

Four Essays On Karma

by Yuen Liao Fan

Translated by Evelyn Li and K.C. Ng
Edited and Revised by Kender Tomko
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A Brief Biography Of The Author

Mr. Yuen Liao Fan, originally named Kun Yee Wong, was born in the Ming Dynasty in the Honan Province in China.

He was a well-educated, well-recognized scholar in China. He studied many fields in depth, including astrology, humanity, mathematics, physics and music, publishing many books. A well-respected top government official in China, he died at the age of 74.

I. How To Control One's Own Fate

Chapter 1. Everything Is Prearranged

I lost my father when I was a child. My mother felt that choosing medicine as a career would probably be the best thing for me since it would not only benefit others but also provide me with a good livelihood. Besides, that had been what my father had wished. So I gave up all my thoughts of taking the entrance exam for government administration.

One day, I came across a sanctimonious elder in the Mercy-Cloud Temple. His physical appearance was that of an immortal. He said to me, "Young man, your fate tells me that you will be a government official. You will be a county administrator next year. Why aren't you studying?"

I explained to him my reasons, and I humbly asked him his name and where he came from.

He said, "My last name is Hung. I am from Yuen Nan. I have received the lineage transmission of 'The Ultimate Fate Reading of Shaozi which is destined to be passed to you.'"

I thereupon invited him to stay in our home for a while.

I related what happened to my mother. Mother advised me to treat him with utmost respect. Many times, she tested his abilities of reading fate. To our amazement, his accuracy was unquestionable. Hence, I decided to follow his advice to study and to prepare to become a county administrator for the government¹.

Mr. Hung then started to read my fate.

"On your first Imperial exam, you will rank 14th; on your second exam, you will rank 72nd; and on your third exam, you will rank 9th."

The year passed by. I passed all three of these exams, as predicted by Mr. Hung. To my great surprise, I scored exactly as he had predicted.

At this point, I was totally intrigued, and I asked him if he would finish reading the rest of my life. He then proceeded with the year: that I would again pass my exam, and what my score would be. He continued, telling me when I would leave my job and move on to another province. He predicted that I would pass away at age 53, between one o'clock and three o'clock in the morning, on the 14th of the eighth lunar month. I would have no son.

As time passed, every one of my exam scores were those infallibly predicted by Mr. Hung, regardless of my diligence. In one incident, Mr. Hung foretold that I would be promoted after I had earned 91 credits in my administrative position. After I had earned 70 credits, my supervisor recommended me for advancement. I began to doubt Mr. Hung's prediction. But my recommendation was rejected. The following year, I was again recommended for advancement and successfully promoted. I counted my credits at that time, and they totaled exactly 91!

Ever since then, I have believed that our lives are truly totally controlled by fate. And since then I have lost my ambition, my hope, and all my desires.

¹ *In those days, it was honorable to be a government official.*

Chapter 2. One Creates One's Own Fate

As time passed, I worked for a year at the capital, but was not inclined to study for advancement. Instead, I spent most of my spare time in meditation.

When I returned to Nanking, I went to Mountain Qi-xia to visit Zen Master "Cloud Valley". We practiced Zen meditation together for three days and three nights without sleeping.

Master Cloud Valley asked, "You have meditated for three days and three nights without distraction of improper thoughts and desires, unlike other ordinary people. May I ask what is the reason?"

I replied, "Mr. Hung has convinced me that my life is predetermined. There is no reason for me to have any presumptuous thoughts or desires."

Master Cloud Valley responded, "If one does not awaken to his own nature and achieve a quiescent mind, then one's life is governed by the dual force (Yin and Yang) of the Universe, and hence one's fate shall be predetermined. However, a person whose nature is extremely kind will not be restrained by fate; neither will the ones who are the most wicked. So, for twenty years, you have let yourself be bound by fate. You are just an ordinary being and I thought you were a sage." Then, he burst into laughter.

I asked, "So, do you think one can change one's own fate?"

Master said, "As the proverb says: 'One creates one's own fate, and one's outer appearance is projected from one's mind. Calamity and happiness never enter a door-except when invited.' It also says in the Buddhist scripture: 'One shall have fortune, longevity, or a son or daughter if one wishes for it.' This is not an irresponsible remark. Absence of deceit is one of the fundamental precepts of a Buddhist, and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not deceive people."

"Mencius mentioned that one should wish for things that one can work for, such as loyalty and a moral character. As far as prestige and wealth are concerned, they are bestowed by others. How can one wish for them?" I asked.

"Mencius's words are true, but you need to arrive at a further understanding. The sixth patriarch Zen master Hui-Neng said, 'All seeds of fortune are within one's mind. Look into one's heart and one will get what one wants.' Man should seek help from within himself, and practice earnestly to attain goodness. He will win respect from all others; consequently, external things like prosperity, fame and success in society follow. If a person doesn't seek within his heart, his pursuit of fame and wealth, no matter how hard he tries, will be in vain."

Chapter 3. Calamities Sent By Heaven Can Be Avoided

Master Cloud Valley asked again, "How did Mr. Hung foretell your future?"

Without hesitating a bit, I told him everything.

"Do you feel you deserve to be a top official, and to have a son?" he asked.

I reflected for a while, and then replied, "The faces of most high officials show signs of blessing; however, my allotment of blessing is poor. I have not done enough works of charity; I am impatient, intolerant, conceited, and inconsiderate; I give rein to my passions, and speak heedlessly. All of these are signs of a poor blessing, so I guess I do not deserve to be a top official for the government".

"As the proverb says, 'Dirty places nourish many creatures, while clear waters sustain no fish.' I am extremely tidy and clean to the point of idiosyncrasy, and that makes me a solitary person, a reason to deserve no son. Life flourishes under harmony, but my temper is hot and stormy, and this is a second reason to deserve no son. Kindness to others is an important virtue that one should have in rearing the next generation; I am too selfish to sacrifice for others, and I am not sympathetic to others' needs; that's a third reason to deserve no son. There are many other reasons: I waste my energy by speaking too much; I lose life's essence by drinking too much; I carelessly deprive myself of sleep by sitting up all night, and so on.... All these are good reasons that I have no son".

Master Cloud Valley responded, " There are far more things in this world besides a career and a family that one never obtains! There are karmic reasons why each of us falls in this category, whether we are millionaires, billionaires, or living in poverty. God is there only to facilitate things, by improving situations or by offering instructions. Like a person's body weight, much depends on his diet and how his body functions.

"The passing down of generations is the same. We reap what we sow. Those who have much progeny must have done much that is full of grace".

"The point is, if we understand our own faults, we can correct them and thus change our fate. For example, we can change greed to generosity, anger to love, hypocrisy to sincerity, laziness to diligence, pride to humility. Start accumulating merit! Be kind, agreeable and tolerant towards others. And treasure one's own life essence. Let bygones be bygones. Renew your life as if you were just born."

"As our physical body is governed by our karma, so is our moral body closely affected by our behaviour. A morally reborn person is definitely blessed. There is a saying in the Book of History: 'Calamities sent by Heaven can be avoided; but there is no way to escape the calamities brought upon oneself in retribution for one's deeds.' The Book of Songs says, 'If one understands the natural way of living and always seeks help within oneself, one receives blessings.'

