



The Happiness Code
for
Family Harmony and Social Peace

BY KHENPO SODARGYE

**THE HAPPINESS CODE FOR
FAMILY HARMONY AND SOCIAL PEACE:**

Illuminating The Classic of Filial Piety
with Buddhist Wisdom

By Khenpo Sodargye

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The Classic of Filial Piety

(Root Text)

Chapter One: Opening the Theme and Illuminating Its Meaning

Zhongni (Confucius) was in his dwelling place, and Zeng Zi was attending to him. Confucius said, “The former kings possessed the highest virtue as their vital way to bring the realm into accord. (By practicing the way,) people lived in peace and harmony so that neither those above nor below harbored resentment. Do you know what it is?”

Zeng Zi got off his seat and said, “I, Shen, am not wise enough; how could I know?”

The Master said, “Filial piety is the foundation of all virtues, the source from which education is born. Sit down again, and I will tell you.

“Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received from our parents; therefore, we dare not damage or wound them. That is the beginning of filial piety. We establish ourselves and practice the way to spread our good name through future generations, thereby bringing honor to our parents. This is the ultimate fulfillment of filial piety. Filial piety begins with attending to our parents, extends to serving the rulers, and culminates in establishing ourselves.

“As it is said in the ‘Major Odes’, ‘You must remember your ancestors and uphold the virtues which you inherit from them.’”

Chapter Two: The Emperor as the Son of Heaven

The Master said, “Loving one’s parents, one dares not dislike others. Revering one’s parents, one dares not disrespect others. With love and respect being exerted to the utmost in serving the parents, such virtuous conduct and teaching educate and transform the common people, serving as exemplary to the four seas. This is the filial piety of the Son of Heaven.

“‘Fu on Punishment’ says, ‘When one person has felicity, millions of people will look to him as their dependence.’”

Chapter Three: The Feudal Lords

“Above others, yet not arrogant, one can dwell on high without peril. By practicing frugality and caution, one’s resources are abundant but never wastefully overflowing. To be in a high position without jeopardy is the way to preserve nobility for the long term; to have abundance in one’s resources without waste is the way to preserve wealth for the long term. With wealth and nobility always present, one can protect one’s *sheji* (state) and bring harmony to the people. This is the filial piety of feudal lords.

“The *Classic of Poetry* says, ‘Ever so cautious, as if standing upon the brink of a deep abyss or treading on thin ice.’

Chapter Four: The Ministers and High Officials

“They dare not wear what is not prescribed by the former kings’ regulations on clothing; they dare not speak what is not in accordance with the former kings’ regulations on speech; they dare not exhibit conduct that does not correspond to the former kings’ virtuous conduct.

“Therefore, speak nothing unprescribed; do nothing deviating from the way. In speech, there is no need to choose what to say; in conduct, no need to choose what to do. Their words fill the empire, yet are without fault; their actions fill the empire, yet provoke no dissatisfaction or resentment. When these three aspects are fully aligned with propriety, they are able to safeguard their ancestral temples. This represents the filial piety of ministers and high officials.

“The *Classic of Poetry* says, ‘Never slackening day or night, to serve one person.’

Chapter Five: The Lower Officials

“Draw upon one’s devotion to one’s fathers to serve one’s mothers, and the love is the same; draw upon one’s devotion to one’s father to serve one’s lord, and the respect is the same. Thus, the mother takes the love while the lord takes the respect; the one who takes both is the father.

“Hence, service to the lord with filial piety is loyalty; service to superiors with respect is compliance. Through unwavering loyalty and compliance in service to those above, one can preserve one’s position and continue one’s ancestral rituals and offerings. This is the filial piety of the lower officials.

“The *Classic of Poetry* says, ‘From early morning to nightfall, do not disgrace those who gave you life.’

Chapter Six: The Common People

“By following the course of heaven and making use of earth’s resources to best advantage, and by being prudent in one’s conduct and frugal in one’s expenditure, one supports one’s parents. This is the filial piety of the common people.

“Thus, from the Son of Heaven to the common people, filial piety has no beginning or end; no one should be concerned that they are inadequate for the task.”

Chapter Seven: The Three Powers

Zeng Zi said, “Profound indeed! How great is filial piety!”

Confucius said, “Filial piety is the principle of heaven, the righteousness of earth, and the ethical conduct of the people. The laws of heaven, earth, and humanity are what the people take as their model. Thus, the rulers benefit all through emulating the heaven to illuminate and the earth to support, so as to bring the entire realm into accord. That way, the teaching is not stern yet effective; the governing is not severe, yet good order reigns.

“The former kings recognized that education transforms the people; consequently, they first led with universal love, thereby ensuring no one would neglect their parents. When the former kings explained the meaning of morality, such conduct became popular among the people. When the former kings set an example of respect and yield, the people did not contend. When the former kings used rites and music to guide the people, they became harmonious. When the former kings clarified the distinction between good and evil, the people understood what was forbidden.

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘Oh, renowned Master Yin, the people all look to you.’”

Chapter Eight: Governing through Filial Piety

Confucius said, “In ancient times, when wise kings governed their territories through filial piety, they dared not neglect even the ministers of small states—how much less so the dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons? Therefore, the kings won the allegiance of all the states and inspired them to assist in serving the ancestral kings. Those who governed feudal states dared not insult widowers and widows—how much less the lower officials and common people? Therefore, they won the hearts of the people and enlisted their help in serving ancestral lords. Those who governed families dared not neglect their servants—how much less so their wives and children? Therefore, they won the affection of others and had them serve their own parents.

“This way, when alive, one’s parents can relax; when deceased, their spirits can enjoy the offerings. Thus, the empire was at peace; natural disasters did not occur, and disorders were averted. That was how wise rulers used filial piety to govern the realm.

“The *Classic of Poetry* says, ‘When there is great virtue, states from all four directions comply.’”

Chapter Nine: Sagely Governing

Zeng Zi asked, “May I presume to ask, is there any virtue of the sages that surpasses filial piety?”

Confucius replied, “Of all the beings in heaven and on earth, humans are the most precious. In human conduct, nothing is more important than filial piety. In filial piety, nothing is more important than revering one’s father. In revering one’s father, nothing is more important than matching him with Heaven. The Duke of Zhou embodied this. In ancient times, the Duke of Zhou offered suburban rituals to Hou Ji to assist the ritual to Heaven; he performed ancestral ritual offerings to King Wen in the Bright Hall to assist the ritual to the Five Celestial Emperors. Therefore, within the four seas, all residents participated in the rituals according to their social classes.

“Of the sages’ virtues, what can surpass filial piety? Therefore, love for parents should begin in early childhood; as children are nurtured by their parents and take proper care of them, the veneration grows with each passing day. The sage taught reverence through respect toward the father, and taught love through affection toward the mother. The sage’s teaching succeeded without severity; their governance ruled without harshness, because their teaching lay at

the very root—the fundamental virtue of filial piety. The proper way between father and son is a natural propensity that, by extension, becomes the appropriate relationship between ruler and minister. Your parents gave birth to you, and nothing is greater than continuity.

“In both parent-child and subordinate-supervisor relationships, nothing is more important than filial respect. Therefore, those who do not love their own parents, but love others, are said to have perverse virtue; those who do not respect their own parents, but respect others, are said to have perverse propriety. To gain the people’s obedience, education rooted in such perversity would be counterproductive, leaving them without any standards. Individuals who never engage in virtuous conduct, but instead persist in non-virtuous deeds, will not be esteemed by noble persons, even if they achieve worldly success.

“A noble person, however, is not like that. Before speaking, he carefully considers whether the words are appropriate. His actions bring joy to others. He is honored for his virtue and righteousness. His way of handling matters serves as a model to be followed. His demeanor is admirable, and his choices and conduct set a standard for others to emulate. When such a noble person governs the people according to these principles, the people respect and love him; they

look up to him as a model and emulate his example. Therefore, such a ruler is able to effectively carry out moral education and smoothly implement political decrees.

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘A noble person’s deportment is flawless.’”

Chapter Ten: A Record of Filial Conduct

Confucius said, “When filial children serve their parents, they show utmost reverence in daily life, bring joy while providing care, show concern when parents fall ill, express grief when parents pass, and present genuine respect during ancestral rites. Only when these five aspects are fulfilled can one truly serve one’s parents.

“Those who are truly able to serve their parents are not arrogant when in high positions, do not act unlawfully when in middle positions, and do not engage in conflict when in low positions. To be arrogant in high positions leads to destruction; to act unlawfully in middle positions faces punishment; to engage in conflict in low positions results in violence. If these three behaviors are not eliminated, even daily offerings of the three animals’ meat cannot be considered filial.”

Chapter Eleven: The Five Punishments

Confucius said, "Among the 3,000 offenses subject to the Five Punishments, none is more egregious than filial impiety. Those who threaten rulers recognize no authority above them; those who slander sages acknowledge no law; those who denigrate filial conduct recognize no parents. These three lead to great chaos."

Chapter Twelve: Expounding the Vital Way

Confucius said, "To teach the people mutual respect and love, nothing is better than filial devotion. To teach the people propriety and compliance, nothing is better than fraternal respect. To transform societal norms and customs, nothing is better than music. To bring peace to the nation and govern its people well, nothing is better than ritual propriety. The essence of ritual propriety is simply reverence.

"Therefore, respect the father, and the sons are happy; respect the elder brother, and the younger brothers are happy; respect the lord, and the subjects are happy. By honoring one individual, countless others are made joyful. The object of respect may be few in number, yet those who feel pleased by that respect are many. This is what is meant by 'vital way.'"

Chapter Thirteen: Expanding the Highest Virtue

Confucius said, “The way a noble ruler teaches filial piety is not by visiting each household or meeting people daily face-to-face. Filial piety is taught so that all fathers in the nation are respected. Fraternal respect is taught so that all elder brothers in the nation are respected. Ministerial deference is taught so that every lord in the nation is respected.

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘The kind and compassionate lord is the parent of the people.’ Without supreme virtue, how could one possibly bring such remarkable accord to the people?”

Chapter Fourteen: Widely Spreading One’s Name

Confucius said, “A noble person is filial in serving his parents, and so his loyalty can be transferred to serving his ruler. He is respectful in serving his elder brothers, and so his obedience can be transferred to serving his elders. He is well-organized in managing his household, and so his governing ability can be transferred to official duties. In this way, noble qualities are cultivated at home, and one’s name is honored for generations to come.”

Chapter Fifteen: On Remonstrance

Zeng Zi said, “Regarding compassion, respect, caring for one’s parents, and bringing honor to one’s family for generations—these principles I have already heard from you. But may I venture to ask, if a son simply obeys every command from his father, can that be considered true filial piety?”

Confucius replied, “What are you saying! What are you saying! In ancient times, when the Son of Heaven had seven types of remonstrating ministers, even if he lacked virtue, he would not lose his empire. When a feudal lord had five types of remonstrating officials, even if he lacked virtue, he would not lose his state. When ministers and high officials had three types of remonstrating officials, even if they lacked virtue, they would not lose their households. When common people had friends who offered sincere advice, they would not lose their good name. When a father has a son who will remonstrate with him, he will not fall into unrighteousness. So when there is unrighteousness, a son cannot refrain from remonstrating with his father, and a minister cannot refrain from remonstrating with the ruler. One must speak up against immorality. How could simply obeying the commands of one’s father be deemed filial?”

Chapter Sixteen: Feeling and Responding

Confucius said, “In ancient times, wise kings served their fathers with filial piety; seeing this, the deities of Heaven recognized them as filial sovereigns. When rulers served their mothers with filial devotion, the deities of Earth likewise recognized them as filial sovereigns. The elders and the juniors were harmonious with each other, and therefore proper order prevailed among those above and those below. When Heaven and Earth observe with clarity, divine blessings become manifest. Thus, even the Son of Heaven must revere someone—namely, his father; and must defer to someone—namely, his elder brothers.

“At the ancestral temple, sacrifice rituals are performed, and offerings are made in remembrance of parents and ancestors. One cultivates one’s character and is careful in one’s conduct out of concern that one might bring dishonor to one’s ancestors. When offerings are made with reverence at the ancestral temples, the spirits and deities will manifest. When filial piety and fraternal love reach their utmost perfection, their power connects with the divine, illuminates the four seas, and penetrates everywhere without obstruction.

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘From west to east, from south to north, there is no one who does not show respect.’”

Chapter Seventeen: Serving One’s Lord

Confucius said, “When a noble person serves his superior, he should contemplate carefully and be loyal. Upon leaving office, he should continue to reflect on any errors and make amends where needed. He supports the superiors’ policies while helping correct their faults. Thus, those above and below can maintain harmony.

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘My heart is filled with love and reverence for him—where is too distant that I cannot speak to him directly. Deep in my heart I treasure him—when will I ever forget him?’”

Chapter Eighteen: The Passing of a Parent

Confucius said, “When a filial child mourns the loss of a parent, they weep without melodic inflection, perform rituals without elaborate makeup, speak plainly without eloquence, feel uncomfortable in fine clothing, find no joy in music, and taste no flavor in delicious food. These are genuine expressions of grief and sorrow.

“After three days of mourning, one is expected to resume normal eating. It is the emperor’s responsibility to teach the people not to

harm their own lives through excessive grief over death, and not to violate human nature by mourning beyond what is reasonable. Such is the policy established by the sages. Mourning does not exceed three years; this teaches the people that grief has its proper limits.

“Prepare inner and outer coffins, burial garments, and shrouds for one’s deceased parent, and carefully place the body within the coffins. Offering vessels are arranged to express the grief and sorrow of the living. Beating their chests and stamping their feet, weeping and wailing, the mourners escort the deceased with deep sorrow. Divination is used to determine the timing of the final send-off and the location of the proper gravesite. The body is then interred in peace. Prepare an ancestral temple to place the spirit tablet and make offerings so that the departed can enjoy them. Conduct rituals annually to regularly remember the departed.

“While parents are alive, serve them with love and respect; when they have passed away, attend to their affairs with sorrow and care. By fulfilling these fundamental and meaningful duties of humanity, which embrace life and death, filial children bring their service to their parents to its culmination.”

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with Buddhist Wisdom

By Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture One

April 4, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

A Personal Approach

This course will explore *The Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing)*, a foundational Confucian text and a key part of Chinese cultural heritage. While my primary expertise lies in Buddhism, notably Tibetan Buddhism, my interest in this text has grown over the years. Though I am not an expert, I have read it a few times and find its teachings increasingly relevant. Last year, while teaching in Switzerland, due to special causes and conditions, I revisited this classic along with some other traditional Chinese texts. At that time, I felt compelled to share its wisdom with others and made a vow to do so. Now, the right conditions have come together for this aspiration to bear fruit.

Unlike traditional Buddhist teachings, which are rooted in established lineages and transmissions, my approach to this classic text will be more personal and individualized. I will share insights from traditional Chinese culture, ancient Buddhist wisdom, and modern societal contexts. Since this course does not involve formal

guru-disciple lineage transmission, we can engage with the text more collaboratively and openly.

That said, for Buddhist texts, especially tantric scriptures, it is vital to respect the proper method of transmission. I have seen some teachers passionately share their favorite Dzogchen books with their students, even teaching the pointing-out instruction¹ publicly. From the perspective of a tantric practitioner, however, profound teachings of Tantrayana are typically not shared without meeting specific prerequisites. But that is a topic for another time; today, our focus is on traditional Chinese culture.

The Global Relevance of This Classic

The Classic of Filial Piety holds significant importance. Some may assume that it is just a guide for children to obey their parents and dismiss its relevance for adults. In reality, its teachings extend far beyond parent-child relationships. The text outlines five types of filial piety, each corresponding to distinct roles—such as emperors, officials, and commoners. It also offers practical guidance on how to fulfill these filial duties, cultivate virtue, and navigate relationships with wisdom. Therefore, the classic has been highly regarded for over two thousand years, not just in China but around the world.

While some argue that the Eastern ideal of filial piety conflicts with certain Western cultural principles, potentially dampening interest abroad, the extensive translation of classic texts like this suggests otherwise. Not mentioning other works, this classic alone has been translated at least six or seven times into English. It is also available in Japanese, French, German, Spanish, and Italian, among other languages.

People across cultures continue to draw inspiration from the wisdom of ancient Chinese sages. Although portions of these classical teachings may not fully align with every cultural perspective, a significant number of people, including many distinguished scholars, acknowledge their enduring significance. For them, studying classical Chinese thought remains not only intellectually rewarding but also deeply relevant, offering lasting insights for both academic rigor scholarship and personal growth.

Why Might Interest in Traditional Culture Be Changing in China?

Historically, venerable intellectuals accorded great significance to Chinese classical texts. *The Classic of Filial Piety* probably ranked among the most popular classic works. Despite its brevity—just over 1,800 characters—it was highly esteemed by generations of

emperors and ministers alike. According to historical records, Tang Emperor Xuanzong and Qing rulers Shunzhi and Yongzheng not only studied it from their teachers but also wrote commentaries on it. When influential leaders treat Confucian classics as matters of great importance, the ideas they emphasize inevitably become internalized by society—leading to the remarkable flourishing and long endurance of Confucian culture throughout history.

However, in contemporary China, interest in this text, and in traditional culture more broadly, has waned. This decline stems from a confluence of factors, two of which are particularly significant. The first factor is the lingering impact of the Cultural Revolution.² During that tumultuous period, traditional culture suffered devastating blows. I remember participating in rallies criticizing “Kong Lao’er” (Confucius).³ Not yet in school (I began at sixteen), I did not even know who he was. Still, everywhere propaganda posters depicted him as an extremely ugly old man, accompanied by captions condemning his “decayed and corrupt thinking.” In that environment, even I, a young yak herder, was led to believe he must be awful.

Under the People’s Commune system⁴ at the time, our family was responsible for raising hundreds of yaks. Before turning sixteen, I spent my days herding yaks in the snowy mountains and forests under the blue sky and white clouds, singing Mani songs.⁵ Although I

did not receive much formal education, I had a beautiful boyhood in a relatively free environment. It is similar to the West, where parents often allow their children to grow up in an open environment to broaden their imagination and foster an open-minded mindset.

It was a beautiful childhood, but it was also a time when traditional culture was actively dismissed. I recall that our family occasionally received notifications in the middle of the night demanding attendance at the next day's "Criticize Lin (Lin Biao), Criticize Kong (Confucius)" rally. They were delivered by those labeled as having "one layer of stigma" or "two layers of stigma" due to their undesirable class background.⁶ My father and I took turns attending. As a child who had never been in contact with large crowds, I felt both excited and anxious—awed by the crowds yet fearful of being singled out. It was during this time that I heard dismissive and even hostile remarks about traditional teachings. The Cultural Revolution was truly catastrophic for traditional culture, potentially creating a generational gap in cultural transmission.

Another key factor in the evolution of traditional Chinese culture is its dynamic interaction with contemporary global culture. In some ways, this influence is of a different nature than the challenges of the Cultural Revolution. While that period saw significant damage to the external structures of Confucian temples and Buddhist

monasteries, people's inner reverence for inherited traditions and devotion to the Three Jewels remained. In contrast, the influence of globalization today operates more on the level of values and beliefs.

The forces of rapid modernization and globalization in China have created a cultural tension between ascendant individualistic values and traditional collectivist norms. As a result, individual priorities increasingly supersede long-held social and familial obligations. Such a trend places traditional Chinese culture in a precarious position, vulnerable to erosion by dominant global influences. If this trend continues, essential elements of classical heritage risk being marginalized or fading from everyday life, resulting in an irreparable loss of cultural heritage.

The Significance of Studying Traditional Culture in the Twenty-First Century

Understanding traditional Chinese culture is essential for everyone in the modern world, regardless of one's religious beliefs. Even Buddhist monks and nuns who reside in secluded monasteries should study it. Suppose we Buddhists focus solely on our own doctrines and terms, such as ultimate truth and conventional truth, without

stepping outside our comfort zone to understand the broader cultural context. In that case, we risk becoming disconnected from society and struggling to communicate with others.

Perhaps due to the influence of contemporary foreign culture, many today assume that only Western logic and science are valid, while traditional culture is optional or even irrelevant. Under certain circumstances, this might be the case. While engaging with classic texts like this one, bear in mind that it is impossible for ancient teachings to align with modern values and developments fully. After all, this text was composed more than two thousand years ago. Over time, human society has undergone earth-shattering changes—from an agricultural society to an industrial one, then into the digital age. As the world has undergone drastic changes, so have people's values, lifestyles, and many other aspects.

Yet, many excellent traditional teachings continue to hold profound relevance in modern society and deserve thorough study. In fact, many contemporary family and social issues can be traced back to a diminished sense of traditional familial and societal responsibility. Our actions are under the guidance of our values, which are largely shaped by our education and the cultural environment.

Why Both Parents and Children Should Study This Classic?

While children can benefit from this text, it is perhaps even more essential for parents to study it. The concept of filial piety is much broader than most people realize. This text extends beyond teaching children how to behave; it provides practical advice that can enhance everyday life.

A multitude of parents today grapple with how to instill the correct values in their children. But if parents do not understand the essence of filial piety themselves—if they do not respect their own parents or teachers—how can they expect their children to learn these values? Children often learn their behaviors by mirroring their parents, so a lack of filial piety can be a learned trait. Inadequate or misguided parental guidance can be a root cause of youth violence. Overindulgent parents who shield their children from consequences can allow bad habits to develop unchecked until they become unmanageable. This is a social issue that warrants serious reflection from all parents.

When I taught another classic Confucian text, *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child (Di Zi Gui)*, I encouraged both parents and children to study it. Many parents, after completing the course,

reflected on their behaviors toward their elders. Some deeply regretted their past shortcomings, realizing only too late that they had not properly cared for their parents when they were alive. While they could not undo their actions, it is commendable that they gave rise to such a precious sense of repentance and gratitude.

Filial piety is not merely a culturally specific ideal; it is a universal imperative to honor and express gratitude to our parents. Nor is it exclusive to Chinese or other Eastern cultures—many religious and ethical traditions, including Buddhism, emphasize it. A myriad of Buddhist scriptures extol the deep kindness of our parents and how to repay it, including the *Difficulty of Repaying the Profound Kindness of Parents Sutra*. The *Ullambana Sutra* and the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* likewise highlight filial duties and concrete ways to repay the kindness of one's parents, particularly mothers.

It is best to understand teachings on filial duties while our parents are still alive so we can properly repay their kindness. Even if they have passed, studying these teachings allows us to examine our past actions and, if necessary, practice repentance. It is also wise to minimize conflicts with our parents while they are still with us. Too often, people only realize the depth of their parents' kindness after they are gone. A close friend once confided in me: "When my

parents were alive, we never got along. But now that they are gone, all I can recall is how kind they were to me. But no matter how much I regret it now, it is too late.”

I am at peace with the care I provided for my late parents while they were alive and have no regrets in that regard. Even so, I still feel I could have done more to accumulate merit in their behalf after their passing. According to Buddhist tradition and Tibetan customs, children continue to honor their deceased parents by performing a great deal of virtuous activities and dedicating the resulting boundless merit to them. It is indeed a meaningful way to repay parents’ kindness and love.

Filial Piety in a Cross-Cultural World

After spending time in Western countries, I came to realize that Western cultures have their own approach to filial piety. By about age eighteen, young adults are generally expected to be independent rather than under constant parental supervision. In many Western countries, adult children often relate to their parents more as equals, and intensive, co-resident eldercare is less common than in much of East Asia. That said, it seems that Western parents accept that their children may not be their primary caregivers in old age. Rooted in traditions that value individual autonomy, they tend to embrace an

independent lifestyle and plan to manage their later years on their own.

However, for many immigrants in the West, the intergenerational cultural gap can lead to tension. I have encountered a significant number of first-generation or second-generation Chinese immigrants who struggle to navigate the diverse cultural values. For example, holding a strong conventional value of providing for children, Chinese parents usually cover all their children's tuition and living expenses, refusing to let them work even after they become adults. But their Western-educated children may not reciprocate with traditional filial piety. Over time, parents continue to give, but never receive their children's filial respect, leaving them with complaints and grievances. We often hear comments like, "I sacrificed everything for my children, paid for their college, and now they do not even acknowledge me!"

What these parents fail to realize is that while their children's looks remain typically Asian, their values and lifestyles are entirely Westernized. They have fully assimilated into Western cultures. When parents still hold onto the ancient tradition of filial piety, their second or third-generation children have become, in every way, Westerners.

It is understandable to feel that some of these traditional ideas are outdated and hard to accept, especially if you are familiar with both Eastern and Western perspectives. I encourage you to approach this classic text with an open mind. We do not need to agree with everything uncritically; instead, we can discuss and reflect on the teachings we have not yet embraced.

Authorship and Versions

Scholars have been debating about the authorship and versions of *The Classic of Filial Piety*. I will briefly touch upon these opinions without delving into detail, as most of you present here probably already know them. In Chinese history, during the Qin Dynasty's notorious movement "Burning Books and Burying Scholars,"⁷ most previously existing classic texts were burned to ashes, which played a role in fueling this debate.

Like the Bible and other esteemed ancient texts, the text has been transmitted in multiple versions over time. *The Book of Sui* records that the classic survived because of Yan Zhi, who secretly preserved it.⁸ The focus of our course will be this version. According to the *Book of Han*, another version written in ancient script was discovered in the wall of Confucius's former residence during the Western Han Dynasty.⁹

Scholars have proposed various theories about its authorship. Some attribute it to Confucius, others to his disciple Zeng Zi, his grandson Zisi, Mencius, Mencius' disciples, or the seventy-two noble disciples of Confucius. Some even claim it was a later fabrication. However, no definitive conclusion has been reached to this day. The more plausible theory is that it was composed by Zisi. Given his familial and scholarly lineage—Confucius taught Zeng Zi, and Zeng Zi taught Zisi—certain historians drew an inference that Zisi was the likely author.

In fact, it is not uncommon that the exact authorship of some pieces of ancient literature is uncertain. Regardless of its uncertain versions and authorship, the text's core teachings clearly align with Confucian thought.

Confucius and His Blessing Power

Confucius, the founder of Confucian philosophy, lived roughly around the same time as the Shakyamuni Buddha (623–543BCE).¹⁰ He had a lifespan of seventy-two years¹¹ from 551BCE to 479BCE.¹² Though his exact lifespan is a matter of debate, what is undisputed is that he was revered as a sage by people of his time, much like how a buddha or bodhisattva is regarded by Buddhists.

Without question, *The Classic of Filial Piety* is a cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture. Yet, I confess that in lecturing on it, I do not always sense the same spiritual blessing that is so present when teaching Buddhist scriptures. I engage with this text out of respect for our cultural heritage. When I teach a Buddhist text, I regard the spiritual blessing of its original author as crucial. Does this classic confer such a blessing? As a text within the tradition of the sage-like Confucius, one might expect it to; nevertheless, I cannot say with certainty.

THE TITLE: THE CLASSIC OF FILIAL PIETY (*XIAOJING*)

The Meaning of *Xiao* and *Jing*

The meaning of *xiao* or filial piety is very profound. In addition to obedience to one's parents, *xiao* also means upholding ethical conduct, respecting, and serving. The Chinese character “孝” for *xiao* carries profound symbolism. It is an associative compound ideogram consisting of two parts. The top part “老” means “old,” signifying elders. The bottom part “子” means “child,” symbolizing the younger generation. This visual structure conveys the principle that children support and honor their elders, and disciples respect their teachers.

The Chinese character “经” (*Jing*) has been given various meanings throughout history. In Tibetan Buddhism, it strictly refers to the Buddha's words (sutras), while commentaries written by bodhisattvas and great masters are called treatises (shastras). Understanding the distinction between sutra and shastra is crucial. By contrast, in Han Buddhism, certain treatises—such as *The Platform*

Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch—are also honored with the title of *jing* or sutra. Accordingly, perhaps in ancient China, the most precious teachings or highly revered texts were collectively referred to as *jing*.

By the Tang Dynasty, *The Classic of Filial Piety* was formally recognized as a classic. During the Southern Song Dynasty, it was included in *The Thirteen Classics*, the canonical collection of core Confucian texts.

CHAPTER ONE: OPENING THE THEME AND ILLUMINATING ITS MEANING

The Classic of Filial Piety is composed of eighteen chapters. For our series of lectures, my plan is to explore one chapter at a time, perhaps covering two when the chapters are particularly brief. The first chapter, titled “Opening the Theme and Illuminating Its Meaning,” encapsulates the meaning of the entire text. Now, let us turn to the main text.

Brief Explanation of the Significance of Morality

Zhongni (Confucius) was in his dwelling place, and Zeng Zi was attending to him.

Zhongni was the courtesy name for Confucius. Confucius was resting in his residence, and his disciple, Zeng Zi, was attending to him by his side.

Zeng Zi, also known as Zeng Shen or Zeng Can, was a descendant of the Yellow Emperor¹³ and was widely renowned for his exemplary

virtue, especially his exceptional filial piety. His story in *The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars* illustrates the depth of his devotion to his mother. It shows how his heart was so deeply connected to his mother's that he could sense her distress and pain, even from a distance.

One day, while Zeng Zi was gathering firewood in the mountains, some unexpected guests arrived at his home. His mother felt flustered, unsure how to host them properly on her own. I am reminded of my own father, who would grow anxious whenever a guest arrived while my mother was away. In Tibetan culture, entertaining guests is often quite simple; one might offer some tsampa (roasted barley flour) and share in some light conversation. But my father, being somewhat reserved, struggled with conversation. So, he would always send my brothers and me to find my mother to host guests.

Zeng Zi's mother must have felt a similar sense of unease at the time. When the guests arrived, she did not know how to conduct herself and wanted her son to return home quickly. However, Zeng Zi delayed his return. In an age without modern means of communication like cell phones or the internet, she resorted to an extraordinary act to communicate her distress: she bit her own finger. As she bit down hard, Zeng Zi suddenly felt a sharp pain in

his heart. Sensing his mother needed him, he immediately carried his firewood and rushed home. Upon arriving, he knelt before her and asked what the matter was. His mother explained, “Some guests came unexpectedly, so I bit my finger to arouse you to return to me.”

This can be perceived as their unique way of communicating—a profound, heart-to-heart connection. Such a bond is rooted in his mother’s deep kindness toward him and his unwavering devotion and respect in return. In today’s world, such level of mutual respect and devotion can seem increasingly rare. One may wonder if these silent, profound connections still exist, or perhaps they have become too subtle for our hurried lives to nurture or even recognize.

Confucius said, “The former kings possessed the highest virtue as their vital way to bring the realm into accord. (By practicing the way,) people lived in peace and harmony so that neither those above nor below harbored resentment. Do you know what it is?”

Confucius told Zeng Zi that the preceding sovereigns—such as Yao, Shun, and Yu—upheld the most sublime moral principle as their essential way of conduct and governance. Such highest virtue aligned people’s hearts with wholesome values. By following this

path, people always lived in peace and harmony, free from disputes and conflict. There was no grievance, ill will, or resentment between and among the upper and lower classes. Confucius then asked Zeng Zi if he knew of this vital principle.

Zeng Zi got off his seat and said, “I, Shen, am not wise enough; how could I know?”

Zeng Zi rose from his mat and replied humbly: “I am not intelligent enough; How could I possibly know the highest virtue?” In ancient times, people did not sit on chairs, sofas, or carpets as we do today. I see that some of you are so accustomed to chairs that sitting on the floor for our lecture¹⁴ requires you to constantly adjust your legs and massage your knees to stay comfortable.

Similar to Zeng Zi, who claimed that he was not wise, some of you said something like, “I am so ignorant; I understand nothing. Please bless me and grant me the wisdom of Manjushri!” Sometimes, claiming ignorance is an expression of genuine humility. As we learn in *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*,

*In front of a respected elder,
Do not show off.*

Thus, even if a student understands a topic, it is proper to maintain humility in front of their teachers or elders rather than boasting of one's knowledge. Here, we can infer that if Zeng Zi knew the answer, his great reverence for Confucius would lead him to respond humbly in the same way rather than claiming complete understanding.

Ancient societies upheld traditions of respecting teachers and honoring elders. Here, Zeng Zi showed respect for his teacher by "getting off his seat" prior to speaking to the teacher and calling himself "not wise." Similarly, as provided in Buddhist scriptures, disciples would "bare the right shoulder, kneel on the right knee, and with palms joined, respectfully address the Buddha." When Ananda spoke to the Buddha, he would typically drape his robe over his left shoulder and join his palms.

This deep respect for teachers and elders is, in itself, the highest virtue or the vital way that brings world peace. Virtue is truly crucial. Without a fundamental ethical baseline, the world can easily descend into chaos. We catch glimpses of this today in increasingly tense international relations and self-centered interpersonal relationships. These situations often stem from a lack of forbearance or an altruistic mind emphasized in Mahayana Buddhism, which encourages us to genuinely seek the well-being of others. When

individuals prioritize only their own interests, even at the expense of those around them, it not only causes suffering for others but ultimately for themselves as well. In fact, so much of humanity's suffering is self-inflicted.

The “vital way” that Confucius spoke of is one that enables everyone to live in happiness and harmony, free from resentment. Since Zeng Zi professed his ignorance on the matter, Confucius, as a good teacher, first offered a summarized explanation before elaborating further.

Brief Explanation of the “Vital Way”

The Master said, “Filial piety is the foundation of all virtues, the source from which education is born. Sit down again, and I will tell you.

Confucius revealed to Zeng Zi that the “vital way” was none other than filial piety. He explained that it is the very root of morality and the origin of ethical education. He then invited Zeng Zi to retake his seat so he could elaborate. This approach is similar to how the Buddha often began his teachings, with phrases like, “Listen attentively, and I will tell you.” It demonstrates how various wisdom traditions from ancient times usually share common principles.

A well-known Chinese proverb goes, “Of all the good deeds, filial piety is foremost.” Indeed, filial piety is the root of all goodness. When one practices filial piety, the respect and kindness shown to one’s parents naturally extend to other elders in the family and, ultimately, to the leaders of the nation. Conversely, neglecting this fundamental virtue can lead to a host of problems that affect the stability of both the family and society. This is why filial piety is held to be of paramount importance.

Cultural traditions have historically played a crucial role in shaping parenting styles. Eastern societies, influenced by Confucian thought, have traditionally placed a strong emphasis on family values and the authority of parents. In China, where filial piety has long been highly valued, parents feel a strong sense of responsibility to discipline their children. Many parents enforce strict control over their children from a young age and continue to oversee their lives indefinitely, which can leave children with little personal freedom. Certain parents in their seventies or eighties still treat their adult children like five-year-olds, constantly telling them what to do and what not to do.

At the same time, younger generations today have been exposed to Western cultural values. Though many wish to be obedient to their parents, they also crave independence and can find their

parents' ongoing guidance restrictive. Over time, this ideological gap between generations can lead to tension or even conflict. The situation can be further complicated as parents may become more irritable with age. Especially when living together, the slightest sign of defiance from a child might provoke a parent to say, "I raised you to adulthood, and now that you are well-educated, you will not even listen to me anymore?"

Even within some Buddhist families, conflicts can arise from time to time. You may have parents and children who have both taken the Mahayana path and generated bodhicitta, vowing to liberate limitless sentient beings. Yet, before they can benefit others, they find themselves struggling to resolve tensions within their own family.

As children mature into adults, the parent-child relationship naturally evolves. While maintaining respect for parents remains essential, parents might also consider adjusting their approach to acknowledge their children's growing independence and autonomy. Finding a healthy balance that honors both traditional values and modern development can strengthen family bonds and reduce unnecessary tension.

Perhaps we could say the Eastern parenting style emphasizes direct guidance, which can sometimes feel restrictive, while the Western style prioritizes autonomy, which can seem quite lenient in comparison. For instance, you might find Western parents who are university professors whose children have chosen low-income jobs. These parents often remain content, saying, “It is their choice. They enjoy it, and that is what matters.” Not only do they accept it, but they might even share the news with pride. To take an extreme example, if a child chose an unconventional path of panhandling, certain Western parents might still say, “If that is your choice, so be it”.

In summary, the passage teaches that filial piety is the foundation of all virtues and the cornerstone of education, whether it be in the family, at school, or in society at large. Buddhist texts contain similar ideas, stating that discipline is the root of all merit. In *Nagarjuna’s Letter to a Friend*, it is said:

*Just as the earth is the base for
All that’s still or moves,
On discipline, it’s said,
Is founded all that’s good.*¹⁵

As we continue our study of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, I encourage you to commit its key teachings to memory. This passage we have just discussed is one of the key instructions in the main text. In the future, these timeless principles can serve as a reliable guide in your own cultivation of virtue and as a valuable source of reference when you teach these topics to others.

Extensive Explanation of the “Vital Way”

Having provided a brief introduction, Confucius began to elaborate on the “vital way” or filial piety in three aspects.

The Beginning of Filial Piety

“Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received from our parents; therefore, we dare not damage or wound them. That is the beginning of filial piety.

What is filial piety? True filial piety begins with not harming any part of our bodies, including hair, skin, and flesh, because our body is a gift from our parents. Anyone who grew up in China is likely familiar with the passage above from the original text, as generations of parents and teachers have taught it, and it is frequently quoted in literature and films. Thus, a detailed explanation of this part is probably not necessary.

In ancient times, people in the Central Plains of China valued their hair so immensely that they would never cut it casually. Historical records show that hair could signify one's cultural identity. The Yuan, Ming, and Qing empires each had different cultural perspectives on hair.¹⁶

In Buddhist terms, our body arises from the union of the father's white essence and the mother's red essence, together with the entry of consciousness propelled by karma. Because we owe our parents an immense debt of gratitude for giving us life and raising us, we ought to repay their kindness by not harming our bodies, by not making them worry, and in other such ways. This means we should not engage in actions that harm our bodies or compromise our health, such as maintaining irregular lifestyles. It is best to avoid staying up too late, limit excessive internet usage, and refrain from unhealthy eating habits, such as midnight snacking.

As it is stated in the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*,

*If my body is hurt,
My parents will be anxious;
If my virtue is compromised,
My parents will feel ashamed.*

Many Buddhist texts also expound on parents' deep kindness and devotion to their children. For example, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, a well-known text on the Great Perfection preliminaries, describes how parents would rather take on their children's suffering themselves than see their children in pain.¹⁷ Our parents, especially our mothers, have endured tremendous hardship to give birth to us and raise us. *The Sutra as Spoken by the Buddha on the Profound Kindness of Parents and the Difficulties in Repaying Them* discusses the immense emotional and physical toll on a mother during childbearing and childbirth.

The Ultimate Fulfillment of Filial Piety

“We establish ourselves and practice the way to spread our good name through future generations, thereby bringing honor to our parents. This is the ultimate fulfillment of filial piety.

The ultimate purpose of filial piety goes beyond just preserving the body. It involves establishing ourselves in the world through ethical conduct and meaningful endeavors, such as building a family or a successful career. After achieving success, we will earn a widespread reputation that continues through future generations. Such personal esteem can subsequently bring glory to our parents.

Confucianism lays particular stress on family, posterity, and social prestige. Among Han communities, there is a traditional value placed on having descendants and maintaining a good reputation, as social prestige is deeply tied to family pride. Parents often worry when their children choose unconventional paths, such as entering monastic life, as it could mean the end of the family line and a perceived loss of face in society. Facing this social pressure, many Han monastics may hesitate to return home, even for major holidays. If they do go home, their families might treat them like “rare treasures,” keeping them somewhat hidden from judgmental eyes. (Audience laughs.)

However, perspectives on monastic life differ significantly across cultures. In Tibetan and Indian cultures, for a family member to be ordained as a monk or nun is considered a great source of honor. It also seems that Westerners have a more relaxed attitude and do not see it as a significant issue. Cultural values and traditions can vary across regions—and they naturally evolve. Those who have traveled extensively and encountered diverse perspectives understand this well.

While some may feel that cross-cultural study is unnecessary, I believe this view deserves a second thought. Within humanity’s diverse cultural mosaic lies timeless wisdom that transcends its

origins, offering insights that can meaningfully enrich modern life, regardless of one's background. These enduring perspectives merit our thoughtful and sincere exploration.

