe, vow to go to the Pure Land and practice mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. Master Hui-Neng only taught those with supreme root natures. However, his students, although they had achieved, 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 Hui-Neng achieved the three non-regressions, but not perfectly.

The Pure Land method is unsurpassed. We are unbelievably fortunate to have encountered it. But it is no accident that we have done so. It is due to the maturing of our good roots, good fortunes, causes and conditions that we have accumulated over infinite eons. And this is why we have encountered this method.

To practice good deeds with one sincere mind means to have no wandering thoughts, no second thought. Proper and virtuous thought is the first thought, is the absolute and ultimate proper thought. Also, it is to chant "Amitufo" to practice single mindedly Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha and wholeheartedly seek birth into the Pure Land. The most marvelous way to reform and reduce our karmic obstacles is to have no wandering thoughts. It does not mean no proper thoughts. If we are 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 thoughts. However, everyone can achieve this by practicing the Buddha Name Chanting Method.

What is meant by "proper thought revealed"? It is "Amitufo". "Amitufo" is the most truthful and ultimate proper thought. We would do well to understand this. The only important issue in our life is to constantly maintain proper thought, not to cling to deviated and erroneous ones. We would do well to be constantly mindful of Buddha Amitabha day and night, without interruption. If we can continue our cultivation in this way, then we will receive wonderful results after three months. If we can constantly maintain mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, with this one thought we will assuredly reduce our wandering thoughts.

It is impossible for us to not have any wandering thoughts. Certainly, we will have some. Do not be afraid of them. Thoughts of Buddha Amitabha will occupy us the most. Six or seven out of ten thoughts are of Buddha Amitabha with only three or four wandering thoughts. No matter. But, if we are not mindful of Buddha Amitabha, then our minds will be filled with wandering thoughts. If we can

continue mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha for three months, letting the thoughts of Buddha Amitabha increase, our wandering thoughts will decrease. Then we will be at ease and free in spirit. Our minds will become more serene and our savoring the Dharma joy will indicate that our karmic obstacles have been reduced. In the past, our minds were filled with afflictions and worries, our futures darker and darker. Now we will be happy and wise. Our lives will be interesting and filled with confidence and our futures will be bright.

Everything will change as we continue our chanting for half a year. We will receive even better results. This will serve to 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 Buddha Amitabha. Numerous people have achieved this. There are others who have said that they cannot practice this method, for 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 reincarnation in the Six Realms. This is shortsightedness. They do not know that the happiness and enjoyment of the Pure Land is peerless, even human and heavenly realms and all other Buddha Lands cannot compare with it. Such a wonderful place and you do not want to go? You prefer to stay here and remain mired in suffering. Then what can I say? Nothing.

People with true aspiration and profound insight need to know that it is the perfect and complete accomplishment to single-mindedly seek birth into the Pure Land and be with Buddha Amitabha. Naturally, we will set our body and mind free, to let go of wandering and discriminatory thoughts and rid ourselves of attachments forever. There is nothing worthy of worry, nothing worthy of greed. We follow and 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, to live or die at will, not just to pass away when our time is up, but to leave when we wish. If we feel we need to remain in this world for several more years, there is no harm in so doing. However, there is only one reason to remain. If we still have affinities with those who are here then 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 go early to 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, to continue this teaching, then we can pass on the work to them. We can leave first and let them carry on with this great matter of guiding sentient beings to transcend the cycle of birth and death. What freedom this is. Thus, everyone needs to know that those who "attained achievement and left this world in three years" had no Dharma affinities, had nobody to teach. They would certainly leave and not delay here any longer. Those who cannot leave have no choice, have no alternative but to stay. Those, who are able, will go.

As long as we single-mindedly chant the Buddha's name without doubt, without intermingling, without interruption, we are assured of attaining achievement in three years. Look at the student of Master Di Xian who solely chanted "Namo Amitufo" and was ignorant of everything else. After becoming a monk, the Master did not require him to be ordained for he was worried that the new monk could

not withstand the hardship (of the long training session) due to his advanced age. Also, he was uneducated and illiterate and so it was not necessary for him to attend the lectures. He did not even remain in the way place to work with everybody. If the others made fun of him and he lost his temper as a result, it would have been very difficult for him.

Consequently, he was sent to the countryside of Ning Bo County to live alone in an abandoned way place. From dawn to dusk, he chanted "Amitufo" for three years. He knew in advance when he would die. How did he accomplish this? As Mr. Liao-Fan told his son, "As long as the mind is virtuous and kind, then naturally it will not generate any improper thoughts". This is to achieve from sincerely chanting the Buddha's name! Average people cannot compare to him. He succeeded and was born into the Pure Land because he did not have the ability to teach Buddhism to others. He was illiterate with no knowledge of Buddhism, but he attained achievement and was born into the Pure Land. He did not suffer any illness or pain but knew in advance his time of death. When he died, he was standing and remained so for three days, waiting for Master Di Xian to take care of his memorial service. Not at all easy! He is a role model for Pure Land practitioners. Others may say that the Pure Land method is not a good practice, but which other method of practice can present something like this for us to see? Which other method of practice enables us to be clear-headed at the time of death, enables us 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 teach everyone is to single-mindedly chant "Amitufo". While our body remains in this world, we have no choice but to make a living to support ourselves. But after work, we can let go and be mindful of the Buddha. When we are working, we concentrate on our job. Once we are finished, start chanting. Even while at work, when there is no thinking required, we can silently chant or play a cassette to listen to "Amitufo" while working. If our work requires thinking, then we can temporarily lay aside chanting to concentrate on work. When thinking is not needed, we can again chant or listen to the Buddha's name while working. We would do well to understand that chanting "Amitufo" is the greatest matter in our life. The rest is unimportant, not worthy of any real concern. This is the way to regret our wrongdoings, to change from our mind. People who know how to practice do so from the root, from the basics.

Demons do not appear in bright daylight. This is the essence, the key for us to turn over a new leaf. All mistakes stem from the heart; therefore, 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 example of changing through behavior is to cut down the branches, the twigs one by one, or to pull off the leaves one by one. To change from the heart is to uproot the tree. Thus, we need to know what is the key? What method do we use to change ourselves? If everybody can memorize, follow and uphold the teaching of Master Ou-I, then everybody will change from the heart. In so doing, all the

transgressions accumulated over infinite past aeons will be absolved. "Amitufo" can reform all wrongdoings. By sincerely chanting "Amitufo", we perfectly practice all the virtuous teachings, be they worldly or Buddhist teachings. Cultivating one is cultivating all. Changing one is changing all. Truly inconceivable! Many people have doubts, thinking this method is not very reliable, or thinking there is an even better one. I smile after I hear this, place my palms together and chant "Amitufo" and am not bothered by them.

The best way to reform our faults is through cultivating our hearts. If we are willing to cultivate our hearts, then it is possible to purify our faults right away.

The foremost way for us to change is from the heart. If we were able to let go of everything and continuously chant "Amitufo" for three months, for six months, our minds would be purified, the result would come forth. As for people learning to lecture on the Buddhist sutras, I encourage them to learn just one sutra. By reciting a sutra daily, we can attain purity of mind in three to five months. If we were learning many sutras simultaneously, we would not attain purity of mind in the same amount of time. Consequently, our learning would be useless. The solution is to specialize. Not many people realize this.

When our practice of Buddhism is genuine, the more we practice, the more purified our hearts will be. We will have fewer afflictions, lighter ignorance, increased wisdom as our faces glow with health. These are the effects of genuine practice! We need to keep firmly in mind what Master Lian Chi said, "Let others learn all of the Great Buddhist Canon". We need to remember that the books in the library we have are for others to read, not for ourselves. Why do we need to let them see so many books? Because they do not believe, so we let them read. If they want to travel so many roads, let them. We will take a different road, a single short road. They change their ways through their actions, but they only change on appearance and then only change minor details. We change from our hearts. From here, we can see the difference in viewpoints and the degree of wisdom between the two. This is because wrongdoings originate from the heart.

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, are karmic obstacles. As soon as they start to rise, we recognize them immediately and change them into "Amitufo". As a wandering thought arises when our senses come into contact with the external world, whether we like or dislike something, whether the wandering thought is good or bad, we immediately replace it with a second thought of "Amitufo". We can chant either "Amitufo" or "Namo Amitufo". Once our mind has given rise to a wandering thought, it is awakening when our second thought is "Amitufo", to be awakened and not deluded. The first thought is one of delusion but the second thought is one of awakening. To gain the tremendous effect the awakening needs to be immediate. The delusion must not be al-

lowed to increase or to continue. In so doing, we will truly uncover our wisdom.

If we are able to persevere like this for six to twelve months, we will attain wisdom. Our eyes will be brighten, our six senses will be intelligent and sharp. We will be able to understand completely anything that we come into contact with. Others may have to read numerous books, reference materials or other forms of information throughout the whole world to be able to judge and still may not reach the right conclusion. Whereas, having uncovered our wisdom, we may only need to see something once to totally and perfectly understand it. Ordinary people do not have this ability for this is the ability of a Bodhisattva. The Buddha teaches us to seek true wisdom.

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 to learn 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 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 analyzing its meaning, without seeking its meanings. We just need to honestly recite to purify our minds and uncover the wisdom in our self-nature.

If someone comes to ask us the meanings within sutras, we can tell them they are infinite. By not purposely seeking the meanings, the infinite meanings will be revealed, a revelation from the wisdom in our self-nature. Having done so, when we lecture on the sutra, we would naturally do it perfectly whether the talk is complex or profound, short or long. After lectures, when people ask us what we said, we really would not know. Why? When no questions are asked, there is no meaning. With questions, the meaning arises. The generation of infinite meanings is to benefit others. Having no meaning is to benefit self. Self-benefit is cultivating a pure mind, with no thoughts arising but "Amitufo". Lecturing on sutras to explain the teachings is to benefit others not ourselves. Thus, there is no need for us to remember what we just lectured. By not knowing, our mind is pure.

We would do well to constantly maintain our purity of mind. Purity is awakening. Pollution is the mind that is moved, that has wandering thoughts. In other words, pollution is when we have wandering thoughts. Having no wandering thought is original awakening. When we are chanting "Amitufo", it is genuine practice for our every thought initiates awakening in accordance with original awakening. Indeed, the Buddha Name Chanting method is inconceivable. Thus, for sutras we only need to recite the Infinite Life Sutra and the Amitabha Sutra. There is really no need to recite any others.

When we lecture on the teachings to benefit others, we can read the commentaries of the Infinite Life Sutra. We can also read the commentaries of the Amitabha Sutra written by Master Lian Chi and Master Ou-I. The one by Master Lian Chi is very well written, perfect, just as Master Ou-I praised it to be broad and profound. Reading the commentary of the Amitabha Sutra would be the same as reading the Great Buddhist Canon. Master Lian Chi covered all teachings, worldly and Buddhist, for reference citation thus the content indeed is abundant and enriched. Master Yuan Yin and Master Bao Jing also wrote explanatory notes on the Essential Explanation of the Amitabha Sutra commentary by Master Ou-I. These four commentaries, would be enough reference material to propagate the Pure Land School. Mr.

Nian Zu Huang wrote the Commentary of the Infinite Life Sutra.

Once we have thoroughly comprehended these four commentaries, not only would we thoroughly comprehend all the Pure Land Sutras but also the Great Buddhist Canon and the teachings of all other Buddhist schools. If we study many schools, our minds will become scattered. With scattered minds, naturally our wisdom will not be uncovered. These four commentaries are sufficient for those who volunteer to propagate the Pure Land method.

There is no need to look into additional references. Do not think that because we read less we would not have enough materials to lecture on. With shorter, more concise reference material, we would require less time to lecture. Why struggle to try to talk for a certain length of time? When we speak for a shorter time, we will only speak 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 compile a talk using many reference materials as if to make up one giant platter of hors d'oeuvres, others cannot even begin 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 a fault 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 action and force the thought to dissipate. The best way is by cultivating the heart and understanding the reasons behind the need to change. The alternative way is forcing ourselves not to commit the wrongdoing again. Sometimes all three methods have to be used to succeed at reforming a fault. It is foolish to dismiss the best way, which is to reform from the heart and to be attached to the inferior way of reforming through action.

If we are unable to achieve using the best method, then we have no choice but to try the alternative way, to try to change from understanding, to know the reasons why we need to make the change. When something happens, we need to think calmly of why it happened. After we understand the reasoning, our minds will naturally become calm. Our wandering thoughts will lessen and our anger will dissipate.

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 level of trying to reform by changing through action and in this way, force the thought to dissipate. We need to put a check on our every action, find our faults and correct them one by one. If we cannot do this, we will find ourselves in trouble, creating even more severe negative karma, bringing even greater suffering upon ourselves. Therefore, beginners were required to strictly abide by the precepts for they did not yet understand the reasoning. The spirit of abiding by the precepts is to "stop and refrain from committing further wrongdoings".

Mr. Liao-Fan said that the best way to reform is to cultivate the heart and understand why we need

to change. An alternative is to force ourselves not to commit the wrongdoing again. When we attain purity of mind and understand the reasoning, we will be able to uphold and maintain good conduct, which is the best way to change. Until we can do this, all three methods may have to be used to correct a fault. This indeed is achieving self-cultivation while influencing others, for we attain purity of mind while serving as a role model for beginners to follow.

Some people are very rigid about abiding by the precepts. They are attached to the behavior, to the formality of cultivation and are unable to raise the level of their state of mind. Actually, the precepts are very flexible. When we uphold them, we need to understand the logic behind them. And it is even more important that as we abide by them that we strive to attain purity of mind. The purpose of upholding the precepts is to attain deep concentration, which is the purity of mind. If we were overly attached to the formality of upholding the precepts, then it would be difficult for us to achieve deep concentration because we would differentiate and be attached to the appearance, the formality of abiding by them daily. How could we succeed? Only by severing our discriminatory thoughts and attachments are we able to attain deep concentration. This concentration is still a means, a way, thus it would not do to attach to attaining it or we would still be unable to uncover our wisdom.

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. They are attached and cannot let go and thus they guard the gentle and serene state. They are still discriminatory, 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 use changing through behavior with reasoning, but not from the heart. Thus, it takes seven cycles of birth between the human and heaven realms for a practitioner who has attained the level of Arhat to sever their attachments. The sutras tell us that trying to sever attachments by changing through behavior is as difficult as "trying to cut off a raging waterfall of water that is forty miles wide". Just imagine how difficult it would be to try to stop it all at once!

As said earlier, this is as difficult as trying to cut down a tree by plucking one leaf at a time. This is a good example of why changes should be made from the heart. How should we proceed? We could try to pluck off all the leaves one by one, then to cut off each and every twig and branch and then slowly try to dig up the root, but this would be difficult and time consuming. Wise people would go straight to the root, to uproot the tree. Then, the leaves would naturally wither and fall. So, 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 are witnesses to 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 regret

sincerely and wholeheartedly from morning to night. If we can honestly regret from one to two weeks, one to three months, then continuing in this way, we are assured of attaining results and benefits.

We need to generate our shameful heart, fearful heart and courageous determined heart, for they are the inner, direct cause and condition in reforming. But we still need catalytic factors, that is, good friends on the path to awakening to remind us, to help us from the outside, our visible assisting factor. If we ourselves have one virtuous thought, one sincere thought of trying to correct our faults, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas would be happy and all benevolent spirits would praise and respect us. Thus, without our even being aware of it, they will most certainly help us. We can see that one virtuous thought can result in inconceivable results. Therefore, we need to truly change through actions when the condition is right.

We need to be diligent in our regretting, to do so sincerely from morning to night. If we are not diligent, then we will inadvertently create negative karma. So, we cannot be remiss! It is best if the Cultivation Hall has chanting for twenty-four hours a day. In the way places of ancient patriarchs and masters, the chanting continued night and day. During the daytime, everyone participated, but 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 should not be so loud that it disturbs others, nor too soft for us to clearly hear. We can even listen to it when sleeping. Sometimes, we can even hear it when we dream, so we can chant in our dreams. The ancient people said this was like "hearing the drum play or the thunder roar as we slept". It would be wonderful if we could even hear the chanting in our sleep, as if still participating in a seven-day retreat.

Mr. Liao-Fan spoke of sincerely regretting for one week. Participating in a seven-day retreat, in which the chanting was for a limited time each day, is not as good 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, not just during the daytime. Also, when we attend our first retreat, we should not try to participate for all seven days, because most people have difficulty tolerating the full schedule. We could try one day and night, twenty-four hours. After we feel this is effective for several times, we could try two days and nights, then three days and nights, etc. to gradually lengthen the time span.

Thus, to truly cultivate, we could chant once a week for three days and nights. If we are unable to do this, we could try a shorter period. The merit accrued from this would be effective and outstanding. [Liao-Fan'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 way place, a good environment for cultivation, then we should be able to obtain what we seek. If this kind of 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. A person of low intelligence may suddenly become wise. Another might maintain a clear and relaxed mind even in a disturbing and confusing environment. We would also feel an extensive understanding of everything. Or we would be able to drive out all hatred upon seeing an enemy and maintain a happy attitude.

There are many examples of desired results. If we have been depressed or unhappy in the past, now we can become joyful instead. If we had many worries, they can be lifted from our mind after we reach understanding and instead we can become liberated and free. If we were confused, we can become intelligent and no longer be foolish. When we find ourselves in circumstances that are disturbing or agitating or we encounter many diverse and hard to solve matters, we are able to easily resolve them even as others seem overwhelmed by them. We have seen examples of this in some of our fellow practitioners. Some are able settle matters they undertake without any apparent difficulty, while others find it extremely difficult to resolve them.

Mr. Yu said in his commentary, "This is a sign of good fortune, merit and wisdom". This speaks of former enemies, those who resented us, but who now are very favorably inclined towards us, who have changed their whole attitude towards us. All this is due to our merits from cultivation, of being able to influence and change others unobtrusively and imperceptibly. It is said, "A kind-hearted person has no enemies" and has the appearance of good fortune, merit and wisdom.

We may dream of spitting out black things. We may also dream of ancient sages or virtuous people who have come to encourage and escort us or we may dream of flying in space without a care in the world. We may also dream of all kinds of colorful pennants and ornately decorated canopies. These distinctive phenomena are all 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 numerous nightmares or dreams of great confusion, but not anymore. Although we still dream, what we see is as clear as what we see in the daytime. This is obviously very good. We may also dream of ancient sages or virtuous people who have come to help us. 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, of colorful pennants and canopies. These are all phenomena that indicate success in our attempts to reform. Whether in our daily life or in our dreams, all these responses are signs that our karmic obstacles are gradually being reduced and eradicated, signs of good fortune and happiness gradually materializing.

However, we must not consider seeing these phenomena as a sign 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. Therefore, we must guard against becoming arrogant. Instead, we need to increase our resolve to attain even further self-improvement and put even greater effort into our reforming. If we become satisfied with what we have accomplished, then we will be unable to make further improvement. We would do well to be constantly diligent, to seek improvement and never limit our efforts to improve. Even when we are born into the Pure Land, we need to continue to improve. How can we be content? We need to be satisfied in our material and spiritual manner of living. However, we should never be content when seeking improvements in our virtue and cultivation, but persevere with deep-felt confidence.

When Bo-Yu Qu was twenty, he was already mindful of his faults. He analyzed his mistakes and tried to correct them thoroughly. At the age of twenty-one, he felt he still had not completely corrected all his faults. When he was twenty-two, he felt as if twenty-one was spent dreamily, without practical improvement. Thus, year after year, he continued to correct his faults. When he reached fifty, Bo-Yu 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, there was a high senior government official in Wei, named Bo-Yu Qu who was 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 that "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." Bo-Yu Qu had accomplished this. Every year, every month, every day he would continuously reflect within and reform. This account of Bo-Yu Qu is an excellent example of how diligent our ancestors were. They persevered, practiced great willpower and patience in reforming themselves and they proved that their endurance and efforts are worthy of our emulation.

We are all just ordinary people and our mistakes are as numerous as the spines on a porcupine. Oftentimes when we look back, we do not even see our own faults. This is because we are careless and do not know how to reflect on our own actions. It is as if a cataract is growing in our eye.

Mr. Liao-Fan taught his son to observe the conduct of our ancestors, then to look back on our own conduct and reflect within. We are ordinary people who possess excessive faults and wrongdoings as numerous as the spines on a porcupine. Thinking back over today, looking back at yesterday, at last year or even earlier, it would seem that we have committed no great mistakes, that we have not done anything wrong. What is the reason for this? We are negligent and careless. It is as if a cataract has grown in our eyes, blocking us from seeing our own faults. If we do not see our faults then we will be

unable to reform. If we do not reform, we will forever be deterred from standing out from the crowd.