"Mr. Hung foretold your future: that you will not be a top official and that you will have no son. All of these are 'Calamities sent by Heaven' and can be avoided. If you expand your moral activities and sow good seed, than you will always have a good harvest. The Book of Changes is written to instruct sages to follow the good and to avoid the bad. If fate were fixed, then there would be no way to avoid it. The first chapter of the Book of Changes says: ' A family with abundant merit has blessings passed down from generation to generation.' Do you believe that?"

Chapter 4. Those Ignorant of Magic Charms will be Laughed At By the Spirits and the Deities

Suddenly I have come to an understanding; I took in Master Cloud Valley's words and paid homage to him. I presented myself to the Buddhas and repented all of my transgressions. I supplicated for promotion and vowed to perform 3,000 acts of charity, to repay the generosity of my ancestors, and of heaven that provided me with so much.

Master Cloud Valley instructed me to keep a diary. If I do wrong, I need to compensate with a good deed. He also taught me to chant the Cundi¹ Mantra until I receive response.

He said further that: "People who draw the magic charms say, 'Those ignorant of Fu² will be laughed at by the Spirits and the Deities.' The secret of drawing charms is to be free from thoughts. First empty the mind and let go of every worldly business. In this thought-free state, one begins to paint the first point, and that is like the beginning of the Universe. From then on, the whole picture is drawn in one stroke without stopping and this charm contains magic power. Similarly, when supplicating Heaven to change one's fate, one must start with a quiescent mind.

"Mencius said, 'There is no difference between being long-lived and being short-lived. Personal cultivation is the important thing.'

"Everyone feels that being long-lived and being short-lived are very different; why did Mencius say this?

"Just think: if one only lives in peace, devoid of desires and wishes, satisfied with whatever is available and fulfilling one's responsibilities, then what difference does it make to be either short-lived or long-lived? In fact, the distinctions between rich and poor, noble and base, exist only in one's mind. It is because people indulge in vain hopes that they are unwilling to face reality. They easily become excited or miserable. They cannot treat happiness and calamity with a tranquil mind. To them, a long life and a short life are two very contrasting spans of time. Actually, birth and death are the two most important things. Our life is transient, no matter how long or how short. We should simply follow its natural development, whether it is in adversity or in prosperity.

"As for personal cultivation, correct what is wrong, and cultivate the seeds of goodness. Be calm and serene even in adversity. If one always attains a state of serenity with clear thoughts, then one is very close to awakening (to one's own nature). At that time, all one's transgressions vanish, and one's fate is simply a reflection of one's mind, neither good nor bad, a true wisdom that actually benefits all living beings.

"If one has not reached this state of quiescent mind, one can concentrate on chanting Cundi Mantra all the time, until one reaches a state of emptiness; in this emptiness, one is not even aware of one's chanting, a situation that is similar to the drawing of a magic charm."

From that time on, I renamed myself Liao Fan, which means "leaving worldly affairs behind".

¹ *The Great Cundi Bodhisattva is a female Buddhist Deity whose name means 'The Ultimate Purity'. Her Mantra is 'Om Tze-li, tzu-li, tzun-ti, so-ha'. You can find out more about Cundi Mantra at www.tbsn.org/english*

² *Fu are a type of magical talisman or charm. They are made from strips of paper inscribed with symbolic drawings that have powers for cure and protection.*

Chapter 5. Worthy Persons Content With Their Fate

Since then, I paid more attention to my behaviour and started feeling more at ease and justified. I used to be aimless, dissolute, and easily worried; now I watch myself cautiously and with great care, even when I am alone. At times when people scold me or slander me, I simply treat it with indifference.

The following year, I took another exam for advancement. Mr. Hung predicted that I would rank third. But I ranked first instead. In the Fall season, I passed the nomination exam and successfully became a candidate in the imperial examinations at the provincial level, an unexpected event in Hung's prediction. However, after reflection, I felt my self-cultivation was inadequate. For example, doing charity without being thorough going, helping others while hesitating, or doing good with the body but speaking thoughtlessly. When sober I behaved myself, but I became unconventional and unrestrained when drunk. Many good deeds were cancelled by the bad ones, and thus it took me over ten years to accomplish the pledged 3,000 good deeds.

The next year when I visited my home village I was able to dedicate those merits before the Buddhas. I then made a wish for a son and vowed to do another three thousand good deeds. After a year, my wife gave birth to my son. Everytime I did a good deed (such as giving food to the poor, helping others in need, or releasing animals to their habitats), I recorded it. My wife didn't know how to write so she just drew a circle on the calendar. Sometime we ended up accomplishing more than 10 each day. In little over two years time, I accomplished three thousand good deeds. I quickly returned to the temple and made my dedication. I put forth my third wish, which is to be a successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations. I vowed to finish 10,000 good deeds.

Three years passed. I successfully attained the desired status and was assigned to be a district governor. I put a notebook on my desk and asked my students to record every good deed I have done during the day. At night I would pray and speak to the Jade God.

Seeing that I didn't accomplish enough charities, my wife talked to me with worry, "When we lived in our village, I could help you perform charities and we accomplished 3,000 good deeds in a rather short time. Now that we are in this government office, there is nothing I can do to help. How can we fulfil the vow to accomplish 10,000 good deeds?"

Then one night I dreamt of a deity. I talked to him about the difficulty of fulfilling the vow. The deity said, "If you implement a rule to cut the grain tax, you would have done enough for the ten thousand good deeds."

The grain tax rate of my district is 23.7%, which is quite high. I immediately designed a new law to reduce it to 14.6%. However, I was not sure if that could really be counted as ten thousand good deeds. Fortunately, a Zen master came from Five Platforms Mountain and I told him about my dream. He said, "As long as you perform charity with a sincere heart, and do the best you can, one deed is as good as ten thousand, especially when the one deed is a district-wide reduction of grain tax! Thousands of people will benefit from this new administrative rule."

Hearing that, I donated my salary to the master to make "food offerings to ten thousand monks" in his temple for the completion of my vow and to thank the divinity in fulfilling my wish. Mr. Hung had foretold that my longevity would not last beyond 53 years. I had not prayed to extend my life expectancy. But I lived through that year peacefully. I am now 69 years old.

As it is said in the Book of History: "Heaven is difficult to believe in, and there is no permanence in one's life." It also said: "Fate is not fixed." All these are words of truth.

As I now understand it, those who claim that lives are dictated by fate are ordinary folks; those who claim that lives are dictated by themselves are the wise ones.

Chapter 6. Modest Persons Attain Tao

Overall, one cannot predict one's future. Therefore, when one reaches one's best time, one should be prepared for the downfall. When one is in prosperity, one should be prepared for the adversity. Be prepared to be poor when one enjoys great wealth. Be prepared to be slandered when one is praised. Treat one's own honorable family lineage as low birth. Always regard oneself as inadequate of knowledge even when one is well educated. Praise the virtue of one's ancestors. Remedy the faults of one's parents. Repay the generosity of the country. Work for the benefit of the next generation. Help all those who are in great plight. And shun away idleness and improper thought.