Traditionally, establishing oneself meant starting a family, among other things; today, many young people are rethinking whether to have children. It is reported that the global fertility rate has halved in sixty years.¹⁸ In China, for example, the fertility rate continued to decline from 2016 through 2018, despite the introduction of a series of fertility policies, such as the "two-child policy," aimed at encouraging more births. Some experts suggest that in this aging society with rising economic pressure, fertility policies alone may not be enough to address the demographic challenge, as young adults' attitudes toward family and procreation have fundamentally shifted. In fact, many prefer not to marry or have children at all. A growing number of married couples are choosing a "Double Income, No Kids" lifestyle.

While birth rates have been declining in many parts of the globe, populations in some low-income countries and Islamic nations, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, continue to grow. The Muslim population, with its growing global presence, may shift demographic balances in various regions. It is reported that the number of Muslims in Europe has been increasing steadily in the

last few years, outpacing the growth of other religions in the region. These demographic shifts will likely influence cultural and religious landscapes in the future, though the precise social impacts remain complex and multifaceted.

Critics have sometimes argued that monastic traditions, with their practice of celibacy, undermine ancestral lineages, ethnic continuity, and broader demographic vitality. A Tibetan scholar once remarked, “Currently, there are around 3,000 nuns ordained at Larung Gar. Had they each given birth to two children, the Tibetan population would have increased by 6,000...” However, in light of the current global trend of falling birth rate, many young people today, regardless of religious status, are not contributing to population growth. If monastics are ever blamed for depopulation or hindering the continuation of the family line, they now have a response.

In reality, plummeting birth rates and global population decline stem from a combination of factors, including shifting attitudes toward parenthood and the staggering economic burden of raising children. These financial pressures are particularly acute in China. For instance, it is estimated that raising a child to adulthood in Beijing can cost up to one million yuan. While this figure likely reflects the expenditures of higher-income families providing premium conditions, the baseline costs remain incredibly high.

Ultimately, raising a child in first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou places immense financial strain on average families. It is ironic that a practice once unique to monastics—voluntary childlessness—is now being adopted by a growing number of laypeople.

Three Progressive Stages of Filial Piety

“Filial piety begins with attending to our parents, extends to serving the rulers, and culminates in establishing ourselves.

Here, Confucius outlines three progressive stages of Filial piety. Initially, filial piety is expressed through reverent service to our parents. It then extends outward, becoming loyalty, respect, and obedience toward our teachers, superiors, and national leaders. The ultimate culmination of filial devotion is to establish ourselves by cultivating virtuous qualities, attaining great personal success, and earning a good name for both ourselves and our family. This path—from family to society to personal establishment—naturally raises a practical question: how do we serve well while also standing as virtuous individuals across different cultural settings, especially in professional relationships?

In Western societies, the emphasis on personal autonomy and freedom tends to foster more casual leadership structures. As a result, people may show less formal deference to superiors than is customary in more traditional cultures. I saw this difference firsthand during a Dharma trip to France, when I overheard a young child say, “Macron is doing a terrible job. I will not vote for him when I grow up!” The ease with which a child critiqued the president struck me; in many cultures, national leaders are typically addressed with greater formality and deference, particularly on the international stage.

In many traditional Chinese environments, whether in business or education, authority figures often expect discipline and respect from their subordinates. Some leaders may even prioritize obedience over competence, favoring those who show personal deference. That said, leadership styles vary, and many leaders recognize the value of talent even when a subordinate is not especially deferential. Within our own Buddhist communities, I have observed a similar range of leadership styles among volunteer teams.

My root guru, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, taught that a leader should “live in harmony with everyone, have compassion and loving-kindness, respect superiors, care for subordinates...”¹⁹ One of my core principles has always been to retain talented and

capable people, even if they are not always fully compliant. Had I dismissed everyone who showed occasional disrespect, I would have lost many valuable contributors over the years. In my view, a lack of deference—perhaps just a poor attitude or a resentful look—is not, on its own, enough to justify dismissal.

On the other hand, some leaders will only accept those who show obedience and offer flattery. When they encounter wise intellectuals with strong personalities, they might perceive them as disrespectful and quickly terminate them. Such a leadership approach can be problematic.

If the subordinates in this case understand traditional Chinese culture and different leadership approaches, they might be able to communicate with their supervisor more effectively. For instance, even if they did not truly respect their leader, they might at least feign deference, perhaps by saying: “Leader, you are so amazing! We feel so fortunate to be under your wise guidance!” Under certain circumstances, words like this, even if flattering, might be helpful. (Audience laughs.)

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

The first chapter concludes by quoting a line from the *Classic of Poetry*,²⁰ a foundational text of the Chinese literary tradition, to exhort future generations.

“As it is said in the ‘Major Odes’²¹, ‘You must remember your ancestors and uphold the virtues which you inherit from them.’”

Ancient texts often cite authoritative sources to strengthen their points, just as Buddhist texts frequently quote the scriptures. Here, this line from the Major Odes urges us to constantly remember the value of traditional culture. In other words, regardless of time or place, we should never forget our ancestors, practice moral conduct, and uphold the valuable traditions they have passed down to us.

It is my sincere hope that we can all engrave such excellent teaching deeply into our minds. Whether we are monastics or laypeople, the treasured wisdom of our religious and ethnic heritage should be well preserved and never forgotten, no matter where we find ourselves in the world.

For Buddhists, this means preserving the teachings of the Buddha and the great lineage masters, such as Nagarjuna and Shantideva.

For followers of Confucianism, it means never forgetting the wisdom of Confucius and Mencius. For adherents of Daoism, it means treasuring the precious teachings in texts like the *Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution*. The teachings and texts of all these various traditions bear significant importance and deserve to be carefully preserved.

We all need the grounding of excellent traditions, and we must not let them fade—especially in an age of global cultural assimilation. If we cast aside the wisdom cherished for millennia, those priceless treasures may be lost beyond recovery. Some people—especially those who live or study abroad—may gradually lose touch with their own precious customs, faiths, and cultures. Fortunately, recognizing the significance of ancient wisdom, groups of dedicated scholars and Dharma teachers who deeply cherish traditional culture work tirelessly to preserve and revitalize it. By engaging sincerely in study and practice ourselves, we too can make meaningful contributions to this significant endeavor.

Lecture Two

April 11, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Why Am I Teaching This Course on Traditional Chinese Culture?

Given that I am a Dharma teacher, it would have been much easier for me to teach a Buddhist text, such as *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* or the *Seven Points of Mind Training*. You might wonder why I am choosing to speak on Confucian thought. First, it serves as a gentle reminder for us to recognize the enduring value of our traditional culture. Many young people today are drawn to modern ideologies and trends. While innovation certainly brings valuable progress, there is a risk that in embracing the new, we might lose touch with the ancient wisdom of our ancestors and sever the connection to our own roots. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to remind ourselves of the timeless value of these traditions.

Second, it is my hope that we can all carefully reflect upon these teachings and cultivate a deeper sense of gratitude and stronger family values. *The Classic of Filial Piety* emphasizes such values, particularly the respect and care we owe to our parents. Whether our parents are still with us or have passed away, we should always

be grateful to them and seek to repay their kindness. For those whose parents have passed on, a meaningful way to repay their kindness in the Buddhist tradition is to perform virtuous deeds and dedicate the merit to them regularly. For example, when visiting Buddhist monasteries or meeting with monastics, we can make offerings and submit our parents' names for a dedication of merit. A note with their names can be given to the sangha or placed before the buddha statues. Wholesome actions like these can bring immense benefit to our departed loved ones.

Third, I believe this is an opportune time to promote traditional culture. Facing the current complex environment, studying classical texts such as *The Classic of Filial Piety* and *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child* can be very suitable in various settings, especially within Buddhist communities. Where overt Buddhist teachings may not always be welcomed or feasible, courses on classical heritage offer a flexible and meaningful secular alternative. In fact, as long as a teaching resonates with the fundamental Buddhist principles, its origin becomes secondary to its value, and we can help share it. Through engagement with Confucian teachings, which share much common ground with Buddhist ritual, study, contemplation, and practice, we are able to carry out a wide range of virtuous deeds.

I am aware that some of you have taken the initiative to organize Dharma study groups. If you plan to offer a course on the Chinese classics, please ensure it is led by qualified instructors in the field. Even as we study Confucianism, our coursework can often engage with Buddhist principles.

Employment of skillful means is affirmed in Buddhist scriptures. The *Kalachakra Tantra* clarifies that it is permissible to use secular language to spread the Dharma, provided that such language benefits sentient beings. The *Uttaratantra Shastra* also teaches:

*Whatever those of perfectly undistracted mind have expounded,
Solely in accordance with the teaching of the Victorious One and
Conducive to the path for attaining liberation,
Should also be placed on the head, like the Buddha's own words.*²²

My root guru, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, explained that “undistracted” means being free from the desire for the eight worldly concerns. If one wholeheartedly dedicates oneself to the Dharma and teaches doctrines consistent with the path to liberation, then we should respect their words as we would the Buddha’s. Since traditional culture shares many commonalities with the Dharma, it is somewhat consistent with the path to liberation. Accordingly, *The Classic of Filial Piety*, though a work of Confucius’s philosophy, merits

propagation when taught with the pure motivation of benefiting beings.

I encourage you to remember this well-known verse and frequently quote it if possible. In the future, if we are asked why Buddhist monastics expound secular ideals, we can respond confidently that as long as these teachings are in harmony with the path to liberation, they should be respected as the Buddha's words, regardless of their origin.

Yesterday, while reciting the opening verses before the first lecture, I hesitated at the line, "May I understand... the true meaning," as this course is about Confucius's teachings, not the Buddha's. While some claim that Confucius was a Buddha-emanation, other accounts portray him less favorably—some even accusing him of eliminating a rival. We cannot be certain about these various accounts, as verifying them presents considerable challenges. After all, even the authorship of *The Classic of Filial Piety* itself remains a matter of debate.

Of course, there are many other reasons for teaching this course, but these are just a few that come to mind now. Do these reasons resonate with you? (Audience applauding) Is your applause heartfelt, or are some of you still a little skeptical? (Audience laughing)

Studying with an Open Mind

With origins dating back over two millennia, this text may not seem to align perfectly with contemporary society. Rather than forcing rigid interpretations through a modern lens, we can approach the text with an open mind. That is, to accept the valuable insights while setting aside parts that may seem unclear or less relevant, without rejecting them outright.

A common approach in Western academia is for instructors to present topics for discussion and encourage students to express diverse perspectives. Some viewpoints may align with scholarly consensus, while others may diverge. Nevertheless, each individual has the freedom to hold their own views. Similarly, as we study this text, we can approach passages that seem difficult to grasp with a thoughtful attitude, retaining our own perspectives while continuing to learn and grow.

Open-mindedness and an expanded perspective are essential, especially for those of us who are Buddhists. We should be willing to step beyond our comfort zones. I have noticed that some practitioners share content on social media that is exclusively Buddhist, often using highly specialized terminology. While this demonstrates a deep knowledge and sincere devotion to the Dharma—qualities I

truly admire—it may also limit engagement with a broader audience. Over time, if we become increasingly detached from everyday language, we may struggle to communicate meaningfully with others.

Effective communication requires accessibility. Some Dharma teachers and tutors, after years of immersion in Buddhist studies, use Buddhist terminology that is largely inaccessible to the public. Imagine the difficulties they might face when trying to guide others by sharing the Dharma in everyday language. From this perspective, pushing our boundaries to study classical texts is not just beneficial—it is necessary.

CHAPTER TWO: THE EMPEROR AS THE SON OF HEAVEN

Although commonly defined by the reverent care shown to one's parents, the concept of filial piety holds a much broader significance. Against the sociopolitical backdrop during its time of composition, the text outlines five distinct applications of this virtue, corresponding to emperors, feudal lords, ministers and high officials, lower officials, and common people. The highest tier in this hierarchy is the emperor.

Since the text's authorship and date of composition remain subjects of debate, it may or may not have been written by Kong Zi (Confucius). Nevertheless, it was likely written by someone whose name includes the character "Zi"—perhaps Meng Zi, Zeng Zi, Zisi, or even Fo Zi (which means bodhisattva). Of course, I was only joking about Fo Zi. (Audience laughing)

Today, we turn to Chapter Two, "The Emperor as the Son of Heaven." The term "Son of Heaven" (Tianzi) in the title of this chapter refers to emperors. As a Confucian treatise explains, "The King has Heaven

as his father, and Earth as his mother; he is the Son of Heaven.”²³ Before the Qin Dynasty, the title “emperor” did not exist. Qin Shi Huang²⁴ proclaimed himself “Shi Huangdi” (meaning First Emperor), establishing the title for future rulers.

Historically, the supreme rulers primarily governed the Central Plains region of China. While maintaining overarching control of the nation, they granted lands to meritorious officials, who in turn became feudal lords governing their own territories, known as feudal states. This enfeoffment system was abolished when the state of Qin conquered the other six major feudal states—Han, Zhao, Wei, Chu, Yan, and Qi—and unified China. Following this consolidation, Qin Shi Huang replaced the enfeoffment system with a centralized system of prefectures and counties.

Extending Love and Respect Beyond the Family

The Master said, “Loving one’s parents, one dares not dislike others. Revering one’s parents, one dares not disrespect others.

According to Confucius, those who genuinely love and respect their parents do not harbor resentment toward others. That filial devotion naturally extends to all people, grounded in the conviction

that parents everywhere deserve love and respect. Of the various interpretations of this line, I find this one the most persuasive.

From Our Parents to All Mother Sentient Beings

A person who truly loves their parents understands that all parents are worthy of love. As a result, they not only refrain from harboring hatred toward others but also cultivate a genuine love for everyone from the depths of their hearts. Mencius taught something similar:

*Respect older adults in my family and
Extend that respect to all older adults;
Care for the young in my family and
Extend that care to all the young.*²⁵

Respect for one's own parents and love for one's own children can be expanded to embrace all people. Alternatively, it may be understood as extending reverence to others' parents and care for others' children.²⁶

In Buddhism, filial piety begins with cultivating compassion and loving-kindness toward our parents. We all have parents, and they bestow deep kindness upon us—the kindness of nurturing us, educating us, and so much more. The wise recognize that

everything they possess comes from their parents, so they love and honor them. From there, they can infer that other beings have either been their parents in past lives or will be their parents in future lives. Consequently, they come to love and respect all beings. Through their own parents, they foster compassion for all mother sentient beings.

The Mahayana Sutra of Previous Lives and Contemplation the Mind-Ground states: "All men are your kind father and all women are your compassionate mother."²⁷ In the endless cycle of rebirths in samsara, all sentient beings have been our parents. Although Confucianism may not have yet reached this profundity, it does uphold the significance of filial piety.

In essence, parents deserve their children's filial respect, and children should care for and love their parents. If someone cannot even love their own parents, their capacity to love other beings remains questionable. Some of you may deeply respect your parents, treating them with consistent love, while others may have more strained relationships. Suppose you constantly find yourself in a problematic relationship with your parents. In that case, it may present a challenge to making meaningful progress in your Buddhist practice, as this foundational connection of love is so essential to our path.

Certain modern educational philosophies advocate for absolute equality between parents and children, arguing that children have their own human rights and should not be obligated to revere or defer to their parents. Some children may use this perspective to avoid their familial responsibilities, justifying their self-interest. If this is the case, such self-centeredness will likely impede the cultivation of genuine respect for their parents.

Modern principles of equality present a complex dynamic when applied to parent-child relationships. In rare cases where parents excessively abuse their children under the guise of traditional authoritarian values, the principle of equality serves an important role. It empowers children to assert their rights and protect themselves from harm. However, when this idea is misinterpreted, it can diminish the reverence for parents. Parents, with their wealth of life experience and knowledge, are often invaluable guides. Yet, a premature interpretation of modern egalitarian ideas can foster an inflated sense of self-importance in children. As a result, they may overlook their parents' wisdom and fail to see them as sources of virtue, making it difficult to sincerely love and respect their parents, let alone all beings.

By contrast, Confucianism teaches that children should approach parents with love and respect, a sentiment echoed in Buddhist scriptures. The *Itivrttaka Sutra* states,

If sentient beings deeply respect, pay homage, and make offerings to their parents, approaching them with hearts of loving respect, immeasurable merit can be accumulated.

In essence, while the passage literally speaks of love and reverence for parents, its more profound message can be understood as a universal call to love and respect all sentient beings.

Exemplifying Filial Piety Across the Realm

“With love and respect being exerted to the utmost in serving the parents, such virtuous conduct and teaching educate and transform the common people, serving as exemplary to the four seas. This is the filial piety of the Son of Heaven.

The ancient kings wholeheartedly loved and respected their parents. Through their virtuous conduct and teachings, they educated the people of their reign, essentially the Central Plains, to adopt such practices. This moral principle then became a model for communities in surrounding regions. That is the filial piety of the emperor.

In ancient times, the Central Plains represented the heartland of the majority ethnic group and was also home to the highest ruler, comparable to today's capital and major urban cities. The "four seas" refer to diverse communities in the surrounding areas, which were often viewed from the center as less culturally developed. In this context, the highest ruler would first demonstrate the utmost filial piety within their own families, then promote it throughout the heartland. Over time, their example extended outward, gradually influencing neighboring minority tribes to follow suit. Ultimately, the entire realm embraced the tradition of loving and respecting one's parents.

Ancient wisdom truly holds timeless value. Reverence for one's parents is not only a personal virtue but also a model for broader societal harmony. Historically, people across the country deeply emphasized loving and respecting parents—not just in theory, but through active practice and promotion.

Moral Education Should Begin in Childhood

In China, excerpts from *The Classic of Filial Piety* have been incorporated into primary school textbooks. We also ask that this text be taught in our primary and elementary schools.²⁸ It is not enough for teachers to merely present the text and have students casually flip

through it. As educators, we should embody these key principles in our daily conduct, serving as living examples for our students.

I have heard that many modern parents entrust their children's education entirely to schools. Yet some kindergartens focus primarily on activities like singing and dancing, neglecting moral instruction. During these formative years, when children possess a remarkable capacity for learning and imitation, they urgently require ethical guidance in kindness, compassion, and filial devotion. When this fundamental moral guidance is absent, it can feel like a profound loss for a child's development and for society as a whole. Early childhood programs should actively help children foster values of compassion and love, as they are essential to a child's development, familial harmony, and societal stability.

Love for Parents Leads to World Peace

The Classic of Filial Piety teaches that rulers must first exemplify filial devotion to their parents before it can spread throughout the nation. History offers us an example of this in Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty. During his twenty-three-year reign, he promoted the moral value of filial devotion throughout the empire, resulting in its widespread prosperity and stability.

Emperor Wen's story is quite extraordinary. Initially, he was appointed as the feudal lord of the remote state of Dai, where he lived quietly with his mother. Later, following the Lü Clan disturbance,²⁹ he ascended to the throne due to his reputation for virtue, benevolence, and filial piety.

One of his filial stories is recorded in *The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars*. When his mother fell gravely ill, Emperor Wen, despite his royal status, devoted himself entirely to her care. For three years, he attended to her day and night without rest, so dedicated that his belt never slackened. He even personally tasted all her medicinal soups to ensure their safety. His deep filial piety remains legendary.

The filial piety of the emperor also applies to us, especially when we hold positions of influence. It is essential to first practice loving and respecting our parents, and then we can extend this ideal to all of humanity. Parents naturally love their children. When children reciprocate with respect and love, families become harmonious. As the family is the basic unit of society, this harmony can radiate outward, cultivating a more compassionate and caring society. Ultimately, this mutual love can lead to peace and joy across nations, and even the world. Without love, however, humanity risks falling into cycles of resentment and exploitation—a truly alarming prospect.

Some children today neglect caring for their parents, often placing career ambitions above family obligations. After achieving a certain level of success or wealth, they may delegate parental care to hired help. Even worse, some rarely visit their parents while they are alive, yet rush to claim their inheritance upon their passing. Sadly, such unfilial behavior appears to be becoming more common.

This disturbing trend was sternly warned against by the Buddha in the *Buddha Speaks of the Sutra of Ajatashatru*, which was translated by Zhi Qian. The Buddha said,

According to the scriptures, the greatest virtue is honoring one's parents; the greatest evil is harming one's parents.

Certain great masters in the Han Buddhist tradition frequently quote this passage.

We often say that filial devotion forms the foundation for all virtues. Those who are not filial to their parents will struggle to cultivate love within their families. Without love at home, it becomes even more challenging to extend compassion to society, let alone to one's nation, to humanity, or to all sentient beings. Even from a secular standpoint, being disrespectful toward one's parents is widely condemned.

Moreover, cursing, abusing, or beating one's parents carries heavy negative consequences. A story in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* recounts the severe karmic retribution for disrespecting one's parents. Even the Buddha himself endured unbearable torment in hell in one of his past rebirths because of past-life transgressions. When the Buddha was reborn as the "daughter" of the sea-captain Vallabha, he kicked his mother in the head and later suffered unbearable torment in the hell realms as a result.³⁰

I understand that from a child's perspective, some parents can be difficult. They may be overly critical or nagging, making it challenging to revere them. My late mother, however, was not like that—she was very understanding. I know she missed me deeply and longed for me to stay by her side, even for a few minutes. Yet she never imposed, always giving me the freedom to make my own choices. Her words were gentle and considerate: "I only mention this for your consideration."

The Challenge of Intergenerational Harmony

Many parents and children who live together find it difficult to maintain harmony over time. Even in our Buddhist academy, such challenge exists. In recent years, due to housing shortages, some families may have been compelled to cohabitate again. The tension

does not necessarily indicate poor spiritual practice. As people age, they may become more critical of their surroundings, while younger individuals, focused on their Dharma studies, may be unable to attend to their parents at all times. Their different perspectives can lead to mutual frustration.

I recall a monk and his father who stayed at our academy for about seven or eight years. After the first three months, they spent the rest of their time living apart from each other. When I asked why, the monk explained, "At first, we lived together briefly. But afterward, we never spent a single night together because our perspectives clashed. The 'elderly bodhisattva' grew confused, making cohabitation unbearable. Now, we occasionally share a quick meal, but that is all." Though he called his father a "bodhisattva," his tone suggested he did not fully believe it. (Audience laughing) Differences in karma, preferences, and views can certainly create tension, even among close family members. While shared blood might not guarantee shared perspectives, mutual regard is what sustains harmony.

The Chinese character "孝" (*xiao*) explicitly conveys the meaning of filial devotion. However, it defies direct translation into Tibetan. The Tibetan terms for love, respect, and service cannot fully capture its profound meaning. It appears that there is no precise equivalent,

and I have not yet found an ideal alternative. I wonder if Sanskrit has an exact equivalent. This term appears in the *Buddha Speaks of the Sutra of Ajatashatru* mentioned earlier, which was translated from Sanskrit to Chinese by Zhi Qian, a renowned Chinese translator from the state of Wu. This is something we need to look into.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Book of Documents*

“Fu on Punishment”³¹ says, ‘When one person has felicity, millions of people will look to him as their dependence.’”

Just as Tibetan Buddhist texts often reference scriptural teachings, the original text cites a passage from the *Book of Documents*. “One person” refers to the ancient king or sovereign. Ancient rulers often referred to themselves as “the humble one” or “the one person.” If a ruler practices filial piety and possesses the virtue of loving and honoring his parents, then gradually millions of people will rely on him and emulate his virtuous conduct.

As the leader of a nation, an emperor’s beliefs and actions have historically shaped the values and direction of society. When monarchs embraced Buddhism, the faith often flourished across their domains; when they opposed it, the religion frequently declined.

History reveals that a sovereign's example, for better or worse, sets the course for the nation.

Even today, with certain exceptions, the values of leadership profoundly shape society at all levels—from national governments to provinces, counties, villages, and companies. When leadership ideologies change, subordinates generally adapt accordingly. Therefore, if leaders practice and promote the ideals of love and filial piety, these virtues will spread effortlessly throughout society.

While we may not be kings, many of us hold positions of influence that are akin to those of a king within our families, workplaces, and communities. For instance, a teacher serves as a guiding figure—much like a king—to their students. In that role, a teacher has an excellent opportunity to instill the value of love and respect in their students.

Guarding the Mind: Traditional Guidance for an Age of Information Overload

In today's fast-paced world, young people often find themselves having a hard time navigating a pull between tradition and modernity. This cultural dilemma is especially true for those from Eastern cultures with deep-rooted values—such as filial piety—who now live in increasingly individualistic societies. For them, disrespecting

parents goes against a deep-seated tradition of familial duty; yet, the traditional emphasis on filial devotion can sometimes feel at odds with the freedom and independence so highly valued in modern culture.

Western culture—through its science, technology, art, entertainment, and way of life—has had a profound impact on the world, helping to connect people across borders. As we engage with contemporary culture, we should do so thoughtfully, embracing only what supports our well-being while staying rooted in the wisdom of our own traditions. Advances and global prominence, while impressive, do not by themselves determine what is true or morally right; valuable insights come from many places, past and present. Open-mindedness is vital, and discernment matters just as much. The celebrated strengths of modern society—individual initiative and critical inquiry—serve us best when balanced by an appreciation of the enduring wisdom that guides us across generations. When individualism slides into extreme selfishness or skepticism hardens into a blanket rejection of everything, it can lead to suffering.

Today's digital environment bombards us with an unprecedented amount of unfiltered information. Without proper discernment, a constant stream of harmful information can distort our perceptions,

erode our mental well-being, and contribute to various sufferings like anxiety and depression. Many factors underlie mental suffering—past karma and habitual tendencies among them—but detrimental cultural influences certainly play a part.

An untrained mind is fragile, easily swayed by harmful influences. Flooded with various information, it struggles to distinguish truth from falsehood and wisdom from noise, leading to chaos and instability. Mind discipline through the study of traditional culture and Buddhist teachings is therefore essential. Such study and practice foster a calm and virtuous mind, creating the foundation for a peaceful and productive life.

Our mind is indeed the key. A famous line goes “Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind.” Those who are trapped in negativity, regardless of age, often mentally age prematurely. On the other hand, elderly individuals who maintain a sense of joy and peace remain youthful in spirit. In the same vein, those facing physical illness but equipped with a healthy mind often find ways to thrive. They can manage to carry out necessary activities with the help of medication, and physical ailments do not appear to cause significant harm to them. Conversely, those with a healthy body but a troubled mind may still suffer deeply, being tormented by constant negative emotions and various wrong views.

Some, plagued by past karma and negative influences, develop harmful views and are unable to cultivate pure perception. At times, I meet individuals who are deeply distressed by their negative thoughts. They might say, “Please bless me, I have recently developed terrible wrong views!” I dare not ask how terrible. (Audience laughing) Sometimes these people would even wait for me on my way home at night. When they cover their faces with scarves and suddenly appear, it can be a little startling. Once, a particularly anxious person approached me, confessing, “Lately, I have developed wrong views about everyone.” I instinctively began reciting the Vajra Guru mantra—“Om Ah Hung Benza Guru Pema Siddhi Hung”—both for his protection and, admittedly, for my own peace of mind. (Audience laughing)

These encounters point to a deeper reality: mental and emotional instability is real—and on the rise. Whether it originates from the food we eat or the harmful information we absorb, psychological suffering is becoming both more common and more intense. When the mind is unwell, even basic daily life can feel overwhelming, and cultivating love for one’s parents or compassion for all beings can seem out of reach. This is why regular spiritual practice holds such profound significance. The recitation of the Guru Rinpoche

mantra, for example, is a powerful method for calming the mind and dissolving the external and internal obstacles we face.

Lecture Three

April 18, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

In our journey through the classical texts, we previously explored the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*, a work that has brought great benefit to people from diverse backgrounds. I am delighted that my Tibetan translation of it has become a cherished part of the moral education for Tibetan students in multiple regions, including Qinghai Province. The positive response to these teachings has encouraged me to share another gem from traditional culture—*The Classic of Filial Piety*. It is my aspiration to also share teachings from other classics, such as *The Analects (Lun Yu)*, the *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong Yong)*, the *Great Learning (Da Xue)*, and the *Thousand Character Classic (Qian Zi Jing)*. (Audience applauding) Making such an aspiration is, in itself, a virtuous act. Even if it is not fulfilled in this lifetime, it plants seeds that will bear fruit when causes and conditions come together.

In today's world, it is essential to broaden our knowledge. Some people focus only on modern advancements and dismiss traditional culture and religion. Over time, this can weaken their connection to their heritage, which is the very root of their identity and

values. Modern knowledge alone often struggles to provide effective solutions for the challenges we face in our minds. In an age of information overload, many of us lack the wisdom to distinguish between what is helpful and what is harmful. As a result, we may absorb a constant stream of misinformation that disturbs our peace of mind. Indeed, many of the psychological ailments we see today are connected to this relentless exposure.

Those steeped in traditional culture often struggle with modern knowledge, while those immersed in modernity may overlook the worth of tradition. This disconnect widens the generational gap: in some families, parents lack understanding of modern technology and current global developments, yet their kindergarten—or elementary—aged children are already proficient. Parents often rely on their children for basic smartphone and computer tasks, reversing roles. Over time, children may cease to see their parents as wise or authoritative, weakening filial respect. To hopefully bridge the gap, parents should engage with modern technology, and children should recognize the enduring value of ancient wisdom. Our cultural heritage offers rich and valuable guidance for life and deserves to be understood and preserved.

CHAPTER THREE: THE FEUDAL LORDS

In the last class, we discussed the filial piety owed by emperors. Today, we will discuss the third chapter of the text, which addresses the filial piety of feudal lords. In the ancient political system, a king ruled over various feudal lords, who governed their own territories granted to them by the throne. While these states were autonomous and operated like miniature kingdoms, they remained under the king's authority. The feudal lords were expected to follow the king's commands, and provide tribute—sometimes regularly, sometimes as needed. In turn, they also received the king's protection.

Of course, the terms “feudal states” and “feudal lords” belong to an ancient system. You might wonder if these teachings remain relevant today, given that such figures are no longer present. After all, different countries may implement different administrative systems nowadays. However, the principles apply to any leader. A business, a school, or a monastery can be viewed as a state, and its CEO, principal, or abbot can be seen as its leader. As we saw in

our study of *The Just King*, teachings directed at monarchs are in fact applicable to everyone, because a “king” can be interpreted as the head of a large nation or simply the leader of a small group in modern terms.

Valuable teachings transcend the boundaries of time, space, and culture. The wisdom of Buddha Shakyamuni, Nagarjuna, and Mipham Rinpoche emerged in worlds vastly different from our own, yet their words remain incredibly relevant today. Similarly, the insights of contemporary spiritual masters will continue to be applicable for generations, even hundreds or thousands of years into the future.

Whether we can benefit from these valuable teachings depends on our own receptivity and spiritual practice. A good practitioner can transform their mindstream through profound insights into what they read, while others may read numerous books but experience no inner change. As we explored the *Vimalakirti Sutra* yesterday, we noted how the Buddha told Bodhisattva Ratnakara:

Listen clearly, listen clearly, and consider this well.³²

If we listen with care, reflect thoroughly, and repeatedly recall the teachings, the teachings will surely benefit us.

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* was initially spoken by the Buddha to an assembly, notably Bodhisattva Ratnakara and the five hundred sons of elders. Those ancient teachings remain applicable today. Likewise, the teachings of Confucius in *The Classic of Filial Piety*, though over two thousand years old, are not only useful today—they are exceptionally valuable.

The First Aspect of Filial Piety Applicable to A Leader

“Above others, yet not arrogant, one can dwell on high without peril.

Even in positions of power, those who remain humble and avoid haughtiness and pride will be less likely to face danger. While teaching the *Letter to a Friend*, I have outlined the definitions and classifications of arrogance and pride, and clarified the distinction between them. Arrogance tends to be overt and outward-facing, whereas pride is subtler and inward—a sense of superiority rooted in one’s talents, status, appearance, or other advantages. A famous quote from the *Book of Documents*³³ says,

Complacency invites harm; humility brings benefits.

In other words, pride increases suffering, while humility lessens adversity. Therefore, whether one is a king or a manager, it is always best to remain modest.

Some people become overly proud with even a slight elevation in status. They believe they are extraordinary and exude an air of authority in every action. This superior attitude makes it easy to look down on others, which places them in a precarious position of downfall. Conversely, those who remain humble are rarely at risk, even in high positions.

Everything that rises is impermanent and bound to fall. Though no position is eternal, those free from arrogance are less likely to fall prematurely. The arrogant, by contrast, can tumble into ruin almost at once. As the Tibetan proverb says, "one who sits on the ground cannot fall; only those riding high on elephants or fine horses are at risk of a significant plunge."

Guarding the Three Doors to Avoid Mara's Trap

History abounds with the once-exalted—kings among them—brought low by heedless thoughts, words, and actions. As taught by the Buddha, arrogance and indulgence are the bait in a trap set by Mara, leading to our downfall. To avoid being ensnared, we must

guard the three doors of our being—body, speech, and mind—with constant mindful awareness.

This timeless wisdom is illustrated in a conversation between King Prasenajit and the Buddha, recorded in *An Alternative Translation of the Samyukta Agama*. The king, during his reflection, realized that as people gain wealth and status, they often become arrogant and indulgent, obsessing with the five desires and bringing severe afflictions to living beings. Believing he had discovered a profound truth, King Prasenajit shared his insight with the Buddha.

The Buddha affirmed his observation, comparing a person who succumbs to arrogance, indulges the five desires, and harms living beings to a deer caught in a hunter’s trap. “Indeed,” he explained, “They are falling into the trap of Mara, which ultimately leads to endless suffering in the hell realm.” The Buddha then expressed the point in verse:

*Indulging in worldly pursuits,
Lost in the five desires,
Unaware of future consequences,
Like deer falling into deep pits,
They will experience immense suffering.*

The lesson is clear: when we remain free of pride, we are safe from the danger of premature downfall. By cultivating a humble, servant-oriented mindset, we build a foundation for ourselves—whether in leadership or in life—that is both stable and enduring.

The Second Aspect of Filial Piety Applicable to A Leader

“By practicing frugality and caution, one’s resources are abundant but never wastefully overflowing.

“Frugality” means avoiding extravagance and not wasting food or other possessions. “Caution” is being mindful and cautious in speech and behavior, and carefully upholding the relevant rules and codes of conduct. For instance, a Buddhist must carefully observe the precepts appropriate to their path, whether lay or monastic. In our Buddhist practice, we often say, “Safeguard the precepts as you would your own eyes.” When one cultivates both “frugality” and “caution” in conduct as well as in mindset, abundant merit accumulates and endures, supporting success in all aspects of life.

Treasuring merit is highly relevant in worldly life and has long been emphasized by eminent masters of the past. It does not, however, mean we must deny ourselves basic comforts. It is appropriate to

use resources to meet essential needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. While Buddhists are generally adept at avoiding extravagance, some err toward excessive frugality—an opposite extreme to avoid. The key to our practice is to find a middle way.

Thus far, we have discussed cultivating humility while holding high office to avert the danger of downfall and practicing frugality and caution so that abundant merit is not easily exhausted.

Reasons for Practicing the Two Aspects of Filial Piety

“To be in a high position without jeopardy is the way to preserve nobility for the long term;

Occupying a high position without becoming arrogant allows one to be away from the danger of downfall, which subsequently maintains dignity for a long time.

Humble Leadership That Lasts

The key to lasting leadership is to remain humble and not allow a high position to breed arrogance. We see that some national leaders remain in power for many years, because they stay grounded, hold

themselves to high standards, and earn the trust and reverence of their people.

In some cultures, leaders are encouraged to project confidence and assertiveness. While I was teaching abroad, someone suggested I present myself in a more dominant and forceful way in public. Confidence has its place, but there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Even in societies that prize self-belief, a leader with an inflated ego who issues commands instead of doing real work will lose others' trust and respect—and, eventually, their authority. The core principle remains universal.

We might not be heads of state or prominent religious figures, but whenever we are responsible for even one or two people—at work or at home—we are leading. While a degree of professional decorum is certainly appropriate, the foundation of effective leadership is a humble, service-first mindset. Rather than thinking, “Now that I am in charge, I must look the part,” it is better to ask, “How can I help others do their best?”

This principle, however, can be challenging to uphold in practice. For instance, even within spiritual contexts, such as Buddhist organizations, where selfless service is a core value, a leader's focus can sometimes drift. The power of managing an organization

can lead to prioritizing personal authority or cultivating networks over serving the community's needs. When leadership becomes entangled with favoritism, and some individuals feel promoted while others feel marginalized, the sense of trust is eroded. The attitude and act of rewarding those they favor and suppressing those they dislike have no place in a Buddhist management team. Of course, many exemplary leaders genuinely embody selfless service. Ultimately, a community can always sense whether its leader is motivated by collective well-being or by personal gain.

It is helpful for us to understand the context of this teaching. It originates from traditional Chinese culture, thus primarily offering ethical guidance, rather than instructions for ultimate liberation. In a secular frame, it resembles sound management training. From a Buddhist standpoint, it functions much like a code of ethics or a set of precepts, guiding our thoughts and actions in daily life. Hence, guidance from ancient sources remains instrumental today.

“to have abundance in one’s resources without waste is the way to preserve wealth for the long term.

When one possesses immense merit, including wealth, but avoids indulgence and extravagance, that wealth is less likely to be exhausted and can be preserved for a long time.

The Importance of Avoiding Extravagance

It is a common human tendency, especially when we are young or new to success, to want to display our good fortune. A little celebration is natural, but when it turns into a pattern of careless indulgence and excessively reckless behaviors, it can set a course toward eventual difficulty. We see that some leaders following this path may start with great promise but ultimately falter.

I once witnessed a memorable example of extravagance. Years ago, I met a high-ranking official whose every detail was promptly and carefully attended to. He was seated, yet had several attendants waiting on his every need. To smoke, he would simply hold out two fingers, and an assistant would place a cigar there. After a single puff, he would raise his hand for another assistant to take it away. When a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead, someone was there instantly to wipe it. It was as if he had outsourced his own basic movements. The scene has stayed with me—not as a judgment of the person, but as a reminder of how excess can detach a person from reality. From this perspective, it becomes clear why such a lifestyle is often unsustainable.

History echoes the same lesson. The Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin once wrote:

*Upon observing the great nations of the past,
Success was born from diligence and frugality,
And failure from extravagance.*

Across cultures and eras, excess and corruption have weakened various communities and even entire nations. Religious communities are no exception: when extravagance becomes the norm, they risk decline and even disappearance.

The Art of Practicing Simplicity

Embracing frugality does not mean we should swing to the opposite extreme. The Buddhist path encourages a life of simplicity, but this can be misunderstood. Some people adopt a rigid view, believing that to be spiritual, one must live in performative poverty, dressing in tatters like a beggar. This misses the true spirit of the Dharma teachings. I have noticed a trend where some individuals will deliberately wear robes with colorful patches they sew, just to cultivate an image of being a great, austere practitioner and attract admiration. There is even a saying they circulate: "One who wears a hundred patches is close to enlightenment."

I recall a monk visiting our academy whose robe was carefully crafted to look worn and ragged. Yet, as I have learned over the

years to observe people with a discerning eye, I could not help but notice a contrast between his clothing and his restless gaze. It served as a reminder that true humility is an inner state, not a costume we wear for others. When austerity is performed for praise—to hear someone say, “Wow, what a dedicated practitioner!”—it is no longer about simplicity. It has become another form of pride.

This brings us to the central challenge: finding a graceful balance between two extremes. On one side, we have an extravagant lifestyle that risks depleting our merit and resources. On the other hand, we have a performative shabbiness that can be rooted in pride. The path of being “abundance in one’s resources without waste” is about finding the middle way. For those with significant resources, this means channeling that abundance into meaningful endeavors, like charity, rather than into ostentatious displays. This approach helps sustain merit, including material wealth, over the long term.