This is why Great Master Lian Chi taught beginners to use the Merit-Fault Chart so that they would be watchful over their every word and deed. Only when we discover our numerous faults, will we be truly afraid. As to reform, we need primarily to change from the heart. We then reinforce this with changing through reasoning. In this way, we are simultaneously practicing both the primary and secondary ways to reform.

All these are the symptoms of having accumulated too many offenses and transgressions! Our hearts may feel confused and oppressed, lacking energy and spirit. We will become extremely forgetful, filled with worries even when nothing is happening.

We receive some small benefits by practicing Buddhism. Not only the signs of our great or small karmic obstacles can be detected, but those of others as well. (When we have committed too many offenses) our hearts may feel heavy and we may become extremely forgetful at work or study. We will find that we are unable to lift our spirits. When young people unexpectedly begin to forget things like elderly people do, it is due to karmic obstacles. True cultivators will find that even in their eighties and nineties, their memories are still good.

It is also an indication of karmic obstacles when we worry even when nothing is happening. The past is past, what is the use of dwelling on it? Tomorrow is yet to come, to think about it is wandering thoughts. Some people are extremely good at worrying and thinking about the past, 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 may feel embarrassed and depressed upon meeting a virtuous person. We become displeased at hearing proper reasoning and when showing kindness to others, we are in turn treated with hostility. We will constantly have nightmares where everything is upside-down and will talk incoherently and behave abnormally. All of these are signs of misfortune.

If we are just and honorable, we will neither be embarrassed nor conscience-stricken when we meet a genuinely good person. Neither would we feel listless, dispirited, dejected or unable to exert ourselves. Also, we will become displeased at hearing proper teachings. In other words, we will not like to listen to the teachings of the Buddha, Confucius or Mencius (or to those of Mohammed, Moses or Jesus or any other teachings of morality). In the earlier years of the Qing Dynasty, everyone in the Imperial court recited the Infinite Life Sutra, but due to Empress Dowager's discomfort in hearing it, the recitation was abolished. Perhaps listening to the teachings on the Ten Bad Conducts and their respective consequential sufferings in the human and hell realms made her uncomfortable, due to her karmic obstacles.

When we are kind to others, we may be met with hostility. For example, if we give 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. This means that

when we speak nonsensically and disjointedly, when our behavior becomes psychotic, then we have come up against a major karmic obstacle. These are all signs of significant transgressions.

If we have any of the above symptoms, we must immediately gather our willpower and reform all faults. It is necessary to form a new life and not delay!

If we have any of these signs, we need to regret earnestly to rid ourselves of these bad habits. We no longer have the time to procrastinate or to be careless. If we do not reform, then for us there is no future. Therefore, upon discovering any of these symptoms, we need to immediately correct our faults. We need to not stray off on a deviated path and waste our whole life in the process. Only when we truly rid ourselves of bad habits and faults will we be able to accept the teachings, to cultivate good deeds and accumulate merits.

Especially in education, when imparting the teachings to others, it is important to pass the teachings to those who have qualities such as having fewer faults, purity of mind, bravery in reforming and achievement in wisdom. Without these qualities, it would be useless to teach this person. For example, we might teach a person who is not virtuous, does not have the right motivation to learn. They would not learn the true essence. We might have enabled him or her to commit even greater offenses! Without having this knowledge, then he or she would have less chance of harming others, less chance of creating negative karma. With more knowledge and more abilities, this person could commit more ill deeds of greater severity. In this case, the teacher would have selected the wrong person as a successor. Therefore, teachers need to know if the person is qualified to inherit their knowledge and ability. If not, they will not pass down the teachings to them. This is not withholding knowledge. However, 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 merit? We need to correct our faults. This will enable us to have the abilities and the conditions to accept the great teachings. We then perform more good deeds to meet the qualifications for being a Dharma repository before accepting the great teachings.

THE THIRD LESSON:
THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

A Family that Accumulates Kind Deeds is Sure to Have Abundant Prosperity

Ten True Accounts of Virtuous People

I Ching, the Book of Changes explains that, "Families who perform good deeds will accumulate prosperity which can outlast many generations". Let me give an example. Once there was a family by the name of Yan. Before they agreed to give their daughter in marriage to the man who later became Confucius' father, they looked into the past deeds of the family. After finding the family to be one that practiced kindness and accumulated virtues, the Yan family felt assured that their daughter would be marrying into a family that would be prosperous with outstanding descendants.

I Ching, the Book of Changes is used as the introduction for the principle in this lesson. A family that accumulates good deeds is bound to have prosperity to spare. Even if we could not enjoy all the good fortune during this lifetime, we would have enough left over for our descendants to enjoy for generations. There is profound meaning within this.

People in the past were very different from those of today. Since ancient times in China, the decision of the parents and the advice of the matchmakers have always determined a union of marriage. When we compare freedom of love in today's society with the traditional ways, the latter has its advantages. Parents who were well-educated and high in moral standards undoubtedly chose the best and most promising spouse for their children. On the other hand, the disadvantage is that parents, who had no education and did not know better, often sold their daughter out for a good price. Therefore, children were unwillingly forced together as they followed their parents' wishes and were unhappy for the rest of their lives. This is an obvious disadvantage but we should not let this overshadow the advantages.

Liang-Ge Shu was Confucius' father. The maiden name of Confucius' mother was Yan. The "Yan family" spoken of here is Confucius' maternal grandfather who married his daughter to Confucius' father, which proved that careful thinking went into this match. He knew that the family had accumulated virtues and practiced kind deeds for several generations. This proves that "by the decision of the parents and the advice of the matchmaker", many happy families have been joined since ancient times.

In ancient times, all those who held power, whether it was an emperor who ruled an empire or a mayor who ruled a city or town were to faithfully follow three guidelines. They were to "act as leader, parent and teacher". First, it was necessary to act as the leader of the governed area. To act as the parent meant to be the parent of the citizens in the area that he was responsible for. He was supposed to behave towards the people as if they were his relatives in terms of protecting them, caring for them,

nurturing them. To act as the teacher meant that he should be a role model for them and teach them what they did not understand. Consequently, the responsibilities of acting as the leader, the parent and the teacher all fell upon the shoulders of the ruler. If he could fulfill these responsibilities, then he had performed infinite goodness. Unfortunately, these three guidelines do not exist in today's democratic system.

Confucius had once praised Shun on his filial piety, saying, "Due to his great filial piety and sincerity, Shun could deeply move even his ancestors to accept his offering. His accumulation of merits and good fortune would last for many, many generations." These sayings were later proven true by history. Now I will show in some true accounts that merits can be attained through performing good deeds.

Confucius highly praised Emperor Shun. In ancient Chinese history, Shun was the first person recorded in history for his greatness in filial piety. He saw only his own faults, not those of others. In Buddhism, he was a prime example of a practitioner. The Platform Sutra says that, "A true practitioner does not see the faults of others". Shun accomplished just this. As history proved, the virtues he had accumulated guaranteed his descendants prosperity. 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 innumerable generations of Chinese.

The examples of the people who had performed kind deeds are all supported by historical fact. All of the people and events, which Mr. Liao-Fan used as examples, were from his own time, the Ming Dynasty. All of the events that happened were only a few decades apart and were familiar to everyone of his time. He used these examples to encourage people to practice good deeds and accumulate goodness because these would result in good rewards.

In Fujian province, there was a prominent man named Rong Yang who held a position in the imperial court as the Emperor's teacher. His ancestors were boat people who made a living by helping people cross the river. Once, there was a storm, which lasted so long that fierce flooding washed away all the houses. People, animals and belongings were carried downriver by the current. Other boaters took advantage of the situation and strove to collect the floating belongings. Only Rong Yang's grandfather and great grandfather took interest in rescuing the drowning people. They did not take any of the goods that floated by. The other boaters all laughed and thought them to be very foolish. Later, when Rong Yang's father was born, the Yang family gradually became wealthy.

When I was young, I lived in Jianou for six years and often went with schoolmates to play in what had formerly been Rong Yang's house. It was of an ancient style filled with many antiques. There were 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 way place.

At the time of this account, when there was too much rain, the rivers would overflow and cause serious flooding, destroying houses and washing away belongings. Other boaters took advantage of the situation by collecting the victims' belongings in order to make a small fortune. Only Rong Yang's grandfather and great grandfather were the exceptions as they were concerned with rescuing those who were drowning and took no interest in any of the passing possessions. The other boaters all laughed and thought they were very foolish in passing up such a great opportunity to become rich and instead chose to save lives. It was only with the birth of Rong Yang's father that the family's living conditions improved.

Consider how much money they could have made rowing people across the river. Sometimes, the passengers did not have had money to pay the fare, but they would still have to be transported across the river. Therefore, the fee was given at will and depended on how much the passenger was able to pay. A small container was placed on one side of the boat and the passengers would put in whatever amount they wished. There was no set rate. This was the accepted practice in Fujian during that time. Students did not even need to pay. With good causes, there will be good rewards.

One day a heavenly person manifested as a Taoist monk came to the Yang family. He told them that their ancestors had accumulated much hidden merit. Consequently, their descendants would enjoy wealth and prominence. He said that there was a special place where they could build their ancestral tomb. So, they followed the Taoist's suggestion. Today it is called the White Hare Grave.

Feng-shui, which is an early science of placing buildings in a way that will take maximum advantage of the natural chi or energy of the landscape has its factual basis. However, we need to have the good fortune to receive good Feng-shui. Good or bad, it depends largely on our good fortune, virtues and conditions. It has a natural course. If a knowledgeable person shows us a good Feng-shui spot, this will only enable us to receive what we are supposed to have sooner rather than later. If we do not deserve good Feng-shui, then not only will we not benefit from it, it will actually bring us misfortune. This is because we do not have the good fortune to enjoy it. Therefore, do not be too happy seeing a good thing coming. Think first whether we will be able to bear it.

After reading Liao-Fan's Four Lessons, we will realize that everything that happens does so for a reason. Indeed, for an ordinary person "one sip, one bite all is predestined". If we do not acknowledge this fact and do not go about reforming our faults and practicing good deeds, then there will be no variable in our life; it will always remain a constant. Only when we truly understand the way to accumulate kindness and reform faults will we have changing factors and be able to truly change our lives and create our destiny. In our lifetime, we have seen many happenings that have been totally proven by Buddhist and Confucian principles.

Shortly after, Rong Yang 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 his grandfather and great grandfather with the same imperial honors. Today, his many virtuous and prosperous descendants are still very prominent.

In ancient China, males were initiated into adulthood at the age of twenty. We can see here how young Rong Yang was when he passed the highest imperial examination, the Jin-Shi level and attained the highest academic degree at that time. It is equivalent to earning a doctorate degree today. His appointment was extremely high, similar to today's National Affairs Advisor. In other words, he was an advisor to the Emperor, obviously a very prestigious position. Later, he received the rank of Imperial Teacher.

The Emperor also conferred the same honors on his grandfather and great grandfather. In ancient times, it was a great honor to the family's ancestors if an individual became an imperial official. Although Rong Yang's father, grandfather and great grandfather were only common citizens, due to Rong Yang's high position, the Emperor bestowed upon his ancestors the same honors although they had already passed away. This was the way to honor ancestors during ancient times in China.

Today, we encourage and reward good deeds. Governments praise and cite good people and their accomplishments. Frankly speaking, the methods used in citing good deeds were a lot more effective in ancient times and had a deeper educational meaning. Because the descendants of a particular family had contributed to the country, it could bestow honor on the individual as well as on his ancestors. Today, the praise or honor ends with the individual and does not extend to his ancestors; whereas, in ancient times, the Emperor could bestow the same honor on the three previous generations.

We may not see any reason in bestowing an honor upon a person who died so many years ago. What was the point? Actually, there is a very good one for there is a valuable lesson to be learned from this. It can help us to realize that 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 fortunes that stemmed from them. Realizing this, why would there be any reason not to practice good deeds? If this situation arose when the ancestors were in the Six Realms then they could still obtain an honor that was bestowed by the Emperor, regardless of which realm they were in. If they were in the hungry ghost realm, then all the kings of ghosts would respect them. Being great virtuous persons, they would gain the respect of heavenly beings and spirits. This is why it is such a valuable lesson. It can provide a wonderful incentive, which can encourage people to practice acts of kindness. Therefore, the true merits and virtues from this lesson are inconceivable.

Mr. Liao-Fan wrote how Rong Yang's descendants were still very prominent in his time. This happened because so many generations had accumulated goodness, had built a solid foundation. They held official positions for generations thus these descendants also had virtue and remained very prestigious and prosperous.

Zi-Cheng Yang, from the county of Yin in Zhejiang province, is another example. Zi-

Cheng worked as a member of the staff of the county courthouse. He was kind and humane, fair and law-abiding.

Once, the county magistrate punished a criminal by beating him until his blood spilled out onto the ground. The magistrate's anger did not subside and as he was about to continue, Zi-Cheng knelt and pleaded with him to stop beating the prisoner. The magistrate said, "It is all right for you to plead, but how can I not be angry when this person has broken the law!" Zi-Cheng replied that when those in a position of leadership in the government do not follow the proper path, ordinary people would lose their way. Once we realize this, we should feel sorrow rather than joy. And if we should not feel joy, then how could we feel anger? Thus, a case like this called for more understanding. The magistrate was touched by Zi-Cheng's speech and ceased the beating.

Mr. Zi-Cheng Yang had a job in the county courthouse, which is similar to today's section chief. It was not a very high-ranking position. He had a kind and generous heart and he was very honest, impartial and law-abiding. At the time of this incident, the county magistrate also handled judicial matters. The magistrate was also the judge. When the criminal refused to tell the truth and even talked back, the magistrate became angry. He beat the criminal severely until his blood fell on the ground. But even then, the magistrate remained infuriated. When Zi-Cheng saw this, he felt compassion for the prisoner, knelt and pleaded with the magistrate to stop. Because of the seriousness of the prisoner's offense, the magistrate was infuriated.

This took a great deal of courage because what he said was a direct accusation against the behavior of the government. If the superior officer had not agreed and blamed him for being so blunt, Zi-Cheng could have gotten himself into serious trouble. However, if the superior officer were virtuous, moral and wise, he would not become angry. He would have realized that his staff was only reminding him to be rational.

Zi-Cheng spoke of those in positions of leadership in the government. He was talking about the provincial and city magistrates. Zi-Cheng said these officials did not follow the "Proper Path", which means that the government did not do a good job in political education. What is the "Path"? It is the Three Guidelines for a ruler to follow, to act as "the leader, the parents and the teacher". When a district government official who presided over the local administrations did not fulfill the duties similar to those of a parent or a teacher, then he did not properly look after his people. When a citizen had committed an offense, it was because the ruler did not teach them well. This is why Zi-Cheng said that when those in a position of leadership in the government do not follow the proper path, fellow citizens would lose their way because they had no guidelines to follow and no one to turn to for advice. If the administration behaved properly, then the people would have set principles to comply with.

During the Han Dynasty (approximately twenty-one hundred years ago) the philosophies of hundreds of scholars were replaced by those of Confucius and Mencius. Confucianism was used as the ba-

sis for the educational system. Before this time, during the Spring Autumn period, there were so many philosophies and scholars that it was difficult for the people to know which one was appropriate. In the numerous volumes of books written by hundred of scholars, each one had its distinct point of view and its own theories. Upon a rough examination, each seemed to make sense; however, with so many selections, people were at a loss as to which one to choose. This was why it was imperative to choose one as the model. The teachings of whoever was chosen had to be widely accepted, even by those with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Once this model had been chosen, then the works of other scholars could be used as supplementary references. Thus this established the objectives of the national education.

In China, the main moral standards derived from the philosophies of Confucius and Mencius. This system was used from the Han Dynasty up to the time of the Qing Dynasty. It naturally became the basis of the teachings for the Chinese people. Confucius and Mencius taught us the Five Human Relationships and the Ten Moral Responsibilities. These are the fundamental principles for people to follow, they are the proper path.

The Five Human Relationships concentrate on relations among people. They start with the basic relations between a married couple within their own bedroom. The husband should fulfill the responsibilities pertaining to his role as a husband and the wife should do likewise. Those responsibilities are a form of obligation. Each person must fulfill his or her obligations. A harmonious couple is the basis of all prosperous families. Outside of the bedroom is the larger family. There are the parents over us, children under us and siblings around us. Each holds a different role with different responsibilities, which we need to fulfill. These duties are innate, not assigned by another. Nor are they ideas of a particular person. They are moral principles, the proper path.

Beyond the family are society and the country. At the top is the leader of the country. Below the leader are the government officials. On the same level with us are our friends. The Five human Relationships refer to husband and wife, parent and child, siblings, friends, and political leaders and the public. To expand into a broader view, everyone in this world is like a sibling to one another. Therefore, the five relationships among people are the unification of a country. In this way, the entire country is like a big family. This is the proper path.

In the minds of the ancient sages and virtuous people, government officials would be considered as great people and so they were addressed as such. They had the responsibility to educate their people, 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 their people proper moral principles (such as loyalty, filial piety, humanity, faith, honesty and peace).

The basic educational goal in Confucianism is to “sever material desires, obtain awakening, have a sincere mind and a virtuous heart, discipline ourselves, have a harmonious family, rule a country and foster world peace”. Today, schools do not teach these anymore. Emphasis is now placed on technology rather than humanity. Therefore, our thoughts, viewpoints and behavior have no guiding principles. The latter teach us that when we see the misdeeds of others, we would do well to take a hard look at

ourselves and see if we have fulfilled our duties as a government official.

Once we know the motive behind a criminal offense, we should feel compassion for the offender rather than joy at having solved the case. Why should we not feel joy? Because we have yet to fulfil our own responsibilities. And if we should not feel joy, then we certainly should not become angry. Fortunately for Zi-Cheng, in ancient times, in order for a person to hold a government position such as that of a county magistrate, he would have to pass an imperial examination. In other words, he would be well-educated. Therefore, the magistrate immediately realized his error when Zi-Cheng reminded him of it.

It was extremely brave for Zi-Cheng to speak up on behalf of the prisoner. The magistrate immediately recognized this and ceased to be angry. From this example, we could see that Mr. Yang had considerable wisdom, virtue and insight. Thus, it was good for him to accumulate virtue and merits in the court because he could do many good deeds.

Although Zi-Cheng came from a very poor family, he never took any bribes. If the prisoners were short of food, he would always take food from his own home even if it meant going hungry himself. One day, several new prisoners needed feeding. Zi-Cheng's home was short of food. If he gave them what he had then his family would go hungry. But, if he kept the food for his family then the prisoners would go hungry. He felt that the prisoners needed the food more than his family did. A deplorable situation. He discussed it with his wife who asked where the prisoners came from. Zi-Cheng answered that they were from Hangzhou. They had to tolerate hunger along the way.

Zi-Cheng's family was very poor. At that time, government officials received only a small salary and a lot of them retired with hardly any savings. If an official retired with a lot of money, it was most likely that he had taken bribes or embezzled money during his office. Where else could the money come from? In ancient times, scholars did not learn how to run a business. If a scholar became a high-ranking official and contributed great services to the country, then he would in turn receive rewards in the form of farmlands and houses. So, it was possible to become wealthy in this way. However, if he held just an average position, then his salary would be quite meager. Zi-Cheng only held a very low rank in the county government.

Regardless of this, he refused any gifts that were offered to him. Sometimes relatives of the prisoners would offer him bribes in exchange for a lighter sentence or better care in the prison. It was inevitable that he would receive such offers. However, he never accepted any of them and always acted justly and fairly in all circumstances. It was difficult to be so honest in such a tempting environment. Also, at this time the amount of food provided for the prisoners was meager. Often when the prisoners were moved over a long distance, they went without food. Zi-Cheng always did his best to try to help them.

It is quite a distance from Hangzhou to Ningpo. The prisoners had to walk with shackles so the travelling time was considerably slower than usual. At the maximum, they could cover maybe fifty or

sixty kilometers a day. This means that they would have to spend several days on the road. Zi-Cheng felt great compassion for these prisoners who went without food for all those days. If he gave his small amount of rice to the prisoners, his family would go hungry. If he gave the rice to his family, the prisoners would go hungry. So, after discussing the situation with his wife, they came to a solution. They would take what little rice they had, make a pot of rice porridge and share half of it with the prisoners.

Later, Zi-Cheng had two sons. The elder's name was Shou-Chen and the younger was named Shou-Zhi. Both sons became very prominent and held important government positions. His eldest grandson became Vice Minister of the Ministry of Justice. His second grandson was a member of the government staff in Sichuan Province. They were both prominent. Today, the government official, Chu-Ting Yang, who is known for his virtuous deeds, is also their descendent.