Try to reflect and correct one's mistake daily. If one feels that he is faultless even for a day, one shall regress rather than progress.

There are plenty of smart people in this world. However, not too many of them are successful, because they do not cultivate their morality and simply seek ease and comfort, wasting their treasured life.

Master Cloud Valley's words about how one creates one's own fate are the essence; it is the most profound, most true, and most correct understanding.

One should remember and recite these words constantly, so that one does not waste one's lifetime.

II. Methods of Correction

Chapter 7. The Three Essentials in Correction

During the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.), many learned officials were able to predict the rise and fall of a person by just observing his words and deeds. The predictions were very accurate. Examples can be found in Zuo Chuan¹, and in other history books about the Spring and Autumn Period.

In general, the sign of one's prosperity and misfortune originates from one's inner heart, and projects outward onto one's outer appearance. If one appears to be "thick" [stable, kind and generous], one usually encounters prosperity.

However, if one appears to be "thin" [unstable, flippant and untrustworthy], one is likely to approach misfortune. It is lacking the proper knowledge for common folk to believe that there is no way to predict fortune and misfortune. One's being kind or unkind is usually felt by Heaven. When a person is about to experience good fortune bestowed by Heaven, we can tell so in advance from his calm and serene appearance. When a person is about to experience misfortune, we can also tell in advance from his flippant and untrustworthy behaviour. If a person wants to avoid mishaps and to pursue prosperity, he should first try hard to correct his mistakes and only later worry about doing charity. That way, he will naturally be led toward virtuous behaviour.

Speaking of correction, the first essential is to sense shame.

Just think of the heroes and heroines in our history. Why were they able to leave us memories to respect? Why are we well known to no one, and why do some of us even end up with broken homes or in bankruptcy? If one hungers only for fame and money, engages privately in immorality, and is shameless and proud since nobody knows, then one is even worse than an animal. Nothing is as shameful as that.

Mencius states, "Shame has a great influence on man. One becomes a sage if he has it, and becomes an animal if he loses it." Thus, having a sense of shame is the gift of correction.

The second essential is the attitude of "fear and respect".

The ghosts and deities cannot be deceived. Even if our wrongdoing is tiny and seems not worth mentioning, it is nevertheless recorded and judged by the Heavenly beings. We will be punished lightly or heavily, depending upon the size of our mistakes.

One should develop an attitude of fear and respect toward the spiritual beings. No matter where we are, even if we hide ourselves in a well-sealed cave, we are always observed. Our thoughts are like a radio frequency, easily broadcast to spiritual beings. Therefore, even though we cannot touch or feel the spirits, we need to respect them.

As long as a person still breathes, there are chances for him to repent and correct his mistakes, even if his wrongdoings pile up to reach the sky. Examples can be found in history that a person who spent his entire life in vice, upon truly repenting and vowing to be good in his last moments, can obtain a peaceful departure. Thus it is said that a truly sincere thought of repentance can wash away a thousand years of transgressions. This is like lighting a lamp and banishing a thousand years of darkness away in the shining light.

So no matter how big the mistakes may be, it is never too late to mend. Human life is impermanent and our mortal body is very susceptible to decay. When a person stops breathing, there is then no way for him to amend his ways, even if his spirit wants to do it. The evil that he does lives after him from generation to generation. He could be suffering retribution forever in Hell; even the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot help. How can one not be afraid?

¹ *A commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*

The third essential of correction is "courage and determination". One fails to mend one's faults because one always hesitates. One should keep a firm determination to remove small mistakes like taking out a thorn by its root from one's wound. And, one should keep a firm determination to eradicate serious mistakes, like cutting off the finger that was bit by a poisonous snake. Don't hesitate. Don't wait. Just like the lightning and thunder. Then, surely, one will succeed in correcting one's self.

If one possesses the above three essentials, repents and corrects oneself, then one's mistakes will go away, just like the spring ice meeting the Sun melts away.

Chapter 8. The Three Ways Of Correction

There are three ways of correcting one's faults: by action, by reasoning, and from the depths of mind. Each way is demonstrated by different methods, and the effect of each is different. Action is not so good as reasoning, which is not so good as reaching the depths of the mind.

For example, corrections by action: yesterday, one killed; today, one stops killing. Or yesterday, one was enraged; today, one stays calm and reflects.

However, this method only manages to suppress one's wrongdoings outwardly. It is not a thorough method of correction.

A better way for correction is by reasoning. For example, to avoid further killings, one should take the welfare of living beings into consideration. Every life treasures its own kind, so how can one feel at ease in killing others just for one's own nourishment? Just imagine the suffering of being boiled or cooked.

Good health depends on metabolism-how one utilizes the foodstuff, and not on how exotic the food is. Delicacies consisting of animals and fish are not always nutritious. Since fruits and vegetables suffice to sustain one's life, why diminish one's merit by turning one's stomach into a crematorium? Furthermore, all beings with flesh and blood, just like human beings, have their own consciousness. We should feel ashamed not to treat them as our children, let alone to kill them and cause them to hate us. If one can reason in that way, one is able to generate compassion toward other beings and consequently stops the habit of killing.

Similarly, for taming one's temper, one should reason that everybody has his specialties and shortcomings, and nobody is perfect. Therefore, one feels sympathy rather than anger toward others' shortcomings. No one in the world can be right all the time, and no discipline teaches people to blame others. How can one make demands of others but not of himself? Rising dissatisfaction about daily events is usually due to a lack of cultivation and insufficient self-control.

Every person should always examine his or her own thoughts and feelings. Regard any slander as training and testing of your temper. If one can reason this way, one will accept slander and never feel angry again.

Also, if one can stay calm when slander arises, one will find that the slander, though it may flare up all over the sky, eventually burns itself out. If on the contrary one gets mad at every slander and toys hard to argue over it, then it is like being trapped in a cocoon one should leave, causing unnecessary trouble.

In brief, killing and getting angry are harmful to one's own self. For correcting other kinds of faults, one can apply the same principle of reasoning.

The third method of correction is from the depths of the mind. In general, all faults originate from the depth of one's mind. If one keeps a tranquil mind that is void of desires and selfishness, then there is no way for faults to occur regarding fame, money and sex.

All one needs is a determined mind to lead a moral life. With a righteous mind, wicked ideas will vanish, like demons disappearing under the sun. All faults are originated in one's mind and hence must be corrected from there. It is like cutting the harmful tree by its root, then all its branches and leaves will fall off.

Thus the best method of correction is from within the depths of one's mind. Keep your mind purified and remove any improper thought when you sense it. If this is too difficult to practice, then the next best method is to apply reasoning to regulate one's behaviour. If even this is not feasible, then one only can correct by action, that is, correct the mistake when it happens.

Apply all three methods to correct one's faults is the best of all. Merely changing one's faulty behavior without reasoning and examining the recesses of one's mind is inefficient.

