11. Liao Fan's Four Teachings — A Guide to Establishing Virtue and Cultivating the Person

Recently I read a vernacular translation of Liao Fan's Four Teachings and was deeply moved. That Mr. Yuan Liaofan set down in writing what he gained from lived experience, bequeathing his teachings to later generations, is truly admirable.

At first, Mr. Liaofan resigned himself to the calculations of fate and destiny, seeking nothing further. Later he encountered Master Yungu, who used the words "Destiny is made by me; blessings are sought by oneself," "Every field of blessings lies within the heart; seek from the heart, and there is no resonance that fails to connect," "Calamities sent by Heaven may still be evaded; calamities wrought by oneself leave no escape," and "A family that accumulates goodness will surely have abundant blessings" to shatter Liaofan's fatalistic outlook of leaving everything to Heaven's will. The Master then further encouraged him with the path of cultivating the person and establishing destiny and of eliminating evil while accumulating goodness. Mr. Liaofan upheld these teachings, conducting himself with vigilant caution, humbly inclining toward goodness, and in time he verified that the words "Though Heaven is trustworthy, destiny is not constant" and "Whatever is called fortune or calamity is all self-sought" were no empty claim.

Correcting Faults

Having clearly understood that fortune and calamity are self-sought, and that destiny is established by oneself, one must then cultivate the person and accumulate virtue, correct one's faults and turn toward goodness. In the methods of correcting faults, one must first develop a sense of shame and a sense of reverent awe, and moreover one must have the courage to swiftly root out evil and correct faults. There are three methods of eliminating evil. The first is to correct at the level of deeds: after committing a fault, quietly reflect. The second is to correct at the level of reasoning: think carefully through everything beforehand so that once the principle is clear, one does not commit faults. But the best approach remains to correct at the level of the heart, because if the heart harbors no stirring of thought, no selfishness, no desire, then from where could faults

possibly arise? Therefore, if one cultivates the heart, illuminates principle, and restrains faults — relying on good friends for reminders and the spirits as witnesses — repenting single-mindedly and turning toward goodness, the heart and spirit will surely grow serene and expansive; wisdom will open suddenly, and one will be able to still the heart and settle one's nature.

Accumulating Goodness

After correcting faults, one must still accumulate goodness and merit, dissolve the karmic debts of past lives, and transform one's destiny. Therefore, in the methods of accumulating goodness, the text draws on such principles and examples as: "A family that accumulates goodness will surely have abundant blessings," "It is more blessed to give than to receive," "Protecting life brings good reward," "A person who accumulates virtue is revered by spirits," "Redressing injustice and reducing punishment accords with Heaven's heart," "Revering the divine and protecting the Dharma brings prosperity to one's descendants," as well as the distinctions between true and false goodness, upright and crooked goodness, manifest goodness and hidden virtue, partial and correct goodness, and how to gauge motive regardless of scale or difficulty — all to illustrate the principles and guidelines of doing good. As for the specific methods of accumulating goodness, they are too numerous to list in full, but include: (1) Be good to others, (2) Maintain a heart of respect and love, (3) Help others achieve their good ends, (4) Encourage others toward goodness, (5) Rescue people in urgent danger, (6) Undertake great works of public benefit, (7) Give away wealth to create blessings, (8) Uphold and protect the true Dharma, (9) Respect and honor elders, (10) Cherish and spare living creatures. If one extends and practices these methods broadly, then every kind of merit can be perfectly fulfilled.

The Benefits of Humility

Finally, in "The Benefits of Humility," the Yijing is cited: "The way of Heaven diminishes the full and augments the humble; the way of Earth transforms the full and flows to the humble; spirits harm the full and bless the humble; the way of humanity despises the full and favors the humble." And the Book of Documents says: "Fullness invites loss; humility receives gain." These passages explain that a person should be as open and receptive as a valley, always maintaining humility, offering convenience to others, and in doing so one will surely move Heaven and Earth. Therefore, whoever cultivates the person and establishes destiny must persevere with firm resolve, broadly accumulate hidden virtue, and extend blessings in all directions — and then destiny will no longer be able to constrain that person.

"Every field of blessings lies within the heart; seek from the heart, and there is no resonance that fails to connect." "Fortune and calamity come from oneself." These words truly serve as a wake-up call for those who regard good and bad fortune as predetermined from a past life. "To reap a certain harvest, you must first plant accordingly." Each person's entire future life lies in one's own hands. Rather than leaving everything to fate, it is better to rise up and cultivate the person and establish destiny. Therefore, after studying the work carefully, we should embody Liaofan's fine

words and noble teachings: settle body and establish destiny, refrain from all evil, practice all good. As Master Shanxuan has said, those who cultivate Dao should use these teachings to deliver themselves and deliver others, awaken themselves and awaken others. Those who have not yet heard the sages' heart-method may read this book and come to know the method of cultivating the person, gain clear insight into the truth of human life, and further use it as a stepping stone toward seeking Dao — seeking the way to transcend birth and death. Liao Fan's Four Teachings, therefore, is our guidepost for establishing virtue and cultivating the person. If everyone upholds and practices it, society will surely reach the highest good, and we shall not have failed the painstaking effort of Mr. Liaofan.

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