The two sons received the good fortune, which was accumulated by their parents. The government office they worked in would be equivalent to today's Ministry of the Interior. There were only six ministries at that time. Today, there are over a dozen in Taiwan. Therefore, the positions held in ancient times would be higher and entailed greater responsibilities than a similar position today. Zi-Cheng's two sons were both in what was then called the Department of Civil Personnel. Their rank would be similar to a vice-minister. Usually, there was one minister and two Vice-Ministers. One handled administrative matters and the other took care of general matters.

The eldest grandson was a vice-minister in the Ministry of Justice. The second eldest grandson was on the administrative staff, which was one rank lower than the Governor. He supervised each county's magistrate and oversaw approximately eight to twelve counties. Both grandsons were well known for doing a good job. A current descendant, Mr. Chu-Ting Yang also held a government position and was known for his honesty and fairness. This proves that the goodness accumulated by this couple benefited the following generations.

Here is another true example that happened during the Zheng-Tong period during the time of Emperor Ying-Zong. Once, a group of rebels appeared in Fujian Province. Many intellectuals joined them. The Emperor appointed Imperial Censor General Zhang to go south and subdue them. The general tricked the rebels and captured their chief. Later, official Zhang dispatched General Xie to subdue the remaining rebels, in eastern Fujian Province. General Xie managed to attain a list of those who belonged to the organization and commanded that a white flag be secretly given to those who did not belong with the rebels. They were told to place the flag on their door when the imperial army came to town and the soldiers were ordered not to harm the innocent. With this one thought of goodness, General Xie saved tens of thousands of people from being killed. Later, his son Chian Xie achieved first place in the imperial examinations and later became an advisor to the

Emperor. His grandson Pi Xie, also placed third in the imperial examinations.

This happened over five hundred years ago. The rebels were actually a revolutionary army preparing to revolt. This talks about the effects of preventing unnecessary killing. When we look back in Chinese history, we see very few descendants of famous generals who had good fortune. Why? They caused too many deaths. They made too many mortal enemies. There are probably less than ten generals in Chinese history who have descendants who received good fortune and General Xie was one of those few.

Another prime example of the Law of Cause and Effect is the famous General Zi-Yi Guo who lived during the Tang Dynasty, (approximately thirteen hundred years ago). He had prominent descendants because he accumulated goodness and virtues. During the Song Dynasty (approximately one thousand years ago), there were two generals under the leadership of Emperor Zhao, Kuang-Yin; Bin Cao and Han Cao. The descendants of Han Cao had very little good fortunes, which did not even last three generations. The daughters became prostitutes and many family members became destitute. Bin Cao, on the other hand, was a very benevolent general. He did not kill any innocent people and his descendants were all quite prosperous.

So, if a general did not strictly discipline his troops to keep them from harassing the civilians, then the burden of the blame would be on his shoulders. So in this example, we talked about the consequence of unnecessary killing. General Hsieh was smart. He taught his troops how to distinguish the rebel supporters from the civilians. In this way, he would not mistakenly cause the death of innocent people. The prestige and prosperity of his descendants' proved that there is no escaping the Law of Cause and Effect.

Another example is the Lin family from Putian, in Fujian Province. Among their ancestors was an elderly lady who was very generous. Everyday she made rice balls to give to the poor and always gave as many as they asked for. There was an Immortal who manifested as a Taoist monk and came everyday for three years and each day, would ask for six or seven rice balls. She always granted his request. The Taoist monk then realized her deep sincerity.

This is another example of an ancestor who accumulated good fortune for her descendants. She made some rice balls every day to distribute to the poor. She treated everyone the same and gave the rice balls to whoever asked for them. It is easy to be good occasionally, but to be continuously generous is very difficult. She was tireless in this good deed. A heavenly being who manifested himself as a Taoist monk requested six or seven rice balls from her every day for three years. Thus, he knew that the elderly lady was indeed sincere in the good deeds that she did. Sincerity is an accumulation of virtues and giving is an accumulation of goodness. She had no other wish but to help those who were poor.

He said to her, "I have eaten your rice balls for three years with nothing to show my gratitude in return. Perhaps I can help you in this way. On the land behind your house, there is a good place for you to place your grave. If you are placed there in the future, the number of your descendants who will have imperial appointments will be equivalent to the number of seeds in a pound of sesame seeds". Her son followed his recommendations and buried her there.

Having some knowledge of Feng-shui, the Taoist monk suggested to her a good place for her grave. If his advice were followed, then an unimaginable number of her descendants would receive imperial appointments. Just imagine how many sesame seeds there are in a pound! When she passed away, the Lin family followed the heavenly being's suggestion and buried her at the designated place.

The first generation after that, nine men passed the imperial examinations and it continued that way for every succeeding generation. There was a saying in Fujian that the results of the imperial examination always had the surname Lin on it.

Because of the good fortune, the elderly lady had accumulated from her good deeds, not only did she have many descendants but they were prosperous as well. The Lin family in Fujian province was the largest family and was very prosperous. This is the effect from the cause of sincerely giving away food to the poor.

Another example comes from the father of an imperial historian whose name was Zhuo-An Feng. One winter many years ago, Zhuo-An Feng's father was on his way to school when he encountered a person lying frozen in the snow. Finding the man still breathing, he quickly took off his coat to wrap around the frozen man. He carried him back home and revived him.

This example tells of the good fortune accumulated by saving someone's life. Zhuo-An Feng held his official duties in what is equivalent to the National Academy. When Zhuo-An's father was a young scholar himself and was on his way to school one morning, he saw a person alongside the road lying frozen in the snow. We can imagine that the person must have been poor and ill to have fallen to that state. Zhuo-An's father touched the poor man and realized that the man was on the verge of death. He immediately took his coat off to wrap it around the man, carried him home and nursed him back to health.

A lot of common sense is needed when treating a person who is suffering from a freezing condition. Northerners are familiar with this kind of procedure; however, southerners tend to be ignorant of it. In a case like this, cold water must be used. Use a towel soaked in cold water and rub it against his body in order to let the cold within his body slowly seep out of the pores.

That night, Zhuo-An's father dreamt of a heavenly being telling him, "You helped a dying man out of utter sincerity, this is a great virtue. I will bring the famous General Qi Han of the Song Dynasty to be reborn as your son". Later, Zhuo-An 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. Qi Han was a very famous general during the Song Dynasty. He was greatly admired by the Emperor who bestowed a noble honor to his title. General Qi Han was highly regarded in Chinese history; so, the heavenly being arranged for Qi Han to be reborn into the Feng family by being reincarnated into the Human Realm. It was because Zhuo-An's father saved someone's life that he was rewarded with a good son. This also exemplifies that reincarnation within the Six Realms is factual. The ancient Chinese all deeply believed in it.

Another example is Mr. Ying, the Minister who lived in Taizhou. When he was young, he used to study 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 say happily 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 here and will replace me. Then I can be reborn!"

In times past, when scholars wished to study, they usually lived in Buddhist way places, because only they were equipped with extra rooms and a library. Each way place had its own library of sutras and the collections were quite complete. Not only did they have Buddhist sutras, but also would have had the Four Books and the Five Classics. Most would also collect the works from the numerous schools of thinkers from the late Zhou Dynasty (over twenty-two hundred years ago). They usually referred to the library as the sutra collection chamber.

During ancient times, there were no public libraries. Buddhist way places were often regarded as a school and the sutra collection chamber was essentially the local library. Most scholars preferred to reside in these way places, which were usually located in the mountains or in some woods. They provided a quiet and fresh environment for pursuing academic study.

Ghosts do actually exist and they live among humans. They usually appear in sparsely populated areas or when a person's energy is low. Mr. Ying's mind was pure and honest; he neither paid heed to nor was afraid of them. However, one day he overheard one ghost telling another that a young woman was going to commit suicide. Anyone who commits suicide needs to find a replacement before he or she can be reborn. If no replacement can be found, then the ghost would undergo much suffering. Another person must commit suicide in exactly the same spot, in exactly the same manner for the previous ghost to be set free. The same applies to car accidents. Although the deceased did not commit suicide but was the victim in an accident, he or she would still need to find a replacement. Thus, it is

very unlucky to die in an accident so we need to be careful of places where fatal accidents frequently occur for they may have spirits waiting for substitutes.

This example is about a ghost who had hung himself and was looking for a replacement. He had known in advance of the death of the young woman. He said that there was a family whose son was away from home on business and had failed to return home for a long time. The family knew nothing of his whereabouts and consequently, was forcing the daughter-in-law to remarry. She did not wish to comply and planned to commit suicide in the same spot the next day. The ghost said that his chance for freedom was soon to materialize because she was to be his replacement. It was this conversation that Mr. Ying overheard.

Mr. Ying heard this and immediately set out to sell a parcel of land that he owned. He received two hundred grams of silver for it, made up a letter from the daughter-in-law's husband and sent it to her home along with the silver. The in-laws 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 truly alive and well." Consequently, the daughter-in-law did not need to remarry and her husband returned home after a while. The couple got back together and were like before.

This was a critical matter of life and death. But, Mr. Ying was a poor scholar. Where would he get the money? He immediately went home to sell his land and obtained two hundred grams of silver. He then made up a letter and sent it along with the silver to the family. The parents knew right away that the letter was not from their son, but who on earth would send them that much money? The silver was certainly real. They decided that their son must still be alive and well. Not long after, their son returned home.

Mr. Ying saved the breakup of a family, an act of great merit. When he was selling the land and sending the money, he did not consider for one moment that he would be accumulating merit. He simply acted out of compassion by wanting to help the woman, to save her life and keep the family intact. He thought no further of what he had done and returned to the way place to continue his studies.

Mr. Ying heard the first ghost say, "Originally, I was supposed to be able to leave this place to be reborn, but Mr. Ying messed up my chance!" The second ghost asked, "Why don't you get even with him?" The first ghost replied, "I cannot. The heavenly beings have recognized his goodness and virtue and he is going to receive a prominent position in the future. How can I harm him?"

The first ghost was so upset because it took a long time to find a replacement and Mr. Ying had just destroyed his chance to be reborn. When the other ghost asked him why he did not get even with Mr. Ying, he answered that the heavenly beings had already recognized his goodness and virtue and so he could not hurt him. From this, we know that if a spirit or a heavenly being can harm a person, it is be-

cause that person did something to deserve it. If a person has committed no wrongdoings, then the spirits would not be able to harm him or her.

There is an old Chinese saying, "There is a thirty percent possibility that people may be afraid of ghosts, but a seventy percent probability that ghosts are afraid of people". It is silly for us to be afraid of ghosts because they are much more afraid of us. Only when we have done something wrong do we need to be afraid of them because only then, are they able to harm us. If our conscience is clear, then malevolent spirits can do nothing to us. There are several books, which tell of such accounts. They are collected in several volumes, such as, Notes from Yuewei Chamber by Xiao-Lan Ji, Spiritual Collections by Sung-Ling Pu and the Twenty-five Books of Official Records. In the first year of the Republic of China, there was a publication called A Record of Response and Retribution in History. These all provide numerous examples of the Law of Cause and Effect.

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.

Mr. Ying heard this and became even more diligent in practicing kindness and accumulating merits. Whenever there was a famine, he would give grain from his storehouses to the poor and needy and was always eager to do whatever he could to help relatives in emergencies. When things did not go his way, he always reflected within himself rather than complain of external conditions. Thus, he always quietly complied with conditions. Even today, his descendants are still very prominent.

When people were rude to him or infringed on his rights, Mr. Ying always examined his own actions first to see if he was at fault. He took everything in stride and never argued with anybody or had any thoughts of revenge but practiced tolerance. Not only did he reach the high position of Minister, but his descendants who were also very capable and virtuous were likewise prominent. All of this happened because Mr. Ying had saved a family from being torn apart.

There was another person, Feng-Zhu Xu, who lived in Jiangsu province. His father was very wealthy. Whenever there was a famine, his father would be the first waive the rent on the rice fields, hoping that other wealthy people would follow suit. He also donated grain from his storehouses to the poor.

Feng-Zhu was his courtesy name; his formal name was Shih. At that time, wealthy people owned all of the land, which they rented to farmers. When there was a disaster or a bad harvest, Feng-Zhu's father would waive the rent to help the farmers hoping that other wealthy landowners would follow suit. Most of the farmers would be able to survive a bad year as long as they did not have to pay the rent. This was a great act of goodness. Not only did he waive the rent, but also he shared his stored grain

with the poor.

One night, he heard ghosts outside his home, “No kidding! 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 Feng-Zhu passed the examination. After that, Feng-Zhu’s father became even more diligent in accumulating good deeds. He spent money to repair roads and bridges and provided food for monks as well as the poor. He would do anything he could to help others. Sometime later, he heard the ghosts again, “No kidding! The provincial scholar from the Xu family is going to hold a high position in the government.” Eventually, Feng-Zhu became the governor for Zhejiang Province.

People who live in the countryside hear many ghost stories. Sometimes ghosts can be seen or heard clearly. Outside the house of the Xu family, they sang that a family member was going to pass the provincial imperial examination. Indeed, his son Feng-Zhu passed the examination. Good fortune is the reward for good deeds. Those who are aware of this will try even harder to accumulate goodness. The ghosts sang that Feng-Zhu would receive a high position in the government. He first became an imperial judge in the Supreme Court. Later, he became governor of Zhejiang Province. All of this resulted from his father sincerely helping the poor.

Another example is Kang-Xi Tu who lived in Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province. Mr. Tu used to work 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 a secret report to the Minister of Justice, telling him why a prisoner was innocent. The Minister would then question the prisoner accordingly and clear the case. Through Mr. Tu’s effort, 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 judgement.

Helping a prisoner who had been wrongly accused was most admirable. No matter how careful one might be when examining a case, there was always the possibility of a wrong judgement. Even when an error has not been made intentionally, 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 so that he could learn everything about each case to clear up any wrong accusations. When the prisoners were being questioned in the courtroom, sometimes they would become extremely frightened and would not be able to retell the true account of the circumstances of the case. Trials usually began at the break of dawn so that the courtroom was still very dark. It was quite similar to being held for judgement in hell. The whole atmosphere was frightening. Therefore, it was like taking the prisoner to meet the king of the underworld, which is quite different from trials today.

Mr. Tu worked in the judiciary department, which is similar to today's Supreme Court. His position was similar to that of section chief. It was not a high rank. 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 this to the Minister of Justice so that all the credit went to his superior officer. His superior was, of course, very pleased with this for when he tried the cases at dawn, he already knew the truth of what had happened. After detailed questioning, he acquitted over a dozen innocent men. This was talked about throughout the imperial city and everyone praised the minister for bringing true justice to the system.

Soon after, Mr. Tu also made a report to the Imperial Judge saying, "If even in the Imperial City so many innocent people are imprisoned, there must be many more throughout the country. I recommend that the Imperial government send investigators to check the prisons for innocent people every five years. The sentences can be reduced or canceled in order to prevent the innocent from remaining in prison." The minister, his superior, took his request to the Emperor, who agreed to Mr. Tu's suggestion. Mr. Tu was chosen as one of the special agents in charge of reducing sentences for those who were found innocent.

The imperial city, which was where the Emperor resided, was considered the best area. Circumstances there should have been a model for the country. Therefore, the capital city was called "capital master". Master means to be a model for all the other cities. Mr. Tu understood that if the capital city had unjustly sentenced prisoners, then there must be many more such cases outside the city. So, he suggested that there should be a thorough investigation at least once every five years. An investigator appointed by the Emperor would re-open all of the questionable cases and free any innocent prisoners. The Imperial Judge carried this recommendation to the Emperor who willingly agreed. The Imperial Judge was very fond of Mr. Tu and knew him to be an honest, just and humane individual. After this investigation system was established, a new position became open, Agent in Charge of Reducing Sentences. The Court appointed Mr. Tu as one of the agents who were assigned a number of districts to investigate.

One night, he dreamt that a heavenly being came to him and said, "You were not supposed to 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." After that, his wife gave birth to three sons who all became prominent men in society.

Similar to Mr. Liao-Fan, Mr. Tu was not destined to have sons. Mr. Liao-Fan sought a son and received one. Mr. Yu received a son due to his accumulation of good deeds.

Another example of attaining good outcomes from practicing kindness is Ping Bao who lived in Jiaxing. Ping was the youngest of the 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. Ping Bao was very knowledgeable and talented, but he was never able to pass the examinations. He spent his time studying Buddhism and Taoism.

Once, while traveling to Lake Mao, he came to a village and saw a way place in desperate need of repairs. The statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva was wet from the rain that leaked through the roof. Ping took out all his money and gave it to the Abbot of the temple, asking him to please use it to restore the way place. The Abbot replied "It will be a very big project, I am afraid this amount is not enough to complete your wish." Ping Bao then took out all his luxurious belongings 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 Great Compassion Bodhisattva remains undamaged, I do not care if I have to go without clothes."

This was an act of sincerity, donating money to restore way places. Ping's father was the head of the local government. Ping had failed in several attempts to pass the imperial examinations. Therefore, he had given up the hope of a government career. The finances of his family were adequate, so he was able to spend his time studying Buddhism and Taoism. One time, he happened upon a Buddhist way place and saw that the statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva was wet from a leak in the roof. It was obvious that the way place was in desperate need of repair. When he saw this situation, his immediate thought was to help repair it. So he opened his purse and took out sixteen ounces of silver, all the money he had and gave it to the Abbot to repair the damage. Doing this was an act of pure sincerity.

This was quite a large amount of money at that time and yet the Abbot told him that it was not enough. When Ping heard this, he took out the four bolts of cloth that he was carrying with him along with some fine clothing from his luggage to donate to the Abbot so that he could trade them for silver. Some of the clothing was new, made out of very good material and very expensive. Ping's servant advised him to keep it for himself. Ping answered that if it would help to fix the way place and protect the statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva he would donate all of his clothing.

The abbot, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed, "To give up money and clothing is not a difficult deed to accomplish, but your deep sincerity is truly rare and precious to encounter". After the way place was repaired, Ping Bao asked his father to visit the temple and together they spent the night there. That night the Dharma Protector of the way place, Qie-Lan, came in his dream to thank him and said, "Since you have accumulated these merits and virtues, your children and descendants will enjoy

having imperial appointments for generations to come.” Later, his son and grandson both passed high examinations and were appointed as imperial officials.

It was not hard for a wealthy individual to donate money in aid of others, but his sincerity in thinking only of the statue and not of himself was very rare. He was the sole benefactor in repairing the way place, so they issued an invitation for him to return and view the restoration. He took his father with him and that night, he dreamt of the Dharma protector Qie-Lan, who thanked and told him of his good fortune, which he deserved due to his kindness in repairing the way place. Like the other examples, the good fortune was also rewarded to his descendants. So good results come from good causes and bad results come from bad causes.

Li Zhi from Jiashan County, in Zhejiang Province is another example. His father used to be a clerk in the provincial courthouse. Once, Li’s father learned of an innocent man who was given the death penalty and tried to save his life. When the prisoner heard about this, he told his wife, “I am so indebted to this man who has spoken on my behalf but I have no way of showing 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.”

Li Zhi’s father, knowing of the prisoner’s innocence, took pity on him and pleaded with his superior to spare the inmate’s life. If he could save the prisoner, he would also save the entire family. The prisoner knew of the clerk’s intent so when his wife came to visit him in prison, he told her to try to repay the favor by giving herself to the clerk. He felt that by so doing, he would have a greater chance for a reduction of his sentence.

The wife cried as she listened to his request. However, it was the only way she could help her husband at this critical time. Therefore, the next day when the clerk came to visit, she offered him wine and told him of her husband’s wishes. The clerk refused, but continued to do all he could to clear the case. When at last the prisoner was released, he and his wife both went to the clerk’s house to thank him. The man said, “One with such virtue as yours is truly rare these days, how can I show my gratitude? You do not have a son. Please allow me to offer my daughter in marriage to you, this is the only way I can repay you. Please accept.”

Li Zhi’s father refused the prisoner’s offer of his wife because he did not wish any reward for his action. He had acted out of a sense of morality and justice, feeling that it was part of his job. Li Zhi’s father was not wealthy. His only source of income came from the small salary paid by the government. He had been married for many years, but 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.

This was an accepted custom at that time.

So the clerk accepted and soon afterwards, she bore him his son, Li Zhi. Li passed the higher level imperial examination when he was just twenty years old. Later, he was appointed to a high government position. Li's son Gao, grandson Lu and great grandson Da-Lun all passed the examinations and received imperial appointments. These ten examples all tell of the different deeds cultivated by different people. Although their actions differed, their intent was the same: doing good deeds.