For those of us with more limited means, the practice takes on a slightly different look. It becomes about cultivating contentment and reducing our desires. When I first arrived at the academy in 1985, I had no choice but to live frugally, as I had very little to my name.

It is often when our conditions improve that we forget these essential lessons. Status and wealth are powerful forces that can subtly change our mindset. Few people, after attaining them, remain as humble and grounded as they once were. This transformation often happens so gradually that we do not notice it in ourselves, even when it is obvious to others. As the saying goes, “Those involved are confused, while bystanders see clearly.”

Ultimately, the most significant value of these teachings is to serve as a mirror for our own self-reflection. By regularly examining ourselves, we can stay grounded, maintain our humility, and ensure that our inner and outer wealth will last for a long, long time.

Wealth, Nobility, and Harmony

“With wealth and nobility always present, one can protect one’s *sheji* (state) and bring harmony to the people. This is the filial piety of feudal lords.

As long as one possesses wealth and nobility, one can preserve one’s country, leading to its prosperity and stability. Moreover, the nation’s people can live in harmony and contentment. Accomplishing this is the fulfillment of filial piety owed to feudal lords.

“Wealth” generally refers to material possessions, whereas “nobility” pertains to dignity and social rank. Those who possess both are often described as “wealthy and noble,” and are thought capable of preserving their status, dignity, as well as their nation, ensuring its prosperity. The term *sheji* refers to the deities of the land (*she*) and of grain (*ji*), together symbolizing the state itself. In ancient China, the deities of the land and grain represented the most significant objects of worship for the Han people, a culture rooted in agriculture. Back then, everyone in the agrarian society was deeply concerned with basic sustenance. The primary measure of prosperity was sustenance. If the people had enough to eat, the society was typically considered prosperous. Additionally, the society was strictly hierarchical: only emperors were permitted to use five-colored earth when making offerings to the land deities, whereas feudal lords could worship only a single land deity with earth of one color. These ritual distinctions were highly elaborate.

Ruling by Compassion

A compassionate leader can safeguard and expand their realm through moral example and upright governance. King Wen of Zhou is a classic exemplar. As a feudal lord under the Shang Dynasty, he earned widespread respect for his virtue—qualities so profound that Confucius held him in particular esteem. Ruling

with genuine concern for his people's welfare, King Wen gradually expanded his territory. He built a foundation of power and loyalty that ultimately enabled his son, King Wu, to overthrow the corrupt Shang regime and establish the Zhou Dynasty.

Accounts of King Wen's life vary—mythic traditions speak of a hundred sons, while more reliable records place the number at seventeen or eighteen. Yet across all versions, one thread is constant: his benevolence. He governed with compassion, consistently prioritizing his subjects' welfare. This moral authority explains how he secured loyalty, expanded his realm, and earned enduring praise.

King Wen's example illustrates a timeless principle of leadership, one echoed in both secular traditions and spiritual teachings like Buddhism. Whether leading a nation or a small team, a good leader guides others with loving-kindness and compassion. Only then can one achieve the ideal that "wealth and nobility always present."

To fully grasp this ideal, we must understand that "wealth" here encompasses both external prosperity and, more importantly, internal spiritual riches. While some people possess material abundance, others are rich in virtuous qualities. At a minimum, a compassionate leader holds the spiritual wealth of a kind heart. When leadership

is grounded in compassion, wealth and nobility accompany the leader, and those under their care can live with contentment.

Still, not every leader is well-regarded. When a leader finds that they are disliked by almost everyone they guide, it can be an opportunity for honest self-reflection on whether they are leading with sufficient compassion, or perhaps it is due to heavily burdened karma from the past. Of course, universal approval is unrealistic: people's karmic dispositions differ, and no one can please everyone. Yet a responsible leader should at least earn the support of the majority—and, most importantly, maintain a clear conscience.

Today's discussion serves as a reminder for all of us. Whether you are leading a spiritual community, a company, or a household, I hope you will always consider the well-being of those who depend on you. Even from a worldly managerial standpoint, team managers must think and act in the best interest of their team members. At the level of family life, you are essentially the feudal lord or the leader of your children. Do you guide them with loving-kindness and compassion, or do you tend to assert your authority with pride? True respect is earned through wholehearted, selfless service, not demanded by position. This kind of compassionate, service-oriented leadership is the modern expression of the ancient ideal of filial piety.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The *Classic of Poetry* says, ‘Ever so cautious, as if standing upon the brink of a deep abyss or treading on thin ice.’”

This frequently cited line appears in the *Classic of Poetry*—the earliest extant anthology of Chinese poetry—whose poems range across governance, love, the natural world, and more. In its original context, the verse exhorts feudal lords to be vigilant in all their actions, never reckless. The paired images are arresting: one misstep at a cliff’s edge can be fatal, and a moment’s carelessness on thinning ice can send one plunging into freezing water. In midwinter, ice may bear weight; yet as spring arrives, what once seemed firm swiftly becomes treacherous. This classical counsel aligns with Buddhist teachings, where mindfulness, awareness, and carefulness are core principles. A careless or indifferent attitude is strongly discouraged, as it often leads to negative consequences.

In our time, many—especially the young—may dismiss the guidance of parents and mentors, adopting an “I do not care” mentality that is both concerning and dangerous. Consider, for example, those who lose their freedom and end up in prison. Except for a few cases in which judgment is impaired by alcohol intoxication, many are

the tragic result of patterns of undisciplined behavior rooted in a fundamental disregard for the consequences of one's actions.

Buddhist scriptures consistently warn against such heedlessness. The *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* teaches:

One must not be careless with the workings of body, speech,
and mind.

I have cited this verse many times; by now, many of you can likely recite it from memory. It urges constant vigilance over the three doors of body, speech, and mind. Here, we see a remarkable convergence, where both Buddhist sutras and Confucian classics emphasize the necessity of vigilance. Genuine practitioners or monastics are especially mindful of guarding their three doors at all times. The more careful one is with respect to one's conduct in daily life, the more respect one earns from others.

To convey the sheer intensity of this required awareness, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* provides an even more startling analogy:

*I will be like a frightened man, a brimming oil-jar in his hand,
And menaced by a swordsman saying,
"Spill one drop and you shall die!"
This is how practitioners should hold themselves.*³⁴

Imagine being forced at sword point to carry a bowl filled to the brim with oil, warned that even a single drop means death. Amidst a thousand dazzling performances lining the road, fear for one's life would not permit so much as a sidelong glance; one's focus would remain absolute. This, the teaching suggests, is the level of unwavering vigilance we ought to apply to upholding our precepts—whether individual liberation vows or bodhisattva vows—in the midst of daily distractions.

Therefore, whether we envision ourselves standing at the edge of an abyss, treading on thin ice, or balancing a brimming bowl of oil under threat of a sword, the essential lesson remains the same—we should exercise the utmost alertness as we possibly can in daily life.

Serving with a Steadfast Heart

This principle of steadfast vigilance is the key to achieving success in any pursuit. Yet, I have observed that in areas like volunteer work, some approach their commitments with a casual attitude, doing only the bare minimum. The issue is often not a lack of ability, but rather a lack of a steady and responsible attitude. Our mindset is both a window into our character and the chisel that slowly shapes

it. Having committed, let us strive, as best we can, to see it through with care and mindfulness, rather than half-heartedly.

The subject of steadfast commitment is something I feel strongly about, based on my own journey. While I am certainly not exempt from shortcomings, I can say that for over thirty years, I have dedicated myself to the mission entrusted to me by my root guru: teaching the Dharma and translating Buddhist texts. That commitment has been my anchor. Therefore, when I discuss this topic, it is from a place of lived experience, not abstract theory.

Here at our academy, this theme of commitment feels particularly relevant. I have noticed that some volunteers struggle to remain patient and dedicated, and a few working units experience exceptionally high turnover rates. At a few worksites I visit, I see new faces almost every day. Once, out of curiosity, I counted how many people had come and gone from a single department over just eight months, and the number was truly startling.

This high turnover rate leads one to ask: what are the underlying causes? Perhaps it is a restless mindset, where enthusiasm wanes as quickly as it appears. In other cases, the instability may stem from poor leadership. A manager who assigns roles based on mood—delegating when happy and reassigning when upset—can

create an environment of uncertainty that makes it difficult for anyone to feel settled. Or, perhaps, it is simply the bad feng shui in the department. (Audience laughing)

Whatever the specific cause, the solution points toward a shared principle: we must approach our commitments with responsibility, wisdom, thoughtfulness, and perseverance. For volunteers, this means carefully selecting roles. No one is compelled to serve; participation is a choice. Therefore, before committing, it is wise to take time to consider where and how you can best contribute. For leaders, this means clearly communicating expectations and responsibilities from the very beginning. It is necessary to discuss the anticipated duration of service to ensure both sides share a mutual understanding.

In any organization—be it a monastery, a school, or a community center—stability is essential for growth. Once a volunteer has grown accustomed to their work, frequent changes can create confusion and suggest a lack of structure. This is why I have been encouraging volunteers to commit to serving in one position for at least one year, and ideally for three. To illustrate the importance of this stability, consider the example of a school I sponsored. I once advised the principal not to reassign teachers arbitrarily. It typically takes about half a year for teachers and students to build a meaningful rapport.

If, just as that connection solidifies, the teacher is suddenly replaced, the students' learning is disrupted. The more often such changes occur, the more detrimental the effects.

This example highlights a broader truth about leadership: leaders without wisdom and skillful means can make decisions with severe negative consequences. This problem can be amplified when those around a leader simply agree to everything, regardless of whether the decision is sound or not. Such over-the-top deference can turn a single careless remark into a policy with far-reaching repercussions.

At our academy, volunteers are the backbone of the teams that serve our whole community. Without them, many essential functions would grind to a halt, and I am deeply grateful. It can be disheartening, however, when individuals leave their posts after just a few days, offering reasons that, while personally valid, seem minor when weighed against the collective good. It is understandable when a genuine family emergency requires someone to leave, and we would never hold anyone here against their will. But all too often, the pattern is one of enthusiasm one day and a departure the next, driven by fleeting emotions from minor dissatisfactions. A mind that thinks one thing today and another tomorrow, quitting

at the first sign of difficulty, is not a mind conducive to deep and lasting accomplishment.

Just last night, while walking around observing group discussions among the oral presentation teams, I realized that many people I saw two years ago—or even last year—are no longer around. It serves as a poignant reminder of impermanence, as described in a verse from the *Chapter on Causes and Conditions*:

In the morning, you may see many people;

By afternoon, some will already be gone.

In the afternoon, you may see many people;

By the next morning, some will no longer be there.

Though everything is impermanent, sustained Dharma study and practice benefit from long-term commitment—three years, five, or even ten. In earlier years, when we took oral presentation exams before His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, none of us considered quitting. Only in his later years were those exams discontinued; until then, we remained steadfast.

Times and mindsets have shifted. Perhaps this restlessness reflects a broader trend in our modern world, or perhaps it is a collective karmic ripening. When I see those enthusiastic new faces during

the oral presentation session after class, I cannot help wondering how many will remain next year. In any case, the path forward is clear. The *Classic of Poetry* reminds us to be cautious in all we do. Let us be constantly mindful of our body, speech, and mind, and practice patience. With stability and perseverance, both worldly endeavors and spiritual practice can bear meaningful fruit. Let us stop here today and dedicate the merit in accordance with the Dharma, so that it brings genuine benefit to all sentient beings.

Lecture Four

April 25, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Embracing a Wider World of Wisdom

Recently, a few Buddhist practitioners asked why I am teaching Confucian philosophy instead of focusing solely on Buddha Dharma, such as Vajrayana or Madhyamaka. This question touches on a common perception that Buddhists should not explore traditions outside their own. This perspective is understandable, yet at its core, Buddhism encourages us to transcend fixed concepts, let go of attachments, and realize the nature of no-self. Some may identify themselves strictly as students of a particular subject, such as Madhyamaka, and in doing so, dismiss other sources of wisdom. When their thinking is confined to narrow frameworks, they risk cutting themselves off from the vast richness of humanity's collective insight.

Expanding our intellectual horizons is a critical part of our path. We can find valuable knowledge in diverse sources worldwide, including ancient cultures, history, and politics—even from less admirable political events that may not seem immediately relevant today. An experienced practitioner learns to extract profound insights from

these materials. At the same time, it is worthwhile to explore modern innovations, especially artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Equally important is the inward journey, which involves observing the nature of our own minds. In this pursuit, we can draw wisdom not only from traditional Eastern philosophies and religions—such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—but also from other major world faiths like Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam.

Such exploration thrives when it is guided by genuine interest. There is no need to force yourself to study worldly or spiritual topics that do not engage you. If your devotion centers entirely on a particular deity such as Avalokiteshvara, and you find fulfillment in the daily chanting of the mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum,” that is also a valid approach.

At the same time, it may be helpful to stay alert to the risks of exclusive devotion to a single teacher without a firm foundation of wisdom and discernment. Some Buddhist newbies listen only to one spiritual teacher and dismiss all others—perhaps even to the extent that, if Shakyamuni Buddha himself were to appear, they might ignore his guidance. Without learning the Dharma and gaining wisdom, when that one teacher treats you poorly, or when their mystique fades and they fail to meet your idealized expectations, seriously mistaken views can arise.

A self-centered and narrow perspective will not serve us well on the path. I encourage modern Buddhist practitioners to cultivate a relaxed and open mind, thereby engaging with a broader spectrum of knowledge in this rapidly shifting world. In the face of an overwhelming flood of information, this relaxed and open approach enables us to navigate contemporary life in a more meaningful and effective way.

Recognizing Our Shared Humanity

Our world today faces numerous challenges that demand a collective response. The most effective path forward begins when we recognize our shared humanity, release our destructive emotions, and embrace one another with wisdom and compassion. Despite our differences, human beings have much in common. Our bodies are structured similarly, with only slight variations. Our facial features are generally alike—most of us have two eyes, one nose, and two ears. Our fundamental goals are the same: everyone strives for happiness and wishes to avoid suffering. Our lifestyles are also broadly identical, with most people working during the day and sleeping at night, though a few, due to unique circumstances, follow a different rhythm.

Given these commonalities, it seems unwarranted to completely reject humanity's collective knowledge or alienate one another due to differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or nationality. The world's problems cannot be solved through destructive emotions, which harm not only ourselves but also our families, our societies, and humanity as a whole. If we genuinely wish to create a beautiful and happy future together, we must first recognize our shared foundation—we are all human. When we view the world through this lens, conflicts naturally diminish and are less likely to escalate into hostility or war. Indeed, most wars in human history—civil or international, hot or cold—have been fueled mainly by afflictive emotions such as hatred and anger.

These afflictive emotions are detrimental not only to our interpersonal relationships but also to our health and professional lives. When we are emotionally distressed, we cannot work effectively, sleep well, or maintain a healthy appetite. Imagine someone who, after a heated argument, must attend a friend's dinner party. That person would likely have no appetite for the delicious food. Over time, such patterns can affect our physical health. Furthermore, those who frequently hold negative mindsets often struggle to interact harmoniously with others, which increases psychological

anxiety. In ways both seen and unseen, disturbing emotions erode our physical and mental well-being.

Therefore, I hope we learn to let go of these negative emotions and instead cultivate virtue, especially compassion for all beings. Developing a compassionate heart enables us not only to heal ourselves but also to connect authentically with others, thereby opening the door to inclusive and meaningful communication.

Practicing Open Communication

A couple of days ago, a group of Daoist practitioners visited our academy. Though our time together was brief and my schedule was full, I felt a genuine sense of joy for our exchange. This interfaith encounter reminded me of the World Youth Buddhist Symposium, which has been held eight times. Each year, among other things, we invite representatives from Daoism, Confucianism, and many other world religions to engage in interfaith dialogue.

In these dialogue sessions, they are able to share their religious perspectives on globally significant topics of common concern—such as happiness, peace, and artificial intelligence—without fear of being judged. After listening to these insights, we realize that multiple religions differ merely in outward expressions such as hairstyles, clothing, liturgy, methods of recitation, or meditation

techniques. Many faiths share a common language, and at their core, have similar values and goals. These commonalities offer fertile ground for mutual understanding, learning, and cooperation. By embracing these commonalities and working together, religious communities can make a significant contribution to the welfare of countless sentient beings.

Both religious practitioners and intellectual scholars need to broaden their outlook and consider: What does this world truly need? What is the current state of humanity? Once we grasp the broader context and recognize the vital role of spiritual teachings, we can explore diverse religious traditions more meaningfully. In doing so, it helps to be mindful of prejudicial thinking, such as “This is not our teaching; it belongs to them,” which can block genuine understanding and objectivity.

Open communication and shared exploration among the world’s religions are much needed. Except for a few extreme or misguided doctrines shaped by individuals with hidden agendas, the vast majority of authentic religious teachings offer meaningful and beneficial guidance. They encourage goodness and point the way toward physical and mental liberation—whether in this life or beyond. For this reason, it is necessary to approach different religions and their teachings with a spirit of inclusivity and openness.

Open-mindedness is especially imperative today. For those who hold a religious faith, it also means leaving space for those who do not. Believers need to avoid assuming moral superiority or looking down from a perceived spiritual high ground to find faults with the non-religious. Even in the time of the Shakyamuni Buddha, India was home to a diverse range of philosophical traditions, including non-religious perspectives. Regardless of one's spiritual stance, a truly open-minded person seeks to consider issues from both their own perspective and that of others.

In our daily lives and spiritual practice, it is most beneficial to cultivate a mindset that is inclusive, open, and relaxed. According to Buddhist teachings, all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature. From this perspective, every being—not only humans but also ants, earthworms, and other creatures—carries within them the seeds of liberation. Therefore, each being is worthy of our care, and it is deeply meaningful for all beings to communicate with and benefit one another.

With this understanding, we are less likely to be burdened by unnecessary worries or misunderstandings when we create harmonious platforms for shared dialogue—whether to deepen personal practice or to benefit others through the Dharma. Life is brief, and

it calls us to invest our precious time in what truly matters rather than wasting it on anxiety, doubt, or fear.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MINISTERS AND HIGH OFFICIALS

In our previous sessions, we explored the concept of filial piety as it relates to the Son of Heaven (the emperor) and the feudal lords. Today, we will turn our attention to the third category: filial piety as it pertains to ministers and high officials. These individuals occupied positions subordinate to the emperor and feudal lords, with the responsibility of faithfully carrying out their directives. Such titles and arrangement reflect the hierarchical administrative system of the Zhou Dynasty, providing the broader historical context for this text.

As we study classical texts like *The Classic of Filial Piety*, we may notice that some teachings resonate with contemporary values, while others might appear outdated or less compatible with modern customs and lifestyles. It is crucial, as mentioned earlier, to approach these materials with an open mind. Rather than restricting ourselves to knowledge that seems immediately relevant, we can benefit from considering a wider range of perspectives.

In practice, it is common—even for Buddhist practitioners—to find that only a portion of what they study can be directly applied in daily life. For example, in addition to *The Classic of Filial Piety*, I also teach *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* by Gampopa. Each chapter of this text contains ten pith instructions, yet I may not be able to put all ten into practice myself. When I was translating this work into Chinese, I sometimes encountered passages that were difficult to fully understand, let alone apply immediately in my own life. Let us see if today's content is clear and relevant for people today. The teachings in this chapter are fairly straightforward.

Proper Attire, Speech, and Conduct

“They dare not wear what is not prescribed by the former kings’ regulations on clothing; they dare not speak what is not in accordance with the former kings’ regulations on speech; they dare not exhibit conduct that does not correspond to the former kings’ virtuous conduct.

Ministers and high officials were expected to dress, speak, and behave strictly in accordance with the laws, regulations, codes, or customs established by previous kings. Any carelessness in these aspects was considered irresponsible and unacceptable. While these

ideas originate from an ancient context, some of their underlying principles remain relevant and can still be applied today.

Proper Attire

To begin with, the text states, “They dare not wear what is not prescribed by the former kings’ regulations on clothing[.]” During the Zhou Dynasty, clothing was a clear symbol of social hierarchy. The emperor, feudal lords, ministers and high-ranking officials, as well as lower-ranking officials, each wore attire appropriate to their respective status.

As described in the *Book of Documents* and *Zheng’s Commentary to The Classic of Filial Piety*, emperors wore garments embroidered with the sun, moon, and stars; feudal lords’ attire featured mountains, dragons, and pheasants; ministers and high officials wore clothes decorated with aquatic plants and fire; and lower officials’ clothing was adorned with white rice. These garments were in five colors. Even the color of the imperial robe varied by dynasty. For instance, Emperor Qin Shi Huang wore black robes, while from the Tang Dynasty onward, emperors commonly wore yellow, and ordinary citizens were limited to the other colors. The costumes seen in historical TV dramas often reflect these customs in their design and color.

At that time, clothing was not a matter of personal preference but was strictly regulated according to social rank. Ministers and high officials could not wear garments reserved for higher positions, such as those of feudal lords or the emperor, and feudal lords were similarly prohibited from wearing the emperor's robes.

In the current secular world, multiple professions enforce strict dress codes. Soldiers, police officers, and doctors, for instance, each have designated uniforms that signify their roles. In most walks of life, appearance is expected to reflect one's identity. Of course, numerous people today choose their clothing based on personal preferences—black today, white tomorrow, red the next day, and so on. To some extent, these choices also reveal aspects of their background and identity.

Chinese culture has long valued dress as an essential expression of status. However, many young people today may view such traditions as outdated, preferring instead to express themselves through freer, more revealing styles that align with modern fashion trends. While this may be the prevailing aesthetic in certain cultures, there is no need to criticize it harshly, nor do we need to praise it overly. After all, even in the world's most liberal countries, prominent public figures still wear formal attire, such as suits or gowns, when attending significant events.

It is imperative to understand the basic societal norms, including those related to dress, and to be mindful of our clothing choices. For monastics, wearing monastic garments is the most appropriate attire. If a monk or nun frequently chooses to wear lay clothes, their sense of monastic identity may gradually weaken. Conversely, a lay person who often wears monastic robes may eventually find themselves drawn toward ordination. As Ju Mipham Rinpoche wrote in *The Just King*, a text I have previously taught and highly recommend for study,

People's status as good or evil can be adduced

Based on their attire and conduct.

So do not violate the customs

*Of the ancient noble tradition.*³⁵

Observing how different groups dress and behave today can offer valuable insights into the future direction of their communities—whether they are Tibetan, Han, or other ethnic groups. As a Chinese proverb says, “A child’s future can be seen at age three.” In this sense, dress carries long-term significance.

The principle of appropriate attire is also found in Buddhism, where precepts guide appropriate dress based on one’s vows. Practitioners of different statuses must wear clothing suitable to their roles. For

instance, fully ordained monastics wear the traditional three robes, while lay practitioners wear lay robes known as “*haiqing*.”

Similar to the ancient tradition of not wearing “what is not prescribed by the former kings’ regulations on clothing,” Buddhist practitioners should not wear clothing that deviates from the precepts set by the Buddha. These disciplinary rules are not only reasonable but also carry deep spiritual significance.

A story in the *Abhiniskramana Sutra* illustrates this point. Venerable Nanda was the Buddha’s half-brother.³⁶ He possessed thirty excellent marks, only two fewer than the Buddha, and he was considered unusually tall, just slightly shorter than the Buddha. Perhaps out of deep reverence, he made a robe identical to the Buddha’s.

Probably because Venerable Nanda resembled the Buddha somewhat, when Nanda appeared before the bhikshus wearing this robe, they mistook him for the Buddha and stood up respectfully. Only upon closer inspection did they realize that it was Nanda. Some bhikshus were displeased and reported the matter to the Buddha, saying: “Nanda does not possess your qualities; how can he dress like you?” As a result, the Buddha established a rule forbidding anyone from making and wearing robes based on the Buddha’s measurements.

The monastic three robes have been passed down continuously since the time of the Buddha—more than 2,500 years ago. These robes are imbued with deep spiritual, historical, and cultural significance. I urge all monastics to strictly uphold applicable precepts and wear robes appropriate to their identity. Some monastics may wear solemn robes within their monastery but change into lay clothing when outside. Unless there is a compelling reason, monastics should refrain from such practice, as it can gradually erode one’s sense of discipline and monastic identity.

Clothing rules are not exclusive to Buddhism. Almost every religion has distinctive attire and traditions, often with rich historical meaning. When we see a variety of garments, it is helpful to understand their origins and backgrounds. Even if we do not have time to learn the full context, it is imperative that we at least respond with understanding and respect.

Proper Speech

Additionally, the ancient kings established regulations and norms governing speech, and ministers and high officials “dare not speak what is not in accordance with the former kings’ regulations on speech[.]” In our daily communications, cultivating right mindfulness and awareness is essential to ensure our language aligns

with both social conventions and higher ethical principles. As Ju Mipham Rinpoche wisely stated:

*All the actions to be cultivated and avoided in the world,
Are known through language.
So we must now contemplate and mention the faults and benefits
That inhere in the spoken word.³⁷*

The Buddhist path of acceptance and renunciation is frequently conveyed through speech. Words not only reflect a person's discernment of right and wrong but also carry the power to influence others deeply. A public speech can inspire joy or cause widespread suffering. Therefore, before speaking, it is crucial to contemplate carefully: "Should I say this? What positive or negative impacts will it have?"

Careless speech, often characterized by speaking at length without pause or seizing every opportunity to talk, is not a mark of wisdom. True wisdom lies in understanding that there are appropriate times to speak and proper times to remain silent. Knowing when and how to communicate is a fundamental aspect of societal etiquette. Much of human interaction hinges on speech. The delicate balance between peace and conflict, whether between nations or within communities, often rests on diplomatic language. Even the strongest

friendships can be fractured by a single thoughtless remark. Such is the immense power of speech. Accordingly, each of us should strive for mastery in the art of speech.

Some might mistakenly believe, “I have been speaking since childhood—this is my strong suit.” Yet, ironically, some individuals offend others the moment they open their mouths. Recognizing their tendency towards impulsive speech, some individuals choose to practice silence, even wearing “silence” badges. To avoid idle chatter and uphold their vow of silence, some Buddhist practitioners display similar “silence” signs on their chests. Sometimes these signs can be so conspicuous that they resemble the placards worn by convicted criminals in the past, visible from a great distance. Such visible declarations signify the practitioners’ firm resolution, reflecting their understanding that conversation concerning worldly topics offers little lasting value and their preference for turning inward for genuine spiritual practice.

Proper Conduct

Thirdly, “they dare not exhibit conduct that does not correspond to the former kings’ virtuous conduct.” Here, “virtuous conduct” refers to Confucian virtues like benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. In Buddhism, these virtues

essentially correspond to the Three Refuges,³⁸ the Five Precepts,³⁹ and the Ten Virtuous Actions.⁴⁰ “Virtuous conduct” can thus be understood as the foundational ethical guidelines, particularly as embodied in the Ten Virtuous Actions.

One should abstain from any behavior that falls outside the boundaries of basic human morality. As Confucius articulated in *The Analects*:

Do not look at what is contrary to propriety;

Do not listen to what is contrary to propriety;

Do not speak what is contrary to propriety;

Do not act on what is contrary to propriety.

Any action contravening this ethical code of propriety is deemed immoral. In essence, these ancient principles—of proper attire, mindful speech, and virtuous behavior—parallel many aspects of the Buddhist code of discipline and remain highly applicable today.

The Power of Proper Attire, Speech, and Conduct

“Therefore, speak nothing unprescribed; do nothing deviating from the Way. In speech, there is no need to choose what to say; in conduct, no need to choose what to do. Their words fill

**the empire, yet are without fault; their actions fill the empire,
yet provoke no dissatisfaction or resentment.**

This passage provides a summary of the points discussed above. Ministers and high officials could not speak words that ancient kings had not prescribed, nor could they engage in actions that violated moral principles. Once they reached a certain level of virtue cultivation, they no longer needed to choose or deliberate over what to say or what to do. No matter where they were in the world, whatever they spoke would naturally be free from error; whatever they did would not give rise to dislike.

A term in the second line of this passage presents an interesting linguistic nuance. While my current Chinese text uses “择” (*Ze*), meaning choose or select—implying that one no longer needs to choose because their virtue guides them—an alternative translation uses “ ” (*Yi*), meaning disgusting or dislike.

Under the “择” interpretation, through deep cultivation of virtue, individuals reach a point where choices become unnecessary—their speech and actions effortlessly in harmony with established norms and ethical principles. They find that, wherever they are, their words are always appropriate and well-received, and their actions never cause dislike, resentment, or discomfort. The “ ” interpretation,

however, emphasizes that one's speech and behavior should never be offensive or distasteful; instead, they should bring comfort and joy, and adhere to propriety.

The Buddhist code of discipline also places great emphasis on mindful speech and conduct. To be consistently aware of one's words and actions is itself an excellent form of practice. As stated in *The Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma*:

*Vigilance is the foremost friend,
Always bringing benefits;
While carelessness is the worst enemy.
Therefore, stay close to the virtuous friend.*

Vigilance is our greatest companion, constantly benefiting ourselves and others. Heedlessness, by contrast, is our worst enemy—a significant obstacle, or even a kind of inner demonic force. Therefore, in all aspects of life—be it in clothing, speech, or behavior—it is best to rely on the virtuous friend of vigilance. As the ancients cautioned, we ought to be “[e]ver so cautious, as if standing upon the brink of a deep abyss or treading on thin ice.” This cautious mindset transcends faiths or traditions; it is a universal imperative for navigating daily life with wisdom and integrity.

The Significance of Monastic Attire

In Buddhism, monastic precepts provide clear guidelines on appropriate attire. While not strictly mandated within the privacy of their own dormitories, monastics must wear proper robes in public settings. On formal occasions, even stricter dress codes apply. Wearing clothing that suits the occasion is critical.

Sometimes, people wonder if what we wear really matters. They might say, “Shouldn’t we avoid attachment, even to clothing? What I wear is simply my personal choice, and I cherish the freedom to express myself.” However, true freedom does not mean doing whatever we want without any boundaries. Without guidelines, things can easily become disorganized. As the saying goes, “Without rules, nothing can be done properly.” In fact, sound guidelines can help us develop self-discipline and bring out our best qualities, allowing us to experience a more profound sense of freedom.

I remember that around 1990, I was inspired by the exemplary behavior of many great masters, and quietly vowed to always wear monastic robes when teaching the Dharma. I may have shared this intention with His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Since then, apart from a few rare instances, I have faithfully upheld this commitment.

I believe that in all aspects of life, including attire, it is helpful to follow certain principles. Over the years, well-meaning friends have suggested that I might be holding too firmly to tradition, urging me to explore more contemporary styles and even offering me a variety of colorful outfits. While I can see the charm in these clothes, I lack the courage to wear anything other than my monastic robes. Quoting from this text, I “dare not wear what is not prescribed by the former kings’ regulations on clothing[.]” (Audience laughing)

There are times, especially when I travel to sweltering cities in the summer, when I wish I could wear something lighter. My robes have two layers, and although removing the inner layer would be more comfortable, it feels improper. The heat becomes particularly noticeable when I add a third layer and find myself in a non-air-conditioned environment. Still, I never show my discomfort—perhaps this is what people call “feigning dignity.” (Audience laughing) Whether it stems from pretense or principle, I remain steadfast in my monastic attire.

As for the future, who knows what might happen? Everything is constantly changing—the world, the seasons, even our own thoughts and feelings. Perhaps one day I will be teaching the Dharma in a police uniform! (Audience laughing) In that case, it might not resonate with everyone, but perhaps it could help

connect with certain audiences in a new way. I remember teaching in prisons while wearing my monastic robes, and sometimes the inmates did not seem very attentive. Perhaps if I had worn a police uniform, they might have paid more attention.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

While guidelines on attire are important, the rules that govern our speech and behavior are equally vital. In the realm of Buddhist teachings, a significant number of Dharma teachers and tutors are gifted speakers who can explain Dharma teachings with great eloquence. However, because Buddhist teachings are profound and their language is nuanced, it is beneficial for Dharma teachers to undergo proper training and prepare thoroughly before giving a teaching. If, on rare occasions, time does not permit extensive preparation, it is still essential to maintain mindfulness and awareness while sharing the Dharma.

With respect to the significance of our actions, Gungtang Tenpe Dronme Rinpoche said in his *Water and Wood Shastras*,

*Words may be few or many,
But actions reveal the person;
Rivers may be wide or narrow,
But crossing reveals their depth.*

This analogy reminds us that while a handful of people may speak with great skill, their actions reveal whether they can live up to their words. Just as the depth of a river is only known when we cross it, the sincerity of our words is measured by our conduct. No matter how beautiful our words may be, if our actions do not align with them, our words lose their meaning. For Dharma teachers and tutors, while clear and inspiring speech is essential, it is even more crucial that our actions reflect the teachings we share. Ideally, our words and deeds should be in harmony.

In *The Just King*, Ju Mipham Rinpoche offered further insights, and I am particularly fond of this line:

People do not venerate

*Anyone whose speech and actions are haphazard.*⁴¹

This line serves as a gentle reminder that respect is earned through truthful speech and disciplined behavior. If our words are unreliable and our actions lack integrity, it is difficult for others to trust and respect us. It is a crucial piece of advice—one that is worth remembering and internalizing. I encourage you to commit this short line to heart and hold yourself to this standard.

Here, “haphazard” speech includes lying. Some may think that only monastics are required to observe the precept of no lying. In reality, refraining from lying is one of the Ten Virtuous Actions, a guideline that applies equally to both monastics and laypeople. Similarly, “haphazard” behavior refers to actions that lack discipline or do not conform to virtuous standards. If someone’s conduct is unprincipled, it is natural that they may not earn the respect of others. While past karma certainly influences how we are perceived, our present words and actions also play a role.

For those interested in deepening their understanding of proper speech and conduct, I strongly recommend studying texts such as Ju Mipham Rinpoche’s *The Treatise on the Modes of Being* and *The Just King*, as well as Sakya Pandita’s *Treasury of Good Advice, Water and Wood Shastras*, and a classical text—*The Gem Garland of Maxims and Proverbs*. It is not uncommon for some individuals to feel confident in their spiritual practice, or even to believe they have attained extraordinary realizations. However, without consistently upholding the basic principles of ethical speech and conduct, it might be challenging to fully embody the essence of a true practitioner, let alone an enlightened being capable of guiding others to liberation.

My root teacher, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, often emphasized the importance of being a good person with noble qualities. Even when teaching the profound path of Dzogchen, he would return to the foundation of ethical conduct. Sometimes, while discussing worldly ethics, he would seamlessly transition to the highest teachings of Dzogchen, demonstrating the natural spontaneity of an accomplished master.

I realize that in my own lectures, I sometimes transition between topics more quickly than intended, and I understand that this can create difficulties for translators. I often change subjects before I even notice it myself. In some ways, this reflects a more spontaneous and natural way of speaking. As Buddhist practitioners, we are taught to go beyond fixed ideas, so perhaps we can also allow for a bit more flexibility and openness in our teaching styles.

“When these three aspects are fully aligned with propriety, they are able to safeguard their ancestral temples. This represents the filial piety of ministers and high officials.

Maintaining proper attire, speech, and conduct enabled ministers and high officials not only to protect their ancestral temples but also to maintain their official rank and social standing over time.

This is essentially the filial piety expected of ministers and high officials.

As discussed earlier, ancestral temples constitute essential venues for ceremonial offerings and acts of remembrance. Ministers and high officials traditionally maintained ancestral temples that were appropriate to their status. This reverence for ancestral temples has long been significant in Han regions, where people have placed great value on rituals for honoring their forebears. Similarly, in Japan, a considerable number of Buddhists deeply respect memorial tablets and ceremonies for the departed.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The *Classic of Poetry* says, ‘Never slackening day or night, to serve one person.’”

This quote highlights the expectation that ministers and high officials should carefully serve their leader with unwavering diligence, both day and night. Such dedication is often echoed in familiar phrases like “wholeheartedly serve the people” or “wholeheartedly follow the guru and practice according to the instructions.” These ideals invite each of us to reflect on our own lives and consider whether we truly embody the principles we profess. Most people

find themselves devoted to someone or something—be it a cause, a community, or a spiritual path. For example, Buddhists pray to the Three Jewels and their teachers day and night, while followers of other faiths may meditate on their own deities with similar devotion.

At its core, the filial piety expected of ministers and high officials is expressed through steadfast loyalty and service to authority. This form of filial piety can be viewed as a means of cultural transmission or a political tool employed by ancient rulers to shape social norms, from leaders to ordinary people. It is also worth noting that the concept of filial piety in *The Classic of Filial Piety* differs from that found in the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*, which focuses more narrowly on respect within the family. Here, filial piety is expanded to encompass loyalty and service within a wider social and political context at the time of the text's composition, thereby reflecting broader cultural ideals.

Lecture Five

May 2, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

A Heartfelt Welcome to All Visitors at Larung Gar

It is a genuine pleasure to welcome so many visitors to Larung Gar during the May Day holiday. I would like to extend a special greeting to the teachers of our traditional culture study groups. In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, the opportunity to engage with our precious traditional culture is more valuable than ever, regardless of one's background or position. I sincerely appreciate and admire the dedication of those who pursue this meaningful journey of self-cultivation.

Today's lecture on *The Classic of Filial Piety* is expected to last approximately one hour, concluding with a dedication of merit. For those new to this practice and unfamiliar with the concept of dedication, please feel at ease. Simply participating in the recitation with sincerity can have a positive impact on your physical and mental well-being, promote harmony within families, and enrich many other aspects of life.

As I mentioned previously, although traditional culture is not my primary area of expertise, I believe we can explore it together. In some Western educational settings, it is common for teachers to approach subjects with an open mind, learning alongside their students. For instance, a teacher might begin a class by reading the first chapter of a favorite book aloud, then invite students to continue reading in turn. This collaborative approach fosters a spirit of shared discovery and growth, moving beyond conventional models of instruction.

During our session today, I kindly ask everyone to remain attentive, except in cases where special accommodations are needed. Should you experience any discomfort from sitting on the carpets, you may stand or take a brief walk at the back of the Dharma hall. To help maintain a focused and respectful environment for all participants, I also ask that you silence your mobile phones.

Beyond the Role and Filial Duty of Lower Officials: The Significance of Reverence

As many of you are aware, *The Classic of Filial Piety* primarily discusses the principles and practice of filial duty. The text classifies filial piety into five distinct categories, each corresponding to a different social rank. In our previous discussions, we have examined

the expectations of filial piety for emperors, feudal lords, and ministers and high officials—figures who held significant authority in ancient society. While these teachings may initially appear most relevant to those in positions of leadership, it is worthwhile to consider how these principles can also inform and enrich our daily lives.

Today, let us focus on the filial responsibilities of lower officials, whose roles in ancient times bear similarities to those of modern civil servants, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs. Lower officials held a unique position, possessing a certain degree of status and authority that set them apart from ordinary citizens. In their professional lives, they were expected to show respect and loyalty to their superiors—the emperor, feudal lords, and ministers and high officials—while also bearing the responsibility of governance and care for those under their supervision—the common people. Traditionally, lower officials were further divided into upper, middle, and lower tiers, depending on their specific rank and duties. This hierarchical structure can be compared to the classification found in Buddhist practice, where practitioners are often described as belonging to one of three categories: those following the path for beings of greater capacity, those of middling capacity, and those of lesser capacity.

The filial piety expected of lower officials was closely tied to the practice of showing respect toward one's parents and superiors. In contemporary society, the value of reverence may not be as prominently emphasized as it once was. However, many ancient traditions, including those of India, China, and other cultures, placed great significance on cultivating respect. From the perspective of Buddhist practice, reverence continues to hold a central and enduring role.

For example, the esteemed Tibetan Buddhist master Patrul Rinpoche taught that the blessings one receives from one's teacher and the Three Jewels are directly proportional to the depth of one's faith and reverence.⁴² Similarly, the renowned Han Buddhist master Venerable Yin Guang observed that a single measure of sincere reverence brings forth a corresponding measure of merit and wisdom; ten measures of reverence yield ten measures of merit and wisdom. In this way, meaningful progress in Buddhist practice—and ultimately, the attainment of enlightenment—is deeply rooted in the cultivation of genuine reverence and devotion. Therefore, whether we consider this principle from a cultural or a spiritual perspective, it becomes clear that the practice of reverence remains fundamentally important.