When a person resolves to repent and makes a vow to lead a moral life, it is better to have friends to remind him or her constantly. It is also necessary to invite Ghosts and Deities as witnesses. If one repents with that single aim in mind and does not slack off for even one second, one will surely see the effect.

One may feel one's spirit soar, or become wiser, or remain in control in a confused situation, or even be happy to meet his enemies. Such a person may dream of having black smoke coming out of his or her body, or of wandering in the universe, or visiting wonderful fairylands. All these are signs of progress in cleansing one's transgression. But one must not be satisfied with this and give up the process of growth.

We ordinary people have faults all over our bodies like the thorns of a hedgehog. It is only due to carelessness and nearsight that we fail to see any wrongdoing.

There are also signs for those with heavy transgressions. Those people are usually confused, oblivious, and distracted. They fret over nothing and feel ashamed when they see righteous people. They feel unhappy when they hear the truth. When they try to do people a favor, they are repaid with resentment. They often have wild dreams, and they nag all the time. These are signs of bad karma. If a person happens to be like that, then he or she should get with it, and cultivate him or herself to live a moral life so as to avoid retribution.

III. The Ways Of Accumulating Merit

Chapter 9. Families With Merit Have Blessings Passed Down From Generation To Generation

In our history, there was a woman named Yan. When the marriage of Yan's daughter to Confucius's¹ father was proposed, Yan only inquired about whether his ancestors had accumulated great merit. She did not care if his family was poor because she felt that if his ancestors had merit, their descendants would prosper.

Confucius also praised Shun's' great filial piety and said, "Shun will be on the scroll of fame, and his descendants will prosper." The above-mentioned theory stands to reason. It can also be substantiated by the following historical events. The ancestors of Young Wing, the Duke of Fujian province, lived as boatmen from generation to generation. Whenever torrential rains caused flooding, houses were destroyed and there were always people, domestic animals and valuable goods that were washed away and swept down the river. When this happened, other boatmen always hurried to grab the valuable goods from the river, while Young Wing's grandfather always saved the people who were drowning. People in the village ridiculed him for his stupidity. But through the years, the family slowly prospered and, by the time Young Wing's father was born, the family had become quite wealthy.

One day, a Tao Master appeared and told the Young family, "Your ancestor has accumulated great modest virtues; hence his descendants will enjoy wealth and honour. There is a dragon site in which you should re-bury your ancestor."

This was done, and the tomb is now called the 'White Rabbit Tomb'². Later on Young Wing was born. Even in his early youth Young Wing passed the imperial examination and was placed in a high-ranking position. Furthermore, his late grandfather was also honored by the Emperor. Young's descendants are, to this day, still prosperous, and many of them are prominent, worthy people.

¹ A legendary Chinese ruler, said to have ruled from 2255-2205 B.C.

² A Feng Shui term

Chapter 10. Everybody Has Compassion

In Kan Province, a man called Young Chi Cheng started as a prisoner guard. He was a man of compassion and righteousness. One day, the county magistrate was enraged and punished a criminal with severe beating. Out of compassion Young Chi Cheng knelt down and begged the county magistrate to calm down and forgive the prisoner. The county magistrate said, "This prisoner committed such a devious crime. How can one not feel angry?"

Young bowed and said, "Because of the mismanagement of the state's affairs, people have become uncontrolled and ignorant of the law. It is enough to find out the details of the crime from the prisoner. Such crimes, even if we can solve them, are not something we are proud of. How can one get angry?"

Upon hearing that, the county magistrate calmed down.

Chi Cheng was born in poverty but he never accepted bribery. When he met criminals who were hungry, he tried his best to provide food for them, even if he himself had to go hungry. His charitable acts never stopped.

He later fathered two sons. Both became well-known, top government officials. More over, his elder grandson became an advisor to the Judge of the highest court, and his second grandson became the chief prosecutor in Sichuan Province. Their families were very prosperous, and many descendants became government officials.

Chapter 11. Heaven Has Compassion For Living Beings

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), there was an upheaval in Fujian Province. Many citizens joined the rebel force. Province Governor Hsieh was sent to seek out and kill the rebels from the east. Afraid of killing innocent people, Governor Hsieh first made efforts to obtain a list of the rebels. Then, secretly, he distributed small white flags to those who were not on the list and asked them to put the flags on their doors when the government army entered the city. He also warned the soldiers not to kill indiscriminately. By so doing, he saved ten thousand lives.

Later, some of his grandsons became chief government officials and his family also became very prosperous.

Also, in Amoy, a city in Fujian, lived a Mrs. Lam. She was extremely generous and always made bread to give to the poor. A monk came to her house everyday and every time would ask for six or seven of the buns. She provided the bread for him regularly for three years, without complaint or reluctance.

One day, this monk came and told her, "For three years, I have been eating your bread and I do not have anything with which to repay you. However, I know of a piece of land behind your house. If you re-bury your ancestors there, then there will be as many government officials from among your descendants as there are flax seeds in a bottle."

Lam did as advised and, within the first generation of her family, nine were able to graduate under the imperial examination system. From then on, in every generation of the Lams, there were always many high officials. Even today, there is still a saying: "There will always be someone named Lam in the graduation list of every imperial examination."

Another story involves the father of the chief astronomer and historian, Fung Zhuo Hang. On the way to school one winter day, Fung's father saw a stranger lying in the snow. He took off his coat and wrapped it around the stranger. Then he took him home and provided care for him. That night, he had a dream. He dreamed that a god came to see him and said, "Because you have saved a life, you shall be rewarded with a son who in his previous life was the famous General Hang-qi of Sung's Dynasty." And such was the birthright of the famous chief astronomer and historian Fung Zhuo Hang.

Chapter 12. Righteousness Suppresses Evil

In Tai Chou there was a state secretary Ying. When he was young he lived in the mountains studying [for the imperial examination]. At night, he often heard the spirits talking and rumbling, but he was not afraid. One night, he heard the spirits talking to each other. One said, "Mrs. so-and-so has not heard from her husband since he left home years ago. Now her mother-in-law is forcing her to remarry. She doesn't want this and is coming here tomorrow night to hang herself. Now I will have someone to take my place and I can be reborn as human."

After Ying heard this, he quickly sold part of his possessions for four ounces of silver. He sent the silver, with a forged letter from the woman's husband, to her home. Her mother-in-law received that letter, but hesitated, wondering whether it was really written by her son. However, she finally decided it must have been, since she could not imagine anyone other than her own son wanting to send the silver. Therefore, she stopped pushing her daughter-in-law to remarry.

Sometime later, the husband finally came home. The family was again happy together.

Ying later heard the spirits talking again. "My plan to be replaced by another was ruined by that scholar." And the other spirit asked, "Then why don't you do something to him?" To which the first spirit replied, "Impossible - the Heavenly God feels that he is a righteous man. He will be assigned to be the Secretary of our nether world. I cannot touch him."

Hearing this, Ying worked even harder to do charitable deeds and he accumulated much merit. When famine occurred, he donated grain to ease the situation. He helped those with urgent needs. He tolerated his adversaries and often reflected on his own wrongdoings. Because of his merits, he was blessed with children and grandchildren who were wealthy and in high positions. His descendants are still prosperous.