Li Zhi's final appointment was similar to present day First Secretary in the Central Research Institute. It was a very prominent position. This was the reward for saving an innocent life. In this lesson, Mr. Liao-Fan told of ten examples. They illustrate how good fortune is the result of accumulating goodness. These numerous examples serve to prove that the good fortune that the families experienced was not mere coincidence. The dates of these events all happened quite close to Mr. Liao-Fan's time. Some of the cases were those that Mr. Liao-Fan knew of personally or which had been related to his family. All this shows that goodness will result in good fortune, while meanness will result in bad fortune.

What Is Goodness?

To Recognize Goodness

If we were to examine goodness closely, we would find that there are many different kinds. There is real goodness and false goodness, honest goodness and crooked goodness, hidden and visible, apparent and actual, proper and improper, full and half, big and small, and finally, difficult and easy. These different types of goodness each have their own reasons, which are to be carefully learned and understood. If we try to practice good deeds but do not learn how to differentiate between right and wrong, we may end up doing more harm than good. Then, all of our efforts would have been in vain.

Sincerity is the most important factor in practicing goodness. It is to do so without asking for anything in return. This is true goodness. However, good acts based on certain conditions would not be considered true goodness but as wrongdoing. For instance, some people, especially Buddhists, do not understand that Buddhism teaches us to break through and eliminate wandering thoughts and attachments. When they go to a way place to pay their respects to the Bodhisattvas, they do so to ask for something. If there is nothing that they want, they do not go. They burn incense in front of the Bodhisattvas and pray for assistance and guidance. If the Bodhisattvas would just grant what they want, then they vow that they will return the favor with special offerings. This is trying to strike up a bargain! Not only are they not sincere, but they view the Bodhisattvas as beings who are bribable. This is a serious offense!

Li Zhi's father was a virtuous man. The prisoner's offering of his wife as a reward inadvertently reduced him to being immoral. Li Zhi's father was not offended and continued to help the prisoner. This

was an act of generosity. Therefore, it was only right 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 would do well not to be ignorant of principles and proper ways to accumulate goodness. First, we will talk about the difference between real goodness and false goodness.

What is "real goodness and false goodness"? In the Yuan Dynasty, a group of scholars went to visit Master Jung-Feng. One of them asked, "Buddhism often speaks of the karmic reward for good and bad, saying that 'It is like the shadow, following the form wherever it goes.' Then why is it, that there are people who practice good deeds, but their family and descendants are neither prosperous nor successful? On the other hand, there are bad and wicked people who behave immorally, but their family and descendants do quite well. What has happened to the Law of Cause and Effect? Are there no standards in the Buddha's teachings?"

Master Jung-Feng lived during the Yuan Dynasty (approximately seven hundred years ago). His name should be quite familiar to many of us because he edited the Thrice Yearning Ceremony Book, which we use. This is one practice of the Pure Land method. At that time, some scholars went to visit the Master and asked him some questions. Buddhism and Taoism both teach that the Law of Cause and Effect is immutable, is permanent. But, they said that nowadays, good people did not have good descendants yet those of bad people prospered. So, the scholars posed the question to the Master saying that this contradicted what they saw.

Master Jung-Feng answered, "Ordinary people are blinded by worldly views, they have not cleansed their minds of impurities and cannot see with true perception. Therefore, they look upon true goodness as wrongdoing and mistake wrongdoing as goodness. This is very common nowadays."

Ordinary people only see ordinary things. When our minds are impure due to worldly emotions, we are still bothered by many wandering thoughts and attachments. We do not have the "eyes of wisdom" to discern the truth. This is why people often mistake good for bad and bad for good. This is delusion. Although many people were like this, the Master was very courteous in his speech and only said that these people do exist.

The Master continued, "Furthermore, these people do not blame themselves for failing to understand, but instead, blame their misfortune on the heavens. This is unfair!" The scholars questioned how good and bad could be mistaken for each other.

The Master explained that not only did these people not examine their actions to determine good from bad, but they blamed their misfortune on others, complaining that the heavens were not fair. But

the scholars were still confused and asked the Master how people could mistake good for bad and bad for good.

Master Jung-Feng asked each of them to express their thoughts on what was good and what was bad. One scholar said that to yell at and hit others was bad, to respect and treat others in a mannerly way was good. The Master replied, "Not necessarily". Another scholar then said that being greedy and taking another's money was bad, not being greedy and behaving properly was good. Master Jung-Feng again replied, "Not necessarily". The remaining scholars all expressed their views on what was good and what was bad, but Master Jung-Feng always concluded, "Not necessarily".

Upon the Master's request, the scholars gave their opinions on what was bad and what was good. The Master said that their standards of good and bad were unreliable and did not agree with any of the examples provided by the scholars. With this, everybody asked the Master to explain his standards, since his differed from theirs.

The Definition of Goodness

Master Jung-Feng said, "To do things with the intention of bringing benefit to others is good. To do things to benefit oneself is bad. If what we do is for the sake of benefiting another, then it does not matter if we yell at or hit that person, it is still considered good. If our intention is for self-benefit, then regardless of our appearance of respect and courtesy, it is still considered bad."

This talks of the standard for good and bad in Buddhism. Anything done with the intent to benefit others is considered good, even if a certain amount of corporal punishment is involved. On the other hand, anything done with the intent to benefit only the self is considered bad, no matter how courteous and polite we may be towards others. For example, we may ingratiate ourselves with or fawn on others.

Master Jung-Feng continued, "Therefore, when we practice good deeds with the sole intention of benefiting others, this is considered public benefit. 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."

This is the true standard for goodness: to benefit others, to provide goodness for every living being. If in the act of doing good, we are still concerned about our own welfare and reward, then the act is no longer sincere or pure. It has become tainted by traces of badness. In addition to "true goodness and false goodness" there is "full goodness and half goodness". To understand full and half goodness, we

need to be able to differentiate between "full and pure goodness" as opposed to "half and mixed goodness".

All the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, sages and virtuous people think only of others and not of themselves. This is true and full goodness. We have seen a good example of this in Zhong-Yan Fan. His actions were those of true and perfect goodness and thus he was an excellent role model. He never had any concerns for himself or of his family, but only of the country and how to benefit society to create good fortune. When we read his biography, we can see that not only he himself, but also his descendents practiced and accumulated good deeds. Mr. Fan served as Prime Minister and two of his five sons became Prime Ministers as well. The Emperor appointed another son High Scholar.

When Mr. Fan died, he did not have enough money left for his children to purchase a coffin. Where had all the money gone? He had given it to help others. This was why Master Yin-Guang praised Mr. Fan as having virtuous conduct second only to Confucius. Until the early 1900s, his descendents remained prominent and prosperous for eight hundred years. It was the result of having accumulated an abundance of virtues and goodness.

Today, when we practice good deeds, we do so sparingly, exerting only one or two percent of our effort. And yet we consider ourselves good people. Not only that, we also expect numerous 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 has the most profit in it. A dollar invested for millions in return. So they burn incense and worship the Buddha because they think that by doing so, they will gain good fortune in return. They think that maybe if they donate a dollar today, they will win ten thousand dollars in the lottery tomorrow. This kind of thinking degrades the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas into someone with no character at all.

Therefore, when we see that these apparently sincere people, their families and even descendants suffer from bad fortune, we will know the reason why. They do not intentionally view the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as bad, but inadvertently view them as beings who take bribes. Although it is not obvious, this attitude is still there. This is a major mistake! Sometimes when some people want something from a government official, 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 not good people. Consequently, if a Buddha accepted the bribe, would that not make him a bad person as well? That would be a major offense!

Master Jung-Feng further explained that, "When goodness springs from within the root of the heart, it is real goodness. When we do good just because others are doing so, it is false. In addition, when we do good without expecting anything in return, it is considered real goodness. When we practice good deeds for some purpose other than to benefit others, it is false. Those who wish to practice true goodness need to contemplate all these differences."

The "root of the heart" is generated from true sincerity. It is true goodness. What is true goodness and false goodness? We must look into our hearts to see if we are really practicing goodness. When

we simply follow others, we are not acting out of sincerity for this is "false goodness". When we wish for nothing in return, it is "true goodness". When we hope for a return, it becomes an act "with a purpose" and thus is false goodness. We would do well to consider this and examine the difference to see if we are doing things correctly. The scholars said greed and excess possessions were bad, but Master Jung-Feng said "Not necessarily". If money and possessions were used to do good deeds, to benefit the public, then this is also considered good, not bad.

Often, businesspeople who are Buddhists have come and told me that they felt they could not abide by one of the Five Fundamental Precepts, which is not to speak vainly or falsely. Consequently, they asked, "When in the course of doing business, our main objective is to convince others to entrust us with their money, how can we do so if we always speak truthfully?" My answer to them was "When you use the profits to solely benefit others, to practice the Bodhisattva Way then it is OK."

Nowadays, 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 the Bodhisattvas? If we resort to using deception (of course, this would be under extreme circumstances) to trick them into handing over the money, but we in turn use it to do good deeds on their behalf, then we are practicing the Bodhisattva Way. But, if we cheat them out of their money with the intent of enjoying ourselves, then it would be a bad deed. Ordinary people do not know how to perform good deeds. They do not know how to practice goodness so we do it for them, we create good fortune on their behalf. This is a good thing. If we see things only from the surface, then sometimes it really is hard to differentiate between what is good and what is bad. It all depends on the heart. The accumulation of great goodness and merit all arise from the heart of sincerity. This is especially true for great Bodhisattvas. Appearing as ordinary people, they do not dwell on the fact that they are Bodhisattvas nor do they dwell on trivial matters, but purely on benefiting all beings. Therefore, their viewpoints are very different from those of ordinary people.

What is "honest goodness and crooked goodness"? People nowadays often look upon an extremely conservative and nice person as good and kind.

"Honest" means being virtuous, dignified and just. "Crooked" means being corrupt and dishonest. When we see a "Yes Man" who is very respectful and subservient to others, we think he is a good person. Presently, many people prefer to employ this type of person. Why? Because he or she is compliant and willing to do whatever he or she is told to do. People think this type of person is good and they like to have them around. He is like a "servant/slave" obeying every command, 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 everyday actions, they may be liked by all 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 the sages and virtuous people.

The great sages and virtuous people do not favor those who appear to be compliant and careful although most people consider these individuals good. They prefer people who have ability although they are stubborn, arrogant and sometimes, even a little rude. Why? These individuals possess particular skills. They may not always agree with us, but are capable of high achievement. Those who are compliant, who are considered nice and kind, sometimes cannot accomplish given tasks because they act according to convention and lack initiative. This is why sages and virtuous people prefer those with courageous and aspiring characters who are not caught up in trivialities.

Although most people may like those who are compliant, sages often call them “thieves of virtue”. They are usually confused about the truth of a matter and cannot tell right from wrong. And this is why they are called “thieves of virtue”. Virtue refers to customs and morality. When people cannot differentiate between right and wrong, then they have broken the moral tradition, like thieves who have broken the law.

Because of this, it is possible that our judgement could be erroneous. Beings and spirits of Heaven and Earth all look upon good and bad from the same viewpoint as do the sages. They do not view things from the same perspective as ordinary people.

We cannot always differentiate between real goodness and false goodness. Why do spirits and gods of Heaven and earth hold the same standards as the sages and virtuous people? Because they all have the same viewpoints and intentions.

Therefore, when we wish to accumulate merits, we must not give way to greed or be affected by the sights and sounds of the world. We need to be aware of our deviated thoughts as soon as they arise and to purify them.

Honest goodness comes from the thought to sincerely help all others. Crooked goodness arises from the thought of flattering others to obtain what we want. Loving others is being honest. Hating others and being jealous is being crooked. Honest goodness is when we are respectful and crooked goodness is when we act without sincerity. These are all to be carefully differentiated.

We must aspire to eliminate all that is bad and practice all that is good. We start from the self. 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 be able to let go of them. As long as we

cling to them, we will never be rid of our selfishness. The thought of benefiting ourselves is the root of all negative karma. Any good deeds, which are done out of bad intentions will become bad. This is why Master Jung-Feng did not agree with what the scholars categorized as good because good things done with selfish intent would be considered as impure and false. Therefore, we must become less attached to worldly desires. Slowly, one by one, try to eliminate each of them until we are totally unaffected by them. In this way, we will be able to detect the desire as soon as it arises in our mind and immediately act to curb it. Also, we would do well to eradicate the deviant and impure feelings from our hearts. The Infinite Life Sutra explains this as "cleansing our hearts and correcting our past erroneous ways" to attain a pure and bright mind, which 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 them to understand the true reality, to break through delusion and attain awakening. As soon as they do this, they will naturally learn how to eliminate the bad and practice the good. Therefore, the foremost merit in Buddhism is that it helps people to learn about the true reality of life and the universe. Once they have accomplished this, then they will be free to choose their existence within any one of the Ten Dharma Realms.

The Buddhas will not interfere with our choice nor will they try to change our minds. Buddhas do not teach 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 reincarnated as human beings, then the Buddhas will teach us the principles in becoming good people. If we wish to be born into the Three Bad Realms, then we can just immerse ourselves in greed, anger and ignorance. Then we will smoothly sail into the Three Bad Realms. Buddhas will not try to stop us nor will they try to help us. They only teach people how to break through delusion and attain awakening. This is the supreme benefit. This is honest goodness.

Crooked goodness arises from thoughts of flattering others so that we can obtain what we want, for example, fame and wealth. But, this is not the proper way to achieve fame and fortune. Any good acts performed out of motives such as this would be "crooked", not "honest". We should be careful and respectful when interacting with beings, matters and objects. Acting without sincerity is a fault and we would do well to be able to recognize it.

What is "hidden goodness and visible goodness"? When we do something good and people know about it, it is visible goodness. When no one knows about it, it is hidden virtue.

It is very important to be able to understand hidden and visible goodness. Ancient sages and virtuous people all taught us to accumulate hidden virtues. What are hidden virtues? Any good acts or deeds that are known by others are considered "visible". When others praise us for what we have done that praise is our good fortune. For example, if the government commends our deeds and rewards us with a certificate or a plaque honoring our actions, then that is our good fortune. In other words, we have used up all that good fortune in the form of praise from others.

This is why it is so important that we realize the best way to accumulate goodness is to let our good deeds remain "hidden" and unknown. There is no need to let others know about them, just keep on accumulating, while asking for no rewards. This is how to accumulate goodness. Once people know about our deeds, then the good fortune that comes with it will begin to diminish because people will start to reward us for our actions. If we receive immediate reward for every good deed we do, then there is no accumulation at all. In fact, we might start to accumulate faults without realizing it. The more faults we accumulate, the worse our outcome will be.

Those with hidden virtues will naturally be known by the heavens and will be rewarded. Those who practice visible goodness will be known by people and will enjoy fame. Fame itself is good fortune, but it is forbidden for heaven and earth do not favor fame. We can see that those who have great fame, but lack the virtue supporting it will eventually encounter some kind of overwhelming adversity. A person who truly has not done any wrong but continues to be falsely accused by others will have descendants who will suddenly become prosperous and successful. From this, we can see how important it is to understand the minute differences between hidden and visible goodness.

If we have greed for popularity and fame, they are considered one of the good fortunes. Then, our reward for our good deeds may be popularity and fame. But actually, they are not considered a good return because they can cause envy amongst people as well as amongst beings and spirits of heaven and earth. Even worse, if we falsely take credit for virtuous conduct we do not have, then adversity will surely follow.

On the other hand, if we do not have faults but were wronged or despised by others for bad deeds, which we did not commit, then we are actually accumulating goodness. The more unsatisfied people are, the more jealous they are and the more they slander us, the better it is for us. Why? Because this slander and these obstacles will reduce our negative karma. When we accumulate virtues, it is best to do it quietly with the least amount of people knowing about it. There is no need to seek praise and respect from others. When all of our negative karma has been eliminated, then our accumulation of goodness will become even stronger. Consequently, our good fortune will be greater. This will result in the sudden prosperity of our descendants. When we carefully observe those who attain sudden prominence, we can see that most of their ancestors possessed a great deal of hidden virtues. Once we understand this, we will truly know the value of hidden virtues.

What is apparent and actual goodness? In the Spring-Autumn Period, there was a country named Lu that made a law, which rewarded those who paid the ransom to free their fellow citizens who were servant-slaves. At that time, Confucius had a very rich student named Zi-Gong. Although Zi-Gong paid the ransom to free his people, he did not accept the reward for doing such a deed.

This example addresses the difficulty of differentiating between "apparent and actual goodness". The difficulty arises because ordinary people's standard for goodness is different from that of sages and virtuous people.

How would someone have become a servant-slave in the homes of the nobility? Because they had broken the law and been sent to the homes of various nobles to serve their sentences. However, the government passed a law, which stated that as long as someone was willing to pay their fine, they could be released and regain their freedom. This was a good deed and the government encouraged the wealthy to perform the good deed of paying the fine for the criminals. The intention was to provide the criminals with the opportunity to reform. Therefore, Zi-Gong paid the fines for a servant to be released from the house of a nobleperson, but did not accept the reward offered through the government.

When Confucius heard this, he was very unhappy and scolded him saying, "You acted wrongly in this matter. When sages and virtuous people undertake anything, they strive to improve morality, teaching people to be good and decent. We do not do something just for personal virtues or reputation. In the country of Lu, the poor outnumber the wealthy. By refusing the reward, you lead others to think that accepting the reward money is being greedy. If this happens, no one will pay the ransom to free our people again".

Confucius was displeased with Zi-Gong's action. Why? Because Zi-Gong did not see the situation as clearly as virtuous people did. A virtuous person's perception of right and wrong is sometimes different from that of average persons. His or her goal is to improve social behavior and moral standards. Their teachings are set up for all people, not for any particular individual. Zi-Gong's action, from an individual standpoint, was extraordinary and praiseworthy. However, he went against local customs and disrupted a set pattern. And that was where his fault lay.

At that time in Lu, the poor greatly outnumbered the rich. Therefore, the reward offered by the government was designed to help motivate the average citizens. Because Zi-Gong refused the reward, everyone praised him as a good man. Consequently, anyone who performed a similar good deed would not dare to accept the reward, for to do so could result in others thinking that the deed was done solely for the reward. If this were so, then no one would be willing to pay the money to free the servants anymore. This would ruin the system established by the government. If the purpose was to encourage everyone to perform good deeds, then Zi-Gong should have accepted the reward, not for the benefit of the individual, but for the benefit of the public. This exemplifies how the sages and virtuous people interpreted things differently from average people.

Another student of Confucius, Zi-Lu, once saw a man drowning in the river and rescued him. Later, the man thanked him by giving him a cow as a token of gratitude. Zi-Lu accepted his gift. Confucius was happy when he heard this and said, "In the future, people will be willing and eager to help those who are drowning in deep wa-

ters or lakes”.

If we look from the eyes of ordinary people, Zi-Gong, who did not accept the reward money, was good. Zi-Lu, who accepted the cow, was not as good. Who would have known that Confucius would praise Zi-Lu and scold Zi-Gong? 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. We would also do well to not only consider our own gain and loss but look to see the impact made on the public.

Zi-Lu was traveling along the road when he saw a man drowning. He immediately jumped into the water to rescue the man. Out of gratitude, the man gave Zi-Lu a cow, which he accepted. Confucius praised Zi-Lu because when others realized that a reward might be given out of gratitude when a life is saved, then it would become a good incentive for people to be braver in helping others in need. These are some examples of Confucius’ truthful and honorable teachings. We can learn much from them.

When Confucius praised Zi-Lu instead of Zi-Gong, his viewpoint was diametrically opposed to that of ordinary people. However, he had sound reasons for doing this. When we look at the sages and virtuous people, we will see that their vision is much farther than ours and that their viewpoints are much deeper than the apparent superficial meanings. Ordinary people have very limited vision. We only see the immediate results. 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 or even the entire world. We should also consider how history will regard events. When we realize the broad scope involved, our viewpoints will be very different than before and we will understand that Confucius’ viewpoint was correct. Therefore, good and bad cannot always be determined by present actions. We need to see whether the long-term effects are positive or negative in order to make a wise judgement.

What we do right now may be good but with the passing years, it may bring harm to others. Therefore, what seems like goodness may actually be bad. What now appears to be bad may actually have positive long-term effects, turning out to have been goodness after all. So, what seems like a bad deed may actually be goodness. There are some examples of what appears to be good but actually is not. Apparent responsibility may be actual irresponsibility, apparent propriety may be actual impropriety, apparent trustworthiness may be actual untrustworthiness, apparent kindness may be actual unkindness. In these instances, we need to differentiate carefully and know how to behave properly.