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: A Path to Personal Growth

The cultivation of virtues such as respect often begins with an appreciation of traditional culture. At the same time, living in a rapidly changing world makes it equally important to engage with contemporary knowledge and cultural developments. Many of us find ourselves navigating a complex mental landscape, one where deeply rooted Eastern traditions intersect with a technological era profoundly influenced by Western thought. We may even experience internal conflict, as the desire to honor inherited values occasionally seems at odds with the demands and perspectives of the present era.

In many Western societies, the integration of cultural heritage and modern life tends to occur with relative ease, as these two elements are often closely aligned. However, younger generations in Eastern countries—particularly those born in the 1980s and 1990s—often face the challenge of integrating new ideas from around the world, particularly those from the West, while honoring the rich cultural values passed down through generations. These traditional values are not abstract concepts; they are transmitted subtly and deeply embedded in the fabric of daily life. Therefore, abandoning them is neither practical nor desirable. Rather than viewing tradition and

modernity as mutually exclusive, it is both valuable and enriching to seek a balanced understanding of both, allowing us to draw strength from our heritage while remaining open to new knowledge and perspectives.

For those who follow the Buddhist path, this balance is especially significant. In an ever-changing world, it is essential to avoid a narrow or isolated perspective. Certain Dharma friends may confine themselves exclusively to Buddhist philosophy, such as Madhyamaka, Buddhist logic, or preliminary practices, rejecting all other forms of knowledge. Those who only socialize with Buddhists, using special Buddhist terms, often find themselves ill-equipped to interact with the broader world and can hardly make any headway. While it is admirable that some advanced practitioners can immerse themselves fully in Buddhist study and practice, most of us are still navigating the complexities of daily life. It is essential to broaden our learning to include both Eastern and Western cultural classics, as well as scientific advances.

Put Down Your Phone, Pick Up a Book

This pursuit of a broader perspective is a universal one, extending beyond any single spiritual path or profession. For non-religious

individuals working in government, civil service, or other professional fields, it can be easy to confine their learning to a specialized domain. However, while securing life's necessities is fundamental, a deeper sense of purpose is often found through the continual pursuit of knowledge and personal growth. Exploring diverse philosophies, such as Buddhist thought, alongside history and culture, can significantly enhance one's personal development. In this regard, reading remains one of the most effective means of self-cultivation.

In our current digital age, however, it can be challenging to make space for deep and focused reading. Many of us, particularly younger individuals, spend a significant amount of time on smartphones, often consuming fragmented and superficial content. While technology offers many benefits, a steady diet of content lacking meaningful substance can distort our thinking, gradually hindering the development of a well-rounded worldview, moral perspective, and life perspectives. With this in mind, we should set aside our digital devices from time to time and dedicate our attention to more substantive reading—to engage with a variety of works that offer genuine depth of understanding.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LOWER OFFICIALS

Filial and Civic Devotion Rooted in Love and Respect for Parents

“Draw upon one’s devotion to one’s fathers to serve one’s mothers, and the love is the same; draw upon one’s devotion to one’s father to serve one’s lord, and the respect is the same.

According to this passage, lower officials were expected to extend the same love they felt for their fathers to their mothers, and to show the same respect to their superiors as they did to their fathers. In ancient times, both reverence and love were directed toward fathers. Interestingly, the original text highlights “love” in relation to mothers, but does not explicitly mention “reverence.” This distinction reflects the traditional cultural perspectives of the period, which often assigned different roles and expectations to each parent. The term “lord” in this context is broad, encompassing not only the emperor but also feudal lords, ministers and high

officials who held authority over lower officials within the social hierarchy.

Given that the relationship with a lower official's father is established as the cornerstone for these other duties, the primary text logically proceeds to address the fundamental question: how, then, should a lower official serve their father?

“Thus, the mother takes the love while the lord takes the respect; the one who takes both is the father.

To articulate from a different angle, the proper attitude toward one's father was understood as a combination of the affection shown to one's mother and the respect accorded to one's leaders. This perspective is reflected in many historical narratives and dramas, where fathers are often portrayed as figures of authority—similar to kings—who are largely exempt from household chores. In contrast, mothers are frequently depicted as caretakers, managing the details of daily life. These portrayals reflect the patriarchal values prevalent in ancient society, some of which continue to shape cultural norms in various regions today.

To summarize, this passage suggests an ancient cultural tradition in which mothers were primarily owed affection, but not reverence,

while leaders were primarily owed reverence, but not love. Fathers, however, were regarded as deserving of both love and respect.

Equal Reverence for Both Parents

Understanding the historical context provides valuable insight into the origins of this cultural tradition. During the Zhou Dynasty, agriculture was the primary means of economic production. The physical demands of farming meant that men typically became the main workforce, establishing husbands as the financial foundation of the family. As a result, men often held positions of greater authority, while women were generally expected to take on more supportive and domestic roles.

With the advent of industrialization, particularly among working-class families, both spouses increasingly contributed to the household income. In contemporary society, particularly in developed countries, significant strides have been made in both legal and social terms toward achieving gender equality. Today, the ancient notion that mothers or women are less deserving of reverence is widely recognized as outdated. Modern perspectives emphasize that both parents are equally worthy of respect.

It is essential to note that various texts present diverse perspectives on this topic. While *The Classic of Filial Piety* reflects certain

traditional attitudes, a myriad of other classical and Buddhist texts advocate for equal respect toward both parents. For instance, pursuant to the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*, the ancient Chinese sages first instructed people in filial duties toward both parents. Following this ancient teaching, we should treat both parents with equal reverence. *The Analects* further underscores this point:

Nowadays people think that filial piety merely means being able to provide food for one's parents. Yet even dogs and horses are provided with food. If one does not respect one's parents, where is the difference?

The passage suggests that providing only material support to one's parents, without genuine reverence, is insufficient. Confucius likened such superficial care to feeding animals. Another possible interpretation is that children who lack genuine reverence for their parents are, in essence, no different from animals. As noted in the Buddhist text *Treasury of Good Advice*, individuals who act out of self-interest, without regard for others, are comparable to animals who seek only to satisfy their own basic needs.⁴³

Throughout history, ancient cultures have placed great significance on filial piety. Authentic filial piety is grounded in sincere respect

for both parents; actions that lack this essential quality cannot be considered genuine filial piety. This principle is further supported by the *Itivrttaka Sutra*, which states:

*Those who desire merit ought to
Respect their parents,
Bow to them, make offerings,
And approach them with love and respect.*

More than 2,500 years ago, the Buddha emphasized the importance of honoring both father and mother with equal reverence and love. From this scriptural teaching, it is clear that authentic Buddhist thought upholds the principle of equality and does not inherently favor one gender over the other.

Proper Attitude Toward Superiors

Respecting authority figures, much like honoring one's parents, is widely regarded as a fundamental value in many cultures. Demonstrating appropriate deference to superiors is essential for maintaining harmonious professional relationships. In contemporary society, many young professionals are characterized by independent thinking, assertive personalities, and direct communication styles. While these qualities are valuable, they may sometimes

result in a reluctance to display overt deference toward authority figures, which can present challenges in the workplace.

In many Western professional environments, hierarchical distinctions are less pronounced, and minimal deference to supervisors may be considered acceptable. It is not uncommon for employees to provide candid feedback to their superiors, who may perceive such feedback not as a personal criticism but as a valuable contribution. The supervisors might say, “Thanks for your feedback! It prevents me from making mistakes.”

Conversely, in many Eastern cultures, attitudes toward hierarchy and authority tend to differ. Publicly pointing out a supervisor’s shortcomings may be perceived as a breach of decorum, potentially eliciting a strong reaction. In some cases, raising concerns with higher management without the supervisor’s knowledge may be viewed as an even more serious transgression.

It is natural for individuals, including leaders, to appreciate praise and positive reinforcement like “You are amazing,” or “That was incredible,” while criticism—especially when directed at a leader’s personality or actions—can be more challenging to accept. Even when criticism is shared privately among colleagues, it may lead to misunderstandings or conflict if it reaches the supervisor. While

some Western professionals may also be sensitive to criticism, there is often a greater cultural emphasis on openness to feedback, with the prevailing view being that constructive supervision and feedback are ultimately beneficial. They might think, “If I truly have this flaw, it is good to know about it. If not, the critic simply shows the person’s poor judgment.”

It is essential to recognize that media portrayals of workplace dynamics, particularly those influenced by Western narratives, may not always reflect the realities of every professional setting. Directly challenging a supervisor, while it may seem courageous in films, can be poorly received in practice and lead to serious consequences, including strained relationships, workplace retaliation, or even the need to leave a position. Workplace dynamics are often nuanced; even when job performance is solid, a perceived lack of respect toward a supervisor can still jeopardize one’s career stability.

Cultivating Emotional Intelligence, Resilience, and Professional Decorum

Many of life’s challenges can be attributed to a lack of emotional intelligence, also referred to as “skillful means” in Buddhist teachings. While intellectual ability is highly valued, it does not always

translate into effective interpersonal skills. Some individuals, despite possessing intellectual gifts, may struggle to navigate complex social dynamics with supervisors, colleagues, or within organizational structures. They may assume that logical reasoning alone should suffice in all situations. Yet, this perspective does not always account for the diverse contexts and personalities encountered in professional and personal life. Thus, possessing a high Emotional Quotient (EQ)—the ability to respond appropriately and sensitively in various situations—is essential for individuals at all levels of society.

In today's world, numerous people demonstrate high Intelligence Quotient (IQ), mastering multiple languages and acquiring vast amounts of information. Younger generations, in particular, are often well-versed in popular culture, able to recall intricate details about global celebrities and quote lines from films and television with ease. If such impressive memory and learning capacity were directed toward the study of profound subjects, such as the Five Great Treatises of Buddhism, the benefits could be truly remarkable and worthy of admiration.

In addition to IQ and EQ, the Adversity Quotient (AQ) is equally essential. Throughout any pursuit, unexpected obstacles are inevitable. Individuals with a high AQ are able to persevere through

difficulties, while those with less resilience may become discouraged at the first sign of adversity. For example, some Dharma friends here may lose motivation when faced with minor setbacks, considering changing volunteer posts or departments at the first challenge. This pattern of frequent change may reflect emotional instability and a lack of resilience resulting from past negative karma. As an ordinary being, when karmic winds blow, everyone drifts in samsara like yellow leaves.

At first glance, filial piety may seem to concern only one's relationship with parents. However, a closer study of *The Classic of Filial Piety* reveals a broader understanding—one that extends beyond devotion to parents and encompasses respect for authority figures and superiors as well.

All the discussion of this passage relates closely to the virtue of reverence. In practical terms, even if one feels inward resistance to showing respect toward supervisors, outward expressions of deference are often a pragmatic approach that can contribute to career stability and professional growth. For instance, I once observed an individual who, despite personal dissatisfaction with his supervisor, consistently demonstrated outward respect in the workplace. This approach reflects a thoughtful application of traditional wisdom in a modern context. In contrast, some young adults, particularly

those influenced by a variety of cultural perspectives, may find it challenging to apply skillful means or appropriate social etiquette when interacting with spiritual teachers or superiors. Nevertheless, consistently demonstrating respect and deference toward those in positions of authority is beneficial.

Impartiality and Inclusiveness in Effective Leadership

For those in management roles—whether in monasteries, Dharma centers, or study groups—it is crucial to approach leadership with fairness. Ideally, decisions regarding team members should not be influenced by personal feelings or relationships, as this would be inconsistent with the Buddhist principle of equality.

From my own experience as a supervisor, I strive to ensure that personal feelings do not influence management decisions. When someone treated me like an enemy, I admit that, deep down, I sometimes wonder, “I have transmitted so many teachings to this person. Why do they still treat me like this?” Even so, I would never dismiss someone just because they disrespected me. Admission to the Buddhist academy and dismissal alike are governed exclusively by established standards, independent of personal ties.

This principle of impartiality in all aspects of leadership is rooted in a vow I made before my root guru, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok

Rinpoche. On one occasion, following a teaching on the management of the academy, I approached His Holiness and expressed my intention: “I acknowledge that I might handle academy affairs with some bias if uninformed. But otherwise, I vow never to make a management decision out of personal emotions or partiality.”

Another hallmark of true leadership is the ability to embrace differing viewpoints and to remain open to feedback, even from those who may not always express agreement or deference. Every organization will include individuals with diverse perspectives. Even during the Buddha’s time, there were figures such as Devadatta, who frequently challenged the Buddha. Yet, the Buddha did not exclude Devadatta from the sangha; instead, he used these challenges as opportunities for teaching. As he noted, “Devadatta behaved this way in the past, and continues to do so now.”

On the other hand, leaders who discourage dissent or surround themselves only with those who offer uncritical agreement may find that this approach is detrimental to effective teamwork and ultimately limits the organization’s potential for growth. Constructive feedback and differing opinions are essential for fostering a dynamic and resilient team.

Whether one becomes an abbot, a Dharma center director, or holds any leadership position, it is beneficial to include individuals who are willing to offer alternative viewpoints. Buddhist texts recount how great masters, such as Lord Atisha, intentionally sought out companions who disagreed with them. Even in a movie, a variety of characters—including a few antagonists—enrich the narrative and make it more engaging.

It is valuable to constantly reflect on ourselves, as it is not uncommon for individuals, upon assuming positions of authority, to develop a subtle sense of pride and dismiss dissenting opinions, sometimes even in modest roles such as leading a study group. Leaders who favor blind followers and rely solely on affirmation and flattery may experience short-term comfort, but without honest feedback, opportunities for meaningful improvement are ultimately limited. Constructive criticism is invaluable, as it encourages self-reflection, remediation, and the ongoing development of both individuals and organizations.

For these reasons, department heads and leaders at the academy should foster an inclusive environment that welcomes team members who are willing to share diverse opinions and provide constructive feedback. Inclusiveness is a defining quality of effective leadership, one that supports both individual and collective progress.

Ultimately, a team composed only of those who always agree may struggle to adapt and improve. I offer these personal perspectives for your thoughtful consideration, trusting that each leader will find the approach best suited to their own circumstances.

Honor Parents in Life and After Death

For a multitude of young people today, supporting parents financially may seem sufficient, and expressions of love and respect can sometimes be overlooked in the busyness of daily life. Phone calls may be rare, and visits can sometimes lapse for a year or more. Such neglect may arise for many reasons, yet from the perspective of traditional culture, it remains a serious failing. As the saying goes, “A mother’s heart is as soft as water; a son’s heart is as hard as stone.” While parents, especially mothers, often hold their children close in their thoughts, adult children may struggle to voice their feelings openly and can too easily seem indifferent.

As emphasized previously, it is always meaningful to cherish and honor our parents while they are with us. Simple gestures—such as regular phone calls, visits, or small acts of care—can bring great happiness to parents, who often lead modest lives and find joy in their children’s attention. Even a small offering or thoughtful act can be deeply appreciated. Once parents have passed away, the

opportunity to serve them directly is no longer available. At that time, Buddhist tradition encourages reciting the Avalokiteshvara mantra regularly and dedicating the merit to one's parents. When visiting temples, it is customary to write down the names of departed loved ones and request the sangha to perform prayers and rituals on their behalf. Even a modest offering of five or ten yuan for prayer recitation can be a meaningful way to honor and benefit those who have passed.

At Larung Gar, it is heartening to see many people submitting the names of their deceased relatives for prayers and dedications. This meaningful practice can indeed bring benefit to those who have passed on. In fact, if the deceased has fallen into lower realms, the merit generated through monastic recitations can offer support and guidance toward liberation. Monastics at our academy always recite the names of the deceased during prayer recitation ceremonies. Buddhist scriptures affirm that such practices can help the departed escape samsara and attain liberation. Thus, it is critical for monastics to recite prayers for the deceased in this manner.

Loyalty, Compliance, and the Preservation of Ancestral Rites

“Hence, service to the lord with filial piety is loyalty; service to superiors with respect is compliance. Through unwavering loyalty and compliance in service to those above, one can preserve one’s position and continue one’s ancestral rituals and offerings. This is the filial piety of the lower officials.

This teaching suggests that to serve one’s ruler with filial piety is considered an act of loyalty; to serve one’s teachers, elders, and superiors with reverence is regarded as an act of compliance. When one consistently demonstrates loyalty and compliance toward those in higher positions, it becomes possible to maintain one’s position, salary, and standing. Such is the filial piety of the lower officials.

Filial piety inherently encompasses respect and often embodies love as well. When one serves superiors with a heart of filial devotion, such an act is seen as an expression of loyalty. In its most direct sense, loyalty means steadfastness—serving with sincerity, trustworthiness, and enduring commitment. Those in positions of authority recognize loyalty in their subordinates when they feel assured of their sincerity, fidelity, and integrity.

Furthermore, serving teachers, elders, and superiors with respect is viewed as a form of compliance. This principle is especially evident in daily interactions within many Eastern societies. For example, when addressed by a superior, it is customary to respond with respect. In Tibetan culture, one might say, “Lasso, lasso,” an honorific expression meaning “yes, certainly.” Such hierarchical etiquette is deeply ingrained and widely observed—individuals in lower positions are expected to follow the directives of those above them.

The practice of observing hierarchical rank provides a clear framework for appropriate social conduct. In contemporary professional settings, for example, it is customary for middle managers to respond with “Certainly” or “Lasso” when receiving instructions from senior officers, and for junior staff to do the same when engaging with middle managers. Historically, this pattern of deference extended through all levels of authority: feudal lords would respectfully say “Certainly” to the emperor; ministers and high officials to feudal lords; lower officials to ministers and high officials; and common people to lower officials.

From a Buddhist perspective, the concept of social status is discussed among the fourteen non-concurrent formations in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*. While status is recognized as a conditioned and

impermanent phenomenon, lacking inherent existence, individuals still develop a sense of superiority upon attaining a certain rank or position.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The Classic of Poetry says, ‘From early morning to nightfall, do not disgrace those who gave you life.’”

This ancient teaching emphasizes the importance of serving one’s parents, teachers, and superiors with filial piety, which encompasses both respect and affection, from the moment one rises in the morning until retiring at night. In doing so, individuals avoid bringing dishonor to their parents, who are the source of their life.

Cultural Perspectives on Family Honor

The concept of family honor and the importance of maintaining it can vary significantly across cultures. In some Eastern traditions, failing to demonstrate adequate reverence or deference toward one’s superiors may result not only in the loss of one’s position but also in causing one’s parents to feel a sense of shame. Unlike many Western societies, where individual achievement and personal fulfillment are often emphasized, Eastern cultures tend to place

considerable importance on family honor or social dignity. Through personal observation, it is evident that these cultural differences are quite pronounced. For example, in Eastern societies, individuals may experience a loss of face due to circumstances such as the family's financial hardship or having unmarried adult daughters. Many aspects of daily life are closely intertwined with this concept of "face" or social dignity.

Furthermore, a child's decision to pursue a monastic path can be a source of disappointment or embarrassment for their parents. During major holidays such as the New Year, a monastic child who wishes to return home may be discouraged by their parents, who might say, "Please do not come home! Your presence would make it difficult for our family to maintain our standing in the community." At our academy, there are several Dharma practitioners who long to visit their families during holidays, yet have not received their parents' approval. Without this metaphorical "visa," they are unable to return home. Understandably, their parents' attitudes are deeply rooted in centuries-old traditions in Han regions. We are all shaped by our cultural environments and often feel a strong sense of obligation to conform to prevailing societal norms.

In contrast, Tibetan culture offers a markedly different perspective on this matter. In Tibetan regions, having a family member who

has chosen the monastic life is regarded as a great honor and a source of joy. During major festivals or family celebrations, such as the Tibetan New Year (Losar), parents often warmly encourage their ordained children to return home for the occasion. A typical request might be, “Could you come back for a visit, even if only for one day? We could share a special meal on Losar and reunite with our relatives.” This welcoming attitude highlights the cultural diversity in how family honor and the role of monastic life are perceived.

Cultural Considerations in the Translation of Sacred Texts

Today’s teaching highlights the nuanced understanding of filial respect. According to *The Classic of Filial Piety*, filial piety toward one’s parents is expressed differently: toward the father, both love and reverence are emphasized, while toward the mother, love is given particular importance. From a Buddhist perspective, however, both parents are to be served with equal love and respect, as Buddhist texts do not distinguish between the devotion owed to either parent.

The interplay of cultural values is an important consideration when ancient texts are transmitted across different societies. It is worth noting that during the translation of these scriptures, a process

of translation localization or cultural adaptation can sometimes occur. A foreign scholar wrote a book exploring this phenomenon after conducting extensive research over many years. The author observed that when Buddhist scriptures were first translated from Sanskrit into Chinese, certain expressions were sometimes adjusted to better align with traditional Chinese values, including Confucian ideals such as filial piety. As a result, some phrases in certain scriptures may have undergone cultural adaptation during the translation process.

Certain masters hold differing opinions about this style of translation. For instance, in our study of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Master Kui Ji, while not entirely dismissing Kumarajiva's translation, identified passages he regarded as less appropriate in his commentary. He also suggested that Xuanzang's historic journey to India to retrieve the original Buddhist scriptures was probably motivated by the conviction that the texts brought back by earlier masters—and their existing translations—were somewhat incomplete or imprecise.

The Transformative Power of Reverence

Whether viewed through the lens of traditional culture or Buddhist doctrine, reverence holds paramount significance. As highlighted

in the teachings of Master Yinguang and Patrul Rinpoche referenced earlier, the deeper the reverence we cultivate, the more fully we become receptive to the blessings of the buddhas. This idea was elaborated by a fellow practitioner during the English oral presentation yesterday, who quoted, “A thousand rivers reflect a thousand moons.” Just as countless pure rivers reflect countless luminous moons, the more reverence we offer to our parents, the more love we receive in return. Similarly, the deeper our reverence for the buddhas and bodhisattvas, the more apparent their blessings become in our lives.

A similar teaching can be found in *A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden*, compiled by the Chinese monk Daoshi. This text explains that for those who seek the Dharma with sincere reverence, the Buddha never truly enters nirvana, and the Dharma never fades away. Even in lands where no physical buddha is present, devoted practitioners who approach with reverence can still witness his presence and receive his authentic teachings and blessings.

Reverence forms the foundation of Confucian culture and lies at the core of Buddhism. To receive genuine blessings from the Dharma and the Buddha, the cultivation of reverence is paramount. This point merits particular emphasis: it is through authentic reverence that one’s spiritual practice gains depth and begins to bear

meaningful fruit. When we regard the Buddha or an enlightened Buddhist master of the past with heartfelt respect, it is as though they have never entered parinirvana—their blessings continue to flow toward us unceasingly. A similar dynamic applies to sacred scriptures. By extension, even when honoring Confucius with profound esteem, despite his demise over two millennia ago, one may still sense his living presence.

Although His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche has entered nirvana, I often feel that he has never departed, especially in my dreams or during prayer recitation. I firmly believe that as long as I maintain devoted reverence and pray regularly, my teacher's presence and blessings will always remain with me. In my daily life, I constantly pray to my guru with sincere respect—while walking, for example, as well as upon waking each morning and before going to sleep at night. This practice is both an expression of my deep gratitude for his immeasurable kindness and a method for softening and transforming my own mind. While my teacher's wisdom is boundless and his compassion universal, I recognize that if I fail to pray and actively connect with him, I may become less receptive to his blessings.

The same principle applies when seeking the blessings of other buddhas and bodhisattvas: sincere, consistent prayer is the key. For

instance, when I regularly pray to Manjushri, I experience a close, living connection with him, as though his blessings are always present. However, if I neglect to pray for a period, that connection seems to diminish, and his blessings no longer feel as immediately present. The same pattern holds with Dharma protectors. When I fail to make offerings, I begin to feel uneasy and think, “I need to resume my offerings soon.” Upon doing so, that sense of connection naturally returns.

Understandably, some individuals who do not share this faith may view such practices differently, perhaps even considering them superstitious. They may feel a kind of misplaced compassion and believe that I am in desperate need of salvation. I am at peace with however others choose to respond, whether with “compassion” or disapproval. Nevertheless, based on my personal experience, I sincerely recommend that everyone have a spiritual anchor in life.

Nourishing Both Body and Mind

Attending to our inner spiritual well-being is as essential as meeting our physical needs. In today’s society, it is not uncommon for individuals to lack a source of spiritual refuge beyond material possessions. Personally, in addition to fulfilling basic physical

necessities such as eating and sleeping, I engage in regular prayer to buddhas, bodhisattvas, and lineage gurus, including those who are no longer present in this world. This practice forms a vital part of my spiritual life and provides a sense of inner fulfillment.

A vast number of people devote themselves primarily to material pursuits, sometimes overlooking deeper values that contribute to lasting happiness. While the pursuit of wealth and comfort is understandable, a life focused solely on amassing wealth may ultimately feel unfulfilling, leaving a sense of spiritual void and emotional detachment. In truth, our happiness and inner peace primarily arise from adjusting our body and mind, as well as drawing strength from intangible sources such as religious faith. Hence, it is imperative to cultivate a robust spiritual dimension alongside our material existence. This does not necessarily require adherence to a particular religion; instead, a secular approach to spirituality—rooted in positive energy and optimistic thinking—has become increasingly appealing to many.

In this context, the philosophical legacy of Wang Yangming has experienced a notable revival in recent years. His thought demonstrates remarkable compatibility with contemporary secular perspectives and has gained growing recognition within academic circles. Notably, plenty of Japanese scholars hold his philosophy in

high regard. For example, one scholar reportedly devoted ten years to studying Wang Yangming's philosophy, visiting his hometown seven times during this period. Wang Yangming was a prolific writer whose works have been widely published, with even more publications internationally than in China. I have read several of his writings.

Although Wang Yangming's philosophy is fundamentally rooted in Confucianism, it also reflects significant influences from Buddhism and Daoism. Historical accounts describe how he studied in solitude in the challenging environment of Longchang Post in Guizhou, where he experienced what he perceived as enlightenment and established his School of Mind philosophical system. Wang Yangming was known for his moral integrity, and many of his teachings continue to resonate today. His final words, "This mind is luminous; what more is there to say?" reflect his conviction that he had lived a life of absolute integrity, with no secrets to keep and no regrets to hold, having expressed all that needed expression. This state of mind at the end of his life bears a resemblance to the serenity often observed in realized Buddhist masters at the time of their passing.

Ultimately, religious faith or formal rituals are not necessary for everyone. What is most important is the cultivation of a life characterized by moral integrity and spiritual clarity—a life that fosters freedom, joy, and ease rather than persistent anxiety. Some individuals seem perpetually weighed down by various concerns, yet living each day with constant worry offers little benefit. During our limited time in this world, we all encounter a range of experiences, both joyful and challenging. If we were to dwell on every hardship, genuine happiness might remain elusive. Thus, while it is important to conscientiously fulfill our daily responsibilities, nurturing and preserving inner joy is equally, if not more, essential.

Take Refuge in Truth

As several individuals have expressed a wish to take refuge in the Three Jewels, I would now like to offer the opportunity to do so by reciting the refuge verses. If you wish to take refuge, please feel free to repeat after me. If you do not want to participate, there is no need for concern—simply hearing these verses will not cause you to take refuge unintentionally. Taking refuge is not a passive occurrence, but rather an active and voluntary commitment. The actual acceptance of this vow depends entirely on one's own intention and resolve. All those present, whether in person or

online, who wish to take the refuge vow are warmly invited to make this commitment from today onward.

To take refuge means to place your trust in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as reliable guides on the path to liberation. The Buddha is the one who has fully awakened to the ultimate nature of reality. The Dharma is the truth revealed through his teachings. The Sangha is the community of practitioners who follow the enlightened path. In essence, we do not take refuge in someone who remains unawakened or confused, nor in teachings that contradict the truth, nor in a community whose conduct is improper or unethical.

If we aspire to seek the truth, it is only natural to take refuge in the awakened one. The very meaning of “Buddha” is “the awakened one.” Because the Buddha has realized complete awakening, we place our trust in him and take refuge in him. The Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—thus represent the awakened one, his teachings, and the community of his followers. Ultimately, taking refuge in the Three Jewels is an expression of taking refuge in truth itself. Only a truly awakened being can realize the ultimate reality underlying all phenomena, and those who sincerely strive to realize this truth constitute the noble Sangha.

If you feel prepared to take refuge in the awakened one, in his teachings, and in the noble community that follows him in pursuit of truth, you are invited to recite the refuge verses after me. In addition, if you can take refuge in the Three Jewels with the motivation to benefit all sentient beings, your action becomes even more meaningful. This practice represents the sacred refuge of the Mahayana tradition.

Now, for those who are ready to take refuge, please repeat the following refuge prayer after me three times:

Lama la kyab su chio (I take refuge in the Guru)

Sang gyela kyab su chio (I take refuge in the Buddha)

Chola kyab su chio (I take refuge in the Dharma)

Gendun la kyab su chio (I take refuge in the Sangha)

(Khenpo snaps his fingers) Upon hearing this sound, you have now received the refuge vow. To conclude, let us dedicate the merit we have accumulated through this session for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Lecture Six

May 9, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Let us begin today's session by generating supreme bodhicitta. As today is Wednesday, we will continue our exploration of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, a foundational text in traditional Chinese culture. According to our current schedule, we will resume our study on *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras* on Thursdays and Fridays, and on Saturdays, we will turn to *A Precious Garland of the Supreme Path*. This course schedule is expected to remain consistent for the time being.

In our previous sessions, we examined the standards of filial piety as they applied to various ranks within ancient Chinese society, including the Son of Heaven (the emperor), feudal lords, ministers and high officials, and lower officials. Today, we will turn our attention to the sixth chapter, which discusses the filial piety of common people. Although the original text addressing this group is relatively brief—comprising only a few lines—it nonetheless offers valuable insights.

During the time of composition of this text, society was characterized by a well-defined hierarchical structure. Among the five

primary social roles, commoners occupied the lowest tier, regarded simply as ordinary citizens with limited social standing. However, they were not at the absolute bottom of the social order. In the slave society that preceded the feudal era, a class of slaves existed below the commoners. While “slave society” and “feudal society” are historical designations introduced by later generations, their meanings reflect the undisputed reality of a rigidly stratified social structure during that time.

Since ancient China was predominantly agrarian, most commoners earned their livelihood through farming. Even today, except for a few countries without agricultural production, many nations, such as China, India, and Thailand, remain major agricultural powers. In this sense, a host of ordinary people today, including farmers, can be seen as analogous to the commoners of that historical era.

What does filial piety mean for common people? In some respects, it differs from the forms of filial piety we discussed in earlier chapters. Through our ongoing study of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, many of us may have developed new perspectives on filial piety. Previously, we might have understood filial piety merely as children’s respectful attitudes and behaviors toward their parents. Upon seeing the Chinese character “孝” (*xiao*), we might immediately picture an image of children serving their elders with reverence. However, as

rooted in traditional Chinese culture, filial piety is a profoundly expansive and multifaceted notion. From the Son of Heaven at the top of society to the commoners, each social class had its own distinctive expression of filial duty.

Concerning the filial piety of common people, its practice is relatively straightforward and shares similarities with the general expectation of honoring one's parents. While it is likely that everyone here already has a good understanding of this principle, our collective study serves as a valuable reminder and an opportunity to reflect more deeply on its significance. Thus, our continued exploration remains a meaningful and worthwhile endeavor.

Integrating with the World Before Teaching the Dharma

As individuals living in the world, it is beneficial for all of us, including Buddhist practitioners, to cultivate a broad perspective and engage meaningfully with the world around us. Engaging with worldly matters does not necessarily hinder spiritual practice; a basic understanding of secular knowledge and the ability to interact effectively with others are essential in today's society.

It is worth noting, however, that this guidance may not be universally applicable to every individual or circumstance. As mentioned

previously, many great Buddhist masters of the past—both in Han regions and the Tibetan plateaus—dedicated their entire lives to solitary practice. They sought seclusion in remote hermitages, deep forests, quiet caves, or ancient temples. In such circumstances, where there was little need to take part in the larger community, the acquisition of worldly knowledge was not essential for them.

However, the circumstances are quite different for most spiritual practitioners or Buddhists today. It is crucial to grasp fundamental worldly principles, such as how to conduct oneself, manage affairs, and communicate and cooperate with others. Without such engagement, those who remain exclusively within Buddhist circles, focusing solely on Dharma study and meditation, may find themselves less prepared to navigate broader society. Life outside the Buddhist context can be quite different, and adapting it requires sufficient knowledge and specific practical skills.

I recall an example of a practitioner who encountered this very challenge. When an opportunity arose to send a Dharma teacher to give lectures outside the valley, I thought he would be an excellent candidate. He had studied and practiced the Dharma for over a decade and excelled in many areas, including oral presentations and personal conduct. However, after his visit, the feedback from the community was less than positive. He returned feeling discouraged

and shared, “I do not understand. After all these years of study, why are people still so unreceptive to me? I just cannot seem to get along with anyone there.”

His challenge likely arose from a gradual disconnect from everyday society, potentially as result of his exclusive immersion in Buddhist circles. His world was likely filled with specialized Buddhist terminology and continuous Dharma study and practice. Over time, his understanding of the outside world became outdated, and he may not have realized how much society had changed. In fact, some long-time practitioners at Larung Gar may find some contemporary language unfamiliar, just as the specialized language used within Buddhist circles may sound nonsensical to those outside the community. As a result, when practitioners leave Buddhist communities, they may lack some basic skills to navigate daily life, let alone propagate the Dharma.

Recently, I have been teaching the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which offers valuable guidance on integrating spiritual principles with worldly life. I believe this text is especially relevant for everyone. After a recent lecture on this sutra, someone remarked, “Your teaching on the *Vimalakirti Sutra* helped me significantly. It completely reshaped my view of Buddhism. I now have a clearer understanding of what the Dharma really is.” Whether this feedback was intended

to be encouraging or was a genuine reflection, it highlights the importance of developing a correct understanding of Buddhism and the Dharma. Without such knowledge, public perception of Buddhism may become distorted, and our understanding of its essence may diverge from its true meaning. A proper understanding requires systematic hearing, reflection, and meditation on Buddhist texts, including those that address life in the world.

Looking ahead, I hope that, when circumstances allow, Buddhists can also learn about modern science and technology. Comparative research between Buddhist philosophy and contemporary scientific principles could be especially beneficial for those with a solid foundation in core Buddhist teachings. However, for beginners, it is essential to maintain a balance; focusing solely on secular knowledge at the expense of Dharma study may leave one ungrounded in both areas. This is offered as a gentle reminder. Given the prevalence of a scientific worldview in contemporary society, a basic understanding of science can be very helpful for building connections and navigating the modern world. Additionally, as we progress in our spiritual practice, questions or doubts influenced by scientific concepts may frequently arise. It can be challenging to address or resolve these uncertainties without a basic grasp of scientific principles.

CHAPTER SIX: THE COMMON PEOPLE

Natural Laws of Heaven, Earth, and People

“By following the course of heaven and making use of earth’s resources to best advantage, and by being prudent in one’s conduct and frugal in one’s expenditure, one supports one’s parents. This is the filial piety of the common people.

Commoners demonstrated filial piety by making full use of seasonal and geographical patterns, obtaining harvests through diligent cultivation of the land. At the same time, they conducted themselves with propriety, acted prudently, observed the law, and maintained a lifestyle characterized by frugality and restraint, avoiding waste and indulgence in daily life.

This passage lends itself to two primary interpretations. One perspective holds that filial piety among commoners is expressed through supporting one’s parents by engaging in farming according to the natural law and practicing prudence and frugality. Another interpretation suggests that commoners should strive to understand the underlying principles governing all things—from the

seasonal and geographical rhythms of nature to the basic tenets of everyday life—and, more importantly, apply this understanding in daily life.

Following the Course of Heaven

The primary text highlights three significant elements, the first of which is “following the course of heaven.” What does this phrase mean? Here, “heaven” refers to nature, while “course” or way denotes its inherent principles. The universe operates according to the laws of the external natural environment and the laws governing our internal body and mind. In Buddhist terms, the workings of the external world can be generally described as the “law of dependent origination” or the “principle of nature.”

For example, the cycle of four seasons brings about predictable changes in climate: spring is warm, summer is hot, autumn is cool, and winter is cold. Plant growth also follows this seasonal rhythm: generally, spring is for sowing, summer is for growing, autumn is for ripening and harvesting, and winter is for storing the harvest. Just as nature abides by its principles, so does the human body. If we disregard these natural laws and act contrary to their timing, sequence, or cycle, our aspirations and efforts are

unlikely to succeed. That is why it is important for commoners to first understand the laws governing all phenomena.

As the Bodhisattva Nagarjuna stated:

*Learning knowledge in childhood,
Nurturing cows in winter,
Sowing seeds in spring—
These three are causes whose effects will come to maturity.*⁴⁴

This verse, which may appear with slight variations in different texts, teaches us the importance of pursuing learning during childhood, as acquiring knowledge becomes more challenging later in life. Some individuals only begin to learn foreign languages in their fifties or sixties. Recently, we provided a platform for multilingual oral presentations, and after witnessing peers deliver presentations in English or Japanese, some Dharma friends were inspired to begin learning these languages themselves. Such motivation is admirable, though it is natural for memory to decline with age. Therefore, it is most effective to acquire diverse forms of knowledge while we are young.

The verse says that winter is a critical time for feeding dairy cows; they must be well-nourished with fodder during this season. If not, they may not survive by springtime, or if they do, they may be too

weak to produce milk in summer. Herders are well aware of this natural law and take great care of their cows to ensure they are fed adequately during winter. In the same way, farmers recognize that spring is the optimal season for sowing seeds and act accordingly. Thus, learning in childhood, nurturing cows in winter, and sowing seeds in spring are all causes that lead to their respective effects. These are examples of natural laws in action. “Following the course of heaven” means acting in accordance with these principles.

Mencius also spoke of “celestial timing, geographical advantages, and human harmony.” “Celestial timing” refers to the way nature changes with the seasons and how various favorable conditions arise accordingly. Moreover, the cycle of the four seasons influences not only our physical well-being but also our spiritual practice. Ancient Chinese classics, such as the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*, and the principles of traditional Chinese medicine offer profound insights into these natural laws.

Making Use of Earth’s Resources

The second element is “making use of earth’s resources,” which refers to utilizing the land’s geographical advantages and unique characteristics. Just as heaven has its natural rhythms, so too does the earth. Different regions exhibit unique variations in elevation,

soil composition, climate, and other environmental factors, all of which determine the types of plants that can thrive in each area. For instance, seeds from trees native to southern regions will not survive if planted in the north. Likewise, trees that flourish in low-altitude areas cannot adapt to high-altitude environments.

A clear illustration of this principle can be found in the cultivation of highland barley, the grain used to make tsampa, a staple food in Tibetan regions. Unlike rice or wheat, highland barley is uniquely suited to the high-altitude plateaus of China, and is primarily cultivated in parts of Qinghai, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Gansu. Even within a generally suitable region, such as the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province, highland barley thrives only at specific altitudes—typically between 2,800 and 3,600 meters. It grows well in places like Drango county but does not fare as well in extremely high-altitude areas, such as Larung Gar. Consequently, attempting to cultivate highland barley at our academy, which has an average elevation of around 3,900 meters, or on the Chengdu Plain at approximately 750 meters, would be unsuccessful. The seeds might sprout, but they would not bear grain, as the conditions fall outside the natural laws of heaven and earth governing the plant's growth.

India also produces a form of tsampa using locally grown barley. However, it differs significantly from the tsampa found in Tibetan regions. During a visit to India, many members of our group longed for authentic Tibetan tsampa. Our host graciously provided Indian tsampa, but its flavor was noticeably different from what we were accustomed to. One of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's attendants, a lama, remarked with a sigh, "Alas, no real Tibetan tsampa here! How many more months until we can return home?" He began counting on his fingers, eagerly anticipating the day he could again enjoy the familiar taste of authentic tsampa.