Another example: Hsu Fung Chu of Changshu Province was born into a rich family. Even so, his father still cared a great deal for the deprived. Whenever there was a famine, his father would donate a lot of food to the needy people. It happened that once, over a period of several days, his father heard a song sung by a spirit that said that his son would definitely pass the county government level examination. Indeed, Hsu passed the examination that year. After that, his father became more actively involved in doing charitable deeds that would benefit the public, such as repairing bridges and roads and taking care of travellers and monks.

Later on, his father again heard the spirit sing, "It is true, it is true, Hsu will be promoted to higher office." Subsequently Hsu was indeed promoted to be the Inspector of the Chekiang Province.

Chapter 13. Leniency And Grievance Redress In Accordance With Heaven

In Chia-hing Province there was a man called Tu Hon Chee. When he was first appointed to the position of secretary of the Justice Department, he frequently visited the prisoners to hear their cases. Whenever he saw that one was innocent, he would file a report and recommend to the chief prosecutor that the case be reopened. Based on Tu's reports, the prosecutor retried those prisoners and more than a dozen of them were released. Because of this, the public praised the prosecutor, while Tu remained humble and never claimed his contribution.

Sometime later he sent a proposal to the emperor: "Since we are a large country and have a huge population, there must be many innocent people who are wrongly imprisoned. Every five years we should appoint an investigator to investigate if there are any grievances to be redressed." The emperor approved Tu's recommendation and Tu became one of the investigators.

He later dreamt that a god told him that he would be rewarded with three sons, even though he and his wife were supposed to be childless. Soon after, his wife became pregnant. As years passed, he did have a total of three sons. And, when they grew up, they all became top officials in the government.

Chapter 14. Respecting Deities And Protecting The Dharma Give One Prosperity

Bao Ping, a man from Chia-hing Province, was the youngest of seven sons of the prefect of the town, Pool-Sun. He was the son-in-law of the family Yuen. Despite his intelligence and diligence, he failed every time he took the imperial examination.

One day, while touring near Tai Lake, he passed by a small village temple. The temple had a leaking roof and the statue of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva was dirtied by rain. He immediately took ten ounces of silver from his pocket and gave them to the monk in charge, so the temple could be repaired. The monk said, "To take care of these repairs requires a lot more money and labor. I am afraid I cannot fulfill your wishes."

So Bao removed every single valuable belonging he had on him and gave them all to the monk. Bao told the monk, "As long as the Buddha statue is protected, it is not important whether I have clothes to wear."

The monk was moved and said, "Donating money and clothes to the temple is not a difficult task, but the fact that you did it from the depth of your heart is, indeed, rare."

After the temple was repaired, Bao dropped by to stay overnight. He dreamed of the temple guardian deity who came and thanked him, saying, "Your sons will be blessed with high government official status."

And, truly, his sons Bian and Sing-Fan became high government officials.

In Chai-Sing province, there was a Mr. Chee who was the father of Chee-Li. When Mr. Chee was a judicial officer, there was a defendant who was wrongly accused of committing a serious crime. In order to avoid the death penalty, the defendant asked his wife to invite Mr. Chee to the village so she could tell Mr. Chee of his case in detail. He further asked his wife to offer herself to Mr. Chee as a servant. In tears, his wife promised to do so.

Next day, when Mr. Chee arrived, she told him the wish of her husband, and that she would offer herself as his servant. Mr. Chee refused the offer. He only promised to do his very best to be just. Later, with much evidence, the court ruled the defendant to be innocent. The man and his wife came to thank Mr. Chee and insisted that, as a social custom, their daughter should come and help Mrs. Chee do little chores at home. Mr. Chee could not but follow the custom and accepted.

Later at the age of twenty, Chee-Li, Mr. Chee's son, passed the imperial examination and became a high official. Mr. Chee's grandson, Chee-Gao, and his descendants were blessed with much prosperity.

Though the method of practice of each anecdote is different, chapters 9 through 14 are all examples of the dedication of one's mind to charitable activities.

Chapter 15. Different Kinds Of Charity

A detailed analysis of charity shows that charity takes many forms: true charity and false charity; upright charity and distorted charity; open charity and hidden charity; right charity and wrong charity; proper charity and deflected charity; complete charity and incomplete charity; great charity and small charity; difficult charity and easy charity. We need to understand the subtle differences. Otherwise, we may think that we are being charitable while we are not.

For example, people often ask, "Mr. so-and-so has been very charitable, so why is it that he ends up in a broken home, while others, who have done much injustice, have families that prosper?"

This seeming unfairness has caused many people to regard as nonsense the proverb "one's retribution is like one's shadow which follows one closely."

In actuality, our basic problem rests on our misinterpretation of the concept of charity. We should not hastily conclude that "reward the good and punish the bad" is merely a lie.

Chapter 16. True Charity And False Charity

Let us examine true charity and false charity. Fighting, screaming, begrudging others, and penny pinching are usually considered unseemly conduct. Courtesy, honesty, cleanliness, and friendliness are usually marked as benevolent attributes.

As a matter of fact, all of these actions are, by themselves, neither intrinsically virtuous nor non-virtuous. We need to look at the motives behind these actions. Scolding and criticizing may actually be considered charitable if these actions benefit people. On the other hand, if one is being courteous and polite to benefit oneself, this action is not considered charitable.

In this world, doing good to benefit others is called charity. If an act is done to benefit oneself, this is false charity. An act of giving from the heart is true charity. An act that is done to impress others is false charity. Performing an act of kindness without any ulterior motive is true charity. One that is done with an ulterior motive is false charity.

Chapter 17. Upright Charity And Distorted Charity

Generally speaking, a prudent, non-contentious person is an upright person. However, sages believe that a decisive, quixotic, chivalrous madman can be an upright person. The reason is simple: a prudent, non-contentious person may be regarded by many as a "nice guy"; however, he may be only drifting with the tide. He may carry no aspiration of his own, may not fight for what is right, and possess no courage. There are many such people in this world.

Gods and sages view and judge uprightness quite differently than humans do. Thus, when we practice charity, we cannot do it just to please others in this world, or to draw the wool over one's eyes. We need to do it from our heart. Helping and caring for others, without expecting rewards from this world, is the upright charity.

If an act of charity is done with an attitude of playing games, or an attitude of trying to please the public, then it is distorted charity.

Chapter 18. Open Charity And Hidden Charity

Charity may also be open or hidden. If we carry out charitable acts of which others are aware, this is open charity. Charity done without anyone knowing is hidden charity. Charity done in the open is rewarded with fame and honor from the community. Charity done in secret is rewarded with blessings from Heaven.

If one has more fame and honor than one can substantiate by one's charitable acts, then one will encounter mishaps. Fame and honor are envied in the living world. Many people with fame and honor have not gained them through actual meritorious acts. Therefore, we see many families with fame and honor who encounter one mishap after another. Thus, an old saying goes, "A name without substance, only a fool will praise."