What we see superficially may appear to be goodness, but actually, it is not. It may be good for a particular individual or it may be good at one particular time. However, it may not be good for society as a whole and it may not be good for future generations. This is why in Buddhism, the determination of good and bad is never based on “current action”. What appears to be good throughout history is the

real goodness for it is good for generations thereafter. What is good now but is not good for future generations or that which has destined us to be born into the Three Bad Realms or the hells 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 seen the development of weapons of mass destruction. The intent, to keep the peace was apparent responsibility. The terrifying reality that countless people now have the means to destroy our world and every living being on it makes it clear that such development may well prove to be the ultimate actual irresponsibility.

In the case of Zi-Lu, who accepted the cow as a reward, his actions may not have seemed to be good at that time; however, since the long-term effects were good, it was good. This is a good example of what is "apparent" and "actual" goodness. What are responsibility and propriety? What are trustworthiness and kindness? There is "apparent" and "actual" goodness in all of these. If we are unable to differentiate between them, then we may have often actually committed great offenses when we thought that we were doing good. If we wish to practice to accumulate good fortune, we must first possess wisdom. Without wisdom, no matter how hard we try, we will not be able to obtain good fortune.

What is "proper goodness and improper goodness"? In the Ming Dynasty, there once was a Prime Minister named Wen-Yi Lu. When he grew old, he retired to his hometown where he was widely loved and highly respected. Once, a drunken villager went to his home and proceeded to insult him. Mr. Lu was not angered by his words but instead, told his servant, "This man is drunk. Let's not argue with him". With this, he closed the door and ignored the onslaught of insults.

A year later, the same man committed a grave crime and was given the death sentence. Upon hearing this, Mr. Lu said with great remorse, "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 only thinking of being kind and unknowingly encouraged an arrogant and malevolent personality. Now he has been given the death penalty". This is an example of doing something bad while having good intentions.

Although Mr. Lu had already retired from office, his virtuous conduct and great merit had earned him respect from virtually everyone. When a drunken dissatisfied man came to his home and verbally abused him, Mr. Lu, who was tolerant and patient told his servant not to argue but to just close the door. He did not take the incident to heart. Later, Mr. Lu heard that the drunkard had committed a serious crime and was sentenced to death. Mr. Lu then felt deep remorse and believed that he had mishandled the situation when the drunkard had insulted him. Had he pressed charges and sent him to jail

at that time, then he might have learned to discipline himself a little more and avoided the deadly offense he had committed.

We see many examples of "doing something bad while having good intentions". This is especially true with today's young parents. They unwittingly spoil their children so that when they grow up, they do not respect their parents and may even commit various crimes. Then, too late, the parents realize the serious mistake they have made. Children must be properly taught when they are young. The personality of the child will become the character of the adult. If children are not disciplined when they are young, then it will be too late to do so when they have grown. They would undoubtedly rebel against their parents' every wish and be disgruntled at the slightest disagreement of opinions. When this happens, it is outrageous!

In ancient China, a criminal sentence could be issued under the heading of "Parental rights". This meant that if a parent went to the judge and complained that the child did not fulfil his or her filial duties and he wished the child to be sentenced to death, the judge would immediately 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. If the parent wished the child to go to jail for three years, then that was exactly what the judge would sentence. Why? "By order of the parents" was indisputable. No trial was necessary because everyone took the side of the parents. After all, what parents did not love their children? If our parents did not love us, then we would not be able to survive in society, we would be discriminated against.

"Parental rights" existed through the 1940's but was abolished soon after. With this kind of a law, no children dared not to fulfill filial duties. They could not even ask for a lawyer because with "parental rights", no defense was allowed. This law helped people practice filial piety and is worthy of reflection.

There is also an example of those who achieved goodness although they had acted from improper intentions. Once, a famine devastated the land and people stole food from others in broad daylight. A rich family reported these losses to the authorities. However, the government, did nothing to stop the thieves. Eventually, the poor grew more daring and chaos was imminent. So, the rich family took the law into their own hands and proceeded to catch and punish those who had stole from them. In this way, peace was restored and people stopped their stealing. Otherwise, the turmoil would have gotten completely out of hand.

When a famine strikes, those who are 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. The thieves became more daring and the authorities had no way of controlling them. So the wealthy people formed a vigilante group, caught and punished the thieves. 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 all benefit from understanding this.

Good intentions are "proper" and bad deeds are "improper". In the previous example, Mr. Lu had committed a bad deed although his intention was good. This is the "improper within the proper". The standard for good and bad are determined by the effect an action has on morality and on society. For instance, becoming a vigilante and punishing someone on our own is obviously not considered good. But in this situation, the authorities had ignored the criminals and the riots were getting out of control. Thus, some action needed to be taken to protect their own lives and possessions. By taking the law into their own hands, the wealthy family restored order. 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 is "half goodness and full goodness"? I Ching, the Book of Changes said, "People who do not accumulate virtuous deeds will not achieve honor. On the other hand, people who do not accumulate bad deeds will not bring about self-destruction". The Book of History said, "The last emperor of the Shang Dynasty, Zhou, had committed the worst of crimes". The dynasty ended with his death.

This is a lesson taught by ancient sages and virtuous people. Such lessons were later called and respected as sutras for they teach the truth. They are a truth, which surpasses time and space. If we do not practice goodness, we will not attain integrity. On the other hand, if we do not commit wrongdoings, we will not suffer self-destruction. This is the absolute truth.

It is like collecting objects in a container. With diligence, it will soon be full. If we are lazy, then the container will be only half full. This is one example of full goodness and half goodness.

This analogy of a container is easy to understand. If we want to accumulate goodness, it will eventually become filled if we persist in our efforts. But if we are not persistent, the container will not become filled. This shows the importance of accumulating goodness. And most importantly, we must not accumulate wrongdoings or we will destroy ourselves.

Once a poor woman went to visit a Buddhist way place and wished to make a donation. Being extremely poor, she only had two cents but she freely gave these to a

monk. To her surprise, the abbot himself came to help her regret for past offenses and dedicate her merits. Later, she was chosen to enter the imperial palace and obtained wealth and prestige. Clad in her riches, she again went to the way place to make a donation, this time bringing thousands of silver pieces.

To her dismay, the abbot only sent his student, another monk to help her dedicate her merits. The lady did not understand and questioned the abbot, "In the past, I only donated two cents, yet you personally helped me express my regret for past offenses. Today, I come with great wealth to give and you will not help me perform my merit dedication. Why?" The abbot replied, "Although the amount of money you gave in the past was small, it came from a true and sincere heart. It was necessary for me to repay your sincerity by personally performing your dedications. Today, although your donation is much greater, the heart of giving is not quite as true and sincere as before. Therefore, it is fitting and sufficient that my student performs your dedications for you." This is an example of how thousands of silver pieces are only considered "half goodness" and two cents are "whole goodness".

This is a true account in Buddhist records. A laywoman wished to make an offering to a Buddhist way place but she was so poor, she only had two cents with her. Nonetheless, she donated them to the way place. Because her sincerity was true, the abbot personally helped her to dedicate the merits from this good deed. Later when she moved into the imperial palace and became wealthy, she returned to the way place and brought a thousand ounces of gold as an offering. To her surprise, the abbot did not greet her personally and only asked one of his students to dedicate the merits for her. 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 exhibiting improper behavior.

In the past, those with high moral standards judged people by their sincerity regardless of the amount they donated. If people were truly sincere, then no matter how little they donated, the abbot would have personally performed the dedications. If not, then the abbot was not obligated to do so. With a heart of sincerity, the donors nurtured good fortune by making offerings to the Buddha. With the heart of sincerity, they had only to donate a little to gain infinite benefits in return.

However, in this example, the woman had become wealthy and prestigious and her sincerity had been covered by her new manner of living. Therefore, by sending his student to greet her, the old abbot was actually trying to awaken her from her deluded state. This is the greatest kindness and compassion. He was trying to show her where she had erred in the hopes that she would feel remorse, acknowledge her mistake and correct her behavior.

When the woman had donated two cents on her initial visit, 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 we are practicing to accumulate good fortune, it is important for us to realize that the determining factor is not the amount of money or the number of good deeds done but the heart of sincerity. As long as

we do things with utmost sincerity and effort then 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. I wish to attain clarity of the true mind to uncover my original self-nature. Second, I dedicate my merits to awakening. 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 wish that the Buddhas will help all to break through delusion and attain enlightenment, to leave suffering and gain happiness. I dedicate my merits for all others, not for myself". If this is truly our intention, then with this thought, we will be able to achieve full merits and virtues. But, if there is the slightest thought for ourselves, for example, for fame or wealth, then we will not be able to gain anything in return, 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 Li Zhong, an immortal of the Han Dynasty. He was teaching his student, Dong-Bin Lu, the art of transforming iron into gold. They would use this gold to help the poor. Dong-Bin asked his teacher, "Will the gold ever change back to iron?" Li Jung answered, "After five hundred years, it will return to its original form". Dong-Bin said, "In that case, I do not want to learn this art for it will harm those who possess the gold five hundred years from now."

These are two of the "Eight Immortals" who are highly respected by the Chinese. Li Zhong offered to teach Dong-Bin alchemy, the art of turning iron into gold. Then, Dong-Bin could help the poor. But Dong-Bin was very cautious. He wanted to know if the transmutation would be permanent. Li Zhong told him that it was not. Dong-Bin's immediate response was that he did not want to learn alchemy because although it could benefit people for a few centuries, it would hurt those who possessed the gold five hundred years later. This would have been a bad deed. When we look around today, most people are only concerned with what they can get now. They 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.

Li Zhong 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 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 in Buddhism. In the latter, we must possess purity of mind before we can achieve the state of mind of Buddhism and become a Dharma repository. Taoists do not seek to attain purity of mind; they seek the compassionate heart. It is more difficult to cultivate purity of mind than the compassionate heart.

With this single good thought, Dong-Bin had instantly accomplished the three thousand virtuous

deeds required to practice immortality. His concern about not harming any sentient beings had actually surpassed the three thousand kind deeds. Thus, one single thought was sufficient to fulfill the requirement. This is similar to what Mr. Liao-Fan did in the act of reducing the taxes on the farmers. That one kind thought alone fulfilled the vow of ten thousand kind deeds. This teaches us the benefits from practicing from our hearts.

When we perform a good deed, it is best for us to not attach to how much we have done. If we practice in this manner, then all our good deeds will reach fulfillment and success. If, instead, we always think of the deeds that we have performed, looking for a reward of some kind, then no matter how diligently we practice, even for an entire lifetime, the deeds will still be considered as half goodness. For example, when we donate money to the poor, we can practice what is called "pure donation". In this type of giving, we do not linger on the thought of "I" who is giving. We do not dwell on the importance of the object that is given. We do not think of the other who has received. We are simply giving out of true sincerity and respect. When we give with this "pure donation" then one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune and the merit from giving one cent can wipe away the transgressions of a thousand eons.

If we always keep in mind the good that we have done and expect rewards for our actions, then even a donation of two hundred thousand gold pieces would not bring us the reward of a fully good fortune. This is another way of explaining whole goodness and half goodness.

If we have tried our very best then we will achieve full goodness. If we still have any reservations and have not done all we can then we have achieved only half goodness. Therefore, the thing to remember when we are accumulating virtuous deeds is to do everything with complete sincerity. Many people in this world do not understand the true reality and consequently, they hold many doubts about Buddhism. This doubt is what we discussed earlier as one of the Five Poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt. They believe and act according to what we have told them. However, in the act of practicing good deeds and in donating, they still want to reserve something, to hold something back. They are still unable to let go of everything. They are afraid that if they give everything away, then they will have nothing left to live on. This is doubt. They do not have the understanding, the wisdom or the determination to practice full goodness. They can only achieve half goodness. This is why although many people are practicing good deeds, they do not obtain good fortune in return and why they do not see any immediate results. Do we want to understand where the problem lies?

If we truly want to practice for good fortune then we must fully understand and believe in Buddhism without the slightest doubt. (Sometimes, worldly people will say that we are foolish and superstitious and when we think about it, we may think this is reasonable." 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 viewpoints.) When we truly believe and act accordingly, then the results will become easily recognizable.

They will be so much more than what was described in [Liao Fan'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 will gain a return of a thousandfold for a fraction of our effort. This is a fact. However, if we act with the hope of gaining a lavish return for our efforts then we have not acted with the heart of sincerity. We could give everything that we have but we would only gain "half" of the good fortune, not the "whole". Also, by keeping the good acts in mind, we have been unable to eliminate all of our longings. This is 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 Cause and Effect is a fact. It is as natural as the laws of heaven and earth. If we perform good deeds 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 receive full and complete everything. Is this not being free and at great ease?

Of course, we will still gain something if we perform good deeds as we seek, but it will not be full and complete. Why? When we no longer have wants and desires our hearts 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 is incredible. And what is most wonderful is that we will be able to go to the Pure Land, the Hua Zang world. The pure land of each Buddhaland is manifested from the true nature. But, if we possess just one longing, then this is no longer a reflection of our true nature. And all the prestige, wealth, health and long life that we have gained through practicing good deeds will eventually be lost. What we will have gained is limited, for it is measurable and one day, it will be used up.

Only a virtuous nature is similar to our 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. No ordinary person would be willing to do so. This is why we can only find Bodhisattvas and Buddhas practicing great merits because even Arhats cannot practice them. They do not wish to be bothered with problems. For example, if we want to help someone and they rejected, slandered or embarrassed us, we would become angry and abandon the attempt. This would be incomplete.

Bodhisattvas, however, are very different. Bodhisattvas are aware of the bad habits, problems and rebellious ways of ordinary people. They would not mind these obstacles and would use their patience and compassion to help them. Therefore, the heart of a Bodhisattva is different from that of an Arhat or a Pratyekabuddha. The latter two still use a false heart, whereas, a Bodhisattva uses his true heart. We seek wealth and prestige not realizing that these do not have to be sought because they are already within our true nature. People who practice Buddhism are trying to uncover their true nature and the abilities that lie within it.

Therefore, one of our goals as Buddhists is to return to reality, to uncover our self-nature, our intrinsic nature. This self-nature possesses everything. There is no need to seek outside, only within.

The self-nature has infinite wisdom and abilities that are inexhaustible. Everyone has this self-nature, we just do not yet realize it. Until we do, we can rely upon the Buddha to teach us how to develop it. This is why the benevolence shown to us by the Buddha is so magnificent! This is the true reality behind all the reasoning. We would do well to understand this. As long as we are sincere in our every good deed, then it is true that freely giving one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune because it fulfills the integrity of the self-nature. And the good fortune from freely offering one cent to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha can wipe away the transgressions of thousands of eons.

The Surangama Sutra tells us that, "During the Dharma Ending Age, the number of deviated teachers is as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges River". They may appear to be teaching Buddhism, but their actual deeds are those of demons. Since this is the case, where should we go when we want to plant the seeds of good fortune and to practice virtuous deeds? What if the way place we choose to visit is run by people with deviated viewpoints? Then, not only will we not plant the seeds for good fortune, but we might even unknowingly commit some bad deeds!

We all would do well to understand that Buddhism is a teaching of practicing within. If our true intention is to go to the way place and pay our respects to the Buddha, then the Buddha will become Buddha Amitabha or Buddha Shakyamuni, according to what our heart is giving rise to. If the heart were true and honest then even if we went to a way place run by bad spirits, the Buddha would be true. However, if the heart were improper to begin with then even if we were practicing at a proper way place, we would still be corresponding with deviated people.

This is not to say that there are no good places to practice Buddhism during the Dharma Ending Age. The real way place is within our heart. The Vimalakirti Sutra tells us that "A sincere heart is the way place, a pure heart is the way place and a compassionate heart is the way place". A way 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 way place. As long as our hearts are proper, then no matter where we go, there will always be proper teachings. This is what we mean when we say "the environment changes according to our minds". It is the mind within that changes the surroundings around us. If we can understand this reasoning and be diligent in our practice, then society and countries would be enveloped in good fortune. If we do not rid ourselves of wandering thoughts and our attachments to our good deeds then even if we gave away tens of thousands of gold pieces, our merit would not be full.

What is "big goodness and small goodness"? Once there was a high ranking official named Zhong-Da Wei, who was led into the underworld to be judged for his good and bad deeds. The judge ordered his records of good and bad to be brought out. When the records arrived, Zhong-Da was astounded at the courtyard filled with his bad records and at the single scroll, which contained his good deeds.

The official then ordered the two to be weighed. Surprisingly, the bad records, which had filled the courtyard, were lighter than the single scroll of good deeds, which was as thin as a chopstick. Zhong-Da asked the judge, "I am barely forty

years old, how could I have committed so many wrongdoings?" 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 through action to be counted as a wrong".

Good fortune and kindness come in both big and small sizes. The above account tells of a man named Zhong-Da Wei who was led before the king of the underworld for judgement. The king asked the judge to bring out his records.

Everyone has committed both good and bad acts during his or her lifetime. Consequently, there would be a record of both kinds of conduct. These records are kept with the king of the Underworld and the ruler of the spirit world. This is why Mr. Liao-Fan taught us to have respect and fear within our hearts. After the records of Zhong-Da had been brought out, he saw that he had a massive amount of records, which told of all his bad deeds. On the other hand, the records that recorded his good deeds were as thin as a chopstick. However, after these records were placed upon a scale to see which was heavier, it turned out that the thin scroll of good deeds out-weighed the volumes of bad deeds! This was probably because he did not commit any serious offenses but many minor faults. Therefore, one large kind deed would be able to offset numerous small faults. Upon seeing the result, the judge was quite pleased. Zhong-Da was a good person after all.

Therefore, when Zhong-Da questioned how he had been able to commit so many faults before he had even reached the age of forty, the judge explained to him that even if it were just an improper thought without any resultant action, it would still be recorded as a fault. Thus, even if we did not actually commit any major transgressions, we have had thoughts about them. Luckily, Zhong-Da had one great good deed, which outweighed all his minor faults.

Zhong-Da then asked him what was recorded in the single scroll of good deeds. The judge replied, "Once the Emperor planned to build a great stone bridge but you proposed against the project due to the hardship and toil it would cause the tens and thousands of people needed for the work. This is a copy of your proposal to the Emperor". Zhong-Da said, "I did make the proposal, but the Emperor dismissed it and proceeded with the project anyway. My proposal had no effect on the matter at all. How can it bear so much weight against my numerous offenses?"

The judge replied, "Although the Emperor did not accept your suggestion, that one thought of kindness you bore for the tens and thousands of people was very great. If the Emperor had listened to you, 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 content of the scroll was a description of the major good deed, which Zhong-Da had performed. When the Emperor wanted to construct a bridge, Zhong-Da foresaw that it would waste money and cause hardships for the citizens, so he submitted a proposal asking the Emperor to reconsider the matter. However, the Emperor ignored his proposal and went ahead with the plan. From this, we can see that the most important factor is in our original intention.

Zhong-Da's concern was not for himself, but for the hundreds of thousands of citizens who would suffer from such a major construction project. Even if they did not have to contribute in labor, they would have to pay heavy taxes in order to offset the cost involved in building the bridge. If the Emperor could forego the idea and avoid any unnecessary expenditure, then all the citizens would benefit from it.

Therefore, we can see the magnitude of goodness behind this single thought. Although the Emperor did not listen to Zhong-Da's suggestion, this does not alter the fact that Zhong-Da was sincere in his proposal. This signifies that his heart was true and the deed was an example of full and complete goodness. Of course, had the Emperor accepted Zhong-Da's proposal, then the significance of the act would have been even greater. But still, the thought itself was to be commended.

Herein lies the difference between big and small goodness. It is determined by our intentions, by whether we are thinking of all the beings in the world or whether we are thinking of just ourselves and our families. We should understand this logic when we dedicate the merits after we recite sutras or a Buddha's name. Usually we would dedicate the merits to a particular person, wishing that the Buddha would help him or her in gaining various benefits. This is what is called a small goodness. The benefits gained would be small as well.

In fact, we are not even sure if the person being dedicated to would actually gain any benefit. Therefore, in cases like this, when one or more of our family members is in a crisis, we should recite sutras and a Buddha's name and then dedicate the merits to all beings throughout the universe. We should wish that all living beings would be void of illness and suffering and that they would all be happy and healthy. When we are sincere in this thought, our family members will gain as well. Why? Because our heart is truly broad! We can see an example of this in the Earth Treasure Sutra where the Brahman girl called "Bright Eyes" made a vow on behalf of her mother.

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 own flame to light those of others, so that the whole world is alight with brightness. This results in great benefit with no loss to the self. This is why 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 Buddha nature.