These examples underscore how seasonal cycles, climate, and geography shape agricultural outcomes. Ultimately, these principles reflect the concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity," which emphasizes living in accordance with natural laws. Some may reject this idea, insisting that "human effort can certainly conquer nature." While human ingenuity is remarkable, ancient teachings and experience suggest that endeavors are most successful when they align with natural principles; otherwise, many efforts may not succeed as intended.

Ancient people possessed profound insights into observing and harmonizing with natural conditions. Before undertaking significant ventures, such as embarking on a journey or starting a new

project, they would carefully assess factors such as timing, as well as the winds, channels, and vital essences of their own bodies. They developed a variety of methods for observing and understanding natural laws. In contrast, many people today are less familiar with these practices and seldom devote time to learning them, which is regrettable.

Human Harmony: Ethical Conduct and Frugality

The third element from the text, “being prudent in one’s conduct and frugal in one’s expenditure,” corresponds to the principle of human harmony, a concept that complements both celestial timing and geographical advantages. Achieving this harmony involves the cultivation of inner virtues, such as kindness, and consistently adhering to the fundamental code of ethics in one’s actions.

When individuals act in accordance with moral principles, they foster both physical well-being and mental peace. Conversely, living in opposition to ethical standards can lead to both external difficulties and various forms of internal distress. For example, a lack of prudence and self-restraint may result in immoral, harmful actions, which can ultimately lead to the loss of freedom and peace of mind. Consider why some individuals end up incarcerated: under the influence of alcohol or poor judgment, they may commit crimes

or negative deeds such as murder or theft, thereby violating both basic ethical norms and legal standards. As a result, they must face the consequences of their actions, including imprisonment. This underscores the importance of compliance with ethical standards at all times.

In addition to ethical conduct, another vital aspect of human harmony is maintaining a balanced approach to material life, avoiding both extreme poverty and excessive luxury. If one is too poor, even basic survival needs go unmet. On the other hand, living in luxury and engaging in wastefulness can, from the Buddhist perspective of cause and effect, deplete one's store of merit. When the appropriate causes and conditions ripen, one will be forced to repay their karmic debts through physical and mental suffering.

For this reason, eminent masters of the past placed great emphasis on accumulating and preserving merit. They taught that one's consumption—be it food, clothing, and other expenses—should be commensurate with one's merit, and that extravagance and excessive desires should be avoided. The ideal is to live within one's means, wisely and efficiently using available resources without waste.

This timeless wisdom presents a notable contrast to a trend of immediate consumption or advanced consumption in contemporary society, which can make it challenging to practice frugality. The habit of spending one's monthly income before it is replenished is a common modern challenge. I have heard that even some practitioners at the academy are "monthly spenders" who fall into this habit, using up their monthly living allowance well before the subsequent disbursement. While living with few material possessions can be seen as beneficial from a spiritual perspective, it is also important to reflect on our habits and consider whether we manage our resources wisely. In some cases, one might even wonder if there are "daily spenders" among us—those who use up their entire monthly stipend in a single day.

Immeasurable Kindness of Parents

In essence, it is paramount to embody filial piety by respecting, supporting, and obeying one's parents in the abovementioned ways. This virtue naturally arises from a genuine understanding of the principle of cause and effect: positive actions, such as honoring one's parents, yield beneficial karmic results, while negative actions like filial impiety inevitably bring about unfavorable consequences. From this perspective, an individual who cannot show respect to

their own parents may find it challenging to achieve significant worldly accomplishments or attain higher spiritual realizations.

Some may say, “I have had a strained relationship with my parents since childhood, and now feel indifferent. Nevertheless, I can still spread the Dharma and contribute to society.” While such feelings are understandable, as relationships with parents can be complex, it is crucial to recognize that achieving these aspirations may prove exceedingly difficult without a moral foundation of gratitude and respect for one’s parents. Regardless of our personal experiences, basic human decency calls for us, as children, to maintain a heart of gratitude toward our parents. Without them, we would not have the life we now enjoy. A lack of filial piety is seen as a departure from fundamental ethical values and the natural law of cause and effect, making realization of future goals—whether worldly or spiritual—extremely challenging.

The kindness of parents is emphasized in numerous Buddhist teachings. For example, the *Mahayana Sutra on the Contemplation of the Mind-Ground* explains that the father embodies loving-kindness, while the mother embodies compassionate kindness. In *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the section on remembering the mother’s kindness details how mothers benefit their children.

Indeed, our parents' kindness has shown us is incalculable and difficult to repay fully.

In recognition of this profound debt of gratitude, the Buddha himself ascended to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three⁴⁵ to teach the Dharma to his mother for three months. His subsequent return to the human realm is commemorated in the Buddhist festival known as Lhabab Duchen.⁴⁶ Throughout his teachings, the Buddha spoke extensively about the merit of repaying parental kindness.

According to Buddhist scriptures, our parents' kindness to us surpasses all others—sometimes even exceeding that of our spiritual teachers or the Buddha himself. In the *Commentary on the Sutra on the Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable*, there is a story that illustrates this point, which I will briefly narrate for you.

Once, during a severe famine in India, corpses were scattered throughout the streets. In his manifested form, the Buddha went on alms rounds for three consecutive days but did not receive a single mouthful of food. (When we ourselves experience hunger or hardship, it is helpful to remember that enduring such suffering is worthwhile. After all, even the Buddha, so majestically adorned with immeasurable merit, appeared to experience suffering to guide sentient beings toward liberation.)

At that time, a bhikkhu learned that the Buddha had not eaten for three days and felt deep concern. However, he too had nothing to eat—during a famine, everyone suffered. In desperation, the bhikkhu sold his three monastic robes and used the money to buy a bowl of rice, which he joyfully offered to the Buddha.

The Buddha, fully aware of the situation, inquired, “In this time of famine, how did you manage to obtain this bowl of rice?” The bhikkhu answered truthfully. The Buddha said, “The three robes are excellent and sacred garments blessed by the buddhas of the three times. I am not worthy of eating food obtained through their sale.” The bhikkhu asked, “You are the supreme field of merit in the three realms. If you cannot even consume it, then who in this world possibly could?” The Buddha responded, “You should offer the rice to your parents. They can consume it because they have bestowed upon you the kindness of giving birth and raising you.”

When the Buddha inquired whether the bhikkhu’s parents had faith in the Buddha, the bhikkhu replied that his parents had not yet developed faith. The Buddha said, “Offer this bowl of rice to your parents. If you do so, they will rejoice, and gradually they will develop faith and eventually take refuge in the Three Jewels. Then they will be fully qualified to receive the offering.”

Through this teaching, the Buddha emphasized that the kindness of one's parents is unparalleled, and that they are more worthy of receiving such an offering than even the Buddha himself. This emphasis is further reflected in the *Sarvastivada Vinaya* (monastic discipline), which explicitly permits monastics to share a portion of their offerings with their parents without transgression. In light of our parents' immeasurable kindness, we should strive to recognize our profound debt of gratitude and to make every effort to repay it.

The Benefits of Repaying Parental Kindness

Numerous Buddhist texts extol the immense benefits of repaying parental kindness. For example, the *Treasury of Abhidharma* states,

*Although they are not noble, gifts
To parents, the ill, or Dharma teachers,
The Bodhisattva's last rebirth
Bring yields surpassing any measure.*⁴⁷

Likewise, a Chinese scripture popular in Han Buddhism, the *Mahayana Sutra on the Contemplation of the Mind-Ground* also says:

*If a person wholeheartedly makes offerings to the Buddha,
And another diligently practices filial piety,*

*The merit of these two individuals is no different,
And the rewards are inexhaustible throughout the three times.*

In other words, the merit generated by wholeheartedly making offerings to the Buddha is equal to that of serving one's parents. Such merit is so vast that even the Buddhas of the three times cannot fully describe it.

It is understandable that some people may believe that making offerings before an image of Shakyamuni Buddha brings immeasurable merit, while providing food and drink to their aging parents is of little positive consequence. Some may even perceive their parents' guidance as nagging or controlling, desperately seeking freedom. Yet, it can be helpful to reflect that what may be perceived as interference often stems from a place of deep love and meticulous care, even if it is expressed in ways that test our patience.

A story from the *Connected Discourses* further illustrates the countless merits—in this life and beyond—of making offerings to one's parents. A young Brahmin once asked the Buddha, "I frequently beg for alms and then offer what I receive to my parents. Can such actions yield great virtue?" The Buddha confirmed, "Your offerings do indeed generate vast merit!" He then elaborated with the following verse:

*If one respectfully makes offerings to one's parents like you,
In this present life, one's good name will spread far, and
After life's end, one will be reborn in a celestial realm.*

Indeed, those who treat their parents well naturally attract a good reputation and abundant merit in this very life. Furthermore, Dharma protectors and benevolent deities also cause this person's good name to be known throughout the world. As for future lives, such individuals will not fall into lower realms but will be reborn in higher realms and may even attain liberation.

A significant measure of a person's character is reflected in their treatment of their parents. In Tibetan communities, for example, it is customary to inquire thoroughly about a marriage prospect's relationship with their parents. If it is known that the individual is "notoriously unkind" or "very harsh" with their parents, the family on the other side probably will not agree with the marriage. While I am less familiar with the prevalence of this practice in Han regions, in Tibetan culture, the assessment of a potential spouse typically includes consideration of physical appearance, family background, personality, and understanding and practice of karmic principles. Yet, above all, filial piety is regarded as paramount. If someone is found to be unkind to their parents, even if all other qualities are exemplary, most families would hesitate to proceed, concerned

about the potential undesirable consequences of living together under one roof.

Given the significance of repaying parental kindness, I have chosen to teach *The Classic of Filial Piety*. Through our collective study, I hope we can cultivate a deeper sense of filial piety toward our parents, which will be reflected in our attitudes and actions. As our parents inevitably age and their health declines, their time with us becomes limited. Eventually, they will depart from this world. When that time comes, our greatest comfort should be knowing that we did everything possible to cherish them and reciprocate their care while they were alive. Recognizing and acting upon this is of utmost importance.

At the same time, a gentle word of caution to parents is also necessary: please refrain from becoming arrogant or overbearing. One might mistakenly think, “Since the merit of honoring one’s parents is equivalent to making offerings to the Buddha, I am as significant as the Buddha and can therefore command my children at will.” If parents, especially those already inclined to be unkind, use these teachings to justify greater control or mistreatment, it would represent a serious misunderstanding and misuse of these principles.

Perspectives on the Authenticity of a Buddhist Scripture Regarding Parental Kindness

One of the Buddhist scriptures that address the theme of parental kindness is *The Sutra as Spoken by the Buddha on the Profound Kindness of Parents and the Difficulties in Repaying Them*. I obtained a copy of this text approximately two to three decades ago and read it briefly. Over time, I have learned that a few esteemed masters, including Master Lianchi and Venerable Jingkong, regarded this sutra as apocryphal. In his *Jottings Under a Bamboo Window*, Master Lianchi asserted that this sutra is apocryphal, though he did not provide extensive reasoning for this view. Similarly, Venerable Jingkong mentioned that his teacher, Mr. Li Bingnan, advised against reading this particular text. Personally, I am not entirely certain about its authenticity. A degree of caution seems warranted before making a definitive claim regarding its authenticity.

In addition to this sutra, another pertinent scripture is *The Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Difficulty of Repaying the Kindness of Parents*, translated by An Shigao. This text is concise but contains a well-known metaphor that vividly illustrates the depth of parental kindness. It depicts a scenario where a child carries their father on the right shoulder and mother on the left for a thousand years, serving them diligently and making offerings, even enduring their

parents' excrement without complaint. The sutra concludes that even such extraordinary devotion would not suffice to fully repay the kindness of one's parents.

During my exploration for corresponding Tibetan versions of these texts, I came across the *Father and Mother Sutra* within the Tibetan Tripitaka. While related to the theme, this text differs in content and is more extensive in scope than *The Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Difficulty of Repaying the Kindness of Parents*.

Although several revered masters of the past questioned the authenticity of *The Sutra as Spoken by the Buddha on the Profound Kindness of Parents and the Difficulties in Repaying Them*, it remains challenging for us to reach a definitive conclusion about its authenticity. In light of this complexity, it may be prudent for us to refrain from making conclusive judgments on such matters.

It is worth noting that, in contemporary times, some individuals may be inclined to quickly label a sutra as apocryphal, sometimes influenced by personal biases. This tendency can occasionally be observed even among those who identify themselves as scholars, yet may not have engaged deeply with foundational Buddhist doctrines such as Buddhist logic or Madhyamaka. When Buddhist scriptures are evaluated solely through secular academic frameworks, it is

possible to construct arguments that appear plausible but may not be fully substantiated. Such methodologies, while valuable in certain contexts, may not always capture the full depth and nuance of Buddhist texts.

Rather than concentrating solely on the authentication or refutation of Buddhist scriptures, it may be more beneficial to engage with the profound wisdom they offer. Numerous Buddhist texts, for example, discuss the immense merit associated with repaying parental kindness, providing valuable insights for personal reflection and practice.

How to Repay the Profound Kindness of Our Parents?

In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, it is noted that guiding one's parents to study and practice the Dharma brings inconceivable merit. As illustrated in the aforementioned story, the Buddha himself taught that if one's parents lack faith in the Three Jewels, it is meritorious to help them develop such faith and take refuge. Similarly, the *Sutra Spoken by Acintyaprabha Bodhisattva* also emphasizes the importance of leading parents toward the authentic Dharma:

Neither food nor treasures

Can truly repay parents' kindness

Guiding them toward the authentic Dharma is

The best offering to both parents.

Material offerings, such as food and precious treasures, are ultimately insufficient to fully repay the immense kindness of one's parents. The most meaningful way to express gratitude lies in helping them take sincere refuge in the Three Jewels, observe precepts, and engage in the path of liberation.

While societal norms often equate filial piety with material comfort—such as providing a lovely home to ensure parents live well in their later years—a perspective informed by wisdom considers their well-being not only in this life but across countless future lives. From this broader viewpoint, guiding parents toward Dharma practice emerges as the most significant way to repay their kindness. Encouraging them to take and uphold the lay precepts is ideal when circumstances allow. If a lay practitioner community is accessible, their participation in Dharma study and practice can be highly beneficial.

The unwavering dedication of elderly practitioners at the lay Buddhist center in my hometown is truly inspiring and often prompts reflection on the younger generation. While establishing schools and Buddhist colleges for young people is undoubtedly valuable, I

contemplate the future path of these young students. Even among young monastics in Buddhist colleges, there are occasional instances of wastefulness or distracted chanting—behaviors that seem at odds with the ideals of their calling.

Of course, it is entirely possible that my concerns are unwarranted—these young practitioners will go on to propagate the Dharma and benefit sentient beings in the future. Nevertheless, after investing considerable effort in providing them with various learning resources, I sometimes question whether these students will fully utilize these opportunities to become individuals who are truly beneficial to the Dharma and sentient beings.

My confidence, however, remains steadfast in the elderly practitioners at the lay Buddhist center in my hometown. Having experienced the full breadth of life, they devote their later years wholeheartedly to spiritual practice. I recently heard of a lay practitioner at the center who passed away. On that very day, a khenpo had just finished teaching the *Aspiration to be Reborn in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*.⁴⁸ At the conclusion of the teaching, the khenpo remarked, “Today we have completed this teaching. Through various methods of reasoning, we can be confident of rebirth in Sukhavati in the future. But remember, life is impermanent—no one knows whether they will live even to step out this doorway.” After attending the teaching that

practitioner passed away just as he reached the doorway. Although his family grieved, they also felt a sense of peace, believing that after many years of diligent practice, passing away immediately after receiving the teaching on the Sukhavati aspiration prayer might indeed signify rebirth there.

As I mentioned, while our parents are still with us, we should make every effort to maintain regular contact—calling them frequently, offering comfort, and, if possible, providing financial support. Even if material means are limited, a few kind and gentle words can be invaluable. In many ways, elderly individuals are not so different from children: a little gentle encouragement or affectionate attention can bring them great joy. While fostering happiness is important, encouraging them to engage in spiritual practice is even more crucial. Given the limited time they may have remaining, guiding them to recite the names or mantras of buddhas and bodhisattvas—such as the sacred name of Amitabha or the mantra of Avalokiteshvara—can be deeply meaningful. In this way, we help ensure their continued well-being, in this life and future ones.

These reflections are grounded in Buddhist principles, and I recognize that those from other cultural backgrounds may have different views on filial piety. For some, the highest form of filial piety may be expressed through giving massages or providing a high-quality

coffin. It is natural for people to have different views, and most perspectives have their own logic or rationale when you understand their context.

This principle of understanding the underlying rationale behind different perspectives can be applied more broadly. For example, actions that one person might consider inappropriate could, from another's viewpoint, be seen as the most beneficial or necessary choice in their particular circumstances. People generally make decisions they believe to be most advantageous. By considering these diverse perspectives, we can gain a deeper understanding of complex matters, including the multifaceted concept of filial piety and its various expressions.

Summary

“Thus, from the Son of Heaven to the common people, filial piety has no beginning or end; no one should be concerned that they are inadequate for the task.”

This passage serves as a summary. Filial piety in ancient China was recognized as a universal virtue, encompassing all levels of society—from the emperor to the common people. This virtue is timeless and ever-present, transcending beginning and end.

This expansive principle extends far beyond the conventional understanding of simply honoring one's parents. Each individual, regardless of their circumstances, has their own way to express filial piety, highlighting its pervasive nature. Therefore, no one should be incapable or deprived of opportunities to practice this virtue; in reality, such opportunities abound for everyone. Even if one's parents have passed away, this virtue can still be embodied by living in accordance with the natural principles of timing, geography, and human relations, which is in itself a profound expression of filial devotion.

Adhering to Natural Principles as an Expression of Filial Piety

Allow me to reiterate a critical point: true filial piety involves a profound respect for natural laws. It is essential to keep this principle in mind in all our actions, including the practice of life release. Some individuals, though well-intentioned, may release animals without proper observation or consideration—for example, releasing freshwater fish into the sea or domestic birds into the wild. Such actions, while motivated by compassion, are inadvisable because they disregard natural laws and may inadvertently cause harm to both the animals and the environment.

A similar principle applies to tree planting. Recently, I have observed many practitioners planting trees at our academy. However, some trees may not survive because the planting holes are too shallow, failing to meet the recommended depth of around sixty centimeters. Some Dharma friends here lack proper knowledge of tree planting and show little interest in learning, choosing instead to plant trees as they see fit. For example, I have heard some people claim, “There is no need to dig deep holes, because tree roots grow sideways, not down.” As a result, the holes they dug were far too shallow to retain sufficient water.

It is essential to understand both professional knowledge and basic common sense before undertaking tree planting. This includes techniques such as loosening the soil, digging appropriately sized holes, correctly positioning the seedlings, and firmly tamping the earth. In addition, different plants require specific growing environments. At Larung Gar, pine trees are typically planted on the shady side of mountains, while cypress trees are placed on the sunny side. I have noticed that many trees on the plain of Dzichen are dying, likely because these guidelines were not followed.

This attention to natural principles extends to everyday activities, such as horticulture. I have seen acquaintances struggle with basic

gardening, sometimes overwatering flowers that require only minimal moisture. I recall an elderly monk who watered his flowers daily with a full bucket, ultimately causing them to wither from overwatering.

As natural laws apply not only to the external world but also to our bodies, adherence to them is equally essential for our well-being. For instance, indiscriminately consuming large quantities of various medicines—whether Chinese, Western, or Tibetan—may, despite good intentions, lead to adverse effects. Thus, cultivating the wisdom to understand and follow natural principles is highly essential for our health and all aspects of life.

I, too, am not immune to lapses in judgment. Not long ago, I consumed too much cold yogurt and felt unwell, only recovering after drinking hot water. Since the surgery last year, my body has become more sensitive, and even minor oversights can lead to discomfort. This serves as a reminder that our physical bodies are inherently impermanent. In fact, not only our bodies, but the entire world is constantly changing as well. Nevertheless, living in this world, acting in harmony with its natural laws is important.

Understanding and respecting both the principles of nature and the ethical guidelines that govern human beings—referred to in

Buddhism as precepts—are acts of filial piety. Filial piety is all-encompassing and ever-present. Please do not think opportunities to practice this virtue are rare or unavailable. In truth, even seemingly simple actions, such as properly tending a flower or planting a tree with care and wisdom, can embody the profound principle of filial piety.

Trees of Life

Over thirty years ago, when I was in middle school, our graduating class participated in a tree-planting initiative along the riverbank near our school. At that time, we were merely children, yet we fondly referred to those saplings as our “trees of life.” Although the school buildings have since been demolished, the trees we planted continue to thrive. When I returned for a visit a few years ago, I met several former classmates who taught in the area as teachers. They shared with me that the trees had grown robustly, their branches and leaves providing much-needed shade during the summer months.

The tradition of planting trees extends far beyond our own experience. Many notable individuals around the world, including leaders and celebrities, have also planted countless trees. I recall accompanying His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche to a botanical

garden in Shenzhen, which has some trees being planted by such distinguished figures. Although many of these individuals are no longer with us, the trees they planted continue to thrive, perhaps reflecting a deeper natural principle.

In Tibetan culture, there exists a method of observing interdependent origination: if a tree planted by someone continues to grow, it is seen as an auspicious sign indicating that the person's life still holds promise; conversely, if the tree fails to thrive, it is seen as an indication of potential obstacles. While I personally feel it is important not to become overly attached to this belief, I must admit that I sometimes find myself influenced by it as well.

There was a time when a cypress tree outside my window began to turn yellow. Concerned that it might be dying, I promptly made offerings to the sangha and requested prayers for its recovery. Later, a lama from Domang Monastery,⁴⁹ who often engages in Dharma practices in cypress groves, reassured me by explaining, "This is normal. Cypress trees shed their leaves annually and then grow new ones." Indeed, after some time, I observed that the tree had produced fresh growth. (Audience laughing) This small episode serves as a gentle reminder that plants have their own unique growth cycles, which we may not always fully understand.

Exploring Nature or Studying the Mind?

Recently, I read about an Australian botanist who lived to the remarkable age of 104, dedicating over seventy years to ecological research. His lifelong commitment highlights the importance of exploring and understanding the principles that govern the natural world. Many scientists, both in China and abroad, share this dedication; some have devoted their entire lives to studying the flora and fauna of the African savanna. Documentaries that showcase their work always inspire in me a deep respect for their perseverance and passion.

This leads to a broader question: Is a lifetime spent studying animals and plants truly meaningful and valuable? From a conventional perspective, such a life is worthwhile and certainly preferable to one spent in idleness. As a Tibetan saying goes, “He came into this world and did nothing but eat tsampa.” In comparison, a life dedicated to the study of biology, astronomy, geography, or the humanities is undoubtedly more significant.

Nevertheless, I believe that the most profound and essential research lies in the study of the human mind. Since the mind continues beyond this life, a thorough understanding of it can benefit all beings, both in this life and in lives to come. For those who do not

believe in future lives, existence may be spent in pursuit of transient pleasures while awaiting the inevitable end. In contrast, those who recognize the continuity of past and future lives understand that death is not the conclusion. This understanding motivates them to work diligently to create favorable conditions for a brighter future.

These two perspectives—one that denies future lives and one that affirms them—naturally lead to different life goals and aspirations. Consequently, the ways in which people choose to live their lives also diverge significantly. Ultimately, the choice of which path to follow rests with each individual.

Lecture Seven

June 19, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Let us begin by generating bodhicitta. Please listen to this teaching in a way that accords with the authentic Dharma. The previous six chapters have explained the practice of filial piety within five societal roles: the Son of Heaven (the emperor), feudal lords, ministers and high officials, lower officials, and common people. Today, we begin the seventh chapter, “The Three Powers.”

I understand that this teaching series on traditional culture has sparked the interest of many. At the same time, some Buddhist practitioners with a more conventional view may prefer to focus on the practical guidance found in Sutrayana and Vajrayana, or on the theoretical teachings of the Five Great Treatises and the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. For such individuals, works like *The Classic of Filial Piety*, which belong more to the realm of worldly knowledge, may seem less immediately relevant.

However, in today’s world, it is incredibly beneficial for us to develop a broad understanding of global cultures, especially those of the East and West. Gaining insight into past history, future trends, and our present circumstances is of great value. This is precisely

why we have taken the time to study *The Classic of Filial Piety* together.

Nourishing the Mind with Joyful Lifelong Learning

In the process of this study, I myself have gained valuable insights. Learning always brings benefits—no matter which sutra or treatise we examine, our virtues such as faith, compassion, and renunciation only deepen as a result. Personally, I find that listening to teachings from my gurus or even attending lectures by contemporary secular scholars has been deeply rewarding.

Throughout the course of this study, I have personally gained many valuable insights, reinforcing the fact that meaningful learning brings benefits. No matter which sutra or treatise we examine, our virtues—such as devotion, compassion, and renunciation—can only deepen as a result. Personally, I find that listening to Dharma teachings from my gurus and even attending lectures by contemporary secular scholars to be a deeply rewarding experience.

Just today, a monastic student at the academy shared with me, “We had a ten-day break recently, and it felt entirely inappropriate! We should not take such long breaks—we ought to continue our Dharma classes.” I responded, “That may be your opinion, but not

everyone feels the same.” He continued, “A flower can survive two or three days without water, but if it goes six or seven days, it will wither. We are the same—if we do not attend classes for six or seven days, we begin to deteriorate.”

Perhaps his enthusiasm is due to his recent ordination—having been a monk for only three years, he still possesses the zeal of a beginner. I recall having similar feelings in my early days. In the second year after my ordination, during summer break, when everyone was relaxing on the grassland, I felt it was a waste of precious time. When we first take monastic vows or begin practicing the Dharma, we often have a strong sense of the rarity of human life, which naturally inspires great diligence in listening, contemplating, and meditating. However, as the years pass—after ten or twenty years—the intensity of that initial fervor may gradually diminish.

Nonetheless, the monk made a valid point. Most of our Dharma friends likely prefer to engage in Dharma studies. One reason is likely that such efforts help bring together our otherwise scattered minds. Whether one is residing in the valley or elsewhere, if there are no classes on a particular day, some may find it difficult even to recite *The King of Aspirations Prayers* once, let alone undertake deeper study. The day may simply slip away. However, when there is a class, at the very least, one recites *The King of Aspirations Prayers*, which

is highly meaningful. Reciting this prayer even once will bring boundless joy to those who delight in learning. Of course, some may feel it is preferable not to have classes, and that perspective is equally understandable.

This year, I have incorporated some secular courses on traditional culture into our curriculum. Some people understand and support this initiative, while others may not. This diversity of opinion is entirely natural. Throughout history, no individual's words or actions have ever received universal approval. Even when the omniscient Buddha and the great master Nagarjuna appeared in the world and turned the wondrous Wheel of Dharma through their vajra speech, there were still those who disagreed. In any case, I believe that our collective study of *The Classic of Filial Piety* is an extremely meaningful endeavor.

Chapter Seven explores the concept of the “three powers” of heaven, earth, and humanity, which fundamentally expresses the principle of the “unity of heaven and humanity.” This principle is a well-established tenet in Confucianism. It is likewise prominent in Taoism, as evidenced in the *Tao Te Ching*. Buddhist traditions, particularly within the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and even more extensively and profoundly in tantric texts such as the *Kalachakra Tantra*

and various Dzogchen scriptures, offer a nuanced exploration of this intricate unity.

Certain young adults may view the concept of “the unity of heaven and humanity” as outdated, superstitious, and dismissible—even before they have had the chance to explore the ideas in depth or begin their studies. Taking a longer-term and more comprehensive view, though, it is helpful to approach such ideas with an open mind, as initial impressions can change with greater experience and broader knowledge. After all, in the grand scheme of things, the knowledge we gain through formal education is just one part of a much larger picture.

Even after completing all prescribed academic courses within the current educational system and attaining advanced degrees—whether undergraduate or doctoral—one can hardly claim to possess truly vast or profound knowledge. Therefore, it is imperative for everyone, especially those with high academic credentials, to cultivate humility and avoid arrogance. This principle also applies to esteemed Buddhist practitioners—be they Dharma teachers, khenpos, khenmos, geshes, or geshemas—who must likewise relinquish conceit.

It is often observed that when a person gains some recognition, their demeanor may change—their gaze, posture, and tone of voice become noticeably different. As someone who pays attention to these subtleties, I can immediately sense their arrogance. My observation leads me to ponder, “Despite their fame, this person seems to look down on others. Has their sense of self-importance outpaced their actual accomplishments?” We should remind ourselves never to let arrogance grow at the first taste of success.

Personally, when I compare myself to the great gurus and scholars, I feel that my own knowledge and experience are truly modest—nothing to take pride in. In fact, they are incomparable. Therefore, even if thousands of people show respect, it is nothing extraordinary. We should let go of thoughts that hinder our spiritual progress and instead dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to learning. Just as every flower requires sunlight and water to flourish, so too must each of us commit to lifelong learning.

It is unfortunate that some individuals cease learning once they obtain certain credentials. After passing exams and qualifying as teachers, civil servants, khenpos, or khenmos, they may feel they have “attained Buddhahood.” Satisfied with their diploma, they may abandon further study. While students, they studied diligently, but upon earning their degrees, they regarded it as the

final destination. Ironically, their diplomas became an obstacle rather than an encouragement, curtailing their intellectual and spiritual growth.

Among the Tibetan students I have financially supported, some were initially exceptionally fond of learning. In school, they always had a book in hand, immersing themselves in subjects ranging from worldly topics such as astronomy and geography to the profound realms of spiritual study. Yet, after gaining some recognition and status, many of them essentially stopped learning. This is deeply regrettable.

The love of learning is essential and is something to be cherished at all times. There are countless subjects we can explore. As we study traditional culture today, we should cultivate a joyful mind, free from the burden of pressure. Whether listening to teachings, reading books, or sharing knowledge with others, these are among life's most rewarding and enjoyable pursuits. While many consider the pleasures of the five senses to be life's greatest joy, I believe that the highest joy lies in learning—embracing both worldly and transcendent knowledge.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE THREE POWERS

Zeng Zi said, “Profound indeed! How great is filial piety!”

This statement comes from a dialogue between Zeng Zi and Confucius. Confucius often engaged in such discussions with his disciples, much like the Buddha frequently spoke with his disciples, such as Ananda and Maudgalyayana. The original text of this chapter opens with an exclamatory particle, similar to “Wow!” or “How extraordinary!” in English.

At first, like many of us, Zeng Zi may have thought that filial piety simply meant respecting one’s parents. But after Confucius explained its five distinct forms, applicable to every level of society from the emperor to commoners, the concept expanded dramatically in his mind. Zeng Zi came to realize that filial piety is a universal principle of immense significance—profound and boundless. His words convey the awe and wonder of discovering the true magnitude of a virtue he had once considered simple.

Heaven, Earth, and Humanity: Foundations of Filial Piety and Good Order

Confucius said, “Filial piety is the principle of heaven, the righteousness of earth, and the ethical conduct of the people.

The idea of this passage is generally captured in the Chinese idiom “天经地义” (*tian jing di yi*), which means “in perfect accord with heaven and earth; perfectly natural and right.” According to the explanation in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, “heaven” refers to space, characterized by its unobstructed nature. Pursuant to a different account, some ancients regarded heaven as a living system.

Here, “heaven” refers to the natural principles that govern heaven. Filial piety is seen as being in accordance with the natural laws of heaven. The phrase “righteousness of earth” indicates that filial piety is consistent with the natural order of earth. “[T]he ethical conduct of the people” means that filial piety is in harmony with the moral behavior expected of people. In this way, Confucius’s statement succinctly summarizes the foundational principles of filial piety, indicating its vast meanings. These principles also reflect the Confucian ideal of the unity of heaven and humanity.

A contemporary perspective often posits that concepts like filial piety are artifacts of a bygone feudal era. In this view, the twenty-first century is defined by a principle of universal equality that extends to all relationships, including those between teachers and students, leaders and subordinates, and even parents and children. From this standpoint, the hierarchical nature implied by filial piety seems irrelevant. Such viewpoint may be influenced by various global cultural shifts and prevailing societal trends.

The dynamic nature of such societal norms can be observed through historical precedent. For example, a personal reflection on educational materials from a different era in China reveals a dramatic shift. A political studies notebook from my middle school years is filled with notes centered on the theme of demolishing traditional culture, which was then labeled as feudal ideology. Today, in stark contrast, the national discourse actively promotes the inheritance, dissemination, and revitalization of that same traditional culture. This example demonstrates how profoundly societal values can evolve.

At present, perhaps influenced by certain interpretations of Western egalitarian ideals, there is a tendency among some to advocate for absolute equality, thereby questioning the necessity of filial devotion. It is important to approach this ideal of universal equality

with thoughtful consideration. Much of Western ideology, after all, is deeply rooted in Christian traditions, where the belief in the equal creation of all individuals by God forms a central tenet. However, while theological equality affirms the inherent worth of every person, it does not necessarily imply that all individuals possess identical rights and responsibilities within familial or social contexts.

Moreover, the concept of equality can sometimes be interpreted in ways that overlook essential nuances. For instance, some young people today may feel that parents and teachers are fundamentally no different from themselves, aside from age, and therefore believe that all parties are entitled to the same rights. While this perspective underscores the value of equality, it may inadvertently overlook crucial aspects, such as existing familial and social roles, the wisdom gained through life experience, and the respect owed to elders. Thus, a more nuanced understanding is needed—one that honors both the principle of equality and the enduring wisdom found in concepts of filial respect.

"The laws of heaven, earth, and humanity are what the people take as their model.

Here, the law of heaven means that the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens naturally emit light. To support and nourish all living beings is the law of the earth. Filial piety represents the code of conduct for humankind or the law of humanity.

The laws of heaven and earth usually represent natural laws governing all things in the universe. The benevolence of heaven and earth toward all living things can be likened to the kindness of parents toward their children. The sun, moon, and stars illuminate the world, their light benefiting all forms of life. The earth, in turn, bears the weight of all things and provides essential support. Without the earth's steadfast foundation, farmers would be unable to cultivate crops, workers could not construct homes, students would have no place to study, and even the simple act of walking would be impossible. In essence, all living beings depend on the earth for their survival and well-being.

In a similar manner, just as all creatures rely on the nurturing qualities of heaven and earth, children depend on the love and care of their parents for growth and development. Thus, filial piety emerges as a natural law or moral standard for humanity, paralleling how supporting and nurturing all living beings are the principles of heaven and earth.

“Thus, the rulers benefit all through emulating the heaven to illuminate and the earth to support, so as to bring the entire realm into accord.

Confucius further elaborated on this principle, advising that a ruler should practice filial piety in accordance with the laws of heaven and earth, thus fostering harmony throughout the world. Just as the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens dispel darkness by bringing light, and the earth supports and nourishes all living things, a ruler should strive to benefit and harmonize all people within their domain.

The language of traditional philosophy, while sometimes appearing straightforward, often carries profound layers of meaning. It extends beyond basic codes of conduct, such as respecting teachers, being filial to parents, or refraining from certain behaviors. Instead, it offers a comprehensive worldview.

Illuminating Like the Sun and Moon, Supporting Like the Earth

This standard of being a source of light and support is not limited to rulers or those in positions of authority; it is a principle to which every individual can aspire and should abide by. Just as the heavens illuminate all things, each person has the capacity to radiate their

own inner light, helping to dispel the darkness of confusion and negativity within themselves and others. We should emulate the earth by benefiting others and cultivating a character of immense fortitude. We can help bear the sufferings of sentient beings, remove their obstacles, and become their source of reliance. By acting in harmony with the world and its people in this way, we embody the true spirit of filial piety.

Viewed from this perspective, filial piety aligns with the natural laws and, more importantly, with the fundamental principles of humanity and the deeper meaning of existence. Cultivating filial piety promises a brighter future for individuals and society as a whole. Everyone should thus understand filial piety from this deeper and broader perspective—as an altruistic mindset focused on benefiting others through dispelling darkness with light. In today’s world, such benevolence is greatly needed. Thus, nurturing an altruistic heart is essential for everyone, whether one is a monastic or a lay practitioner.

Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol Rinpoche once advised a group of female practitioners,

Keep a kind heart, recite the Mani mantra with your mouth, turn the Mani prayer wheel with your hand, and diligently engage in circumambulation and prostration with your body.

Similarly, Lama Tsongkhapa taught,

If the intention is good,

The levels and paths are good.

If the intention is bad,

The levels and paths are bad.⁵⁰

A person with a kind heart naturally moves toward a more positive future. Likewise, a ruler who governs a nation with an altruistic mind is employing the most effective and noble form of leadership.

An Example of Root-Based Governance

A leader inspired by the altruistic mind would likely focus on the root causes of social issues and prioritize the collective good over individual gain. The historical text *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* offers an account that demonstrates the principle of root-based governance. This renowned work has been highly valued by a multitude of prominent figures in Chinese history—they read it almost daily. Unlike some modern historical accounts that may

simply summarize the rise and fall of dynasties, this work provides in-depth analyses of the causes behind the successes and failures of each era, as well as detailed accounts of governance.

The account is recorded in the volume on the Tang Dynasty (*"Tang Ji"*). When Emperor Taizong discussed how to address rampant banditry with his ministers, many advocated for harsher punishments. However, Emperor Taizong, after careful consideration, disagreed. He explained, "The increase in banditry stems from widespread corruption and the excessive burden of taxes and labor, which leave people in severe poverty, suffering from hunger and cold. Some are driven to theft simply as a means of survival. Under such circumstances, imposing even harsher punishments would be deeply unjust. Instead, reform must begin from within. By curbing extravagant spending, lowering taxes, and appointing upright officials, we will ensure that our people have enough food and clothing. Once their basic needs are met, crime will naturally decrease."

A few years later, the entire empire enjoyed unprecedented peace and order. People no longer stole, even when valuables were left unattended on the street. They felt so secure that they did not bother locking their doors at night. Merchants could sleep outdoors without fear. This transformation demonstrated the effectiveness of

addressing the root causes of social issues. Emperor Taizong emphasized that the ruler depends on the state, and the state depends on the people. To exploit the people for the ruler's enrichment would ultimately lead to the state's collapse. He recognized that a ruler's most significant challenges often arise from within, rather than from external sources, and he constantly reminded himself of this principle, diligently guarding against personal indulgence.

Every country or region may encounter issues related to public order and security. However, when leaders are wise and the people are encouraged toward goodness, many underlying social problems can be resolved at their source, leading to an improved moral climate. This principle applies not only to nations but also to any organization, Dharma center, or even a classroom. When challenges like poor discipline or low morale arise, an effective leader will first look inward and examine their own management style rather than immediately assigning blame to others and implementing punitive measures. By adjusting their own approach, they can often resolve the underlying issues at their source.

Many among us may one day manage an institution, a community, or a household, which can be seen as a microcosm of society. In such circumstances, it is essential to remember and implement the

principle of root-based governance, in alignment with the laws of heaven, earth, and humanity.

Finding Strength and Hope in Times of Despair

For individuals who have not previously encountered significant adversity, even minor setbacks can sometimes feel overwhelming, leading to a sense of fragility or defeat. In moments of intense difficulty, thoughts such as “I cannot continue” or “There is no way out” may arise. For some, the idea of ending one’s life can surface as a perceived escape, a notion perhaps influenced by its portrayal in various media narratives.

This mindset, however, deserves careful examination. It is natural to wonder if such a final act truly resolves one’s difficulties or leads to a state of peace. From a spiritual perspective, it is understood that suicide does not provide genuine liberation or happiness. Instead of being a solution, it is seen as a continuation of suffering in a different form. The world, despite its challenges, is filled with immense beauty and the potential for positive transformation. Thus, do not even entertain thoughts of suicide, as there is truly no need for such despair.