Conversely, if a man has not committed any misdeeds, yet suffers from scandal and defamation, and tolerates these without complaint, he must be a man of substance. His descendants would receive multiple blessings.

The difference between open and hidden charity is that one is open to the public while the other is hidden from the public.

Chapter 19. The Influential Effects Of Right Charity And Wrong Charity

Charity seems a right thing to do, so why is it that there is a right charity and a wrong charity?

Let's take a look at the following example. A long time ago in China, the little kingdom of Lu posted a large monetary reward for anyone who would pay ransom to retrieve prisoners of war from an enemy's land.

Confucius's student, Zi-gung, had saved someone but he refused to accept the reward. When Confucius learned of this, he scolded Zi-gung, "You are wrong. An honorable man's behavior can be an example and change the customs of a place. How can you do this just for your own pleasure and to impress others? There are more poor people than rich in this country. What you have done has made others (who have also rescued prisoners) embarrassed to receive the reward. Without the reward, it will be difficult to continue the rescue work; henceforth, no one will be interested in rescuing any more prisoners."

Another example: Zi-lu (also a student of Confucius) had rescued someone from drowning. The family was very grateful and gave him a cow in return. Zi-lu accepted the gift. On hearing of this, Confucius made the comment, "From now on, people in this village will be very zealous in rescuing those who get drowned."

Commonly speaking, Zi-gung's refusal to accept the reward is a good deed, and Zi-lu's acceptance of the reward is a poor gesture. But Confucius viewed these the other way around. Thus it is important to consider the long-term influence of a charitable act. One shouldn't just look at an act and ignore its consequences. The influential effect of a charitable act within a society is more important than personal satisfaction.

If one performs a charitable act, yet its consequence could hurt many, then it is wrong charity. On the other hand, it might seem that one's act is not charitable but, if the consequence of its work benefits thousands, then it is right charity.

Some examples of wrong charity are: too much forgiveness; flattering others to the degree that a person's mind becomes clouded and unable to make correct decisions; keeping a small promise yet permitting a big catastrophe to happen; loving one's children so much that they become spoiled. Therefore, to decide if an act is charitable or not, one needs to look at it in a very calm and rational manner.

Chapter 20. The Consequences Of Proper Charity And Deflected Charity

What are proper charity and deflected charity?

Example: Lu Man Chi was a retired prime minister, living in his home village. The villagers still paid high respect to him. One day, a drunken villager came by and reproached him with foul language. Lu did not reprimand him or send him to the police. Lu felt that, because the person was drunk, he would not hold him responsible for that act. After a year, Lu found out that this drunk had subsequently committed many more crimes, among which were ones which led to capital punishment.

Lu said regretfully, "If I had chastised him a bit and sent him to court in the very beginning, then these smaller punishments might have served as a warning and prevented him from committing bigger crimes."

This illustrates that being nice may lead to bad consequences.

Another example: a certain province had a famine. Some people became violent and started to rob in the daylight. One wealthy family complained to the local government, but the government failed to take any action. As days went by, these robbers became bolder, making the area very unsafe. Finally that wealthy family decided to take the matter into their own hands, and punished the robbers themselves. After that the situation became under control, thus avoiding chaos.

Everyone knows that charity is good and non-charity is bad. However, if charity results in bad consequences, then it is deflected charity. If non-charity results in good consequences, then it is still considered proper charity.

Chapter 21. Incomplete Charity And Complete Charity Are Dependent On One's Mind

What is incomplete charity and what is complete charity? The Book of Changes says, "If one does not accumulate charitable merits, one won't be called a charitable person. If one does not accumulate wickedness, one won't encounter life threatening disaster."

If one always works on accumulating charitable deeds, then it is complete charity. Otherwise, if one is lazy in doing charitable deeds, then it is incomplete charity.

Long ago, there was a girl who went to a temple. She was very poor. All she had was two pennies and she offered them to the temple. Nevertheless, the abbot of the temple was willing to perform a repentance ceremony for her.

Years later, this little girl became a rich lady. She came back with much gold to offer. This time the abbot only sent his student to perform the repentance ceremony. She asked, "Why was it that, in the past, when I only offered two pennies, you gave me your personal service, but now I am offering a thousand pieces of gold and you are sending a substitute?"

The abbot answered, "Although your two pennies were a very small amount of money, you had poured out your heart. Now, although your offering is big, you are not as sincere as you used to be. Therefore, a substitute suffices."

In this example, offering a thousand pieces of gold is incomplete charity, but offering two pennies is complete charity.

There is a story about a Taoist immortal named Chung Li. He was to teach Lu Tung Ben how to change iron into gold for the purpose of helping the poor.

Lu asked Chung, "Will this piece of gold ever change back into iron?"

Chung answered, "After five hundred years, it will."

Lu then replied, "Isn't it true then that a lot of people will be hurt after five hundred years? I do not want to learn such a magic skill."

Chung then praised Lu, "To learn to become an immortal you need to first accumulate at least three thousand good deeds. Because of what you have just said, you have accomplished those three thousand good deeds."

Therefore, charitable deeds must be performed with a sincere heart. If one never thinks of one's own charitable deeds, then even a small charitable action results in huge merit. If one performs a charitable deed with an ulterior motive, such as receiving praise or a reward, then even if one is doing charity all day long, it is still incomplete charity. Take the example of giving money away to help others. If, inwardly, one doesn't see oneself as a giver, outwardly one doesn't see anyone as a receiver, and, in the middle, one doesn't see the gift [money], then one reaches the Emptiness of the Three-Wheel Condition, a state of purification of the whole mind. In this state, even the giving of one penny has such a huge merit that it can remove transgressions of a past thousand kalpas. However, if one gives with expectation, then even the giving of ten thousand ounces of gold is still incomplete charity.

Chapter 22. Great, Small, Difficult, And Easy Charity Are Based On Motive

Charity can be weighed as great or small, difficult or easy.

In the past, there was a man named Wei Chong Dai who worked as a government official. One time his spirit was separated from his body and taken to the nether world. The king of the nether world let Wei examine his lifelong record. He discovered only a few pages of good deeds, yet he had many, many pages of bad deeds. The king asked someone to weigh the pages. It turned out that the numerous pages of bad deeds was lighter than the few pages of good deeds.

Wei was curious, "I am not over forty years old, how did I commit that many transgressions?"

The king replied, "Bad thoughts are also counted as transgressions. One need not have committed the deed."

Then Wei asked, "Why then does the record of my good deeds weigh heavier than the record of my bad deeds?"

The king replied, "The good deeds were the appeal letters you wrote to the government regarding the big construction project of the stone bridges connecting the three mountains."

Wei said, "Yes, but they did not listen to my appeal."

The king said, "Although the government did not accept it, your thought of charity had much weight because it would have benefited thousands of people. If it had been accepted, you would have earned even greater merit."

From here, we can extrapolate that one's thoughts are very important. If one has a mind for the benefit of thousands, then one accumulates much merit even if one's actions haven't accomplished much. On the other hand, if one only thinks of oneself, then even if one accomplishes much in action, one's merit is small.