The heart and roots of Chinese culture lie in two things, namely, "Ancestral Memorial Halls" and "the classical Chinese language". The reason China became a country with so much cultural history that

extends back over thousands of years is because of the strong foundation of the normal human relationships in the Chinese ethical tradition. Classical Chinese must be preserved because if we cease its use, then the Chinese people would suffer great adversities and the race could 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.

What is "difficult goodness and easy goodness"? The knowledgeable scholars of the past used to say, "When one wishes to conquer one's greed and desires, one should start with what is most difficult to overcome". When Confucius talked about how to cultivate one's humanity, he also said to start 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 habits and desires. Therefore, they taught us to start with whatever is the most serious one. If we can overcome our most serious faults, then we can overcome other matters, which would appear trivial in comparison. When we want to eliminate the bad and practice the good, we must know where to begin. This is also why when Confucius was teaching about the cultivation of humanity, he believed that we should start with what is most difficult to practice. The following are a few examples.

For example, the old teacher, Mr. Shu of Jiangxi, gave two years salary to a poor family who owed money to the government. Thus, he saved them from being torn apart if the husband was sent to prison.

This is a very good example. He did something, which was difficult to do and gave up something, which was difficult to give up. During ancient times in China, the students used to give their teacher a small gift during holidays. Originally, it was "strips of dried meat", which were tied into a bundle. Later, the strips of dried meat became acknowledged as a student's gift to the teacher, although they may not necessarily have been dried meat. Teachers would teach at a "private school" and the number of students varied. Twenty to thirty students would be considered a very good number. The smaller "schools" might have had only dozen or so students. Therefore, the gifts (or pay) the teacher would receive could be quite meager. For Mr. Shu to donate two years' salary to help the couple pay off their debt was a considerable undertaking and yet, this is exactly what he did.

Another example is Mr. Zhang from Handan. Mr. Zhang gave his ten years of savings to a poor man so he could repay a debt. This saved him from going to jail and enabled him to remain with his wife.

The first example was to give away two years of salary and this example was to give away ten

years of savings. In both cases, they were given to pay back the money owed to the government. In most case, an offense such as not being able to pay back public funds would entail a jail sentence for the offender. By paying back the funds, the family would not have to be torn apart.

Such examples as Mr. Shu and Mr. Zhang are rare, for they gave what is most difficult to give. What others could not sacrifice, they did so willingly.

People depend on money and materials to survive. Therefore, to be able to give away money is extremely difficult to do. Especially when it is all the savings that we have. This is to “to conquer what is most difficult to conquer, to start with what is most difficult to practice”. It is also a good practice for curbing our desires.

Another example is Mr. Jin from Jiangsu Province. As he was old and without any sons, his neighbor offered their young daughter in marriage to him to give him descendants to carry on his lineage. Mr. Jin refused the offer and sent her back home. This is another example of being able to overcome what is most difficult to conquer in oneself.

Mr. Jin had no sons. During ancient times, it was an acceptable custom for him to take a second wife to bear him an heir to carry on the family name. To have an heir was very important. A neighbor wanted to give their very young daughter to Mr. Jin. However, he recognized the great age difference and although he really wanted a son, he felt that he could not ruin a young girl’s future and happiness just to serve his own purpose. Thus, this is a good example of restraining one’s desires even when it is most difficult to do so.

Therefore, the heavens showered down good fortune, which was especially good for 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 kindness even when it is easy and one has the chance to do so, then it would truly be a shame. For those who are poor and without prestige, doing kind things for others is very difficult. However, if in this difficulty one can still manage to help others then it would be even more valuable.

These are the differences between “difficult goodness” and “easy goodness”. Upon understanding this logic, we should learn to grasp the opportunities for us to practice good and accumulate merit. Once we lose an opportunity, we may not get another chance in the future when we really want to practice some good deeds. Wealth does not last forever. A person’s luck will change every five years. During our lifetime, 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. On the other hand, if the worst five years occur during our old age, then the hardships will be even more difficult to endure because physically, we are al-

ready at a disadvantage.

Therefore, we should learn to practice goodness at an early age, to let everyone share in our good fortune because once we give it away, we will still gain whatever we are destined to have. We need to understand this. When we are young and strong, we would do well to not exhaust all of our good fortune. If we do not use it up, then it will be kept 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 our old age. This is why we must learn to practice to cultivate and accumulate good fortune for us to enjoy during our old age.

It is most important that as Buddhists, we know exactly why we are practicing. We do so to accumulate the ultimate good fortune for when we die. What is ultimate good fortune? That of no illness, of knowing that when our time is up, we can leave this world in a sitting or a standing position and that we know exactly where we will be going. This is the greatest good fortune. Most people have overlooked this most important matter. It is up to those who practice Buddhism to help others who are willing to learn, so that we can all share in the same good fortune.

It is easier to help others when we have prestige and status and therefore, it is easier for us to accumulate merits. Thus, when we have prestige and status, we must remember not to use it in a bad way against others. Instead, we should use it to our advantage to perform more good deeds and to help more people. If we have the means to do this but we choose not to, then we are missing a great opportunity. On the other hand, when we are poor and do not have the means but still choose to help others, then the difficulty of the task makes the act even more valuable.

Practicing the Ten Good Deeds When the Condition Arises

There are many ways to help others whenever the opportunity presents itself. In short, the ways of helping others can be simplified into ten important categories. The first category is "supporting the practice of kindness". The second is "revering love and respect". The third is "helping others to succeed in doing good". The fourth is "persuading others to practice kindness". The fifth is "helping those in desperate need". The sixth is "developing public projects for the greater benefit of people". The seventh is "practicing merits by giving wealth". The eighth is "protecting and maintaining the proper teachings". The ninth is "respecting elders". The tenth is "loving and cherishing all living things".

This is what is often referred to as being joyful over others meritorious deeds. We do our best to help everyone at every possible opportunity. Because there are so many kinds of virtuous conduct that can be accomplished when the right opportunity arises, they have been summarized into these ten main categories. They are truly beneficial to everyone and we would do well to do all we can to achieve them. In the following, we will examine each one separately.

What does 'supporting the practice of kindness' mean? In the Yu Dynasty, there once was an emperor by the name of Shun. 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 the older and weaker fishermen were left with the rapids and shallow water, where there were very few fish.

Mr. Liao-Fan used an example here to teach us how to interact with other people and how to lead and persuade others to practice kindness. Lake Leize is located in Shandong province. During ancient times, fishing was an important part of daily life. The older fishermen were forced to fish in the rapids and shallow waters where the fish were scarce and not easy to catch because the best spots had all been taken by those who were young and strong.

When Shun saw this situation, he felt sympathy for the older fishermen. He decided to join in the fishing. Whenever he saw fishermen grab the good fishing spots, he would not speak of their faults. When he saw those who were humble and yielding, he praised them everywhere he went and even followed their humble and polite ways. Shun stayed and fished like this for a whole year until the other fishermen got into the habit of yielding good fishing spots to others.

Feeling saddened by the situation, Shun thought of an inventive way to remedy it. He was wise, patient, skillful and clever, so he joined the fishermen in catching fish. His true intention was not to catch fish but to try to reform the younger fishermen. When he saw people competing for a spot, he would say nothing. However, when one of them yielded to the other, he praised them highly. He used the method of "concealing faults and praising kindness". After persisting in this way for a year, the young fishermen were all reformed by Shun and ceased fighting over the fishing spots as they yielded to others.

In our society today, much effort has been spent in highlighting bad deeds and conduct. As soon as someone acts contrary to customs, behaves immorally or breaks the law, the media greatly publicizes it. Good deeds are often not publicized. When this is done, then there is bound to be more bad than good people for when no one recognizes good deeds, there is little motivation to practice goodness. In fact, it would be even more encouraging to practice wrongdoings.

We should follow the examples set by ancient sages and virtuous people. They did not speak of others faults but waited for those people to reflect upon themselves until they had awakened. This is the proper way to teach people. Everyone has a conscience. Sometimes it can be overwhelmed by the desires for wealth and power. As long as we use the expedient way to help others to 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 intelligent man such as Shun could have easily influenced others with a few words of advice. Why did he not just say something instead of changing others by setting a good example? Shun's painstaking and good intentions were like the expert craftsmanship that comes only as the result of long practice and hard work.

Shun did not want to use words to influence others, preferring to set an example for them through his own actions. Although it took a longer time, the effects would be much more lasting because "actions speak louder than words". From this, we can see Shun's wisdom.

In today's era of low morality, social breakdown and loss of proper thinking, it is most difficult to find a good standard of behavior. Therefore, when those around us have shortcomings, we do not use our good points to highlight their deficiencies. When others are unkind, we do not use our kindness and compare ourselves to them. When others are not as capable as we are, we do not purposely surpass them with our abilities. Even when we are intelligent and competent, these skills are to be kept hidden and not boasted of. Instead, we need to behave even more modestly than ever. When someone makes mistakes, we tolerate and conceal them, providing the opportunity to reform without the loss of self-respect.

We need to painstakingly refrain from these acts. Just because we have certain good points or advantages that others lack, it does not mean that we can gloat over them. Instead, we must learn to conceal our abilities and to accommodate the faults of others. Remembering this and not flaunting 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 were truly capable of great achievements, we would not be as superficial as many people are. We would have more depth. By being tolerant, not speaking of the faults of others and praising the goodness of others, we will truly be upholding the precepts and cultivating 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 own 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. Bing-Nan Lee, he taught me not to talk about the faults of others and better still, to hide them. I understood that. However, he also told me not to praise others. That confused me. I realized that discussing the faults of others was not a good deed but on the other hand, praising others should be fine, so why should I not praise others for their goodness. He later ex-

plained, "When you praise somebody, the harm you have caused is even greater than when you scold him for his faults". How could that be? He continued, "It takes great wisdom to know how to praise others. Thoughtless praise can cause a person great harm. If others display a little bit of ability and we praise them excessively, then they might become so proud of the fact that they would think that they were incredible. Thinking in this manner would prevent them from making further progress. When they do not progress, they regress. Now, haven't you done more harm than good?" After thinking about this, I understood the logic in what he had said.

So, what sort of a person should we praise? In Buddhism, we praise the one who is unaffected by the "eight emotions of others". The emotions of gain, loss, fame, disgrace, praise, blame, pleasure and pain. We can praise this kind of person because he or she will not be harmed but will remain unmoved by our praises. In fact, the more we praise such an individual, the more modest he or she becomes and the more he or she will strive to improve. We should give special praise to people such as this. Therefore, we should be extra careful with our praise, not inadvertently allowing our good intentions to lead to bad deeds. So from this passage, we can now see how much care Emperor Shun used in taking an entire year trying to help the young fishermen to 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 set standards for others to follow. These are the qualities of a great person, who thinks of the public welfare as more important than his or her own.

When we set standards for others to follow, we should set an example with our own conduct for others to follow. What are the qualities of a great person that Mr. Liao-Fan was talking about? It is someone who disregards his own personal welfare and thinks only in terms of benefiting all others as opposed to the selfish person who only thinks of benefiting himself or herself. For example, Bodhisattvas would be considered "great beings". In the [Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings](#), the term "Great Beings" refers to the Bodhisattvas and the eight kinds of realizations. It discusses the ways and the practice of the Bodhisattva.

What is meant by "revering love and respect for others"? Sometimes it is hard to tell from appearance whether one is an honorable person or a fraud, since frauds can pretend to be honorable. The difference lies in their intentions. The difference between them is like black and white. So, Mencius said that the difference between truly honorable people and ordinary people lies in their intentions.

Confucianism talks about "honorable persons, sages and virtuous people". In Buddhism, there are "numerous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas". What differentiates these two from ordinary people lies in "intention". It is extremely difficult to distinguish just by appearance alone and this is why we have often misunderstood virtuous people. For example, in the past, there were three monks from Tiantai Moun-

tain in Zhejiang Province, named Han-Shan, Shi-De and Feng-Gan. It was recorded in the Diary of Tiantai Mountain, that at the time, everyone viewed the three monks as suffering from mental disorder because their behavior was so unusual. Nobody would associate with them. This shows how appearances can be so deceiving.

Feng-Gan's job was to pound the rice in order to remove the husks, which was what the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Hui-Neng did while he was in Huangmei. Feng-Gan was actually the transformation body of Buddha Amitabha, who husked the rice to feed everyone. Han-Shan and Shi-De were the transformation bodies of Great Wisdom Bodhisattva and Universal Worthy Bodhisattva. They worked in the kitchen too, lighting fires for the stoves and performing other miscellaneous chores. They went shoeless, dressed raggedly and acted absurdly. No one felt that they were worthy of anything. It is true that judging by appearances alone, it is difficult for ordinary people to differentiate those who are truly virtuous people. Feng-Gan was the one who revealed to us 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 travelling to where they were to report to office. Mr. Lu became very anxious after several doctors failed to help his mother. When Feng-Gan was passing through the neighborhood, he sought out Mr. Lu and said, "Someone is ill in your household and I am able to cure that person". Naturally, the Magistrate felt immense gratitude toward Feng-Gan afterward. He saw that Feng-Gan was a monk and therefore inquired as to which way place he belonged. Feng-Gan replied, "I live in Tiantai Mountain". Mr. Lu asked, "Are there any sages or virtuous people residing in your way place?" Feng-Gan answered, "Great Wisdom Bodhisattva and Universal Worthy Bodhisattva live there". Mr. Lu asked, "How will I be able to recognize and learn from them?" Feng-Gan replied, "One is named is Han-Shan and the other is Shi-De".

A few days after Magistrate Lu reported to office, he went to Tiantai Mountain to pay his respects to the two great Bodhisattvas. When he got there, he found them in the kitchen doing chores and acting strangely. He immediately knelt on the ground and paid his respects to them. The two monks seemingly ignored him, then quickly turned on their heels and ran. Magistrate Lu ordered his attendants to follow and see where they were going. Then, he saw that the two monks ran to the base of a mountain and the mountain opened up. The two monks backed inside and the mountain closed up again. But, before they vanished inside the mountain, they were heard saying, "Buddha Amitabha talks too much". Magistrate Lu then realized that Feng-Gan was actually Buddha Amitabha!

The two Bodhisattvas complained that Buddha Amitabha should not have meddled and revealed their true identities. So, these three persons were actually great sages. At that time, the way place held a very important Buddhist ritual twice a month to recite the precepts. Han-Shan and Shi-De often gathered outside the way place, made fun of the other monks and were therefore disliked by everyone. When the other monks realized that Han-Shan and Shi-De were actually the transformation bodies of Bodhisattvas, they then felt ashamed that everyday 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 are close to us while others are strangers, some are in high positions while others are in low, some are smart while others are not and some are virtuous while others are corrupt. Nevertheless, they are humans like us and are thus, all one entity. I should neither hate nor disrespect anyone.

The first of the Ten Great Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva is to pay respect to all Buddhas and others. From the aspect of principle, despite the apparent differences among people, all people are one to those who understand. However, from the aspect of phenomenon, of appearance, we know that differences exist. But regardless of this, we are all part of humanity, are all part of one another. Once we realize this, we will truly view others as we view ourselves. The Buddha once said, "Throughout all time and space, there is only the one self". Thus, the kindness and compassion of the Buddha is "affinity without condition in great kindness and the embodiment of all in great compassion". This is wisdom, which we would do well to understand, respect and pass on. We should have loving-kindness and respect for all beings, animate and inanimate.

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 China, people who were well educated knew how to "respect the sages and virtuous people". This is different from our society 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 the past when this respect was sincere and sages and virtuous people were role models for society. Upon seeing a sage, others would immediately try to correct their behavior in emulation. Today, people often go through the formalities of showing respect to the Bodhisattvas, heavenly beings and spirits, in the hope of gaining something in return. All too often, this is the sole intention.

Mr. Liao-Fan said that understanding and agreeing with other people 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 among us would not prefer to live in a peaceful and prosperous society? The Chinese often wish for the "five good fortunes" of (1) wealth and prestige, (2) longevity, (3) merits and virtues, (4) happiness and no adversities and (5) a good death. These are the wishes of virtually everyone in this world. But what most people wish for are the good effects, the good results. What they do not know or have forgotten is that good effects come only after we have accomplished good causes. If we do not practice good causes and do not perform good deeds, then there is no way that we can expect good results. The sages and virtuous people also want everybody to attain good fortune. The difference is that these virtuous people possess great wisdom whereas we ordinary people are confused

and ignorant. This is why 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 starts from our learning to have loving-kindness and respect for all beings, objects and matters. This loving-kindness and respect must be sincere. This is why the first of the Ten Great Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva is "To respect all Buddhas and others". The first phrase of Book of Rites is "Qu Rite said to respect all". This teaches us how to have sincere respect for everything.

Why? Because all the virtuous people and sages want the people on this earth to obtain what they wish for. Therefore, if we can have loving-kindness and respect for people and help them to achieve in their endeavors, we are doing the job of 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 wish for. For those who are outstanding and intelligent, the virtuous people will try to guide those who wish to be a Buddha or a Bodhisattva. For those who do not wish this, 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 threw away raw jade, it would be like any other worthless stone. But if we carve and polish it, it will be transformed into a valuable object.

We need to help others to achieve in their endeavors. Helping others is one of the virtues of our true-nature and enhances our merits. We use jade as an example, because jade is considered one of the most delicate and beautiful stones. If we carve and polish it, it can become a valuable jade object. In ancient times, these 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". Another style was called "Guei" and "Zhang". Their use was similar to a memo pad and served as a reminder of something important to be done. Usually, the size of a "Guei" was larger than a "Zhang". Examples of several of these jade objects from different dynasties can be found in the National Palace Museum (in Taiwan). They have extremely high historical value.

So, when we see people whom we feel have good potential for doing a good deed or working towards a proper goal, we can guide, support, praise and encourage them, helping them to succeed in their endeavors.

This is talking about nurturing talented people. When we see others whose hearts are kind and who have a loyal and generous nature, or whose goals in life are good and ethical, then we should help them in every way possible to accomplish their endeavors. We need to encourage them to follow the

right path and nurture them until they achieve their objectives.

The Flower Adornment Sutra is a very good example of this. We see Sudhana, who as a student has fifty-three benevolent teachers or spiritual guides. Although he is very young, he is 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 guides, he bowed and paid his respects. The spiritual guide would then ask him, "Where did you come from, why did you come here and what is it that you seek?" All fifty-three spiritual guides asked Sudhana the same questions and all received the same answer. Therefore, this phrase makes a very deep impression because it was said repeatedly. The first part of the answer is "I have vowed to attain perfect complete 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 here to ask for your guidance." Making a vow is what we mean by setting a goal. 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, then we can encourage and assist them in achieving their endeavors. If they suffer hardships, then we should alleviate their difficulties so 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 stand on their feet and become a 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 create confusion and possibly even discourage them from pursuing their studies. If this were to happen it would truly be tragic. This is when we have to share in their worries. When others slander them, we need to help them to clear their name, to do all we can so that they can stand on their own and become a worthwhile member of society. If we have achieved this then we have accomplished great knowledge, wisdom, virtue and merit. They will then be able to contribute to society partly because we have helped them reach their goal. However many virtues and merits they may accumulate, the person who helped them to achieve will receive an equal amount.

In ancient China, if someone were to recommend a person of great worth to the emperor, that person 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 talents could be cultivated.

Why would others want to cause trouble for us if we were good? As an old saying goes, "good things do not come easily". There are many obstacles. If someone wants to commit bad deeds, then Mara would be very happy because he loves bad deeds. Not only would he not obstruct the person

from wrongdoing, but he would do all he could to help. On the other hand, if we want to perform good deeds that would be going against his wishes so he will do everything he can to deter us.

Mara is one factor, which causes trouble. Another is our own karmic creditors from past lifetimes. When they see that we are practicing well and might transcend the Six Realms of Reincarnation, they want to stop us. This is because we have not yet paid what we owe them from the past. This debt may be money. It may be a life. These creditors will not stand idly by and watch us succeed in our practice but will create obstacles to prevent us from achieving our goal. Thus, the path to awakening is filled with obstacles.

Through innumerable eons, we have created infinite karmic obstacles. How then are we to rid ourselves of them? We should dedicate our daily studies to our karmic creditors, to share our merits with them. By passing these merits on to them, we will have achieved 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. When we make this vow, we need to commit to it by following the principles in the Diamond Sutra. We need to sincerely and honestly abide by them.

Most people dislike those who are different from them.

Most of us prefer those who are similar to ourselves. For instance, those who practice Buddhism feel closer to others who are also practicing and more distant from those who are not. This difference is especially noticeable within the family. If our parents and siblings do not practice Buddhism and we are the only vegetarians, then there will be conflicts. This is actually our own fault. It would be helpful to determine what we are doing wrong. Why would other family members disapprove of our practicing Buddhism?