Moreover, persistent preoccupation with suicidal thoughts can make one susceptible to negative influences, such as demonic

forces that encourage such harmful inclinations. When the mind is consumed by negativity rather than virtuous contemplation, it becomes especially vulnerable. This can be likened to how decaying flesh draws flies, or how the scent of corpses on charnel grounds attracts vultures.

Some individuals may find themselves frequently troubled by suicidal thoughts, especially after experiencing loss or failure. Such thoughts can sometimes be a symptom of depression. While certain individuals may experience sufferings that seem insurmountable, perhaps due to the ripening effects of past negative karma, such as the act of killing or other grave misdeeds, this does not mean that hope is lost. For a significant number of individuals, and especially for those who engage in Dharma practice, these challenges can be addressed and overcome with proper spiritual guidance and dedicated practice.

Over the years, I have witnessed many individuals burdened by constant suicidal thoughts undergo remarkable transformations after encountering the Dharma and training their mind accordingly. Even while enduring intense physical pain, they were able to cultivate a stable and healthy mental state. This illustrates a crucial principle: as long as the mind remains sound, even significant physical ailments can be endured. However, if the mind falters, even

the strongest body may eventually succumb to distress. Whether one holds a particular faith or not, mental and physical well-being are of utmost importance.

To this end, one must learn to adjust the mind skillfully. Simply commanding oneself, “I must not have afflictions and experience suffering; I must not commit suicide,” is often insufficient to resolve the underlying issues. A better course of action is to first study the Dharma on a theoretical level and then practice it by applying its teachings in daily life. Methods such as mantra recitation and meditation are particularly effective in transforming the mind. When feeling agitated or distressed, you can start by practicing calm abiding and then pray fervently to your guru, Guru Rinpoche, or Tara. Such practices can bring immense benefits, which can sometimes be obtained immediately. When you pray with sincerity, the blessings of the spiritual teacher or Guru Rinpoche can enter your heart, swiftly dispelling the shadows of negative emotions, much like the radiant light of the sun dispels darkness.

“That way, the teaching is not stern yet effective; the governing is not severe, yet good order reigns.

Confucian wisdom teaches that when a ruler governs the realm and benefits the people in harmony with the natural laws of existence,

effective governance and education can be achieved without resorting to severe punishments such as the death penalty or mutilation. In reality, the principle of non-violence is deeply aligned with the laws of the universe. Mahatma Gandhi, though not a Buddhist, was a prominent advocate for peace, compassion, and non-violence. He wisely observed that violence is essentially born of hatred.

Leadership through Compassion

When leaders cultivate a benevolent heart—or, in the context of our discussion, filial piety in its broadest sense—their guidance can succeed without resorting to harsh measures. An approach based on punishment can often be counterproductive, particularly in education. Some educators might argue that strict, physical discipline is necessary for students to behave and learn, believing that such methods are helpful. However, this approach can inflict lasting harm.

Recently, a photograph of a kindergarten teacher kicking a child went viral online, sparking public concern. Unfortunately, certain teachers may act even more harshly than what was depicted. When children are harmed by those entrusted with their care, they can be left with lasting psychological wounds. As they grow, this trauma can manifest as a deep-seated sense of fear of the world, where even

a gentle breeze might feel threatening and the sound of birdsong might seem like mockery.

Therefore, when we interact with young, tender minds, it is essential to treat them with tenderness, love, care, and compassion. In doing so, we help them grow into radiant, warm-hearted individuals who can make meaningful contributions to their families and society. I have often encouraged schools and Buddhist academies to nurture their students with love and support. To love all sentient beings is, fundamentally, the authentic teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. He did not guide and tame beings through violence or coercion, but through boundless love and compassion. This ideal of governing without harshness is profoundly noble, and I sincerely hope that all who lead—whether families, communities, organizations, or even nations—can do so with a compassionate heart.

Societies around the world differ widely in their approaches to discipline. During my Dharma trips to Europe and North America last year, I observed that some countries have abolished the death penalty, even for the most serious crimes. This principle aligns closely with the core tenets of Buddhism, which emphasize universal love or non-violence.

When I visited a prison in one such country, I learned that the twelve most dangerous inmates were housed in a specialized section, separated from the others. Those with less severe offenses, however, lived in relatively comfortable conditions, with access to coffee and books every day. The atmosphere in their recreation room was reminiscent of a university lounge, with inmates engaged in relaxed conversation. Curious about the effectiveness of this relaxed approach, I asked the prison warden whether the inmates would reoffend after release. The warden replied, “Actually, it works pretty well. Our main focus here is education. While incarcerated, they are learning and acquiring all sorts of knowledge.”

Overall, the treatment of prisoners has improved significantly from previous eras, with a strong international emphasis on human rights. In the last century, there were numerous instances of correctional officers abusing inmates in many nations. Today, however, an increasing number of international organizations are dedicated to ensuring the humane treatment of inmates. This progress is commendable, as brute force can never truly transform the inner minds of individuals.

The *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* contains a story that illustrates the power of taming the mind through love. One day, King Prasenajit visited the Buddha in Shravasti and offered a deep prostration. The

Buddha asked, “Great king, why do you bow so humbly before me?” King Prasenajit replied, “Venerable Buddha, I bow not just with my body, but with my heart. Though I am a king with the power of life and death, I can see from the faces of my ministers that they are not happy with me.” (In certain historical dramas, we may notice a handful of ministers displaying displeasing expressions before their ruler.)

He continued, “Yet when I attend your teachings, I see countless beings, including kings, ministers, and even nonhuman beings, listening with the utmost reverence. They dare not even cough, and if someone whispers, others immediately say, ‘Be quiet! Listen attentively!’ Their faces are filled with joy and reverence. This is due to your inconceivable power—not the force of arms, but the power of your boundless love. Your way of guiding beings has won my deepest admiration. That is why I bow to you with all my heart, offering you my full-body prostration.”

This profound dialogue offers crucial insights. Relying exclusively on strict management or political propaganda to enforce conformity—whether in thought or behavior—rarely leads to meaningful or lasting change. When people are genuinely treated with love and feel secure and trusted, their hearts naturally gravitate toward unity

and cohesion. This same principle applies to spiritual teachers guiding their students. A teacher may have a sincere wish to help, but an overreliance on criticism can inadvertently discourage students, resulting in declining attendance. In contrast, exceptionally popular teachers often embody generosity—both the generosity of Dharma and material generosity. Small acts of kindness, such as offering sweets or a simple meal, can help build genuine connections.

The Mahayana teachings frequently speak of the Six Perfections⁵¹ and the Four Means of Attraction.⁵² These are not merely theoretical concepts, but practical principles to be applied in daily life. Effective teaching does not rely on harsh discipline, such as prolonged standing, writing self-criticisms, or physical punishment. While such methods may yield short-term compliance from a few, it is far more effective in the long run to guide students with love and compassion, as taught in Mahayana Buddhism. The essence of Buddhism is to educate and transform beings with boundless wisdom and compassion. That is what the Buddha himself taught and practiced throughout his life. Buddhism offers innumerable skillful means, and it is essential for us to study and apply them in our own lives and in our interactions with others.

The First Method: Cultivating Compassion

“The former kings recognized that education transforms the people; consequently, they first led with universal love, thereby ensuring no one would neglect their parents.

The term “former kings” refers to the wise monarchs of ancient times. They understood that education in accordance with the laws of heaven and earth has the power of transforming society. To this end, they employed five effective methods. The first of these was to cultivate compassion and loving-kindness within themselves, leading by example. As a result, the people naturally honored and cared for their parents and close relatives, never neglecting them.

From the original text, we see that throughout history, generations of intelligent monarchs governed not through force or coercion—methods considered undesirable—but through the supreme principle of compassion and love. In this way, *The Classic of Filial Piety* expresses ideals that closely align with the Mahayana Buddhist concept of universal compassion.

In preparation for this course, I have reviewed various commentaries on *The Classic of Filial Piety*. While my interpretation of this text is informed by Buddhist philosophy and may differ from other

commentaries and the viewpoints of some traditional cultural scholars, I believe my perspective is valid and reasonable. If you find my explanation questionable, I welcome your thoughts—my classroom is an open forum for discussion. If someone presents an alternative interpretation, I may also find points to question in their argument. The open exchange of ideas is crucial for gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these classic texts.

A Reflection on Cherishing Our Parents

Among us, some may have already experienced the loss of their parents, while others are fortunate to have them in their lives still. For those whose parents are still present, it is important to care for them and cherish them with a loving and grateful heart. If, after listening to and reflecting on the teachings of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, one's attitude towards their parents becomes more appreciative and respectful, this would be a meaningful outcome. Conversely, neglecting to care for our living parents may lead to feelings of deep regret in the future.

After the passing of my own parents, I often find myself recalling their words and presence. In fact, the longing to speak with them has only grown stronger over time. I often think, "If only they were still here, I would spend more time with them." My father passed

away in 1995, and recently, while organizing belongings at home, I came across a photograph of him—perhaps the only one I have left. Ultimately, even with our closest family members, what remains may be as simple as a photograph or a small personal item.

Some time ago, I shared a message on Weibo: “When your parents are alive, care for them more, stay in touch, visit them often, and serve them with devotion. If your parents have passed, when you miss them, recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra, ‘Om Mani Padme Hum,’ more often.” An excellent approach is to be filial to them when they are alive and recite the Mani mantra frequently when they are gone. However, rather than waiting until they are gone to recite the mantra, it is far better to spend more time with them while they are still here. I often think, “If my parents were still here, I would make time to sit and reminisce with them.” Now, not even a single strand of their hair remains in this world. At a certain point, many people will come to have this same experience and reflection. Therefore, cherishing and caring for our parents while they are still with us is the best way for us to practice filial piety now.

The principle of loving care extends beyond the parent-child relationship to encompass all our connections, both within our families and with others. It is natural for conflicts to arise among family members, as each person has their own unique karma. For instance,

when four family members with varied karmic tendencies—or different “specializations”—come together, differing viewpoints are inevitable, sometimes resulting in friction. When these conflicts occur, it is essential to address them with the kind of love and compassion advocated in Buddhist teachings.

The Story of the Elephant King

From the Buddhist perspective, such a peaceful approach is the ideal means for resolving conflicts or wars. The story of the elephant king, a parable recorded in *The Storehouse of Sundry Valuables*, illustrates this attitude. This story is available in Chinese and possibly in Pali, but it does not appear to be included in the Tibetan canon.

While residing in Shravasti, the Buddha once said to the bhikshus, “There are eight kinds of people to whom one should always offer generosity without hesitation: one’s father and mother, the Buddha and his disciples, those arriving from afar, those about to embark on a long journey, the sick, and caregivers.” The disciples praised him, saying, “Venerable Buddha, your filial devotion to your parents is extraordinary!” The Buddha replied, “Not only am I filial to my parents in this life, but I was also extremely filial in my countless past lives.” At the disciples’ request, the Buddha then recounted a story from one of his previous lives.

In ancient times, two kingdoms were engaged in a war. Victory in those days often depended not on cannons, but on the strength and number of elephants. After suffering defeat at the hands of the enemy's elephants, the king of the kingdom without elephants made a proclamation: "Throughout the land, whoever can bring me an elephant will receive a generous reward." Word soon spread that the king of the elephants lived in a distant mountain, prompting a group to set out in search of him.

The elephant king was brilliant. He thought to himself, "Although I could easily escape, my elderly and blind parents cannot flee with me. Therefore, I should go along with them to the royal palace for now, ensuring my parents' safety." When the king saw this mighty elephant king, he was overjoyed and provided the elephant king with a special palace, built for him, and offered him exquisite food and music. However, the elephant refused to eat or drink. (In ancient times, animals could understand human language.) The king asked, "Why do you not eat this delicious food?" The elephant explained, "My elderly, blind parents are left behind without anyone to care for them. Since they cannot eat, how can I?" He then requested permission to return to care for his parents, promising to return to the palace after their passing.

The king was a person of wisdom. Moved by the elephant's display of filial devotion, the king granted his request and issued a royal decree declaring that any subject in his realm who failed to show filial piety toward their parents would be severely punished. The elephant king returned to the mountains, cared for his parents until their passing, and then faithfully returned to the palace as promised. Later, when the king considered seeking revenge against the other kingdom, the elephant king gently advised against war, saying, "War brings suffering to both sides." When the king protested that his kingdom had been unjustly invaded, the elephant king offered to negotiate peace, assuring the king of his return. Trusting in the elephant king's integrity, the king agreed.

The elephant king then traveled to the rival kingdom and addressed its ruler with this verse:

*Victory breeds resentment;
Defeat brings suffering as well.
Those who do not contend for victory
Their joy is supreme.*

In other words, even victory in war leads to greater resentment, while defeat brings only misery. True happiness lies in choosing

not to compete at all. Inspired by the elephant king's wisdom, the two kingdoms abandoned warfare and embraced peace.

The elephant king was none other than Shakyamuni Buddha in one of his previous lives. Before attaining Buddhahood, he used this powerful verse to mediate conflicts and guide beings toward peace. This vital verse embodies the Buddhist ideal of non-violence and is one we Buddhists should all remember.

Even today, many people may still share the same concerns about non-violence as the king did. During a Dharma lecture I gave at a school in Africa, a student asked, "It seems impossible for us not to fight. If we do not fight, what if our enemy destroys us?" Such concerns are understandable, especially in challenging circumstances. However, even in that most extreme situation, striving for a peaceful resolution remains essential. Victory achieved through destruction often sows the seeds of revenge and future conflict, creating an endless cycle of harm. And if defeated, one must bear the heavy burden of loss. Neither outcome is ideal.

It is wise to let go of resentment and choose peaceful coexistence. This approach is not only applicable to conflicts between nations but is equally valuable in resolving disagreements among individuals. Ultimately, the outcome of a quarrel—who wins or loses—matters

little compared to the importance of maintaining harmony. As a Tibetan saying goes, “In arguments, the wife wins; in physical fights, the husband wins.” While this saying humorously reflects the dynamics of conflict, it also reminds us that it is best to avoid both. To summarize, it is imperative to treat one another with love and resolve conflicts through understanding and peaceful means.

The Second Method: Articulating Morality

“When the former kings explained the meaning of morality, such conduct became popular among the people.

The second method used by ancient kings to educate their people was to articulate the meaning of morality to citizens, so that virtuous conduct became widespread. When a sovereign articulates the importance of virtue, the populace is inspired to cultivate it in their own lives. As *The Just Kings* observes:

*Moreover, subjects look upon
The actions of kings and nobles,
Whether good or evil,
And they imitate them.*⁵³

In short, the people follow the example set from above. For instance, if a king lectures on the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*,

the people will begin to study and discuss that text. If a teacher emphasizes morality, students will strive to emulate that quality. This principle endures today; people still look to their leaders and are guided toward the same virtue the leader expounds on.

The Third Method: Exemplifying Respect

“When the former kings set an example of respect and yield, the people did not contend.

The third method employed by the ancient rulers was to first personally embody the values of respect, yielding, and mutual assistance. By doing so, they inspired the people to adopt these values, resulting in a more harmonious society with less conflict.

The practice of yielding is an excellent way to navigate human relationships. Whether between nations, communities, or individuals, a refusal to compromise self-interest from both sides can lead to endless escalation of conflicts. For instance, when one nation raises tariffs, the other reciprocates—one side retaliates and the other counters. Where does the cycle of contention end?

As we discussed yesterday in our teachings on *A Precious Garland of the Supreme Path*, it is a fault for a spiritual leader to act out of self-interest. Even in the mundane world, leaders who prioritize their

own interest at the expense of others ultimately bring harm upon themselves; altruistic leaders win people's hearts. Take the example of Emperor Shun: before ascending the throne, he was simply a farmer, yet he always did his best to help others. Gradually, more and more people were drawn to him, building a solid foundation for his reign.

The Fourth Method: Rites and Music

“When the former kings used rites and music to guide the people, they became harmonious.

The fourth method was to guide the people through rites and music, fostering a spirit of harmony within society. In contemporary times, the significance of traditional etiquette is sometimes overlooked, which may inadvertently lead to misunderstandings or disharmony within families and the broader communities. According to ancient traditions, individuals in different social roles observed distinct codes of conduct. For example, as discussed earlier, there were five types of filial piety corresponding to five social classes, with each group required to observe the rituals and etiquette appropriate to their status.

In fact, when individuals understand and adhere to the proper etiquette for their respective roles, many social challenges can be naturally resolved. However, it appears that the observance of such etiquette has diminished in modern society. In the business world, for instance, many aspire to achieve the remarkable success of figures like Jack Ma. While such ambition is admirable, it is crucial to recognize that not everyone can occupy the same position. As the saying goes, "A soldier who does not want to become a general is not a good soldier." It is natural to strive for excellence, just as students often wish to be at the top of their class. Yet, in a class of fifty-five students, it is simply not possible for everyone to be first.

Those who consistently perform well often set high standards for themselves. Recently, during exams at Larung Gar, some monastics felt disappointed for not ranking among the top three. However, as long as one has made a sincere effort, it is not necessary to feel disappointed. Recognizing our own capacities and setting realistic expectations can help bridge the gap between our aspirations and reality. Many people take a more measured approach to life. During a recent Dharma trip to Sweden, I asked several people about their life goals. Most respondents simply wished to live as ordinary

individuals. Their desires were modest, and they were content to be themselves, which is a commendable attitude.

In ancient times, the observance of proper etiquette was highly valued, with different ranks adhering to distinct codes of conduct. Understanding these principles remains important today. While ordinary individuals may not possess the merit, status, power, or resources of kings, everyone can strive to improve themselves in a positive direction. As we pursue our goals, it is helpful to avoid excessive greed or jealousy. When encountering someone more accomplished, rather than feeling compelled to compete or compare, we can appreciate their achievements and continue to cultivate our own strengths. Healthy ambition is beneficial, but when mixed with intense desire or envy, it can become counterproductive. Ultimately, recognizing the differences in social roles allows us to act appropriately.

The Fifth Method: The Wisdom of Discernment

“When the former kings clarified the distinction between good and evil, the people understood what was forbidden.

The fifth method pertains to a fundamental principle of effective education: guiding people with the wisdom to distinguish right

from wrong, thereby helping them understand what to accept and what to avoid. To achieve this, it is crucial to identify the root cause of any phenomenon. Without identifying the root cause, it becomes difficult to resolve issues meaningfully or to bring endeavors to a successful conclusion.

This principle applies not only to external matters but also to self-governance. A historical illustration of this can be found in the Tang Dynasty, where Emperor Taizong had a loyal minister named Wei Zheng who frequently brought the emperor's faults to his attention. When Wei Zheng passed away, Emperor Taizong was deeply saddened, remarking that he had lost a clear "mirror" for self-reflection.

Wise rulers like Emperor Taizong value those who help them recognize their own shortcomings. In contrast, it can be a common tendency in everyday life to be less receptive to constructive feedback. Some in positions of leadership may find it challenging to accept dissenting views. If faced with disagreement, they might subtly discourage it or exert pressure until an opposing view is withdrawn.

Wei Zheng's counsel was valued not only for its courage but also for its profound and often prophetic wisdom, as events frequently

unfolded just as he had predicted. He once advised Emperor Taizong with the following analogy:

If you wish for a tree to grow tall,

You must strengthen its roots.

If you wish for a stream to flow far,

You must dredge its source.

This timeless advice holds a practical lesson. For instance, as we have recently been planting trees at Larung Gar, great care must be taken to protect the roots. If the roots are disturbed, whether by animal or human activity, the trees cannot flourish. Similarly, for water to flow far, its source must remain unobstructed, lest the stream diminish and eventually disappear.

This same principle extends to all forms of education and guidance. When a teacher or leader possesses the wisdom of discernment—understanding what is appropriate and what is not—they provide a worthy example for others to follow. In this way, the moral and ethical development of a community can be likened to a great river, flowing continuously from a pure and unobstructed source. It is therefore essential to first cultivate this ability to discern right from wrong. For Buddhist practitioners, this discernment is developed through extensive study and contemplation of the

Dharma, which helps us inform and guide our conduct. Without such guidance, one may find oneself navigating life without clear direction—like a blind person who has lost their way—struggling to make sound judgments or act appropriately.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘Oh, renowned Master Yin, the people all look to you.’”

As is often the case in Tibetan treatises, this chapter concludes by citing a scriptural passage to substantiate its teachings. “Yin” is a surname, as in “Mr. Yin” or “Teacher Yin.” The implication is clear: “Renowned Master Yin, you must pay close attention to your words and actions, for the public is always observing you.”

This line is filled with deep meaning. While the actions of ordinary individuals may often go unnoticed, those who attain even a modest degree of fame inevitably attract heightened public scrutiny. Whether one is a monarch, an official, or a celebrity, even minor missteps can be closely examined and their significance magnified a hundredfold. In the contemporary digital age, it can be amplified to an unprecedented degree online, making the phenomenon particularly pronounced in modern society.

In the *Treasury of Good Advice*, which I translated relatively early, there is a line I was particularly fond of at the time:

People seek defects in extraordinary people,

But not in coarse individuals.

People examine the flaws of gems carefully,

But who would so scrutinize a fire brand?⁵⁴

This verse suggests that the faults of ordinary individuals rarely attract attention, whereas those who are distinguished by fame, wisdom, or accomplishment are often subject to close examination and criticism. The simile of the jewel is especially apt: even the slightest imperfection in a piece of coral will prompt intense scrutiny, with observers eager to examine it under a magnifying glass. In contrast, no one is concerned with the flaws of a simple piece of firewood. Thus, while an ordinary person may err repeatedly without being noticed, a single misstep by a public figure can draw widespread notice.

Certain celebrities have remarked, “If I am still being criticized, it means people still care about me—so I am happy.” This perspective is not without merit. Others, however, may feel considerable distress in the face of public criticism. Nevertheless, the very fact that people are invested enough to discuss or critique one’s actions is a testament

to the high expectations placed upon such a person. As the wise have long observed, no one bothers to scrutinize the faults of a worthless rock or firewood; it is only the rare and precious gem that invites such attention.

In light of these observations, it is essential for everyone—especially those in positions of influence—to remain mindful of their words and actions. Individuals of status are often under constant observation, and their behavior can have a significant impact on others. A theory suggests that humans and monkeys share a common ancestor. It is well known that monkeys are quick to imitate. For example, if a monkey observes a human eating fruit, it may mimic the action, even if it is not actually consuming food. Humans, too, display a similar tendency. When an idol or public figure adopts a certain behavior, devoted followers often feel compelled to imitate it. If a celebrity enjoys a particular fruit, their most ardent fans may feel the need to do the same, adopting their idol's preferences without hesitation.

This phenomenon is by no means limited to Eastern societies. While Western cultures may appear more rational on the surface, their fan cultures can be equally fervent. For example, during the World Cup, when a star player dons a specific jersey, countless fans rush to purchase the same item. This suggests that, regardless of cultural

background, many people are inclined to follow the actions of those they admire, sometimes at the expense of individual discernment. The primary texts discussed here reflect this universal dynamic.

This phenomenon is present even within small groups. If a department director chooses a particular style of dress, those under the director may adopt similar attire, perhaps as a gesture of goodwill. If the director expresses a fondness for zongzi (sticky rice dumplings), the entire team might enthusiastically join in eating zongzi together. Similar dynamics can be observed in Buddhist communities, where members may collectively adopt the preferences of their Dharma tutor.

Ultimately, whether in Eastern or Western societies, or across different historical periods, the human tendency to emulate those in positions of influence is a consistent feature of social life. This observation is not intended as a critique of any particular culture, but rather as a reflection on a shared aspect of human behavior. In conclusion, given this widespread inclination to follow the example of leaders, it is especially important for those in management or public roles to be mindful of their words and actions, recognizing the potential impact they have on those who look to them.

Lecture Eight

July 4, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Today, we continue our exploration of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, a text deeply rooted in traditional culture. This classic is composed of sixteen chapters, and our focus today will be Chapter Eight, “Governing through Filial Piety.” I previously mentioned that our contemporary society is marked by fundamental tensions—between traditional and modern cultures, Eastern and Western worldviews, and religious and scientific paradigms. In such a complex context, fully adopting one framework while completely rejecting the other makes it difficult to harmonize diverse values and insights. As a result, it becomes challenging to draw upon our collective wisdom and apply it meaningfully in our daily lives and spiritual practices.

Some people hold fast to ancient traditions, finding it difficult to adapt to the changing times. Others, meanwhile, uncritically adopt every new modern trend, often overlooking the enduring value of traditional wisdom. I hope that all of us—whether ordained monastics or lay practitioners—can reflect deeply on this matter. Reflection is valuable, of course, but it alone is not sufficient; it must be supported by sustained study. Through dedicated learning, we

can address many perplexing questions and ease our inner conflicts. Once these inner tensions are resolved, we may find that life feels less burdensome and complex than it sometimes appears.

From ancient times to the present, human beings have faced various hardships. Some sufferings cannot be eradicated, while others, though not inherently painful, become sources of suffering because of our attachments or dualistic thinking. With such discriminatory thoughts, we can turn neutral experiences into real anguish. Upon reflection, many situations in our lives that seem discouraging, worrisome, or even devastating are not as severe as they first appear. Yet, in the moment, we often feel trapped and unable to rise above them.

In truth, if we can deepen our understanding of both Eastern and Western cultures and clarify the relationship between science and religion, many of our difficulties may resolve themselves with ease. From the perspective of a spiritual practitioner, problems that seem intractable in worldly life often become quite manageable. It is precisely this wisdom found in ancient traditions that motivates us to study the traditional teachings from over two millennia ago. I am confident that this journey of learning will bring fresh insights and lasting benefits.

CHAPTER EIGHT: GOVERNING THROUGH FILIAL PIETY

This chapter primarily explores how individuals from varying social positions can apply the principle of filial piety to the governance of a realm, a nation, and a family. It is helpful to remember that filial piety, in this context, has a broad scope. It includes the five types of filial piety we have discussed earlier, such as that practiced by an emperor. In our time, the common understanding of filial piety often limits it to kindness and deference toward one's parents. I have heard some say, "I care for my parents well, so I do not need to study *The Classic of Filial Piety*." They believe they have fully grasped its essence and have little left to learn from the text. Yet when people thoroughly study this text, they often recognize the narrower scope of their initial view. The filial piety described here extends far beyond honoring or caring for one's parents—it carries broad ethical and social significance.

The Son of Heaven Governing His Realm through Filial Piety

Confucius said: “In ancient times, when wise kings governed their territories through filial piety, they dared not neglect even the ministers of small states—how much less so the dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons? Therefore, the kings won the allegiance of all the states and inspired them to assist in serving the ancestral kings.

Confucius taught that wise emperors in ancient times governed their domains by embodying filial piety. They did not dare to slight or neglect even the envoys of small states, let alone the dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons. In doing so, they earned the heartfelt loyalty of all the feudal states and gained their support in honoring the former kings through ancestral rituals.

Firstly, the Son of Heaven—as the highest authority of the central government—ruled his territory according to filial principles. At the time this classic was composed, an empire encompassed numerous feudal states, similar to today’s provinces or municipalities. And these feudal states or ethnic groups were not fully unified. In this sociopolitical setting, it fell to the monarch to oversee the entire realm, meaning the full extent of his jurisdiction. To do so wisely, a

truly insightful ruler treated all feudal states with sincerity, even the smallest ones. He would never belittle or ignore the rulers and ministers of lesser domains. In other words, if the emperor would not overlook a village chief from a small state, it follows that he would certainly honor those of higher rank.

The titles “Duke, marquis, earl, viscount, and baron” represent five ranks of nobility from the highest to the lowest. They roughly correspond to modern roles like provincial governors, city mayors, county magistrates, and similar officials. Even today, some European countries, such as the United Kingdom and Italy, maintain noble titles. The United Kingdom, for instance, still has a monarchy with a reigning king or queen. In certain nations, the rank of duke may involve various levels, depending on the circumstances. Historically, many monarchies established hierarchical systems that reflected the differing social roles of male individuals during those eras.

The Core Principle: Cultivating Humility and Practicing Compassion

The central teaching of this chapter is that whether one governs a realm, a nation, or a household, one must never look down on those of lower social standing. Instead, one must care for them with

humility, compassion, and equanimity—qualities also emphasized in Buddhist teachings.

Yet when we look at the world today, we find the opposite tendency. People tend to show deference to those with high social status. The more prestigious someone seems, the more deference they receive. By contrast, individuals without appealing appearance, prominent positions, renowned names, or material wealth are frequently overlooked or dismissed. Certain people are extremely pragmatic in their interactions with others, immediately adjusting their demeanor based on another's wealth and social status. They may show less warmth and kindness toward those perceived as being of lower status, while displaying great deference to those in authority.

Yet from the standpoint of this chapter, an emperor who wished to govern effectively and foster peace in his realm would extend respect to all subjects, without affronting even the envoys of feudal states. Although we may not necessarily possess the merit or capacity of a monarch to govern a realm, after studying this teaching, we can commit to offering greater care to the vulnerable in our own lives. In a world where genuine compassion and care for those in need are scarce, we must cultivate an altruistic heart, as taught in

Buddhism, and provide support to those facing adversity with both material assistance and spiritual guidance.

The original text notes that a wise ruler who did not slight even the envoys of feudal states would naturally win the loyalty of many feudal states and their people. These subjects, in turn, would support the ruler and participate in the worship rituals honoring former kings at the ancestral temples. The emperor placed great value on preserving these worship practices and the legacy of the ancestral temples for deceased predecessors. If offerings and rituals continued, it signified that the former king had worthy successors and that his legacy was thriving. Conversely, if no one maintained the ancestral temples or worshiped the memorial tablets of former kings, it suggested that the current ruler lacked virtue or promise.

The text teaches that wise rulers governed through filial piety by cherishing and caring for everyone, without letting pride cloud their judgment. By the nature of their position, monarchs can easily become arrogant. Yet such pride offers no true benefit—it may even erode their authority and moral foundation. As Ju Mipham Rinpoche wrote in *The Just King*:

Of what use is pride to great beings?

When they lack pride, they are all the more beautiful.

Of what benefit is pride to the lowly?

*When they have pride, they are all the more despised.*⁵⁵

Those with genuine wisdom and capability seem even more admirable and approachable when humble. Their humility enhances their dignity and draws others closer to them. In contrast, those who lack virtue or ability, when overtaken by arrogance, become less appealing. In daily life, we often notice that people of high status tend to be remarkably humble and engaging. In contrast, others—lacking depth in character or skill—may come across as distant or overly self-assured.

The Story of the Humble President Mandela

I once read about an account of Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa. He was a key figure in the anti-apartheid movement who spent twenty-seven years in prison before becoming a global symbol of reconciliation and serving as his nation's president. In 1996, a businessman scheduled a meeting with President Mandela to discuss a potential partnership with the government. At the time, Mandela was seventy-eight years old. The meeting was scheduled for 10:30 a.m., and the businessman arrived promptly. To his surprise, President Mandela came out to the parking area to greet him personally. The discussion went smoothly.

As lunchtime neared, President Mandela inquired, “Where is your driver?” The businessman replied, “He is waiting in the car.” Then, to the astonishment of both the businessman and the driver, President Mandela himself went to the car, tapped gently on the window, and asked kindly, “Excuse me, would you care to join us for lunch?” The three of them shared the meal. Neither the businessman nor the driver had anticipated such warmth and accessibility from the president—quite unlike the approach of many other leaders. That single gesture left a deep and lasting impression on them.

President Mandela—despite his position as head of state and his advanced age—interacted with others with genuine humility, never displaying a trace of pretense or arrogance. His spirit embodies the teaching found in the original text: wise rulers know how to warmly receive and accommodate all their subordinates, even those in the most humble positions. In contrast, some lower-level officials behave differently. In the absence of their superiors, they may act with undue self-importance; yet, when a senior leader appears, they rush to assist with conspicuous eagerness.

Nevertheless, I have encountered leaders who stand apart from the ordinary. They extend sincere kindness to both ordinary people and spiritual practitioners, listening attentively to their concerns and

offering help whenever possible. Such qualities are the hallmarks of a true statesman. Writing a book alone does not make one a statesman, just as reading a few volumes does not make one a scholar. Throughout history, only those who sincerely care for the vulnerable and win the trust and affection of the people have truly earned the title of statesman.

Those Seeking Liberation Should Not Be Arrogant

Within the Buddhist community, khenpos, geshes, and other Dharma teachers may at times appear prideful. Yet many teachers from the Theravada tradition—particularly elder masters—typically embody a profound humility, free of arrogance, and embrace others with genuine warmth and accessibility. It is true that among some Dharma teachers, ascending a high Dharma throne can foster a sense of self-importance. In reality, if one lacks authentic inner realization, any honor belongs to the throne itself, which symbolizes reverence for the Dharma—not to the person sitting on it. If mounting it inflates one’s arrogance, it will ultimately cause harm to oneself and to others.

Most Dharma teachers at Larung Gar are still young. In the future, many of you will certainly receive admiration and respect. When that happens, I encourage you not to let such regard lead to pride.

Being respected is a natural occurrence and nothing extraordinary in itself. I cannot speak for others, but I find no cause for pride within myself. Whether evaluated by wisdom, compassion, and power, or by the Three Trainings of discipline, meditation, and wisdom, my qualities reveal no outstanding merit. With that in mind, what foundation could there be for arrogance? We must learn to let go of pride from the depths of our hearts and extend genuine respect to others. Feigned humility or a contrived approachable manner falls short. True humility emerges naturally from within.

The Feudal Lords Governing Their States through Filial Piety

“Those who governed feudal states dared not insult widowers and widows—how much less the lower officials and common people? Therefore, they won the hearts of the people and enlisted their help in serving ancestral lords.

Feudal lords who ruled their territories through filial piety did not dare slight the most vulnerable, such as widowers who had lost their wives, widows who had lost their husbands, orphans, and the solitary—let alone lower-ranking officials or the general populace, who often possessed greater stability and skills, and were deemed to have a higher social status. By extending care to all, the feudal

lords captured the hearts of the people, filling them with joy. In response, many willingly supported the feudal lords by joining in worship rituals for former rulers at the ancestral temples.

Four groups were the primary focus of feudal lords' compassion: a noble feudal lord would not only avoid insulting them but would go out of his way to treat them with extra kindness. These four categories of individuals merit special compassion are known collectively as "widower, widow, orphan, and solitary." The first is the widower—a term, "*guan fu*" in Chinese, not commonly used in China today. Once, a person showed me a photo and said, "This is my late partner; please give us your blessings." That person's life partner, once vibrant, now exists only as an image. The second is the widow—its Chinese translation "*gua fu*" is frequently used. The third is the orphan, a child bereft of both parents. And the fourth is the solitary, an elder without children. These four groups exist in every society and truly deserve our compassion and support.

Individuals who have lost their life partners often endure deep suffering. Such loss brings not only emotional grief but also financial strain. Orphans face immense life challenges without the guidance of their parents. Similarly, elders without children—or whose children offer little care—truly deserve our care and support. It is

reported that the number of such solitary elders has been steadily increasing in urban areas.

In today's society, it remains essential for communities and institutions—such as schools—to show concern and provide aid to these individuals. The schools I founded have always prioritized children who have lost one or both parents; they form the heart of our student body. When a child loses a parent young, the emotional and practical burdens are heavy. For this reason, our schools and related foundations offer financial support for their education.

I have participated in several scholarship interviews where children have shared heartbreaking stories of losing a father or mother. Understanding the depth of such hardship, we usually approve the aid without further inquiry. That said, during our annual reviews, we sometimes learn that a parent of an "orphan" is actually still alive. I recall a girl who once told me, "My father passed away long ago; could you please waive my tuition?" I took her at her word. But a year later, I discovered her father was living. So I called her and asked, "Didn't you tell me your father had passed?" She replied, "I cannot talk right now; I will text you." Her message read, "Though my father is alive, he has never cared for my mother or me. In my heart, he died long ago." Some children receive no real care or affection from their parents, even if both are alive. They feel

utterly abandoned, as if they have been orphaned. We have a moral duty to extend compassion to these children as well.

As we have discussed, ancient monarchs held ritual worship and ancestor honoring in high regard. Commemorative rites, anniversary observances, and the care of ancestral tablets were treated with seriousness. And the people supported feudal lords in worshiping former lords at the ancestral temples. These practices demonstrated a deep respect for the spirits of their predecessors. In some historical instances, kings prepared for such matters during their lifetimes. For example, Emperor Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China, reportedly constructed the Terracotta Army to accompany him in the afterlife. To this day, the Terracotta Army remains one of the world's great enigmas; only portions have been unearthed. Each figure was uniquely crafted, and the materials used exhibited remarkable durability given the technological level of that era.

Heaven, Earth, and Humanity in Harmony

The Temple of Heaven and Temple of Earth in Beijing are historical sites where emperors worshiped and made offerings to deities and spirits. In ancient times, agriculture and daily life relied heavily on the weather. During a drought, the emperor would first examine his own actions for shortcomings. Historical accounts describe

how, during Emperor Kangxi's reign, prolonged drought or other natural disasters prompted him to visit the Temple of Heaven for repentance and prayer. On many occasions, rain followed soon after.

The Temple of Heaven's design—square in the south and round in the north—embodies ancient Chinese cosmology: “heaven is round, and earth is square.” This principle continues to influence architectural and renovation styles even today. Some Dharma friends incorporate it into their homes, building square structures for earth and a central circular, sky-blue dome for heaven.

The ideal of harmony among heaven, earth, and humanity remains of vital importance. In many Tibetan areas today, nearly every household makes offerings to Dharma protectors, which essentially honors local earth deities. Weather patterns and auspicious or inauspicious events arise not only from human actions but also from natural forces—heaven and earth.

Reflecting on Chinese history, after the Cultural Revolution, traditional culture—including the principle of harmony among heaven, earth, and humanity—was often labeled superstition. Only with the restoration of religious freedom did many begin to appreciate that much of this heritage was not mere feudal superstition. To be

sure, some folk beliefs became mingled with classical texts during the long process of traditional culture's dissemination, and not all should be accepted without question. Yet the core of conventional culture withstands scientific examination and resonates with religious teachings.

Our lives encompass both *yin* and *yang*: the visible and invisible, the manifest and subtle. Deeper truths often elude ordinary perception. By drawing on the wisdom of ancient sages, we can access these hidden dimensions. Thus, it is crucial not to dismiss traditional culture as outdated or superstition but to study and preserve it continuously. A significant number of Western scientists are now exploring the profound mysteries within these traditions. Regrettably, much of this heritage has faded in China. In ancient Han Chinese families, ancestral tablets and genealogies were meticulously maintained and passed down through generations. Today, such customs endure only in a few places like Hong Kong, where descendants still honor ancestral tablets with offerings, repentance, lamps, and incense.

Compassion and Responsibility

When feudal lords treated their subjects kindly, as the original text describes, the people reciprocated by supporting the feudal lords in

ancestral worship, helping to sustain the throne's succession. Moreover, the people enjoyed pleasant and fulfilling lives. Ju Mipham Rinpoche captured this dynamic in *The Just King*:

*The king properly cares for the retinue,
And the members of the retinue revere the king.
When these factors come together,
The kingdom overflows with happiness and joy.*⁵⁶

To build a peaceful and prosperous nation, a king relied fundamentally on his people's support. Similarly, for ordinary people to live joyfully, they needed the monarch's guidance and protection.

A feudal lord's kindness and the people's loyalty were mutually reinforcing. Just as a tree with lush branches and leaves draws many birds, while a barren one repels them, so too does compassion attract support. Whether as a national leader or family head, caring for those around you yields greater harmony. The more empathy one offers dependents, the stronger the bonds become. Those who remain distant or indifferent gradually lose goodwill. This dynamic explains why, in numerous contemporary societies that preach democracy, many national leaders—whether sincerely or strategically—strive to appear attentive to their constituents.