Next we shall discuss difficult and easy charity. Sages have said that, to discipline oneself, one should begin at the most difficult place. Similarly, one should begin to practice difficult charity as in the following.

In province Chiang Xi, a gentleman with the surname Hsu used the money he saved from being a teacher to pay back a loan for his friend, thus allowing his friend's family to reunite.

In province Hunan, a gentleman with the surname Cheng used his ten years savings to pay the debt of a person which would save that person's wife and daughter.

In Province Chin Chiang, an old gentleman with the surname Chee preferred to be hairless rather than marry a young girl.

The examples of the shanties cited above are most precious because the doers are acting completely for the benefit of others, doing what others don't want to do, and tolerating what others cannot tolerate. Such shanties will accumulate much blessing from Heaven.

It is more difficult for a poor person to do charity and help others. Nevertheless, if he can try his best and do charity even in adversity, then great merit is accumulated.

For the rich, it is so easy to be charitable. But, if they prefer not to, then they are abandoning their blessings.

Chapter 23. Ten Different Ways To Exercise Charity

Now that we have fully studied the concept of charity, we need to investigate how to exercise charity when opportunities arise. There are ten different ways:

1. Encourage and support those who perform charity
2. Always harbor a mind of respect and love
3. Help others to fulfill their wish
4. Exhort others to do good deeds
5. Help others in time of need
6. Participate in projects that benefit thousands
7. Be generous with one's gifts and donations
8. Protect and uphold the righteous teachings
9. Revere the elders
10. Be compassionate to all sentient beings

1. How to encourage and support those who perform charity?

When he was young, Emperor Shun (of ancient China) watched fishermen catching fish in Shantung province. Wherever there were many fish, the younger fishermen always took over these areas, leaving the old and feeble with places that had no fish. Shun was very upset. So he joined in to fish. Whenever he saw anyone attempting to push him away, he politely conceded.

Whenever he saw others giving him opportunities, he openly praised them. After a period of time, courtesy became a social practice of the place. Let us consider this: Shun was renowned for his wisdom, he was totally capable of teaching others verbally; however, he preferred action to talk. By making use of his actions, he exerted a subtle influence on the social behavior. What a lofty and considerate intention!

Hence, one should never use one's achievement to downgrade another's weakness. One should never display benefaction just to demonstrate the wickedness of others. One should never use wit to tease or chastise others. One needs to respect all of mankind and learn to forgive and accept. One should offer praise when seeing someone making even a small good deed. This way, it becomes a silent protest to the unkind while, at the same time, the unkind do not lose face; thus allowing them the opportunity to reform. The ideal of the sages is to always think of the benefit for others and always be a good example in the society.

2. What does it mean by "always harbor a mind of respect and love"?

It is not easy to tell the wicked from the righteous. Nevertheless, if one pays attention to the motives of a person, then the difference becomes as clear as black and white. Thus Mencius said, "The difference between a villain and a sage is in the thought."

A sage always has a mind of respect and love [toward others]. There is this Chinese proverb: "One type of rice feeds a hundred different types of people."

We are not alike in this world. Some are rich, some are poor, some are intelligent, some are ignorant. But we are all brothers and sisters. We should all respect and love each other from our hearts. If one can respect and love others, then it is like respecting and loving the sages. For this is what the sages do. If we can all learn to love each other, respect each other, respect ourselves, and be content, then we are carrying out Heaven's will and exercising charity.

3. What is meant by "help others to fulfill their wish"?

Generally speaking, most people in this world are very lost and confused. Most people tend to protect themselves and exclude others. Those who have the heart to help others are usually very direct and simple. They do not know how to flatter others and are often excluded by others before they have a chance to accomplish their good deeds.

Therefore, anytime one sees someone who has a kind heart, one needs to encourage, support and protect him. It is the same as the refining process of an unpolished gem. If unpolished, a gem may appear like an ordinary stone. Once polished, it becomes a treasure.

4. *What is meant by "exhort others to do good deeds"?*

Every man (and woman) has a conscience. In this world, we can become buried in affairs of vanity and profanity. People fall for money and fame. One needs always to remind others of this, to help keep everything in perspective. It is said, "A spoken word can educate someone for the moment. A book can educate peoples for centuries to come."

If one sees and grasps every opportunity to induce others to do good deeds, then it is like awakening others from nightmares, and it is one of the best charities one can do.

5. *How does one "help others in time of need"?*

We all face adversity at different times in our lives. Whenever we see others facing adversity, we should treat it as if we face it ourselves. We can comfort others with kind words, provide time to listen to their pain, or provide help in other ways. As it is said, "Charity does not need to be big, as long as it is there when it is needed."

6. *What is meant by "participate in projects that benefit thousands"?*

This means participating in and helping to set up programs or plans that benefit the public, such as building irrigation systems, bridges, or setting up welfare programs. One may make contributions toward such public projects or simply participate physically in their construction.

7. *What is meant by "be generous with one's gifts and donations"?*

Giving is the first and most important practice among the many practices in Buddhism. A sage can give up whatever he owns, including his physical and mental attributes, for the benefit of others. Thus, a sage can give up enjoyments that are attached to sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Of course, common people will find this impossible to follow. In this case, one should begin by giving money to charities. Common people usually regard money as more important than life and death. Therefore, one of the most difficult things to do in this world is to give up money. If one can give, then not only can one benefit others and accumulate merit, one can also help oneself by ridding oneself of selfishness. This is a great help in one's own cultivation. Initially, this is difficult to practice. But as time goes on, one will achieve peace of mind and, eventually, this will result in the elimination of one's other faults.

8. *What is to "protect and uphold the righteous teachings"?*

The Buddha Dharma is a righteous teaching. Without righteous teachings, the universe would be without light and growth. It would be difficult for the beings trapped in Samsara to become liberated. Thus, one should revere and treasure Buddhist temples and sutras. One should be encouraged to propagate righteous teachings and repay the Buddha's compassion.

9. *What is meant by "revere the elders"?*

Respect one's parents, brothers, sisters, teachers, and seniors. Whenever one speaks to one's parents, one needs to soften one's tone. Whenever one lives in a country, one needs to comply with its laws. Whenever one is given the authority to exercise judgment, one must not be conceited. All of these are considered hidden charity.

10. *What is meant by "be compassionate to all sentient beings"?*

There is an ancient saying, "If you love the rats, leave some leftovers for them; if you pity the moths, do not light the lamp." Of course it is very difficult for common men to realize such a realm. This saying only serves to remind us that we should develop a heart of compassion. Mencius stated, "The wise men always stay away from the kitchen."

Many of us have difficulty in becoming vegetarians, but at least we should practice the Four Not-to-eat: "Not to eat those we breed, not to eat those we have seen killed, not to eat those we have heard killed, not to eat those that are killed just for us."

We need to train ourselves to refrain from these desires to generate compassion and increase our wisdom and blessing.

Furthermore, the making of our clothing and food involves the death of many life forms. For example, one boils the cocoons of silkworms to kill the chrysalis inside in order to obtain the silk, and one has to kill many insects in order to secure the crops. Thus, one should treasure everything and not be wasteful. One should constantly avoid unintentional killing.