Sometimes, when fellow Buddhists come to visit us it seems that they are very close to us, even closer than our own family. We might appear happier with them than with our own mother. When she sees this, she is bound to feel unhappy. Therefore, we should love and care for our family members in the same way that we do other practitioners. In this way, our family will not oppose our practicing Buddhism. There are many cases where family conflict has arisen when only one member practiced. Often, that one member did not reflect upon his or her behavior and was blinded to the causes of the discontent. Only when we are watching from the side can we see the problem. If we would only spend some time to reflect, we will easily understand the situation.

When other practitioners come to visit us, we should show even more respect to our parents so that our family will feel better. In this way, they 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". We need to set a good example for them. Then, when 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. Therefore, those who

are good often have difficulty standing on their own.

Good people comprise one group and bad ones another. The latter has a lot of people and more power. Those who are good are in the minority and have little power. Because of this, they often have problems standing on their own. It becomes more difficult for them to perform good deeds because the bad group will use their power to create obstacles for them. Ever since Buddha Shakyamuni gave us the teachings, the above situation has occurred for each succeeding generation of Buddhists.

After Master Hui-Neng attained enlightenment, he went into hiding with a group of hunters for fifteen years. Why? Because of the jealousy and obstacles, he encountered. Good people often do not have the opportunity to learn. Because those who are bad outnumber those who are good, the former will often be able to obstruct the latter. This is why sometimes when good people are trying to stand on their own, they may not get the opportunity to practice goodness as much as they wish to. Thus, many can only keep themselves unpolluted and pure but lack the strength to help others. If we want them to be able to "do good for the whole world" then those of us who possess wisdom, good fortune and virtue must do our best to help them.

Good people have good abilities and virtues, which allow them to achieve fame. They usually do not care much for 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 good and need to stand on their own. They can provide what the good people need to practice goodness. The merits of these virtuous people and elders who do this will be great.

Those who have good abilities and virtues that exceed others usually achieve fame. Locally, everyone would know them. In other words, they are highly "renowned". These people are skilled and talented; however, their life styles are easy going and they do not pay much attention to details. Unfortunately, this often offends others. We know that when we practice Buddhism, we must be extremely respectful towards the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. However, we need not be overly concerned with trivialities. If we pay too much attention to them, it 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 the course of our practice, we need to grasp the main principle, "The pure heart will give rise to the pure land". Night and day, always remember to chant "Amitufo". Everything else is insignificant.

If we are older and less agile, then it is not necessary to kneel when reciting a sutra. We need to not attach to formalities. To seek a bond between Buddha Amitabha and ourselves is of the utmost importance. We can continue our practice even when we are lying down. If we are weak or aged, we can use the most comfortable position while chanting "Amitufo" or reciting the sutra; kneeling, sitting or walking. If we feel weak, we can lie down and listen to the sutra on a tape. Lying in bed listening to the sutra or chanting "Amitufo" can achieve the same merits as when we are sitting or walking. But

we must remember not to chant aloud while lying down because it is harmful to our health.

Mahayana Buddhism is liberal, without many restrictions. So what are all the rituals and rules for? They are used for others. It is "behavioral education" to initiate respect from others and to motivate their wish to practice Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism, on the other hand, emphasizes the formalities. Mahayana focuses on the "mind", not on matters.

Exceptionally talented people are not bothered by minor details and consequently, can easily offend others and cause gossip. Therefore, "attempts to do good deeds often fail" because good people often suffer from accusations and slander. When this happens, those who are trying to do good must depend on virtuous people or an elder with wisdom and virtue to help them overcome their difficulties so that they can truly contribute to society. The virtuous people and the elders will achieve the greatest merit 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 were able to encourage, nurture and help a Dharma master so that he or she could 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 Buddhist way place, the merits would be greater. Actually, such merit is limited. In fact, sometimes we may even have committed a bad deed although we had good intentions. Therefore, only in nurturing talented people have we truly achieved great merit. Only with these masters can we guarantee the propagation of the teachings so that Buddhism will never be forgotten 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 and non-discriminatory without selfish thoughts. These are the necessary qualities for someone to teach Buddhism. If we do encounter such a true Buddhist successor, we should do our utmost to help him or her. Once this person is accomplished and is able to contribute greatly to Buddhism, the merits we have achieved in helping will be equal to his or her own.

In our present society, why are there so few people teaching Buddhism? The opportunity to do so may have not yet presented itself. Or the individuals may not be sincerely dedicated to propagating the teachings to help all beings. The vow, the quality of some people is dubious and 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, then we should not listen so that they can see the reactions of others and learn to reflect and correct their faults. Once they have corrected these faults, we can then listen to them 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 must provide a suitable learning environment for them. The value of this merit is boundless because it can truly extend the life of Buddhism.

What is meant by "persuading others to practice kindness"? Since we are all humans, we all have a conscience, but chasing after wealth and fame has kept us constantly busy and we have forgotten our conscience. Although we want to do good, the necessity of surviving in a world filled with hardships can result in our forgetting to do good. 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 all people would prefer to be good. Even the worst person will say that he or she would like to practice goodness. From this, we can conclude that a good heart and good conduct is the true nature of humankind. Buddhism teaches us that this is a virtue of our true nature. So, if this is the case, why do people resort to bad conduct? Two reasons. First, people commit bad deeds because of their afflictions and bad habits. Second, because of bad conditions. But, despite the fact that some people commit bad deeds, there are very few who are not bothered by their conscience. Unfortunately, they do not have any good friends to remind and help them to reform. Consequently, they become more and more deluded, more and more confused. We see many cases where this has happened.

Mr. Liao Fan expressed it very well in the above example, "Although we want to do good, the necessity of surviving in the 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. Due to this, the environment in which we live has a strong influence on our behavior. This could become unfortunate in our immoral society. For instance, today, many people like to gamble. This is obviously not a good sign. Many young people become obsessed with it, which has proven very harmful to themselves, their families and society. This is very dangerous. However, this is the present trend and it seems to be slowly affecting the entire world.

With the aid of the media, negative effects become magnified and can reach into the farthest corners of the world thus causing even more damage. Therefore, when we see our friends and relatives, we should do our best to try to help them see reason and lead them away from bad influences. We can encourage them to start by reading [Liao Fan's Four Lessons](#) because everything in this book is true.

Sometimes, it is quite easy to become wealthy through the stock market. But, the wealth we gained from trading stocks was still destined to be ours. If our destiny does not include wealth, then the money will soon be gone. If we carry the cash 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? When we think about it, we will realize that wealth only increases our greed, anger and arrogance. It has absolutely no redeeming factors whatsoever.

There is an old saying, which sums it up well. As long as we are in this world, all that we need are

“three meals a day and a six-foot bed at night”. Therefore, would it not be better if we were to use our good fortune a little at a time rather than exhaust them all at once? Thus, we should help family members and friends to realize, through logic and reason, that they are on the wrong path and that they should not gamble with their life. This is the proper path, one that can last for a long time.

Buddhism is both flexible and inventive. We must assist those who wish to learn by helping them to feel happy. Then they will be more accepting of what we say. In this way, we will be able to help others understand how they would do well to change. We can then lead them away from confusion, away from a seemingly endless bad dream. When they suddenly wake up, it will be similar to awakening in Buddhism. Once they awaken, all they need to do is practice. This is like getting rid of the roots of all afflictions. All that remains is a sense of serenity and freedom. This is wisdom. We must help others with what is most beneficial to them.

A scholar named Yu Han 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.” We can use either speaking or writing, whichever is appropriate for the circumstances.

This is showing the flexible and expedient method of teaching. When we are analyzing matters trying to help others to awaken, we are doing it “by word of mouth”, which only benefits others in the current lifetime. If we are trying to guide many others as well as future generations, then the best tool to use would be “written words”. By recording our kind words and deeds, we can pass these down for future generations to use. This will ensure that these good words will be preserved.

An example of this is Liao-Fan's Four Lessons. Mr. Liao-Fan's objective in writing the book was to alert his son of the dangers in committing bad deeds. He did not intend for these four lessons to be so widely read for so many generations. So, he has unintentionally performed a great deed of goodness. Many people have followed his teachings and have succeeded in changing their destinies from those of suffering to happiness. They all have benefited from Mr. Liao-Fan's written words. This thin volume, is a prime example of teaching people to be good. He used his own experiences as an example for his descendants, hoping that they would understand and learn to practice all that is good. This is the most effective, outstanding, profound and all-encompassing goodness.

Actually, writing is something each of us is capable of doing. We may think that we lack a literary background and are thus incapable of writing. But this is not so. If we can just record one or two occurrences that we hear or see each day, the outcome would be quite similar to the lessons in this book. From this, we can conclude that “persuading people by speech and persuading generations by written works” is not difficult, as long as we have the heart of sincerity and the persistence to pursue this act of benevolence.

We can persuade others by word of mouth as well as by writing books to promote

virtue. Compared with teaching others through behavior this is much more direct and obvious. Sometime, 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.

The previous category is referred to as "Associate Embracing" in Buddhism. This means that we should interact with those whom we are trying to help and use our own actions as examples to influence others, similar to what Emperor Shun did with the fishermen.

In Buddhism, four guidelines are used to guide and influence all sentient beings. This is called "Fourfold Embracing Methods". The first method is "giving", which is a way to establish a good affinity and amicability with others. Once we have earned the confidence of others, then whatever we say or do will create a positive effect on them and they will be willing to follow our suggestions. The second method is "kind words". This does not mean we use glib talk or honeyed words to sway others. Kind words means to act with flexibility with others and help them to be comfortable. As explained by Master Jung-Feng earlier in this lesson, when our motivation comes from loving-kindness for others, then even if we scold or hit 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 when it is overdone then our words will have a negative effect. Therefore, when we intend to speak to others of their faults, we should make sure that no one else is present so that they will not feel embarrassed or antagonized. This is an example of being flexible and making the person feel comfortable. The third method is "beneficial and advantageous conduct". This means that our words and actions must be truly beneficial to others. The fourth and last method is "cooperating with and adapting oneself to others". This is to participate in the same activities as others and to be a good example to guide them.

When the Buddhas guide all sentient beings, they do not exceed these four methods. When we are encouraging others to be good, we are using "verbal education". When we are joining others to teach them kindness, we are using "behavioral education". Herein lies the difference.

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 and we tried to) we would do well to reflect and generate the wisdom not to make the same mistake again.

When we are able to advise someone but we do not then we have lost an opportunity to teach. If a person has potential to do good but we do not lead him or her to the right path, then we have "lost a person". On the other hand, if someone is set in his or her ways and will not listen to us but we persist in trying to change him or her to no avail, 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". Master Hui-Neng explained it very well 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 is meant by "helping those in desperate need"? During one's lifetime, people will often suffer from serious difficulties. If we meet someone like this, we can help that person as if we were the one who was suffering. We immediately come to this person's aid. If a person has been wrongly accused or convicted, we should plead on their behalf as well as provide aid in any way we can. Scholar Cui Zi 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 some misfortune during their lifetime. This is especially true during a war when we are forced to suffer overwhelming losses such as that of our home. In such situations, as we drift from one place to another we will have no idea what is going to happen next. Therefore, since the age of ten, all the children in my family were taught how to be independent, how to manage on our own if and when we were separated from our family. Also, we were taught how to survive alone in the woods.

Presently, we are living in a relatively peaceful world in which parents have many opportunities to spoil their children. However, will our world always be this peaceful? If we look honestly at the way we are currently headed, the future looks bleak. It would be most unfortunate if the aforementioned hardships and sufferings were to occur during our mid-life 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 ourselves, then we must alert others and encourage them to join in the effort. Scholar Cui Zi said that 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 are able to provide assistance in an emergency, poverty is a different issue. The best way to assist those who are in poverty is to help them learn ways to earn a living, to learn how to support themselves and to become independent. This is the greatest act of kindness.

What is meant by "developing public projects for the benefit of others"? Small construction works are needed for villages and big construction jobs are needed for cities. As long as it is beneficial to the people, it 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 for the benefit of all.

We should do anything that benefits an area. Only when everyone has good fortune, do we have it as well. Everyone would do well to have this perception. But, if we alone enjoy good fortune while others are suffering, then adversity is not far behind. A Chinese proverb says, "One family's wealth can cause resentment from thousands of families". If we share our good fortune with others, this 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, this is a sign of exhibiting great wisdom, great good fortune and virtue. Today, when we speak of "developing public projects for the benefit of others", we can do so by advocating and encouraging others to practice the teachings in [Liao Fan's Four Lessons](#) and of Mahayana 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 encourage 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 and do not become frightened when the job becomes difficult. Do not allow the jealousy and hatred of others to weaken our resolve to do good deeds.

In China, agriculture was the foundation of the country. Thus, 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 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 good deed. A good deed completed despite obstacles is considered full and complete. There may be opposition at the beginning of a project but once it is finished and everyone has benefited from it, they will know its value and appreciate our efforts. Therefore, our vision must be all-encompassing and far-reaching. We need to possess wisdom, loving-kindness and perseverance in order to accomplish good, the standard for which is to benefit all sentient beings. To be selfish, to benefit only ourselves is not goodness. It was this standard that Master Jung-Feng spoke of.

What is meant by "accumulating merits and good fortune by giving wealth"? 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 of practice. For the sake of simplicity, Buddhism has organized these infinite methods into six major categories, the Six Paramitas. Mahayana Buddhism often teaches the "Six Paramitas of infinite practices". If we were to summarize the categories, then all six become one, become "giving". There are three major categories of giving; that of wealth, teaching and fearlessness. Actually, all of the Six Paramitas are giving. For instance, the Paramitas of abiding by the precepts or self-discipline and patience can both be considered the giving of fearlessness. The Paramitas of diligence, deep concentration and wisdom can be consid-

ered the giving of teaching. Thus, these three types of giving have encompassed all the methods of practice in Buddhism. No matter how many other ways there are, they would all be within the method of giving. In the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha taught us not to be attached in the 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 health and longevity. 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. The last is a good death because it can in turn lead to a good birth. 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 it would be enough to practice according to the Infinite Life Sutra. If we just lead our lives according to the guidelines of the Infinite Life Sutra and Liao-Fan's Four Lessons, we will attain the great liberation in both this world and beyond. Thus, here we are encouraged to practice good fortune through giving.

What is giving? Giving is to let 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, one 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, is 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 in the physical aspect. Think about it, how could we really detach ourselves from our physical body? Even if we were able to discard our body, it still would 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 we do not have any attachments or discriminations within and are not tempted by external phenomena. The Diamond Sutra tells us, "Do not attach to form. Remain unmoved within". Do not attach means to let go of the six senses. Once we have severed our attachments within and on the outside, we will no longer be deluded but will have uncovered our self-nature and become Buddhas.

In our innumerable past lifetimes, we have been deluded and thus remained mired in the cycle of birth and death. However, from now on, we will not create any more life and death karma. Therefore, those who are wise would want to transcend our Saha world, to be mindful of Buddha Amitabha and to be born into the Pure Land. We will maintain clarity of mind and await Buddha Amitabha 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 cannot transcend a spirit into the Pure Land, just reduce the suffering.

For instance, the Venerable Master Bao Zhi was the manifestation of Great Compassion Bodhisattva. He transcended the spirit of Emperor Liang-Wu's favorite wife. But, he could only transcend her spirit to the second level of the Desire Heaven. He could not help her to advance any further. He could not help her to be born into the Pure Land. Although we wish that we could transcend others to Pure Land, it cannot be done. It is only our wish. Being born into the Pure Land depends on our own belief, vow and practice. So, we must do our best to learn the ways of practice while we are still healthy and strong; we must chant "Amitufo" and vow to be born into the Pure Land.

To let go is to do so from the mind. It is to detach ourselves from the Five Desires and the Six Dusts of the mind. We should learn neither to be attached to our bodies nor to our minds. As ordinary people, we are filled with discriminatory thoughts and attachments and find it extremely difficult to detach ourselves from them. We always have wandering thoughts. The Pure Land way of practice is to change our thinking, so that we are mindful only of Buddha Amitabha. Once we change our thinking to only those thoughts of Buddha Amitabha, we will finally be free. Truly cultivating the Bodhisattva way is concentrating only on Buddha Amitabha and chanting only "Amitufo".

There is nothing we cannot give away. When we find ourselves unable to do so, we can start 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 practice giving without hesitation, we can cure stinginess and at the same time, help others in dire need. However, for many this is very difficult to do, especially at first. But, gradually it will become more natural the more we give. This is the best way to cure selfishness and to rid ourselves of attachments and stinginess.

The Diamond Sutra tells us that "Everything with form is illusion, is 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 start by giving away our wealth so that we are not tempted or affected by it.

This is also the method that the Buddha taught us to escape the cycle of birth and death, to transcend the Six Realms 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. We 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. Then, it will become quite natural. Everyone will experience such a stage in their learning and cultivation. Eventually, as we give, we will experience a lessening in worries and stinginess. When we no longer attach to wealth, to our enjoyments, our body, heart and mind will feel great ease and liberation. This is when our self-nature will start to be uncovered and we will gain complete contentment and freedom. The Law of Cause and Effect never changes, either in this world or beyond. Therefore, the more wealth we give, the more wealth we will gain. We do not even know where this

wealth will come from. 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. Illness and short lives are the result of not giving fearlessness.

The five good fortunes are all gained through giving. Giving is the cause; therefore, if we wish to have the good result, then 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 is meant by "protecting the proper teachings"? For millions of years, proper teachings have been a standard of truth and provided spiritual guidance for all living beings. Without proper teachings, how can we participate in and support the nurturing of heaven and earth? Without proper teachings, how can we help people to attain achievement. How can beings in all the realms succeed in their endeavors without a standard to live by? How can we be free of the Five Desires, the Six Dusts, our delusions, our afflictions? Without proper teachings, how can we set a standard in the world and help people transcend the Six Realms.

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

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

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

Therefore, Buddhists would do well to read the Four Books. Truthfully speaking, we can only give rise to the heart, which loves the country and its people, if we have completely read the Four Books and understand China's historical culture. Today's Chinese people have forgotten the country and its people due to the fault of poor planning in the educational system. Nowadays, education places great im-

portance on technology, forgetting the importance of the humanities. No matter how advanced our technology, if we have not studied the humanities, then as the ancient people questioned, "What is the difference between humans and animals?" Humans are animals. If we do not know morality, benevolence and honor, then there will be little difference between humans and animals. Human beings are the cruelest of all the animals, the most ruthless. Therefore, in order to help all beings, human beings must be helped first. If we can turn back from all that is bad to do all that is good, then all beings will be fortunate and happy. Only then, can each sentient being achieve what they want. This is the goal of the sages and the virtuous people in educating and reforming sentient beings.

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

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

Similarly, the Four Books are comprised of the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius and are the essence of the Chinese culture. Confucius and Mencius lived twenty-five hundred years ago. Their guidance benefited individuals, families, society, the entire country. As the Four Books are introduced abroad, people in other countries nod their heads in agreement after learning what they teach. So the

teachings are timeless and beyond the boundaries of space. This is why the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, Lao-Zi and Zhuang-Zi are said to surpass the dimensions of time and space, and are genuine sutras and teachings on how to properly manage the country. Of course, there have always been teachings on the proper running of countries, yet if we compare carefully, the best have been those of Confucius, Mencius, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

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

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

Therefore, whenever we see way places, memorials of past virtuous people or sages, pictures of sages, or Buddhist texts, we should be respectful. If they are in need of repair, we should repair and put them back in order.

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

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

In the early 1900s, the Chinese government abolished Chinese classic education. At the time, many

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

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

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

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

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

Establishing a way place does not mean spending a large amount of money on a building that will result in endless squabbles and conflicts once it is completed. When this happens, the effort and expenditure will become meaningless. We need to understand that once we start learning and practicing Buddhism and attain wisdom, we will realize that wealth is like a puff of smoke, a fleeting cloud. No matter how much wealth we have, it is only something to see. Think about it, is the money we keep in

our home really ours? If it were truly ours, then we would keep it instead of giving it to another. And yet, when we receive money, we pass it on to another. It was ours for a very short time. Thus, we should not place much importance on wealth.

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

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

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

Hopefully, fellow Buddhists will realize that sincerity and respect are the gateway to and the foundation for practicing Buddhism. "Sincerity and respect" are cultivated within our family. At home, we are filial to our parents and respectful of our elders and siblings. Accomplishing this will enable us to be in accordance with superiors, to be diligent and dependable in meeting our responsibilities as individuals, members of society and citizens of our country. As Mr. Liao-Fan said, "habits become one's nature".