The second key insight in this passage is how feudal lords governed by prioritizing care for the vulnerable—the widowed, the orphaned, and the childless. Though we may never lead a feudal state, we encounter those in need of help wherever we go. I hope that when we do, we extend a helping hand. A few days ago, a Dharma friend applied to join our Han College. I intended to follow up, but I was supervising an exam at the time and was unable to do so. Additionally, the Dharma teacher responsible for admissions also did not attend to the matter. The matter lingered in my thoughts for some time. Unfortunately, I never located that person again—I knew his face but not his name.

I encourage Dharma teachers to pay closer attention to their students, especially those who seem to be struggling. It is commendable that some compassionate instructors have been accepting students whom others turned away. Though this decision might bring challenges, they are often short-lived. Some students may experience serious illnesses or emotional distress from time to time. In particular, some female practitioners—due to physiological or other factors—may experience intense mood shifts for several days. As a result, certain instructors hesitate to admit them.

Similar patterns appear in school admissions. Many teachers shy away from students who seem unattractive, disadvantaged, or less

gifted. Only a few teachers with a strong sense of responsibility step forward, thinking, “No one else wants to take him—how heartbreaking if he leaves without learning the Dharma. I must take responsibility and guide him.” Some of these students, embraced through compassion, later thrive. They often feel deep gratitude toward the teachers who admitted them into the class.

People naturally gravitate toward those who are endowed with intelligence, beauty, power, and other merits. When such a child enters the world, those around exclaim: “What a beautiful baby!” But if a child is born with a cleft lip, interactions may dwindle. These inclinations are common. True compassion, however, persists despite potential difficulties. From a practical standpoint, underprivileged students may require additional support and management. Still, instructors should nurture them, particularly those who have been previously rejected.

In contemporary society, many avoid responsibility, fearing personal entanglement. They reason that involvement invites trouble, so they choose inaction: “Do less, and trouble stays away.” To safeguard themselves, people often sidestep even minor duties. Some officials’ conducts reflect this mindset. When we seek project approvals from them, they try to evade accountability by saying, “Ask that person instead.” A responsible person, by contrast, excels at superiors’

tasks first. They then listen attentively to subordinates' needs, resolving what they can promptly or clarifying limitations soon after. Embracing responsibility is a foundational human value—and an essential one.

Ministers and High Officials, Lower Officials, and Commoners Governing Their Families through Filial Piety

“Those who governed families dared not neglect their servants—how much less so their wives and children? Therefore, they won the affection of others and had them serve their own parents.

Ministers and high officials, lower officials, and commoners were not rulers of realms or feudal states. As everyday people, they focused on matters within their social sphere, such as overseeing subordinates or caring for their families through filial piety. Even toward servants, they refrained from disrespect—how much more so with their own wives and children? By showing respect to all family members, they earned the goodwill of their family members, inspiring others to honor their own parents reverently.

The term “servants” corresponds to “*chen qie*” in the original Chinese text. In ancient stories and dramas, concubines often used this phrase self-referentially. In this context, “*chen*” generally denotes male servants and “*qie*” female ones. Wealthy ancient families employed both, whose social status was modest.

As household heads, ministers and officials treated even lower-status outsiders—like servants—with courtesy. In Han regions today, female nannies are common, while male servants are scarce. Household help persists in many affluent homes. Some families show exceptional kindness, calling helpers “auntie” and inviting them to meals: “Auntie, time to eat!” They might even prepare food themselves or introduce helpers to guests first: “This is our family’s auntie!” (Audience laughing) I wonder if male helpers have nicknames as well. Overseas, housekeepers serve similar roles. Male helpers are more visible in countries like the Philippines, though they exist elsewhere. In Tibetan regions, servants were once common but are now rare, limited to a few prosperous households.

The primary text features a clear and cohesive structure. Its three key points—governing the realm, managing the feudal state, and cultivating the family through filial piety—are purposefully interconnected and build upon one another. The third point aims

at family harmony. Whether Buddhist or not, we all benefit from valuing this principle. The family forms society's foundation; harmonious families foster stable communities.

Due to past positive or negative karma, people form family ties. Observing one household's dynamics, Venerable Katyayana once lamented:

He eats his father's flesh, he beats his mother off,

He dandles on his lap the enemy that he killed;

The wife is gnawing at her husband's bones.

I laugh to see what happens in samsara's show!⁵⁷

Many of you are familiar with this stanza and its tale. Some might think: "How could someone devour their father's flesh, strike their mother, or cradle their foe? That is impossible!" Yet this captures samsara's stark reality. Certain familial relationships are formed due to negative karma, leading to constant conflicts. Just yesterday, I saw a short video of a Tibetan couple arguing over something minor. The wife raised her hand as if to strike her husband when it was cut off. I was curious to see what happened next. (Audience laughing) Family discord causes suffering for many. To foster well-being at home, we must treat every member kindly. Even if someone

acts unkindly toward us, responding with patience and seeking a peaceful resolution is a wise path.

Some individuals begin to neglect their families and relatives after gaining power and success. Ju Mipham Rinpoche cautioned against this in *The Just King*:

Even when he is extremely powerful

He does not ignore others.

When one appropriately takes care of others,

One's own excellence increases.⁵⁸

Even with great abilities, it is best not to look down on others. Embracing beings with compassion benefits both self and surroundings. Such individuals harmonize with family and maintain positive ties with superiors and subordinates.

Zheng's Commentary on The Classic of Filial Piety says, "No resentment between the high and the low—thus, peace."⁵⁹ Here, peace means freedom from mutual animosity. While many equate peace with the absence of war, it truly emerges when people hold no grudges. For example, if I, as a family member, guard my mind and live in harmony with parents, children, and siblings, that cultivates genuine family peace.

The Secret to Success

Many successful individuals master managing their households and handling external relationships, evident in their everyday grace. I once read about Li Ka-shing, the Chinese business magnate, before his retirement. A group of people—including a then-obscure real estate developer who later gained prominence—met Li Ka-shing for a meal. On time, the guests ascended to the dining floor. To their delight, Li Ka-shing awaited, greeting each with a handshake. He handed each of them a lottery card with a number for their seating and photo positions. Despite being seventy-six, Li Ka-shing spared no effort in making every guest feel valued. During the meal, he fluidly shifted between English and Cantonese, engaging locals and internationals alike. He visited each of the four tables for about fifteen minutes, engaging in conversation with the guests. Afterward, he accompanied everyone to the elevator, bidding farewell with personal handshakes.

These details reveal that his achievements stemmed not from self-importance but from attentiveness and ease with others, even in trivial matters. Such qualities are cultivated gradually in both family and social life.

Some people interact warmly only with those they favor, deliberately avoiding handshakes—or even eye contact—with those they dislike. When they encounter someone they disapprove of, they immediately turn away. This behavior is problematic, and I have observed this tendency quite keenly among certain Buddhist practitioners. Yesterday, in a meeting, I noticed two people with strained relations. Deliberately, I asked one to sit next to the other. When he arrived and saw who was beside him, he immediately chose a different seat. In most cases, interpersonal tensions are entirely mental constructs. In this sense, the mind’s power can be startling.

Although these matters may seem mundane, from a Buddhist perspective, they touch upon the principle of treating all sentient beings equally. Especially toward those who have harmed us or with whom we have grievances, we should extend impartial compassion. Doing so helps us truly embody the courage of a bodhisattva.

Governing through Filial Piety: Ensuring Peace and Harmony

“This way, when alive, one’s parents can relax; when deceased, their spirits can enjoy the offerings.

If emperors, feudal lords, ministers, and others treated everyone with respect as described above, their living parents would lead happy lives due to their children's virtue. After their death, they would benefit from offerings made in their honor.

Ancient people generally believed that after death, a person became a spirit capable of receiving sacrifices or offerings. Many today share this view, thinking spirits accept items like paper money burned at the Qingming Festival. When this text was written, Buddhist thoughts had likely not reached China. So "spirits" probably meant the soul, not beings in the ghost realm in the Buddhist sense. Influenced by Confucianism, people of that era highly likely believed in the existence of the soul or consciousness. However, the original text does not elaborate on its nature.

The key is that virtuous living and subsequent success bring honor to living parents and merit to the deceased. For the latter, the deceased merit can accumulate through Buddhist pujas—an expression of filial devotion. Ancients valued both this life and the afterlife. It is clear that Confucius did not hold the nihilistic view that death is like a lamp extinguishing into nothingness. Instead, he implied the spirit persists and gains benefits from rituals and offerings. Unlike Buddhist rituals, the rituals of that time may have included meat and other sacrificial items.

Tibetan Buddhist practitioners excel at benefiting the deceased. For departed parents or relatives, offerings to the sangha for pujas and mantra recitations are common. The offering does not need to be substantial; modest contributions made during encounters with masters or monastery visits prove highly meritorious. I intended to elaborate on this in teachings on *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, but the opportunity never arose. Personally, at every Dharma assembly, I give the sangha a note with my late parents' names and a small sum, requesting pujas and mantra recitations for their merit. This practice is indeed beneficial for the deceased. In Tibetan custom, one writes the names of the deceased or those in need of blessings and hands the note to the sangha for chanting. Writing names is key. If ancestors' names are unknown, "Ancestors of [name]" suffices.

Relatives or Spirits?

Yesterday, someone described a spiritual disturbance. Since his younger brother's car accident death, he felt pursued by a spirit. I asked him to write the brother's name and promised him sutra recitation and merit dedication. After someone's death, hearing their original name can still draw their attention. Bardo beings are keenly sensitive: those who once experienced hearing loss can now hear perfectly; those who had vision impairments can see clearly.

Denying the existence of spirits is unwise. When we have nightmares, visit dangerous places, or come into contact with those who died unnatural deaths, it is indeed possible to be disturbed by negative forces or mara of death. In areas where violent deaths have transpired, malevolent spirits are often said to linger with harmful intent. In the case mentioned, the follower might not have been the brother. Likely, the accident's causing spirit trailed him, assuming the brother's form after sensing his fixation as a result of his repetitive deluded thoughts: "Perhaps my brother seeks me."

Another example is dreaming of a deceased relative post-loss. The figure may not be the deceased relative, because it is impossible for them to appear unchanged—their human body no longer exists. Dreams often feature spirits assuming the relative's form and seeking to cause disturbance. Why does this happen? Because one has not realized the nature of emptiness, the mind continually clings to thoughts of the deceased. This fixation provides an opening for the spirit to interfere.

If you ever encounter such situations, recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra, "Om Mani Padme Hum." You can also write down the name of the deceased, make a monetary offering of a moderate amount, and request that the sangha perform Buddhist rituals and recite mantras in their behalf. Such practice benefits the departed

greatly and should end the disturbance. Life and death are matters of great importance for everyone. When we or our loved ones face death, it is essential to follow this approach.

“Thus, the empire was at peace; natural disasters did not occur, and disorders were averted.

By practicing filial piety as described above, the entire realm became peaceful. There were no natural disasters like droughts or floods, no interference from harmful spirits, and no outbreaks of social unrest. The people throughout the realm enjoyed harmony, favorable weather, and contentment.

When our family members are still alive, we should treat them with kindness and respect. After they pass away, we should continue to care for them through rituals and prayers in their behalf. When the sangha is requested to perform chanting, they usually say, “Bless the living and perform transference for the deceased.” It means to pray for the living’s safety and auspiciousness, and to transfer the consciousness of the deceased to a pure land so that they may be freed from suffering and attain happiness.

The main point I would like to emphasize today is the importance of attending to those who are lower in status than we are. Respect

for superiors often comes naturally—people tend to treat managers kindly, at least outwardly, even in a seven-person small office. Yet, in a leader’s absence, gossip and criticism may arise, whether due to cultural norms or personal inclinations. Flattery toward supervisors is common, but it can quickly turn to fault-finding once they leave. While it is true that leaders sometimes neglect their subordinates, as practitioners, we should refrain from airing others’ faults. If criticism is needed, speak honestly and constructively; otherwise, it is better to remain silent.

“That was how wise rulers used filial piety to govern the realm.

Wise rulers of the past governed the territories through filial piety, yielding a peaceful realm free of disasters and disorders.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The *Classic of Poetry* says, ‘When there is great virtue, states from all four directions comply.’”

A ruler with profound virtue drew willing allegiance from all four directions. It implies that leaders win hearts through virtue, not coercion. A good leader should be humble, accessible, and caring.

I hope you all—lay or monastic leaders—cultivate responsibility toward those nearby, never letting position breed arrogance. Some, upon gaining status, inflate with self-regard. But countless stories underscore status' impermanence—elevated status confers no legitimate grounds for pride. Recently, the former prime minister of Malaysia was imprisoned for money laundering, corruption, and other charges. The former President of South Korea was also impeached and sentenced to more than twenty years. Once revered by thousands, they lost all, including esteem. Even Omniscient Longchenpa—a peerless Buddhist master—was expelled from a monastery. Afterward, at the foot of the mountain where the monastery was located, he composed a poem I once translated. When a master of his stature must endure the impermanence, how fleeting are the roles we ourselves play?

Both history and present-day reality demonstrate the impermanence of status. Thus, elevation in status warrants no arrogance. Sakya Pandita advised:

*Good personal qualities are ruined by pride;
One's sense of shame is ruined by desire.
When he always criticizes his subjects,
The ruler has gone to ruin.*⁶⁰

Excessive pride erodes wisdom; unchecked desire erodes a sense of shame. A ruler who constantly belittles subordinates courts downfall. Conversely, a virtuous leader who protects and cares for their retinue rises like a soaring dragon, governing with vast promise. Therefore, the greater one's merit, the more humility one should cultivate.

We have examined three aspects of filial piety: the Son of Heaven governing the realm, feudal lords managing the states, and officials overseeing their families. Essentially, today's teachings remind us to avoid arrogance, cultivate humility, and live in harmony with those around us. Ultimately, I hope that we may all benefit sentient beings through compassion, equanimity, and inclusivity—the very essence of Mahayana Buddhism.

Lecture Nine

July 26, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Compared to the profound teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, many may not attach as much importance to this ancient classic. Yet I believe that certain passages of *The Classic of Filial Piety* align closely in essence with the Mahayana principle. Depending on one's capacity, this text can bring varying degrees of meaningful benefit.

When exploring traditional cultures, it is helpful to set aside pre-conceived notions, such as the idea that “these ancient traditions are mere superstitions from over two thousand years ago, outdated and disconnected from contemporary life.” Someone holding such a view may find it difficult to connect with the text and gain benefit. To better appreciate the society and culture of that era, it is helpful to imagine ourselves in Confucius's time. Only then can we uncover the deeper layers of meaning within these teachings. This approach resembles immersing oneself in a historical period while watching a television series.

I rarely watch television series myself. However, I know some Buddhists who greatly enjoy films and shows. If asked to memorize

a treatise, they might find it challenging. Completing the five hundred thousand preliminary practices can feel daunting. Yet when it comes to a television series, no matter how many episodes, they engage with unwavering focus—sometimes forgoing meals, rest, or sleep until the story concludes. If that same dedication were directed toward Dharma practice, even without attaining full enlightenment, one would likely make considerable spiritual strides in this lifetime.

After watching several Tibetan historical dramas, I often find them unsettling—they rarely offer a true reflection of Tibetan history or culture. As a Tibetan familiar with our daily life and traditions, I notice that both local and international directors miss many of the subtle details. For this reason, I stopped watching these dramas, as they do not capture the spirit of the Tibetan people or the essence of Tibetan Buddhism.

Consider Han culture, for instance. While I do not claim deep expertise, when I watch historical dramas from Han regions, I make an effort to immerse myself in the depicted era. I observe the attire, language, and behaviors across different social classes. During my student days, I read classics like *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*.⁶¹ To engage fully, I would first adopt the mindset of that time, thinking, “I am now living as a person of that era.”

This presence enhanced my experience. Likewise, this immersive approach is essential when we study *The Classic of Filial Piety*.

CHAPTER NINE: SAGELY GOVERNING

In Buddhism, a “sage” or “saint” typically denotes Bodhisattvas who have attained the bhumis,⁶² or stages of spiritual development. Here, however, the term refers to saintly figures venerated by Confucius as exemplars of virtue, such as the Duke of Zhou⁶³ and King Wen of Zhou.⁶⁴ Such sages-like individuals excelled in all facets of life—governing nations, benefiting the populace, managing households, and fulfilling their duties of filial piety. This chapter focuses primarily on how such sages applied filial piety in national governance and family management. The chapter unfolds in a question-and-answer format, similar to previous ones.

The Supreme Virtue Embodied by the Duke of Zhou

Zeng Zi asked, “May I presume to ask, is there any virtue of the sages that surpasses filial piety?”

The phrase “May I presume to ask” reflects a tone of humble respect. As a disciple, Zeng Zi inquired of Confucius whether, among the sages’ myriad virtues, any exceeded filial piety. In essence, he

wondered if filial piety stood as the paramount virtue among the sages' boundless qualities, the one most deserving of emulation.

The dialogue between these two wise individuals, Confucius and Zeng Zi, may not have garnered widespread acclaim in their era, yet it yields lasting value and speaks across the ages. I have observed in numerous biographies that such pattern appears frequently in the lives of great thinkers, especially spiritual masters: their deepest contributions often receive limited recognition during their lifetimes.

There are several possible factors. The presence of a sage or a great master can sometimes stir envy or misunderstanding, leading to challenges or obstacles, such as slander. Moreover, contemporaries may lack the necessary foresight to grasp the profound value of such wisdom fully. Thus, it is frequently only after their time that their wisdom and enduring legacy come to be fully recognized and appreciated.

This chapter begins with a pivotal question. Such dialogic structures are not unique to Confucianism; they also appear in Buddhist sutras. Many sutras begin with essential inquiries from eminent disciples, such as Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Subhuti, or Manjushri

Bodhisattva, followed by the Buddha's responses. These exchanges evolve into cherished teachings from enlightened beings.

Confucius replied, "Of all the beings in heaven and on earth, humans are the most precious."

Zeng Zi asked: "Is filial piety the foremost among the sages' virtues?" Confucius responded, in part, that in the entire cosmos, among all things in heaven and on earth—which, in Buddhist terms, encompass the inanimate universe and sentient beings—humans hold the highest nobility. Zeng Zi's query invites reflection. How might each of us answer? From a Buddhist perspective, if asked, "Among the teachings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, is filial piety supreme?" what response would we offer?

Some might interpret Confucius's words as suggesting that humans are the spiritual essence of all things and the rulers of nature, thereby justifying the power to dominate or even eradicate other species. This reading, however, misses the mark. Human nobility does not arise from weaponry, technology, or domination. It stems from our altruistic spirit and our distinctive capacities—to reason, to create, and to guide—which bring about momentary well-being and, ultimately, liberation. As *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* observes, even the most unlearned human can recite mantras, such as that

of Avalokiteshvara. Yet no matter how clever an animal seems, it cannot utter a single syllable of that mantra. An animal, even facing death from cold, can only huddle in suffering, unable to gather wood or build a fire.⁶⁵

Certain faiths posit that animals are created for human consumption, fostering the notion that their slaughter is permissible. Yet this overlooks the reality that all sentient beings possess consciousness and experience joy and pain alike. If one views humans as nature's overlords and animals as mere sustenance, reflect on this: upon death and rebirth as an animal, one's own form becomes fodder for another. This is the inescapable principle of causality. Such cycles of retribution will continue endlessly unless we act differently.

In our time, some, including a few academics in universities, question, "Is taking life inherently wrong?" Such matters require no research or debate. Basic wisdom affirms the immense value of all life, including human and animal. To still question this only reveals the limitation of our knowledge. We should care for all beings in the world with a compassionate heart. This is a fundamental human virtue and does not require scholarly validation. When Confucius declared humans "the most precious," he did not endorse unchecked harm to other beings.

Some contend that taking life is unproblematic, while releasing animals is misguided, arguing, “Purchasing creatures for release merely bolsters the seller’s trade, rendering the act unwholesome.” While ill-considered and poorly managed releases can potentially disrupt ecosystems, mindful practice—infrequent and modest in scale—avoids such issues and incurs no harm. The notion of inflating trade overlooks the far greater demand from routine meat consumption. Three meat-based meals daily sustain the industry far more than occasional releases. Meat-eating not only ends lives but also fuels the meat production cycle. In addition, according to the perspective of *The Lankavatara Sutra*, eating meat incurs the same fault as taking a life. The faults of meat consumption are also expounded in other scriptures, such as the *Surangama Sutra* and *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*.

Reaping What We Sow

While it is true that humans surpass animals in intelligence, capacity, and many other attributes, if this awareness leads to a sense of superiority, spurring heedless killing and destruction, repercussions inevitably follow. Our era is witnessing an escalation of natural and human-induced calamities, tied to the accumulated negative karma that humanity continues to generate. Past generations consumed animals, but never at today’s vast scale—a global phenomenon

unbound by borders. During travels to the United States, Northern Europe, and Africa, I inquired the locals about their past seafood habits. Responses indicated a shift: “We did not eat so much seafood in the past, but modern transport and global trade bring anything to our tables.” In earlier times, inland communities mostly ate cattle and sheep, and rarely seafood. Today, seafood is everywhere. That accessibility prompts reflection: How many lives sustain a single seafood meal?

Due to widespread killing, the world is now facing unprecedented disasters. While some may contend that such reasoning lacks scientific evidence, it is in fact based on the universal law of cause and effect: wholesome actions lead to positive outcomes, unwholesome actions to suffering. This law transcends philosophy or religion. Marshal Chen Yi once stated: “Good deeds are met with good returns, and bad deeds with bad returns. It is not that there are no returns, but that the time has not yet come.”

Compared with the past, today humanity engages in far fewer virtuous actions and far more harmful ones. Although numerous skillful means for cultivating virtue exist now, people are constantly consumed by greed, hatred, and ignorance. Distracted and confused, they rarely pause to do good. Twenty or thirty years ago, many Dharma practitioners in Tibetan areas were deeply dedicated. Today,

even practitioners I know personally have regressed, distracted by cell phones and the internet.

The primary text here is open to various interpretations. If we misinterpret it to mean that “humans are rulers of all things,” and use that as license for harming and killing other species, how will we ever bear the karmic consequences? In the past, people lived in single-story homes, then in ten-story buildings, now in towers of twenty and thirty stories. In many places today, skyscrapers continue to grow. As structures ascend, has our virtue risen along with them? If our inner quality has dwindled, both scholars and Buddhist practitioners need to contemplate carefully: Are we really progressing or regressing?

Some believe that the erosion of traditional culture or personal virtue does not matter, so long as material prosperity increases. This is a grave mistake. Without integrity, compassion, and conscience, even great wealth cannot yield true happiness—neither for individuals nor for society. It is crucial to reflect deeply on this point.

“In human conduct, nothing is more important than filial piety. In filial piety, nothing is more important than revering one’s father. In revering one’s father, nothing is more important

than matching him with Heaven. The Duke of Zhou embodied this.

Among all human virtues, filial piety is the most fundamental. Within filial piety, its highest expression lies in revering one's father. The supreme form of this reverence is to "match him with Heaven." This phrase refers to conducting rituals and offerings after a father's passing, assisting the rituals to Heaven in accordance with divine will and established rites. In essence, the text teaches that true reverence for one's father includes upholding ancestral rituals, honoring his teachings, and carrying forward his legacy. The Duke of Zhou is presented as a model of this practice. Whether honoring his father, King Wen of Zhou, or the other ancestors of the Zhou lineage, the Duke of Zhou fulfilled ceremonial duty with the utmost perfection.

The ancients cared not only for their parents' well-being in this life but also for their welfare in future lives. In this regard, some Buddhist practices are similar to those in the Confucian tradition. Many Buddhists show deep respect and care for their parents while they are alive. After their parents pass away, they request the sangha to perform recitations, and years later, they continue to perform virtuous deeds, dedicating merit to them.

Just as secular society commemorates the deaths of those who made great contributions—through monuments and annual memorials—Buddhism also has its commemorative traditions. The Buddhist rituals differ from those of Confucianism. Generally, when a great Buddhist master passes into nirvana, devoted disciples perform annual memorial pujas to express gratitude and reverence. For example, the Dharma assembly held in memory of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche provides an opportunity for us to honor and remember him.

It is therefore crucial that we refrain from casually dismissing ancient traditions as mere outdated superstitions. A prevailing sentiment, particularly among contemporary youth, suggests that traditional culture has no place in the twenty-first century. This present-centric perspective fails to acknowledge the enduring value of the past. Lacking diligent study or thoughtful contemplation, some readily reject concepts that do not immediately conform to modern sensibilities—an approach that often indicates a deficit in wisdom and experiential understanding. For example, certain aspects of filial piety may initially seem unfamiliar or even incongruous with present-day values. Yet, their divergence from our current thought patterns should not lead to an immediate conclusion of

irrationality. Many traditional concepts, in fact, embody a profound rationality that awaits deeper understanding.

Based on my observations of Western people, their life philosophies often differ greatly from those of Eastern cultures, yet such differences are no reason for rejection. Similarly, dismissing Western ideas from an Eastern standpoint does not prove Eastern culture universally correct. Much of our modern education is already shaped by Western paradigms. Whether Western culture benefits or harms the East can only be judged over time.

To summarize: among all beings in heaven and on earth, human beings are most significant. Among all human virtues, filial piety is supreme. Within filial piety, the most important expression is honoring one's father. And the highest form of this reverence is "matching him with Heaven," which is subject to various interpretations, but primarily means commemorating the father's spirit and carrying forward his legacy.

The tradition of commemorating important figures is not confined to ancient culture or religion; it remains widespread today. For instance, the two-hundredth anniversary of Karl Marx's birth was marked by commemorative events worldwide. Yet one might ask: If death were truly the end—if the soul vanished like a flame

extinguished—what meaning would there be in offering bows or laying wreaths at a grave? Many deny past and future lives as well as consciousness' continuity, yet still burn paper money or place flowers at the graves of loved ones, as though in veneration of their spirits. A professor once remarked, "We do not acknowledge heaven, but we do acknowledge ghosts," subsequently sharing several stories about the Qingming Festival.⁶⁶ Such contradictions reveal how humans often live with both doubt and belief.

Upon reflection, the wisdom of a living spiritual master merits deep regard. More importantly, after their passing, it becomes our sacred duty to cherish, preserve, and transmit their teachings. By this coming winter, fifteen years will have passed since the departure of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Though his physical form is gone, his wisdom and spirit remain ever present—they continue to live vibrantly in his Dharma instructions, such as *Always Present* and *Always Remembering*.

"In ancient times, the Duke of Zhou offered suburban rituals to Hou Ji to assist the ritual to Heaven; he performed ancestral ritual offerings to King Wen in the Bright Hall to assist the ritual to the Five Celestial Emperors.

In ancient times, the Duke of Zhou performed the suburban ritual at the circular altar located on the outskirts of the capital, a rite honoring Hou Ji, the ancestral founder of the Zhou lineage, accompanying the rituals to Heaven. It was carried out in a manner pleasing to the deities and in accordance with proper custom. Separately, in the Bright Hall, the Duke of Zhou performed ancestral rituals to his father, King Wen of Zhou, a ritual intended to support the offerings made to the Five Celestial Emperors (of the East, South, West, North, and Center). The names of the Five Celestial Emperors are closely related to their respective directional attributes and other cosmological factors.

The Duke of Zhou, the son of King Wen of Zhou and the younger brother of King Wu, played a pivotal role in early Zhou history. Legend holds that King Wen fathered one hundred sons, though only eighteen are historically documented. After King Wu overthrew the Shang Dynasty, he passed away soon after establishing the Zhou Dynasty. The throne then passed to his young son, King Cheng of Zhou. At that time, the Duke of Zhou did not seize the opportunity to usurp the throne. Instead, he helped suppress rebellions and stabilize the Zhou dynasty's rule. When King Cheng came of age, the Duke of Zhou respectfully transferred power to him.

During this period, the Duke of Zhou practiced filial piety by performing exemplary memorial rites for his ancestors, especially for his father. Despite his capability to rule, he never appropriated power for personal gain. Rather, he governed on behalf of his nephew, King Cheng, and performed numerous good deeds for the people. *The Rites of Zhou*⁶⁷ is attributed to him. Although he was not the dynasty's founder, he was nonetheless a pivotal figure during that time. Confucius, therefore, revered the Duke of Zhou as his highest role model. The sages referenced in the original text almost exclusively refer to the Duke of Zhou. Confucius commented, "The Duke of Zhou embodied this." It means the Duke of Zhou fully embodied the principles of filial duty through performing memorial rites for his ancestors with utmost perfection.

We have learned that filial piety includes not only respectfully serving one's parents while they are alive but also performing memorial rites with sincerity after their passing. More importantly, it also means valuing these rituals and their legacy. Yet some children today neglect living parents, converging only at death's edge—not for solace, but inheritance. Such behavior causes parents grief and prevents them from passing peacefully. Ill in isolation, they face final moments amid division. Feeling heartbroken, some

parents choose to donate their property to charities or caring persons around instead of leaving it to ungrateful children.

In Buddhism, filial piety extends beyond parents to one's spiritual teacher. To be filial toward a guru means to diligently follow their guidance during their lifetime and, after their departure, to uphold and propagate their wisdom and compassion. This unwavering devotion represents deepest reverence toward the guru and lineage, and is considered the supreme way to repay their kindness and demonstrate ultimate filial piety. His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once said, "The only way to repay the guru's immense kindness is by benefiting sentient beings." Thus, those who sincerely wish to repay their guru's kindness are called to take immediate and sustained action to benefit all beings.

"Therefore, within the four seas, all residents participated in the rituals according to their social classes.

Following the Duke of Zhou's example of performing rituals for ancestors, people from across the realm participated in memorial activities according to their social status. From ancient times to the present, people have always valued rank and position. Today, rank is largely measured by money and power: a director's salary exceeds that of a deputy director, and so on. This is true in both East

and West. Ancient societal norms often mandated that individuals worship in ways befitting their social position. Participation in the emperor's sacrificial rituals, for instance, was strictly limited to those of a designated status. The prerequisites for such involvement extended beyond mere wealth and power; virtue was frequently considered an indispensable qualification. This historical precedent suggests that a person's true value lies not in possessions or status but in character and moral integrity.

What Is True Equality?

The Western idea of equality is often embraced by young people returning from their studies abroad, leading them to declare, "All are equal—I am equal to my parents, and I am equal to my teachers." But in reality, true equality in every sense is impossible. People differ in age, wisdom, ability, and merit. For example, when I was in middle school, nearly twenty students applied to the normal school in our region, but only three passed. This clearly reflected unequal merit and ability.

While certain aspects of Western culture, such as the ideals of democracy and equality, offer much value, generalizing them without discernment can be problematic. To insist on absolute equality

with parents or teachers overlooks the natural disparities in experience, wisdom, and even economic standing. Consider also that Western university professors often earn substantial salaries, while students must pay significant tuition. Is that full equality?

Therefore, equality is not absolute but shaped by specific contexts. Our understanding of it can be limited sometimes. To truly comprehend equality, we must recognize the fundamental equality of all life: the shared capacity of sentient beings to experience happiness and suffering. Both humans and animals fear death and feel pain when harmed. Yet this deeper perspective on equality is largely absent from conventional education systems—precisely where a sound understanding of equality is most crucial. Embracing this broader view prompts us to reconsider the true meaning of the phrase “humans are the most precious,” urging us to reflect on our responsibilities rather than assume superiority.

From an administrative perspective, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok emphasized the necessity of upholding three forms of equality within our academy.⁶⁸ However, from an individual perspective, differences due to various karmic conditions—such as health, appearance, and life experience—always exist. For instance, in listening to this very lecture, some may experience joy while others may feel impatience, each according to their own karmic conditions.

Some individuals, lacking the necessary merit, might not have the opportunity to attend even a single session of Dharma teaching, while others are able to receive the complete teachings.

The Root of Benevolent Governance

“Of the sages’ virtues, what can surpass filial piety? Therefore, love for parents should begin in early childhood; as children are nurtured by their parents and take proper care of them, the veneration grows with each passing day.

No virtue of the sages surpasses filial piety, which embodies both wisdom and compassion. A child’s reverence for their parents should be cultivated early, when they are still small enough to reach only to their parents’ knees. As they grow and receive more guidance, their love and respect increase day by day.

Modern educators agree that the years before age seven are a crucial stage. A mother is often a child’s most important teacher. If she is compassionate, her child will learn love. Yet many children today are pressured during this golden stage to develop skills such as languages, music, or art, while receiving little education in virtues like love and altruism. As the text suggests, young children must first learn to cultivate virtue and avoid selfishness.

Unfortunately, many parents overindulge their children. When denied anything they want, a child may cry loudly, and the parents immediately yield: “Do not cry, I will buy it for you.” Such habits foster weakness and resentment when the children’s expectations are unmet. Later in life, when the world refuses to accommodate them, they may revert to the same behavior—crying or acting out. By then, however, their parents are no longer there to intervene, and their distress only deepens. Therefore, parents need to adopt a more balanced and appropriate approach to showing love. Excessive indulgence ultimately harms children, and this is something all parents should reflect on.

“The sage taught reverence through respect toward the father, and taught love through affection toward the mother. The sage’s teaching succeeded without severity; their governance ruled without harshness, because their teaching lay at the very root—the fundamental virtue of filial piety.

The sages aligned with children’s natural reverence for their fathers to teach respect and with their natural affection for their mothers to teach love. In other words, by virtue of the respect for their fathers and the love for their mothers, the sages embodied their fathers’ wisdom and their mothers’ compassion. While possessing wisdom

and compassion themselves, they also imparted these qualities to others.

The sages did not carry out their teaching or enforce instruction through harsh punishment, such as death penalties, beheadings, or amputations. Instead, they governed through virtue, relying on moral conduct to educate the populace. Because they valued the most fundamental virtue—filial piety—they were able to lead effectively without coercion. If love and compassion could be cultivated in families and schools, allowing children to receive such education from an early age, then managing households and governing states would be much easier. Without such a foundation, governance through cruel punishment often fails and may even backfire.

In ancient times, some countries, including those in Africa, practiced brutal punishments, such as beheading, burning, water torture, and flogging. Today, under globalization and international oversight, conditions are somewhat better. Yet, even now, many governments still rely on force when unrest arises. The sages, however, governed through love, not fear.

Dharma-Based Management

In our Buddhist communities, Dharma-based management has proven remarkably effective. At Larung Gar, for example, thousands of people live together in harmony. Without the foundation of love and compassion rooted in Mahayana teachings, managing such a large community would be nearly impossible. It is the community's commitment to Mahayana principles that fosters self-discipline, making external laws or armed law enforcement largely unnecessary.

Of course, disputes can still arise, even in Buddhist communities—especially among lay practitioners. However, for groups with deep faith, self-discipline, awareness, and mindfulness, governance operates “without harshness.” No community is perfect, but those guided by Mahayana Buddhist values are generally easier to manage than those lacking moral grounding or adhering to extreme beliefs. This observation holds worldwide. Successful management is not based on coercion, but rather on cultivating self-discipline and compassion. For instance, in the schools I founded, many teachers care so deeply for their students that they are moved to tears when discussing their well-being. This kind of devotion fosters harmony more effectively than any set of rules ever could.

When volunteers at Larung Gar act disobediently, the most suitable management approach is to offer gentle guidance and reasoned explanations. In governance, reasoning is often found to be more effective than punishment. Some companies, by contrast, rely solely on punitive measures, enforcing countless disciplinary policies—such as deducting three yuan from an hourly wage for arriving just three minutes late.

In fact, the practice of creating detailed rules and regulations was learned from the West. Traditionally, the East emphasized morality as a guiding norm, while the West relied on legal standards. Today, Eastern societies have also adopted various written rules and regulations. While such rules are necessary for some, the essence of effective management lies in fostering a peaceful and respectful mindset toward everyone, regardless of their position or role. I believe this is the best method of management.

On that note, I would like to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to our dedicated team of volunteers. We have worked together for over two decades. Though we occasionally disagree on the management and regulations of the Han College, many of our Dharma practitioners embody strong moral principles and self-restraint, requiring little external enforcement. Such virtuous qualities are invaluable—especially for Buddhists.

“The proper way between father and son is a natural propensity that, by extension, becomes the appropriate relationship between ruler and minister.

Parents love their children with compassion, and children, in turn, respect and honor their parents. This is not only a reflection of human nature but also of the natural order. The relationship between parents and children serves as a model for the principles of propriety that should exist between rulers and their ministers.

However, in today’s society, many people no longer adhere to these principles. In Western countries, for example, the traditional “way of father and son” has largely faded, replaced by a strong emphasis on equality between parents and children. Yet, even in these societies, true equality is not fully realized in the relationship between rulers and those they govern. For instance, the President and the Senate do not share equal power, nor do the Senate and the House of Representatives, or regional leaders and ordinary citizens. Thus, even in the most democratic nations, complete equality remains unattainable. Whether in the East or the West, those who show reverence and respect for their parents are more likely to respect their leaders. Likewise, leaders should treat their subordinates with care and compassion.

Our relationships with both our parents and our leaders play vital roles in our lives. Unfortunately, many children today are not taught to respect their parents from a young age. Some even see hitting their parents as normal behavior, starting before they can even stand steadily. This is a troubling trend. I have witnessed very young children, when denied a toy or a phone—children today are so attached to cell phones—begin to hit their parents out of frustration. If such habits persist, these children may grow up to direct their aggression toward their leaders, resulting in potential dismissal. Therefore, understanding and practicing the principle of propriety between ruler and minister is essential. Whether in a nation, where the ruler is crucial, or in a company, where the chairman is key, the primary leader in any group plays a vital role. Failing to respect and comply with them often leads to unfavorable outcomes.

It is truly meaningful for parents to love their children, and for children to respond with respect. Similarly, leaders should care for their subordinates, while subordinates should respect their leaders. We cannot adopt an attitude of, “Why should I listen to him? What does he know?” Such disrespect toward management rarely yields positive results. If we are not in leadership roles and

continually harbor dissatisfaction toward those who are, it only leads to frustration.

“Your parents gave birth to you, and nothing is greater than continuity.

Parents give birth to children, enabling them to procreate and thereby continue the family lineage. This continuity is considered of utmost importance, especially in Chinese culture, where the perpetuation of the family lineage is regarded as a central duty. *The Precious Mirror of the Lotus School at Mount Lu* states that there are two types of filial piety: that of lay practitioners and that of monastics. For laypeople, filial piety is commonly understood as caring for and honoring one’s parents. For monastics, filial piety means diligently practicing the Dharma and guiding one’s parents onto the right path—thus “continue the lineage” in a spiritual sense. Of course, not everyone agrees with this perspective, and some families may even feel uncomfortable or embarrassed if a member chooses the monastic path.

To Bear Children or Not

A quiet revolution is taking place in modern society: many young people are increasingly opting out of traditional family structures.

While this is not a formal renunciation of worldly life, the decision to forgo marriage and children resembles a kind of secular monasticism, especially in its implications for procreation. This trend is reflected in national statistics, with experts noting declining marriage and birth rates alongside rising divorce rates and aging population. One major reason appears to be a reluctance among younger generations to take on the financial and emotional responsibilities of starting a family—choices that often run counter to the expectations of their elders.

For many elders, continuing the family line remains a deeply ingrained value. Yet, the younger generation seems largely unmoved by such traditional pressures, showing a growing unwillingness to marry and have children. This generational divide becomes especially apparent during family gatherings around the Chinese New Year. Many young adults admit to dreading these occasions, anticipating relentless questioning from relatives about their relationship status. Some even go so far as to rent a partner to appease their parents. One cannot help but wonder what the future holds if this trend continues.

China's demographic policy has shifted dramatically—from strictly enforcing the one-child policy to now actively encouraging births. I have heard that some provinces and cities offer incentives to

boost childbirth, with formula companies even partnering with local governments to provide free formula for each newborn. Yet, for those truly uninterested in having children, a few packages of formula are unlikely to change their minds.