In summary, there are many methods to exercise charity. One can start with the ten as listed and perfect oneself as time goes on.

IV. The Benefit Of Being Humble

Chapter 24. The Benefit Of Being Humble

The Book of Changes (I Ching) says, "The way of Heaven diminishes the full and enhances the humble. The way of earth changes the full¹ and spreads humility. Spirits injure the full and bless the humble. The way of humans is to dislike the full and like the humble."

There are sixty-four hexagrams in the Book of Changes and, corresponding to each hexagram, are six variations with comments. Two-thirds of the comments of the total 384 variations indicate that the variations are bad and unlucky. However, the comments for all six variations of the "Humility" hexagram are full of praise. Thus we have an old saying: One loses by pride and gains by modesty.

There are many examples of poor and humble men achieving riches and success.

One year, there were ten people from my village going to Peking to take the Imperial Examination. Among them the youngest was Ben Ting, who was also the most humble and the most polite of all. I told my friend, "He [Ben Ting] will pass this year's Examination."

My friend asked why.

I responded, "Only those who are humble shall receive blessing. Look at this group - only Ben Ting is the most trustworthy and most humble. He tolerates gossips and scandals. He does not engage in disputes. Anyone who can achieve this state of cultivation would impress and receive help from the spirits' world. How can he not pass the exam?"

Indeed, Ting passed the examination of that year.

There are other examples, such as the county administrator, Fang, from Chekiang Province, Mr. Chao of Shantung, and Mr. Hsia. They all failed the Imperial Examination several times. After these repeated failures, they corrected their haughty and conceited behavior. Once they changed their dispositions and became humble, they passed their exams.

If Heaven wants to bestow fortune on a person, it will first open up that person's wisdom. Once a person has wisdom, he will turn away from vain and abusive behavior, and blessings will follow.

In the province of Chekiang lived a very intelligent man, Mr. Chang. He was famous for his high scholarship. In 1594, he took the Imperial Examination and failed. Infuriated, he started to verbally attack the examiner. Nearby there was a Taoist who began to smile. Chang transferred his anger to this person. The Taoist said, "Perhaps your essay was not good enough!"

Chang furiously replied, "You have never read my essay! How do you know it is not good enough?"

The Taoist said, "I have heard that only those who have a calm mind can write a good composition. Seeing that you have such an impulsive character, I must wonder how you could write a good essay."

Submitting to the reasoning of the Taoist, Chang asked the Taoist for advice. The Taoist replied, "Passing the exam also depends on fate. If your fate tells you that you will not pass this exam, the first thing you need to do is to change yourself."

Chang asked, "If it is fate, then how can one alter it?"

¹ Here "full" has the meanings of pride and arrogance.

The Taoist said, "One's fate is predetermined, but one is still in control of establishing one's fate. If one tries one's best to do acts of charity, then there shall be nothing in this world one is not able to obtain."

Chang said, "I am a poor man, how do I perform charity?"

The Taoist said, "Charity springs from the heart. If one can always keep a charitable heart, then every single action one does is charity. For example, you do not need to spend money to be a humble person. Instead of blaming the examiner, you should reflect on yourself. Ask yourself what you can do to improve yourself, so that in the next exam you can do better."

After that, Chang started to practice charity daily. One night, he had a dream. He dreamt that he was in a building and he picked up an exam Recorder Book. In it, many names had been erased. He questioned the person standing next to it. That man said, "This is a list of people who are supposed to pass the exam this year."

Chang then asked, "Why are so many names erased?"

The man replied, "Every three years in the nether world, we reexamine the name list of those - who are supposed to pass the Imperial Examination. Only those who haven't done evil and have accumulated certain merit can stay on the list. The names erased are those who have committed wrong doings."

The man then pointed to a place in the Record Book and said, "These last three years you have been very careful in your behavior. It is likely that you can pass this exam with this ranking." Indeed, Chang passed the examination, ranking 105th.

Thus there is a purpose to the old saying: "Never do wrong. Three feet above one's head stand the gods."

We live in a world full of mishaps. How to avoid misfortune depends on one's mind. If one can have a warm and loving heart, a respect for all nature, all gods and all life forms, and observe oneself in one's behavior, then one will be protected by gods and deities.

However, if one lives one's life based on vanity and pride, executing power carelessly, one will have a dark future. Even if one has any luck at all, it will not be long lasting. Thus a wise person will not deny his blessing by esteeming himself too highly. In fact, being humble enables one to accept teachings from others, thus improving oneself greatly in virtue. This is a necessary attitude for a cultivator.

There is a Buddhist saying: "If one asks for riches, one shall have riches. If one asks for fame, one shall have fame."

If one learns to set the goal of never forgetting to be humble, never forgetting to yield to others, then heaven will be touched. Therefore, success rests upon oneself.

Mencius stated, "If one can learn ethics and set one's hopes and goals for the welfare of all people, then one shall achieve serenity and eternal happiness."

However, most people in this world look only to their own immediate future and success. They do not have a determined mind and they easily give up. Most people are very shortsighted and lack persistence.

Therefore, those who want to improve their fate need to have a persistent mind with a determined goal, and they need to do as many acts of charity as possible to benefit people.

Only then will fate not control them.

Bibliography

Grand Master Sheng-yen Lu and True Buddha School



Grand Master Sheng-yen Lu is a prominent religious figure throughout Southeast Asia. As of 1999, over 4 million people have taken refuge in his True Buddha School. With over 300 chapters worldwide, the True Buddha School is recognized as a major component in Buddhism today.

Grand Master Sheng-yen Lu was born in 1945 in Taiwan. In 1982, he settled in the United States to promote Buddhist teachings in the West. He has since built a major Buddhist temple, the Ling Shen Ching Tze Temple in Redmond, Washington, and a large retreat center in the Cascade Mountains.

Originally a Christian, Grand Master Lu was twenty-six years old when a profound mystical experience led him to study Taoism, Sutrayana and Tantric Buddhism. After intense training and practice over a period of fourteen years, he became a Master of exceptional accomplishment in these disciplines and achieved Perfect Enlightenment.

Grand Master Lu is revered as a Living Buddha by his students. By practicing the True Buddha Tantric Dharma, as taught by the Living Buddha, one can realize Awakening and Liberation in this present life.

Grand Master Lu is also a prolific writer, having published over 140 books in Chinese on such varied topics as Tantric Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Feng Shui and Taoism. Many of these books are now being translated into English.

Further Information

You can find out more about True Buddha School on the Internet by visiting <http://www.tbsn.org>

You can visit the UK's True Buddha Schools chapters at:

True Buddha Temple

265 Willesden Lane,
London, NW2
Tel: 0208 451 9118

Alternatively, you can contact us at Rising Dragon Enterprises for further information and literature:

Rising Dragon Enterprises

35 Fishers Field,
Buckingham, MK18 1SF
Tel: 01280 823278

Please note that Rising Dragon Enterprises is not a part of True Buddha School. We practice and support Grand Master Sheng-yen Lu's teachings and have access to much of his translated works. We would be happy to assist in any way we can.