Once a good habit is formed, then "we will be gentle and this will touch the heart of heaven". When we are peaceful, kind and agreeable, we will be able to move the beings and spirits of heaven and earth.

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

We need to study Chinese history and view the chaos in the world from a historian's viewpoint to realize the source of good occurrences as well as of disasters. This will enable us to detect the Law of Cause and Effect beforehand. What are people thinking today? What are they doing? Knowing this, we will know the future. The results that we are currently seeing come from causes created decades ago. The results of the causes that we are currently creating over and over will be seen in two to three decades. Previously, the seeds that were planted might have taken seven or eight decades to mature. But today, the increase of these bad causes is resulting in a shortening of the maturity period and in greater magnitude. This is horrifying! Good causes will always result in good effects and bad causes will always result in bad effects. The principle of cause and effects is correct, in unchangeable.

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

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

If someone cultivates the virtues of loyalty and filial piety then they also will have descendants to last for a long time. But today, parents and children are more like friends and this is destroying the moral principles. Confucianism and Taoism teach us that moral principles and ethics are the nature of

virtue. Closer examination of Buddhism shows that it is the revelation of the virtuous nature. Sages and virtuous people do not experience selfishness so they have revealed their virtuous nature. Confucianism is the revelation of our virtuous self-nature. When this self-nature is revealed, it will be the same as that of Confucius. It is the same as light. When his lights up, mine does as well. One light intermingling with another light to become one, is the revelation of the self-nature. This is the true greatness, is truly inconceivable, is the perfect and virtuous self-nature.

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

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

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

Not only human beings possess the heart of compassion, animals also do. This is truly the virtuous nature, the original nature. The original nature of animals is no different from that of humans, but because they are even more deeply deluded than we are, they have become animals. All the beings in the Ten Dharma Realms share the same true nature. That is why the Buddha, in the Mahayana sutras, spoke of "Unconditional great compassion and the kindness of realizing that we are one entity". The heart of compassion is the heart of great caring and loving-kindness. They both are revealed from our true nature. This is what "a person in search of the virtues of compassion and loving-kindness" is seeking. It is also what "A person wanting to accumulate virtues" is seeking. It is wanting to broaden the heart to love and care for others, to truly be able to love all beings and objects. We do our best to help

them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mencius taught that it was good to not be near the kitchen so one would not see or hear the killing. Then the individual would have been more at ease when eating. But actually, the mind of compassion could still not be at rest. So, it is best to not eat the flesh of living beings, especially today when we so often hear of meat that contains toxins causing people to contract strange diseases. Where do these

diseases come from? From the consumption of meat. Ancient people said, "Illness enter from the mouth". My late teacher, Mr. Bing-Nan Lee, often sighed as he said that modern people were taking poison at all three meals. How could we not get sick!

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

This speaks of the three pure meats with an additional rule that monks and nuns may not raise animals. Raising animals and then killing them to eat is truly unacceptable. Practitioners who are unable to become vegetarian can practice the "three pure meats", and the "four circumstantial meats" rules, to cultivate great compassionate hearts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FOURTH LESSON:
THE BENEFITS OF THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

Arrogance Invites Adversity while Humility Gains Benefits

Five True Accounts of Virtuous People

Humility enables us to preserve our good rewards. Without it, we will lose what we are trying to accumulate and all of our efforts will have been in vain. We need to rely on humility for it enables us to preserve our goodness. Therefore, the Diamond Sutra explains that we should use endurance to preserve what we have accumulated from our practice of giving which is accomplishing good deeds. If we were unable to endure, then no matter how much we cultivated and accumulated, all would be lost. According to the Confucian teachings, the way to retain what we have cultivated is to practice the virtue of humility.

In I Ching, the Book of Changes, the combination for Humility stated that, "The law of heaven takes from the arrogant and benefits the humble. The law of earth will bring flowing water from areas that are full to those that are lower as it passes by. The law of spirits brings harm to those who are arrogant and good fortune to those who are modest. Even the laws of people despise the arrogant and like the modest."

A good example to help us understand the "Law of Heaven" is the waxing and waning of the moon. After the moon is full, it begins to wane. Before the moon becomes full again, it gets brighter and brighter each day. This gradual increase is the virtue of humility. From this, we can understand natural law and the will of heaven.

The "law of earth" is a natural law. Water will move from areas that are filled to lower areas. When some spirits see that we have become successful, they become jealous and try to cause problems for us. When we are destitute, they feel sorry for us and try to help. People are the same way. The "laws of people" prefer those who are modest to those who are arrogant.

During the Qing Dynasty, Guo-Fan Zeng held the highest post as governor-general of four provinces in China. He was almost like a small emperor. Being highly educated, he knew that he had already advanced very high and that this was not good. So, he named his study "Room seeking Imperfection", to make known his aspiration. 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. Thus, he was able to maintain what he accumulated. Even to the present time, his descendents are quite prosperous. Due to his accumulated merits, virtuous conduct and the following of his teaching by his descendents, the prosperity of the family was prolonged.

In I Ching, the Book of Changes, only the Humility combination contains all good and no bad outcomes.

In I Ching, the Book of Changes there are sixty-four combinations. Every one of the explanations or predictions has the possibility of good fortune and misfortune, invariably mixed. Only the Humility combination, also called "high mountain under the ground", representing humility, has no possibility for misfortune. Thus, the higher we are, the more modest we need to be.

The Book of History explains that, "Arrogance invites disaster and 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 noticed that before they succeeded in passing the examinations and became prosperous, their faces radiated such humility that I felt I could almost hold it in my hands.

Based on the observation of his own life, Mr. Liao-Fan found what was written in I Ching and the Book of History to be logical and applicable to our daily lives. At every imperial examination that he had attended with companions, the students who passed were the most modest. From this, he could accurately predict who would pass the current examination.

Several years ago, ten of us from the village went to take the preliminary imperial examination. Jing-Yu Ding was the youngest and extremely humble. I told one of the applicants, Jin-Po Fei, that this young man would definitely pass the examination this year. Jin-Po Fei asked how I could tell. I told him that, "Only those who are humble receive good fortune. My friend, look at the ten of us. Is there anyone as honest, generous and never tries to come in first, as Jing-Yu? Do you see anyone who is as respectful, tolerant, careful and humble like Jing-Yu? Do you see anyone like Jing-Yu, who when insulted does not talk back or who when slandered does not argue? Any person who can achieve such a level of humility will receive protection from the earth, spirits and heavens. There is no reason he will not become prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Jing-Yu Ding passed.

One year Mr. Liao-Fan went with several other people to take the examination. Based on his observations of everyone, he commented to one of his companions that Jing-Yu Ding, who was the most modest, would pass despite his young age. His companion Jin-Po Fei asked how he could tell. Mr. Liao-Fan said that, "only those who are modest receive good fortune". He asked Mr. Fei to consider the ten travelling companions. Was anyone else as loyal, honest, kind, sincere and agreeable as Jing-Yu? He

explained that Jing was respectful and modest, a rare person who would remain undisturbed and be tolerant when others humiliated or offended him. Those with great tolerance possess tremendous good fortune. As predicted, Mr. Ding passed the examination.

One year in Beijing, I was staying with my childhood friend, Kai-Zhi Feng. I noticed that he always carried himself in a humble way with a kind and accommodating appearance. He was not a bit arrogant, which was an immense change from his childhood ways. Kai-Zhi had a friend named Ji-Yan Li who was straightforward and honest. Ji-Yen often scolded him for his mistakes, but Kai-Zhi always accepted the accusations calmly without talking back.

This refers to the year when Mr. Liao-Fan was in the capital city with a friend named Kai-Zhi Feng. Mr. Liao-Fan had noticed that Mr. Feng had changed greatly since his younger years. After only a few years, he had become a completely different person. Mr. Li was a good friend of Mr. Feng. When he saw any faults in Mr. Feng, he would immediately criticize him right there and then. It did not matter to Mr. Feng whether or not Mr. Li was right in correcting him. He would accept all criticism from others. There is a saying "If we were at fault we need to correct it. If we were not, we need to correct mistakes if we have made any and guard against them if we have not". We do not resent others, if they wronged us for a non-existent fault. It is always good to be admonished. Actually, only those who reproach us genuinely care and look after us. We would reproach our children if they made mistakes. Why would we not admonish those of neighbors? Therefore, although it may be an unjust accusation, still it rose out of a heart of loving-kindness. Thus, we need to accept criticism willingly, to be grateful for the teaching.

I told him, "Just as there are signs that warn of coming good fortune or misfortune, we can see that prosperity or disaster comes to those who have cultivated the cause for it. Heaven will help those whose hearts are humble. You, my friend, will definitely pass the imperial examination this year!" Later, he indeed passed the examination.

Mr. Liao-Fan told him that good fortune and misfortune can be predicted. Mr. Liao-Fan had learned well. He had mastered the art of prediction from Mr. Kong. But knowing how to predict a person's fortune or misfortune is still secondary. When we end our erroneous ways and accumulate merits and virtues, we rewrite our own destiny. Thus, Mr. Feng passed the examination that year as Mr. Liao-Fan had predicted.

There was a young man from Shandong Province named Yu-Feng Zhao who passed the preliminary level of the imperial examinations before he was even twenty. Unfortunately, try as he might, he could not pass the succeeding examinations. When

his father was moved to Jiashan to accept another post in the government, Yu-Feng went with him and came to greatly admire a well-known scholar in that village named Ming-Wu Qian.

Yu-Feng brought his essays to this man. (He had no idea that) Mr. Qian would pick up his calligraphy brush and blot out his entire essay. Not only was Yu-Feng not angry, he sincerely accepted all of Mr. Qian's corrections and immediately made the recommended changes. The following year, Yu-Feng passed the imperial examination.

When Zhou's father was working as an official in Jiashan County, he greatly admired a scholar named Ming-Wu Qian. After Yu-Feng took his own work to Mr. Qian to ask for advice, Mr. Qian would make substantial changes to his essays. Usually, when this happens to us, we feel terrible or become offended. Even if our work was not that good, we would still feel that it did not deserve so many corrections. Surprisingly, not only was Yu-Feng not angry but he was extremely grateful and modest for he sincerely wanted to learn from Mr. Qian. Because of his sincerity, humility, respect 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. I met a scholar named Jian-Suo Xia who had all the qualities of a great man without a trace of arrogance. I felt the intense aura of his virtue and humility all about him. When I returned home, I told my friend, "When heaven wants a person to prosper, it will first bestow him with wisdom. Such wisdom can make a pompous person honest and well disciplined. Jian-Suo is gentle, kind and good. Surely, heaven will now make him prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Jian-Suo had passed the examination.

It was in that year, when he went to have an audience with the emperor that Mr. Liao-Fan met Mr. Jian-Suo Xia. He was stunned by how humble and respectful Mr. Xia was towards others. The important message in this account is that before heaven gives us good fortune, it first gives us wisdom. If we do not have wisdom, then regardless of our cultivation, we will be unable to accumulate good fortune. There are real and false good fortunes as well as half and full, that we do not know about. If we do not understand this, we will commit serious offenses, all the while believing that our efforts are commendable and meritorious. The most important point is to learn and understand what the 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, Mr. Xia passed the examination.

There was a scholar named Wei-Yan Zhang from Jiangyin who was very learned and wrote good essays. He was also very well known among scholars. One year while

taking his examination in Nanjing, he stayed at a temple. When the test results were posted, he found that he had not passed. He became furious and loudly accused the examiner of being blind for not recognizing his obvious talents.

At that time, a Taoist monk stood by smiling and Wei-Yan immediately directed his anger towards him. The monk said the essay must not be good. Wei-Yan got even angrier and demanded how he knew it was not good when he had not even read it. The Taoist replied that he often heard people say that the most important element in writing good essays was a peaceful heart and harmonious disposition. Wei-Yan's loud and angry accusations clearly showed that his mind was not at peace and his disposition was violent. How could he possibly write good essays? Wei-Yan acceded to the Taoist's words and in turn asked him for his advice.

The Taoist explained that he had heard that good writing only comes from a peaceful and harmonious mind. With Wei-Yan's bad temper and arrogance, how could he possibly write a good essay? Fortunately, as a scholar, Wei-Yan recognized the logic in this and realized that the Taoist was right. Thus, he had no choice but to concede. After realizing his faults, he asked the old Taoist for advice. From this, we can see that Wei-Yan was able to change once he realized that he was at fault. This is a true learning, true 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 still fail.

This is truly understanding that destiny, that the Law of Cause and Effect is perfectly accurate. Passing or not passing the examination had little to do with the quality of the paper but with destiny. It is the same with fame and prestige. Whether we become wealthy or not has nothing at all to do with how we plan and manage our lives. The question is whether our destiny holds fame and prestige. When someone is destined to be wealthy, it does not matter whether or not they are knowledgeable. They do not have to know how to obtain wealth. They just receive the amount of money they were supposed to. If we are not destined to become wealthy, then regardless of how much we plot and scheme, we will fail.

Today, people do not know or believe in destiny. They think that they can commit all kinds of offenses and still obtain good results, good fortune. Where is the logic in that! Why is it that in ancient times, most people would see the results from their offenses quickly, while today, we do not seem to suffer from them. Because too many people are committing too many offenses. There are too many for people to receive their retribution one by one. The debts will be collected at one time. Our education, abilities, good fortune, long lives, a peaceful death, everything depends on destiny. Creating destiny is the most intelligent and wisest thing we can do. Otherwise, if we fail to achieve this and seek what we were not meant to have, then all our time and efforts will have been wasted. This would truly

be truly sad!

The Taoist concluded that Wei-Yan would have to make a few changes in himself. Wei-Yan asked how he could change destiny. The Taoist further explained that although the power to form our destiny lies in the heavens, the right to change it lies within us. As long as we are willing to do good deeds and to extensively cultivate hidden virtues, we will receive what we seek.

If he wanted to change his destiny, he had to do just as Master Yun-Gu had taught him. Mr. Liao-Fan knew that he alone could change his destiny. It is a constant that can be completely extrapolated from mathematical calculations. If we break the habit of committing offenses to cultivate good deeds, to accumulate merits, then we create the variables to rewrite our destinies. But, if we do not correct our erroneous ways, then we will remain bound by our destiny throughout our lives.

Wei-Yan said that he was only a poor scholar and questioned his ability to do good deeds. The Taoist explained that practicing good deeds and accumulating hidden virtues all stem from the heart. As long as we constantly have the intent to practice goodness and accumulate virtues, our merits will be infinite and boundless! He used the example of the virtue of humility. It does not cost anything. Wei-Yan should reflect within himself instead of berating the examiner for being unfair.

Wei-Yan said that he was a poor man. What could he do to accumulate merits? The Taoist replied that money was not necessary. More often than not, those who are poor are able to accumulate great merits while the wealthy may not necessarily do so. The Taoist then used Wei-Yan's behavior as an example, saying that his behavior just then had been very arrogant. If he could only be a bit more modest then he would be virtuous and good. To do so does not cost anything. When he did not pass an examination, he should reflect and reform within. How could he blame the examination official? It is obvious that good or bad, fortune or misfortune, all lies in an instant of thought.

Wei-Yan listened to the Taoist monk and from then on suppressed his arrogant ways. Everyday, he put forth additional effort to do more good deeds and accumulate more merits.

Three years later, one night as he slept, he dreamt that he had entered a very tall house and saw a book that contained many names. He also saw many blank lines. He asked the person next to him what it was. The person replied that the book contained all the names of the applicants who passed the examination that year.

When Wei-Yan asked why there were so many blank lines, he answered that the

spirits of the underworld check on the applicants every three years. Only the names of those who practice good deeds and are without faults are listed. The blank lines used to bear the names of those who were supposed to pass the examination, but due to their recent offenses, their names had been removed. Then, the person pointed to a line and said that for the past three years Wei-Yan had been very careful and had exerted such self-control that he had not made any mistakes. Perhaps his name would fill the blank. The person hoped that he would cherish his opportunity and take care not to make any mistakes. Indeed, Wei-Yan passed the examination that year and placed one hundred and fifth.

Dear fellow 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 superstition. When Mr. Jing-Zhou Zhu 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. Life or death is destined. How we will die is recorded in the underworld. No one dies unjustly. Although we live in a high-tech environment and know much of science, we cannot escape the control of the king of the underworld when that is our destiny. This is the truth. It is time for us to be awakened. We would do well to believe what the sages have taught us.

Humility and Modesty are the Foundation for
Good Fortune

From the previous examples, we know that spirits and gods are three feet above our heads. To be able to obtain good fortune and to prevent misfortune depends on ourselves. 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 constantly have compassion for us. Only then will we have a foundation for future prosperity.

There are beings and spirits of heaven and earth who are watching us at all times. We alone are responsible for every good or bad deed we perform, for every good or bad result that happens to us. Thus, we need to be awakened in every thought. Buddha Shakyamuni taught us to be awakened instead of deluded, proper instead of deviated, pure instead of polluted. He also taught us 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 to set a good example for all sentient beings. To perfectly have a kind heart, to do kind deeds, say kind words and be a decent 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, viewpoints and behavior. Then, there truly will be no difference be-

tween Buddha Amitabha and us. This is practicing the true teaching of the Buddhas. We mold ourselves by upholding within, according with the mind, vow, understanding and conduct of Buddha Amitabha. [Liao-Fan's Four Lessons](#) can be used as an invaluable aid in our learning. The [Infinite Life Sutra](#) is our main course of study. When we are abiding by the precepts and practicing Buddha Name Chanting, we are practicing both the primary and supporting learnings. This will assure us of being born into the Pure Land, to never again regress until we become Buddhas. It is to wholeheartedly be a Buddha, not to settle for being a Sound-hearer.

In the past, Zen practitioners used the expression "go drink tea". Today, I teach "go become a Buddha". We really can become one. This is the truth. True believers will be guarded and protected.

Those who are filled with conceit are doubtless not destined to be great. Even if they do prosper, they will not be able to enjoy their good fortune for long.

Look around and see all the wealthy people who live in the east and in the west. Many of them are not genuinely happy. They really do not know how to use their wealth. I have heard of some wealthy people who live in hiding so that they will feel safer. There is no joy in possessing such wealth, there is only suffering. A human being should live a truly happy life. That is true prosperity and happiness.

Intelligent people would definitely not make themselves small and narrow-minded and refuse the good fortune they are entitled to. Besides, those who are humble always increase their opportunities to learn. In this way, the kind deeds that humble people can accomplish are boundless! For those who wish to cultivate and improve upon their virtues, they especially 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 sincerely learn that others are better than we, that they excel in what they do. Even if others cannot see how we really are, if we are only pretending and are conceited, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the beings and spirits of heaven and earth already see us with extreme clarity. Thus, modesty must come from deep within us. It must be without the slightest pretension. We are no better than other people. If others accumulate merits and I do not, then they are above me. Others who commit offenses, when I do not dare to are also above me. Only by doing so are we completely modest. This is putting into practice the teaching of humility in the fifty-three visits of Sudhana in the [Flower Adornment Sutra](#). I am the only student. All others are my benevolent teachers whom I can learn from. Sudhana learned about humility from the fifty-three visits and in the end, he perfectly attained Buddhahood.

The ancients said that, "Those who have their hearts set on attaining success and fame, will surely attain success and fame. Those who have their hearts set on attaining wealth and position, will surely attain wealth and position." A person who has great and far-reaching goals is like a tree with roots. A person who has set

down great and far reaching goals 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. Furthermore, I am the creator of my own prosperity. Look at the applicants who sought fame and wealth. In the beginning, they were not sincere, it was only a passing notion. When they wanted something, they sought it. When their interest waned, they stopped seeking it. Mencius once said (to Emperor Xuan of Qi), "If you can expand from the heart, which seeks personal happiness, to that of sharing happiness with all your subjects and make them just as happy as you are, then surely the nation is bound to prosper!" This is also true for myself in seeking to pass the imperial examination. (I and I alone can seek and thus change my destiny.)

It is said that once we set our goals, we must work towards accomplishing them. If we do so, then naturally, our humility will touch the heart of heaven and earth and we will attain what we seek. Mr. Liao-Fan used a quote from Mencius for his conclusion. When we are enjoying our happiness, why not share it with others? Enjoying happiness with others is genuine and authentic happiness. Good fortune is to extend our happiness to the lives of others. For example, many people today 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 people like, to dislike what people dislike". In so doing, we will be conforming to the heart all others. We should use wisdom to accumulate merits to create wealth to help those who have none. If we only accumulate wealth for ourselves to enjoy then trouble lies ahead. This is a momentous and worthwhile endeavor and is worthy of our sincerest efforts.