As monastics, we generally do not involve ourselves in such worldly matters, but these social issues are certainly worth reflecting upon. If more young people choose not to have children—even without formally renouncing worldly life—they are, in effect, living like renunciants, forgoing marriage and family. In the future, both monastics and this group of laypeople may find themselves, perhaps unfairly, blamed for the declining birth rate and aging population. Globally, the issue of population aging is becoming increasingly severe, particularly in regions such as Europe and Japan. Humanity now faces unprecedented challenges, and it is not always clear how to address them.

Now, turning to our main topic, *The Classic of Filial Piety*. We Tibetans have a saying: “Speech without lineage transmission is unreliable; a disciple without a guru will not attain realization.” Unlike Buddhist texts, which are typically passed down through an unbroken lineage of oral transmission, I have not received a transmission of this classic from my guru. Furthermore, there is no Tibetan translation of this text, which, if available, would certainly

aid understanding. Therefore, my interpretation relies entirely on my own study and reflection. I realize that, for experts in the field, my teaching may seem like “displaying one’s slight skill before a master.” However, I trust that they are not present today, so it should be fine. (Audience laughing)

Although there are many commentaries on this classic, and I have consulted several, my lectures present my personal understanding. I humbly acknowledge that my interpretation may not be definitive. I encourage you to use your own discernment and accept what resonates as reasonable. If your wisdom leads you to deeper insights, I would be most grateful if you would share them. Please keep in mind that certain passages, including this one, are open to various interpretations. Due to time constraints, my preparation for this session was not as thorough as I would have liked. I sincerely apologize if my interpretation inadvertently diverges from Confucius’s original intent.

Lecture Ten

August 2, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

In the previous session, we examined the first half of Chapter Nine, “Sagely Governing,” focusing on how the Duke of Zhou applied filial piety in both governing the state and managing family affairs. That discussion underscored the supreme value of filial piety: among all living beings, human life is the most precious, and among all virtues, filial piety is the most important. Its highest expression lies in honoring one’s father, with the deepest reverence demonstrated through ritual offerings after his passing.

We also considered filial piety in a broader sense, extending beyond immediate practice to long-term cultivation. It is essential to nurture filial devotion in children from an early age, guiding them to emulate their father’s wisdom and their mother’s compassion. Such cultivation allows compassion to permeate family and society, enabling governance that requires no violent measures. Ultimately, the bond between father and child is presented as a natural law, serving as a model for the ideal relationship between ruler and minister.

Filial piety entails caring for and respectfully serving one's parents during their lifetime, and remembering them after their passing. From a Buddhist perspective, this remembrance often includes chanting prayers or requesting monastics to perform recitations for their benefit. The Tibetan tradition offers a vivid example: even decades after their parents' death, children still continue to make offerings—sometimes as little as five or ten yuan—whenever they meet a great master or attend a Dharma assembly. They write their parents' names on slips of paper, present them to the monastery, and ask the sangha to recite prayers and dedicate merit to their parents. I encourage everyone to adopt this practice. For instance, during future pilgrimages or monastery visits, we can request prayers and dedicate merit not only to all sentient beings but especially to our parents, for such dedication is of great benefit.

Many Buddhists frequently ask lamas and tulkus to perform divination to determine which prayers will be most beneficial. In reality, divination is not necessary for this purpose. For the deceased, you can recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra, the Amitabha mantra, or other suitable prayers. For the living, I recommend chanting the Guru Rinpoche mantra and *The Medicine Buddha Sutra*.

Overreliance on divination often arises from a misunderstanding of Buddhism, particularly among those who have not engaged

in systematic study. Some mistakenly view Buddhism as a system of divination or fortune-telling. I have noticed this tendency even among some female practitioners. As demand for divination grows, individuals with little knowledge of the practice may find themselves pressured into acting as “fortune-tellers,” which raises concerns about the accuracy and reliability of their readings. Ultimately, I believe that virtuous actions should be guided by one’s own wisdom, rather than interpretations from oracles.

CHAPTER NINE: SAGELY GOVERNING (CONTINUED)

Danger of Perverse Virtue and False Propriety

“In both parent-child and subordinate-supervisor relationships, nothing is more important than filial respect.

The relationship between parents and children has two dimensions. On a social level, it resembles the dynamic between a ruler and a minister. More fundamentally, however, it is a relationship of blood. First, parents are like rulers, and children are like ministers; children should respect their parents just as ministers must respect their monarchs. Yet, in today’s world—perhaps influenced by Western ideals of equality—there seems to be a diminishing sense of reverence in many relationships, such as those between children and parents, students and teachers, patients and doctors, and others.

Second, there is the blood relationship. To describe the parent-child bond merely as that between a king and his ministers is insufficient,

for there is an extraordinarily intimate connection of flesh and blood. Children are literally the continuation of their parents. Thus, honoring one's parents is of utmost importance. Yet, some people take their parents' kindness for granted, even after recognizing its immense value. More regrettably, some, perhaps due to ignorance or the ripening of negative karma, use a poor parental relationship as an excuse to abandon filial care altogether.

Relationships in samsara are impermanent and transient. I recently read a news report about a village in Hunan province where over a hundred people could recall their past lives. Among them is a young girl whose daughter from her previous life is now older than her. After being reborn into another family and retaining her memories, she sought out her former daughter. They then met and confirmed their connection. Even though she is now younger, her daughter still calls her "Mom." Many find this extraordinary, but it illustrates the formidable nature of samsara. *The Tantra of Subahu's Questions* also teaches that relatives can become enemies, and enemies can become relatives.

Despite the impermanence of relationships, even if our relationship with our parents in this life is difficult—due to divorce, abandonment, or unresolved karmic ties—we should not treat them as enemies or neglect them. Our very existence is a testament to their

immense kindness. Without our parents, we would not have come into this world, nor could we have grown up and enjoyed the life we have today. *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* explains that parents raise us with the greatest possible kindness, protecting us with immense love and offering us the best of what they have.⁶⁹ I sincerely hope that we can all practice filial piety towards our parents. Regardless of how they treat us, we, as their children, must always maintain a heart of profound reverence and gratitude. Respecting and being grateful to parents are virtues of the highest importance.

“Therefore, those who do not love their own parents, but love others, are said to have perverse virtue; those who do not respect their own parents, but respect others, are said to have perverse propriety.

It is regrettable that certain young adults genuinely dislike their own parents, yet prefer to associate with questionable individuals. Such behavior is rare but deeply concerning. By all rights, children should treat their parents with gratitude, respect, and deep affection. To love strangers while neglecting one’s own parents is a deviation from fundamental morality and shows a lack of filial piety.

The Fundamental Morality of Respecting One's Parents

A story from *The Storehouse of Sundry Valuables* illustrates the severe karmic consequences of violating fundamental moral principles, particularly the duty of filial piety. In ancient times, there was a woman who harbored intense hatred toward her mother-in-law. Across Tibetan, Han, and Western societies, the relationship between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law is highly valued. Some daughters-in-law treat their husbands' parents as if they were their own, showing exceptional kindness. However, the woman in this story not only had a terrible relationship with her mother-in-law—she even pressured her husband to murder his own mother.

Foolishly, the husband agreed. He took his mother to a remote wilderness, tied her up, and prepared to kill her. Because his action violated his conscience, at that very moment, the sky suddenly became overcast with dark clouds, and a thunderbolt struck, killing him instantly. The mother managed to free herself and walked home. When she knocked on the door, the wife, assuming her husband had returned after killing his mother, asked, "Is it done?" The mother replied, "It is done!"

In this story, the husband failed to show love or respect for his mother and, blinded by excessive attachment to his wife, attempted

to murder his own parent. As a result, he experienced immediate retribution by being struck dead by lightning. Even more alarming is that this sutra recounts how, after his death, he descended into hell and endured unimaginable suffering. This story teaches that love must be guided by wisdom and moral discernment; we should never compromise our conscience or ethical principles in the name of love.

The phrase “[t]hose who do not respect their own parents but respect others” refers to people who treat their parents with neither respect nor care. Such individuals tend to disregard and dismiss everything their parents say, yet are quick to listen and defer to outsiders. Such behavior violates the most basic etiquette. It reminds me of some individuals who are submissive to their superiors at work but domineering toward their parents at home.

A person’s words and actions reveal their character and conscience. A key measure of character is how people treat their parents, who are traditionally the most deserving of our reverence. A conscientious person instinctively cares for their parents. Someone who disrespects their parents cannot possibly respect others, including leaders or spiritual teachers; any show of respect is likely insincere and self-serving. The principle of filial piety is so essential that it is also reinforced in Buddhist texts. For example, sutras like the

Ullambana Sutra describe the profound importance and benefits of repaying parental kindness. Likewise, monastics—who typically do not provide offerings or prostrations to laypeople—are expressly permitted to care for, prostrate to, and financially support their own parents in certain situations.

Last year, I shared a cautionary message with parents whose children were studying abroad. While some students return with broader perspectives and greater respect for their parents, others, after years of parental sacrifice, come back more critical and disrespectful, influenced by excessive individualism and unwilling to care for their aging parents.

When teaching *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*, I shared the story of “Yuan Gu Urges His Father,” which highlights the importance of filial piety. In this tale, Yuan Gu’s parents, disdainful of their elderly father, decided to abandon him. Yuan Gu pleaded with his father not to commit such an immoral act, but his father ignored him. He built a handcart, took the grandfather into the wilderness, and left him there. Yuan Gu, refusing to accept this injustice, brought the cart back home. When his father asked why, Yuan Gu calmly replied, “When you grow old, I will not need to build a new one—I will already have this one ready.” Ashamed and

remorseful, the father realized his error, brought the grandfather home, and cared for him from then on.

Regardless of its historical accuracy, this story prompts us to reflect: If we do not show filial respect to our own parents, how can we expect our children to respect us in turn? Filial piety is not just a cultural tradition, but a fundamental moral principle aligned with natural law.

Disciples Should Respect Their Gurus

While respect for parents is foundational, it is equally—if not more—crucial to honor our teachers and spiritual masters. This principle holds true even for those shaped by modern ideals of equality. Master Tsongkhapa, in his authoritative work, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, emphasized the severe karmic consequences of disrespecting one's guru. He cited a scriptural teaching: if one fails to regard a Dharma teacher—even for a single four-line stanza taught—as a guru, they will be reborn as a vicious dog for a hundred lifetimes. Even after taking rebirth as human beings, they will endure a pitiable existence, perhaps afflicted with a hunchback.

Therefore, I earnestly urge you: never, under any circumstances, slander the guru or Dharma teacher from whom you have received

Dharma teachings. The immutable law of cause and effect ensures negative consequences for such a hideous act. Unfortunately, a troubling trend has emerged: some individuals, after years of relying on a great master, begin to publicly criticize their teacher's perceived faults. Regardless of the claims' validity, the act of a disciple widely publicizing a guru's shortcomings is itself a serious transgression. Such an act is especially evident in the West—in certain cases, practitioners even denounce their gurus after decades of devotion and receipt of countless tantric instructions.

When such situations arise, it is incumbent on us as Buddhists to first examine the actions of the disciples. Khenpo Ngawang Palzang, in his *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, taught that a disciple with unwavering faith in their guru must not harbor wrong views, even if they witness the guru engaging in seemingly questionable actions, such as associating with a hundred women or slaughtering a hundred yaks.⁷⁰ For a truly devoted disciple, such negative perceptions simply do not arise.

However, when disciples accuse their guru of wrongdoing, many people today focus on scrutinizing the guru rather than the disciple. Perhaps the guru does have certain shortcomings, but we should understand that even the omniscient Longchenpa was expelled from his monastery due to the shallow merit of beings, and the

Sixth Patriarch Huineng was pursued by assassins. Were they truly at fault? Obviously not. When everyone criticizes someone, that person may not be as depicted—hidden circumstances often exist. As I once posted on Weibo: “When you succeed, everyone praises you, but you may not be that good; when you fail, everyone despises you, but you may not be that bad.”

A significant number of people lack independent views and simply echo popular sentiment, which can shift drastically. When former South Korean President Park Geun-hye was elected, tens of thousands cheered her. A couple of years later, when she was imprisoned, the same crowds rejoiced, exclaiming, “Ah! She has finally stepped down!”

When certain negative or positive events unfold in the Buddhist world, some may lament, “Even such a great master has been involved in scandal—this must be a sign of the degenerate age.” Others might claim, “So-and-so master is the embodiment of all virtues; he is the very future of the Dharma, and all our hopes rest upon him.” Both views are exaggerated and lack sound reasoning. The actions of a single individual cannot determine the rise or decline of the Dharma. Its enduring vitality is far too profound to depend on one person. Even figures as exalted as Guru Padmasambhava (often revered as the Second Buddha) and Vasubandhu could

not, on their own, shape the entire course of Buddhism after the Buddha's parinirvana.

Consider a practical analogy: every nation has corrupt officials, but the misconduct of a few—or even thousands—does not invalidate the entire system of government. Similarly, the transgressions of some individuals do not undermine the integrity of the Dharma itself. I offer these thoughts not to criticize or defend anyone, but simply as my personal perspective, and I welcome your own analysis.

In summary, for a disciple, respecting one's guru is of paramount importance. For those who do not accept the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, including the law of cause and effect, my views can be analyzed through other philosophies. Here, from a Buddhist perspective—whether Sutrayana or Tantrayana, Han or Tibetan Buddhism—there is consensus that disciples must embody proper characteristics and conduct, with reverence for spiritual teachers as fundamental. As the saying goes, "A teacher for a day is a father for life." Steadfast reverence for parents and gurus is a basic principle of human behavior, and neglecting it constitutes a significant breach of proper conduct.

“To gain the people’s obedience, education rooted in such perversity would be counterproductive, leaving them without any standards.

A ruler who attempts to govern or educate through immoral or unethical means will find their efforts counterproductive and their authority undermined. When a leader strays from fundamental human principles, the populace loses the model for emulation, resulting in a lack of standards and disorder. For instance, if a ruler cannot even practice filial piety toward their own parents and fails to set a good example, they cannot expect obedience from their subjects. Without public support, none of their initiatives will succeed. Education is paramount, and its success hinges on educators—including leaders—setting an unimpeachable example. Only through such integrity can education flourish and governance be effective.

“Individuals who never engage in virtuous conduct, but instead persist in non-virtuous deeds, will not be esteemed by noble persons, even if they achieve worldly success.

Those who never practice virtuous deeds—not even harboring the thought of filial piety—have corrupted the very foundation of moral principles. Their actions stand in direct opposition to the

basic nature of humanity. Even if such individuals temporarily gain fame, status, wealth, or power through unscrupulous means, they will never be truly esteemed by noble persons.

A Noble Person Cherishes Virtue

A noble person cherishes virtuous qualities and upholds moral principles above all else. As stated in Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*:

*Even if thirsty, birds who crave rain
Will not drink water fallen to the ground.⁷¹*

...

*Even when the lives of sages are endangered,
How could they abandon their superb character?⁷²*

A person of noble character, even when faced with the severest trials, will not resort to base acts. They value inner morality far more than external possessions. Thus, a truly noble individual—one who possesses genuine wisdom and virtue—will not esteem someone who fails to honor their parents, gurus, or teachers, regardless of that person's wealth, talent, or worldly accomplishments.

Regrettably, modern society often inverts these values: the virtuous may go unheralded, while the unscrupulous, armed with wealth

and power, bask in admiration. Such values reveal a widespread deficit in moral education and proper discernment. If society is guided by sound ethical values, people will honor those who achieve success through legitimate means and will not admire those who amass wealth through unethical or illicit methods. While ordinary beings cannot be entirely free from habitual tendencies such as desire, as Buddhist practitioners, we should strive to conduct ourselves in daily life according to the Dharma and proper principles.

Upholding Virtuous Principles and Avoiding Misinformation

In today's digital age, the internet overflows with superficial content—sometimes arising from ignorance, and at other times motivated by hidden agendas. Recently, an article titled “A Monk Discusses Sexual Desire” began circulating online, falsely attributed to me and accompanied by my photograph. Upon review, I confirm that its contents bear no relation to my teachings or writings. I stand fully accountable for my own words—whether from my books, lectures at the academy, or speeches delivered at universities.

It is possible that the individual who published this article hoped to provoke public backlash against me, perhaps with the intention of discouraging me from teaching the precious Dharma. However, such attempts are unlikely to succeed. In fact, when I have faced

slander in the past, it has only inspired me to give even more lectures. The various statements circulating online, whether positive or negative, have little impact on me.

Some people may choose to publish under a well-known name to gain greater visibility, believing it will help reach and benefit a wider audience. While the intention may be positive, I believe it is important for everyone to uphold their own principles, share the values they truly believe in, and publish under their own name. Using someone else's name without permission is irresponsible and inappropriate, as it undermines the integrity of the message. Written works and public statements should be approached with rigor and a sense of responsibility. Going forward, I would appreciate it if no one used my name without my permission.

Noble Person as a Moral Exemplar

“A noble person, however, is not like that. Before speaking, he carefully considers whether the words are appropriate. His actions bring joy to others. He is honored for his virtue and righteousness. His way of handling matters serves as a model to be followed. His demeanor is admirable, and his choices and conduct set a standard for others to emulate.

Unlike those who resort to questionable means to gain success and respect, a noble person—or a wise ruler—adheres to the six principles or six standards. First, they speak only after thoughtful reflection, earning widespread praise. Second, they act with meticulous care, bringing happiness and benefit to others. Third, they command respect through steadfast virtue and moral integrity. Fourth, their approach to handling affairs serves as a model for others to follow. Fifth, their personal demeanor is worthy of admiration. Sixth, their choices and actions are always appropriate and can withstand scrutiny.

These teachings are truly excellent. While they do not expressly discuss the Dharma like bodhicitta or tantric pith instructions, they provide a fundamental framework for ethical conduct. If monastics and Buddhists can embody the principles taught in *The Classic of Filial Piety*, they will undoubtedly cultivate excellence in themselves. Moreover, these standards are invaluable to everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs. For those without faith, studying these teachings remains essential, as they offer powerful guidance for perfecting one's character and conduct in daily life. Unfortunately, such guidance is rarely emphasized in modern educational systems.

Governing the Populace by the Six Principles

The six principles provide a powerful guide for noble individuals to govern themselves and others. First, “carefully consider whether the words are appropriate.” A noble person never speaks carelessly; their words are the result of deep deliberation—thoughtful, precise, and logically sound. Consequently, their speech inspires respect, earns widespread praise, and is readily accepted by others. In the chapter “Analyzing Your Own and Others’ Speech” of *The Just King*, Ju Mipham Rinpoche also advised that one should always think before speaking and avoid impulsive remarks.⁷³

Second, “their actions bring joy to others.” Before acting, a noble person reflects carefully. Actions taken after such thoughtful consideration usually please others. We must be mindful not to cause others pain, sorrow, or anger through our behavior. For example, mischievous young monks often trouble the monastic disciplinarian, and disobedient students can frustrate their teachers. However, if a monastic’s conduct and demeanor align perfectly with the Dharma—as exemplified by Bhikshu Assaji⁷⁴—then simply witnessing their presence inspires faith and joy in many hearts.

Third, “they are honored for their virtue and righteousness.” Upholding moral principles earns one the respect of others. Individuals whose behavior closely aligns with the Dharma—especially monastics—naturally command respect from all.

Fourth, “their way of handling matters serves as a model to be followed.” A noble person approaches all tasks with wisdom and foresight, engaging in careful deliberation before taking action. As a result, their conduct becomes a model for others to follow. *The Just King* says:

*Moreover, subjects look upon
The actions of kings and nobles,
Whether good or evil,
And they imitate them.*⁷⁵

In other words, the actions of a ruler—virtuous or otherwise—are emulated by those beneath them. His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often cited this teaching, and I have referenced it a couple of times in my lectures as well.

In real life, the leaders’ behavior is frequently mirrored by those under their guidance, a phenomenon observable at all societal levels—from nations to small communities. For instance, if a leader

enjoys drinking alcohol, their followers are likely to adopt the same habit. If a leader values study, their subordinates are inspired to cultivate a love for learning. In real life, I know a place where each new leader's hobby became everyone else's obsession: under a book-loving leader, people bought books; under a rock collector, they gathered stones; and with a tree enthusiast, everyone started planting trees.

This phenomenon is also evident in spiritual settings. If the head of a Dharma center is deeply committed to hearing, contemplating, and meditating, the community naturally follows suit. However, if the leader neglects these core practices and instead indulges in activities like Vajra dancing, even those who cannot dance may feel compelled to participate just to gain favor. Leaders often show preference toward those who share their interests and behaviors.

Today, I met with the supervising khenpos of the arts and crafts, astrology and calculus, and Sanskrit linguistics classes at our academy. We acknowledged that people tend to follow the examples set by their leaders. If a class instructor is well-rounded—proficient in both Sutra and Tantra, while also knowledgeable in worldly subjects—they will typically encourage students to explore a broad range of studies. Conversely, if a leader focuses solely on the Five Great Treatises,⁷⁶ they may consider mastery of these texts sufficient

for their students. Thus, the beliefs, values, and conduct of the principal leader are imperative, as they shape the tone and direction of the entire group.

Fifth, “[t]heir demeanor is admirable[.]” The words, actions, appearance—even the manner of dress—of a noble person naturally become objects of observation and imitation, much like fans emulate celebrities by adopting their styles and mannerisms.

Sixth, “their choices and conducts set a standard for others to emulate.” A noble person’s choices—what to pursue and what to avoid—never transgress propriety or law. Their actions withstand public scrutiny and are worthy of emulation.

“When such a noble person governs the people according to these principles, the people respect and love him; they look up to him as a model and emulate his example.

By applying the six methods mentioned above, a noble leader is able to rule effectively. Such a leader commands awe and reverence, while also earning the love and support of the populace. As a result, the people instinctively follow his example.

The role of a ruler in a nation is often considered extremely vital. A wise ruler not only pursues personal study but also seeks guidance from others. As stated in *The Just King*,

So as to understand right and wrong

The best of rulers

Will study the various treatises

And rely on learned people.⁷⁷

This ancient wisdom reminds us that truly exceptional rulers deepen their understanding of right and wrong by immersing themselves in authoritative texts, including various treatises, and surrounding themselves with virtuous, knowledgeable advisors. The principle taught here extends beyond governance—it is equally relevant to anyone striving for personal growth.

However, I have observed that some students, upon reaching their academic goals, become complacent and abandon their pursuit of knowledge. Learning should never cease, regardless of one's position or achievements. True wisdom—the ability to discern what to adopt and what to abandon—comes from continuously studying a wide range of texts, such as treatises, and seeking guidance from teachers. Whenever I visit different schools, I take the opportunity to raise specific, research-worthy questions to the teachers. Despite

time constraints, their clear and insightful responses often greatly benefit me. To summarize, the combination of independent study and expert guidance serves not only as a valuable principle for sound governance but also provides a powerful framework for personal growth, both academically and spiritually.

The Secret of Governing without Ruling

Effective governance does not depend on harsh punishments, such as excessive fines or death sentences. A truly successful ruler leads through the power of dignity and virtue, guided by love and compassion. Such a leader inspires both awe and deep affection among the people. When a ruler of this kind passes away, it is not uncommon for the people to grieve with genuine sorrow. While certain punitive measures may sometimes be necessary to maintain order, it is love—not punishment—that holds the greatest power. Leadership rooted in compassion and care has the potential to awaken love in countless hearts, fostering harmony and trust far more deeply than fear ever could.

His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche exemplified this compassionate leadership style. He held a profound love for all his disciples and everyone under his care at Larung Gar. Even when he offered stern criticism, it arose from a place of deep compassion. His love

was evident not only in the wisdom he shared but also in the meticulous care he showed us in our daily lives. When we first began studying under His Holiness, living conditions were extremely challenging. Yet, thanks to his unwavering support and guidance, we were able to remain at the academy and continue our studies.

Whether residing at the academy or traveling far to teach, His Holiness always remained attentive to our progress in hearing, reflecting, and meditating, as well as to our overall well-being. His love flowed continuously and effortlessly, arising purely from his boundless compassion. To this day, I often recall the countless small acts of kindness he extended to us during those formative years. Each memory stirs a deep longing for my guru: “Ah, how wonderful it would be if he were still here...”

In addition to their kindness and care, the perseverance of our gurus in spreading the Dharma and benefiting all beings is deeply engraved in our hearts. Every time I travel by car from Sertar to Drango and pass through the mountain tunnel, I cannot help but reflect: there used to be no tunnel here. When His Holiness traveled through this region to spread the Dharma, he had to cross rugged mountain terrain. I still remember accompanying him in an old Beijing Jeep—how rough and jolting that journey was. Sometimes, Khenpo Depa Rinpoche would come to the academy to participate

in Dharma gatherings. I remember that the trip from Chengdu to Larung Gar would take about four or five days back then.

“Therefore, such a ruler is able to effectively carry out their moral education and smoothly implement their political decrees.

A virtuous ruler guided by sincere love can win the hearts of the people. When governance is rooted in genuine care and moral integrity, citizens are more inclined to accept the laws. In such an environment, people obey the laws and policies not out of fear, but out of mutual respect and understanding. In contrast, if a ruler lacks love and virtues, relying instead on coercion or authoritarian control, resistance inevitably follows. As the saying goes, “When policies come from above, countermeasures arise from below.” In many cases, strategies to evade or undermine those policies are already in place before they are even implemented, and these countermeasures can sometimes be more sophisticated than the policies themselves.

The original text highlights the vital importance of heartfelt compassion. Whether in governance or in our daily relationships—with family, relatives, or friends—true connection begins with a sincere

intention to help and to love. Let us not delay; now is the time to put that love into action.

Acts of Kindness in Times of Dire Need

This year, we should place special emphasis on addressing the educational challenges faced by many, especially the children of monastics or lay practitioners. There are cases where a student—sometimes an only child—has been accepted into a university but is unable to continue due to financial hardship. In such situations, I sincerely hope that fellow Dharma practitioners will extend a helping hand with compassion. If you encounter difficulties, please reach out to me and my team—we can help through charitable foundations or other means.

It is quite common for people to offer generous donations to their gurus. While it may seem bold to mention, I believe it is worth considering: many true spiritual teachers are not in financial need. In some cases, an overabundance of material offerings can even become a burden. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on making offerings, we might consider engaging in other meaningful forms of virtuous action—such as supporting the education of students in financial difficulty.

Some time ago, a mother carrying two children came to see me. She was from my hometown and began crying the moment she arrived. I asked her why she was so emotional, and she said, “Years ago, you sponsored my education. Without your support, I would probably be doing manual labor every day. Given my family’s situation back then, even basic survival was a struggle—let alone the idea of attending university. However, thanks to your help, I was able to earn a college degree. I later found a relatively good job, and now I have been working for eight years. I have also started a family. I am truly, deeply grateful to you...”

Hearing her words made me reflect deeply. Supporting a student’s education is indeed a meaningful act—one that offers tangible help in times of greatest need. While commissioning Buddha statues and making offerings to spiritual teachers undoubtedly accumulate merit, such merit can be diminished by subtle, self-serving intentions—hoping for personal gain or favorable outcomes. By contrast, offering help to someone in hardship—especially by supporting their education—is often free of such selfish motivations.

We must strive to assist those around us with sincerity and a selfless heart. Whether they are your relatives, vajra siblings from our Dharma community, or non-Buddhists in society, if they are talented but unable to pursue higher education due to genuine

financial constraints, I sincerely hope we can join efforts to sponsor their tuition and living expenses. Given the current situation, I truly believe that helping a student complete four years of university can generate far greater merit than many other virtuous activities we might otherwise undertake.

Of course, making offerings to the sangha has always been a meritorious act. However, when it comes to making offerings to gurus, the matter becomes more complex. When directed toward a qualified and authentic teacher, such offerings bring immense benefits. But when made to unqualified teachers, the offerings can lead to serious negative consequences for both the donor and others. For example, not long ago, someone offered several hundred thousand yuan to a fraudulent guru. Later, when he discovered the truth, he began frantically contacting banks, lawyers, and the police in an attempt to recover his funds. While unfortunate, the situation was also a result of his own lack of discernment—he had not examined the teacher before relying upon him. Instead of making offerings to so-called gurus who lack authenticity, it is far more meaningful to support children in our communities who genuinely cannot afford an education.

When we study *The Classic of Filial Piety*, we must go beyond words. Anyone can speak about filial piety in theory—some may express

it even better than I can in Mandarin. After all, I am a Tibetan, and Mandarin is not my first language. But what truly matters is grasping and embodying the core spirit and essence of this classic teaching. It is essential to take two actions. First, from this moment on, no matter how our parents may have treated us, we should treat them with respect and gratitude. If our parents have passed away, request the sangha to recite prayers and dedicate merit, especially when we visit sacred sites or monasteries. Second, provide financial support to underprivileged students during their formative years if we can, as our help can possibly change the course of their lives. We often speak of “respecting the elderly and cherishing the young.” While it is essential to care for the elderly and the sick in our communities, it is even more crucial to prioritize the education of children.

As we Tibetans say—and this also reflects a natural law—“When the cuckoo appears, it is the time when yaks suffer most. It is in the spring that many yaks starve. But if someone offers just a few handfuls of grass, helping them through this difficult time, they will soon regain their strength and vitality.” Likewise, a financially disadvantaged student’s most difficult period is often during high school and college years. If someone extends a helping hand during this critical time, that support can leave a lifelong positive impact.

When we help others, bear in mind that not every act of kindness will be remembered. Some may not express gratitude—they might even delete us from their contacts to forget they ever needed help. For some, receiving financial assistance can be a source of embarrassment, as they wish to be seen as self-reliant and capable from an early age. But in the end, whether someone is deeply grateful or seemingly ungrateful is not what truly matters. What really counts is whether we can extend our help to those in need with a sincere, altruistic, and compassionate heart.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘A noble person’s deportment is flawless.’”

Indeed, carrying oneself with dignity is of great importance for both monastics and lay practitioners. At the academy, every department should pay attention to each individual’s deportment and general appearance. In today’s image-conscious society, people often feel uneasy around those who appear disheveled, with unkempt hair and poor hygiene. As Buddhists, we do not advocate for excessive grooming or adornment, but a clean and respectful appearance remains essential. In any setting, we should strive to present ourselves in a tidy and composed manner, so as not to

cause discomfort or misunderstanding to others. This is a standard upheld by thoughtful and refined individuals around the world.

The original text reminds us that those with superior wisdom and high moral character always maintain impeccable deportment. A great number of monastics are admirable examples of this, consistently composed and dignified wherever they go. However, some may appear solemn and disciplined in the Dharma hall, but let their comportment slip in more casual environments.

Certain monastics at our academy may need to pay particular attention to this issue, especially those who plan to return home for vacation after having left for over ten years. Due to social expectations, on the rare occasion they do return—such as during Chinese New Year—they might feel pressured to conceal their monastic identity, for instance, by renting a red jacket and putting on a black wig, similar to how some people today rent companions to meet family expectations. (Audience laughing) I must caution against replacing monastic robes with laypeople's attire. Not all practitioners have cultivated the requisite wisdom and inner stability. As the habitual tendencies of lay life from the previous lives remain strong, there is a risk of developing attachments to worldly vanities, such as wearing wigs. Therefore, it is essential for us to always conduct ourselves with impeccable manners and dignity.

Lecture Eleven

August 3, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Written over 2,500 years ago, *The Classic of Filial Piety* imparts wisdom that transcends its ancient origins, offering timeless and practical guidance for the modern world. Yet, the value of traditional culture, including classical texts, has not always been fully recognized. During the “Smash the Four Olds” campaign that began in 1966, society sought to reject everything considered “old”—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. While our modern era celebrates new ideas, new concepts, and innovation, it is important not to overlook the enduring value of ancient wisdom and traditional culture. These timeless teachings continue to provide a vital foundation for our moral values, mental well-being, and spiritual practices.

Although *The Classic of Filial Piety* does not explicitly discuss Buddhist principles like renunciation, Bodhicitta, or emptiness, many of its teachings share a deep resonance with the spirit of the Mahayana path. As the core of Mahayana Buddhism, Bodhicitta is the altruistic aspiration to guide all sentient beings toward enlightenment, expressed through self-discipline and service to others in daily

life. Bodhicitta is a central theme in Mahayana texts. For example, Longchenpa's *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind* and the chapters on "Carefulness" and "Vigilant Introspection" in Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva* emphasize the importance of guarding the three gates of body, speech, and mind with mindfulness and introspection. Similarly, *The Classic of Filial Piety* is fundamentally about the principles of being a good person. Therefore, if we regard *The Way of the Bodhisattva* as one of the most sublime Mahayana teachings, then *The Classic of Filial Piety* can also be considered supreme, as much of its content closely aligns with these teachings and remains deeply relevant to our spiritual practice.

Some Buddhists may ask, "But *The Classic of Filial Piety* is just a worldly text. What does it really have to do with our spiritual practice?" Studying this text is indeed very helpful for our practice. To be a good practitioner, one must first be a good person. A wise and noble person learns to discern right from wrong, as a scriptural authority I quoted yesterday advises:

So as to understand right and wrong

The best of rulers

Will study the various treatises

And rely on learned people.

The path to wisdom—the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood—is paved by studying revered texts and following virtuous teachers. Classics like *The Classic of Filial Piety* provide the moral foundation upon which a deep spiritual journey is built.

CHAPTER TEN: A RECORD OF FILIAL CONDUCT

Today's lesson covers two chapters: "A Record of Filial Conduct" and "The Five Punishments." The tenth chapter focuses on the specific filial behaviors that people should observe in their daily lives. The meaning of "filial piety" in this chapter differs somewhat from earlier chapters; here, it refers specifically to honoring and caring for one's parents.

Five Duties

Confucius said, "When filial children serve their parents, they show utmost reverence in daily life, bring joy while providing care, show concern when parents fall ill, express grief when parents pass, and present genuine respect during ancestral rites. Only when these five aspects are fulfilled can one truly serve one's parents."

Confucius taught that true filial piety is expressed through five essential forms of conduct. Only by fulfilling all five can a child be

considered filial. Embodying these principles is a lifelong practice, and some may reach their senior years without ever fully mastering them.

Utmost Reverence in Daily Life

Firstly, the principle of showing “utmost reverence in daily life” means that filial children treat their parents with unwavering respect in all daily interactions. This reverence is not demonstrated through defiance, but through polite speech, humble actions, and a respectful heart. This teaching is reinforced in the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*:

When parents call, respond without delay.

When parents give instructions, act without laziness.

The lesson is clear: we should respond immediately when our parents call us and carry out their requests promptly and diligently. This text offers numerous practical teachings on how to properly serve one’s parents.

In the traditional culture classes at the schools I founded, we require the study of the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*. After studying this text, many children began to appreciate the importance of showing gratitude to their parents. We have observed

students stop talking back and abandon aggressive behaviors. Suppose a child grows up habitually striking or speaking rudely to their parents. In that case, it is not difficult to imagine how such behavior could escalate into more serious actions later in life—even, tragically, to the point of harming their parents. For this reason, it is essential to instill in children a deep sense of respect for their parents from an early age. Otherwise, these issues may become much more difficult to address as they grow older.

According to the principle of filial piety, children should always respect their parents, no matter how much they themselves may achieve. Even if a child becomes a postdoctoral scholar from an elite university while their parents are illiterate, it is still their duty to serve their parents with profound reverence. This tradition of respect is also deeply embedded in Tibetan Buddhism. Highly regarded khenpos and khenmos may far surpass their original refuge teachers or initial mentors in knowledge and status. Yet, they still prostrate fully before their teachers as a gesture of ultimate respect. This reverence for one's elders and mentors is an essential virtue that must always be upheld.

In an era of globalization, the preservation of valuable Eastern cultural traditions—such as filial piety, which benefits both individuals and society—has become a pressing concern. Given the

significant influence of Western culture and the marked differences between Eastern and Western traditions, it is especially important to preserve the core tenets of Eastern tradition during global cultural assimilation. The erosion of Eastern culture has tangible, painful consequences. I have met many Chinese parents living in Western countries who, after devoting themselves wholeheartedly to raising their children, often face a lack of gratitude and respect. This outcome inflicts deep emotional pain and signals a troubling trend.

Therefore, a discerning approach to cultural influence is vital. A culture's global reach measures its power, not necessarily its virtue or intrinsic value. In any cross-cultural exchange, there is always a risk that the more dominant culture will overshadow—and even erode—valuable local traditions. This is a natural, observable phenomenon. Eastern culture's vulnerability to westernization stems mainly from two factors. First, traditional culture is still recovering from the systematic destruction of its own heritage during the 1960s and 1970s. Second, the overwhelming influence of Western culture worldwide—particularly through Hollywoodism—may lead to the neglect and gradual disappearance of Eastern culture's rich legacy.

Bringing Joy While Providing Care

The second principle is bringing “joy while providing care.” It means supporting and caring for one’s parents with a joyful heart—ensuring their lives are comfortable, and their spirits uplifted. Consider how a wise disciple serves their guru: with utmost reverence and genuine happiness. Whatever tasks or volunteer work they undertake, they do so enthusiastically and joyfully, never feeling burdened or resentful. This is the same spirit we should bring to honoring and supporting our parents. Serving them with dissatisfaction, disrespect, or hostility is inappropriate.

Some people view the duty of supporting their parents as a heavy burden. They may think that giving their parents money occasionally or buying them some daily necessities is enough to fulfill their filial obligations. Yet even then, their attitude may be poor—saying things like, “Fine, I will give you some money then!” This is truly regrettable.

The proverb, “A mother’s heart is like water; a child’s heart is like stone,” reflects how a parent’s heart is gentle and tender, while a child’s heart can sometimes be hard and unyielding. As parents grow older, they often become more sensitive and emotionally fragile. They keenly observe their children’s expressions and sense

their moods, and even a fleeting look of discontent can cause them to worry: “My child does not seem happy with me today—what did I do wrong?” Such concerns weigh heavily on their hearts. It is our duty as children to approach our parents with thoughtful consideration and sincere cheerfulness, ensuring they feel appreciated and happy.

Showing Concern When Parents Fall Ill

The third aspect of filial conduct is to “show concern when parents fall ill.” A truly filial child feels genuine concern and anxiety for their parents’ well-being. When their parents become sick, they make every effort to be by their side and offer care to help them recover as quickly as possible. When our parents get sick, it is not enough to simply hire a caretaker or arrange medical attention while remaining emotionally detached ourselves. If we continue to enjoy our own lives without making any effort to visit or care for our ailing parents, this reflects a lack of filial piety.

In ancient times, when parents became ill, their children cared for them with the utmost attentiveness. Nowadays, however, many people are so busy that they rarely make time to visit their sick parents. In some extreme cases, there have been reports of children remaining unaware that their parents had passed away several

years earlier. In certain developed countries, children who migrate to big cities for work often leave their elderly parents behind in rural areas. Consequently, these parents may be relegated to nursing homes, where they are seldom visited, even in sickness. They are left in a pitiful state, without comfort or companionship. Some people even refer to such facilities as “charnel grounds for the living.”

Expressing Grief When Parents Pass

The fourth filial conduct is “expressing grief when parents pass.” This means that when parents pass away, children should feel and express genuine sorrow. Unfortunately, we sometimes witness situations where, immediately after a parent’s death, certain children are more concerned with dividing the inheritance than mourning, displaying no visible sadness.

While grief is universal, its outward expression has historically been guided by specific mourning rituals, which vary by culture. For instance, in Chinese tradition, white is the color of mourning, whereas black is customary in the West. During the mourning period, bright colors are avoided, and festive decorations—such as couplets typically displayed during the New Year or weddings—are taken down. Nowadays, however, except for a few places such as

Shandong, where traditional customs are still preserved, most regions no longer strictly observe these ancient mourning practices. As a result, many people today, unfamiliar with the tradition of mourning for one's parents, appear almost unaffected by their loss and show little outward grief.

The five types of filial conduct are generally practiced effectively in Tibetan regions. Most children there demonstrate great reverence for their parents and often compete to serve them. In families with several children, parents may rotate between their homes. If they stay with one child and not another, the child who did not get the opportunity to serve might say: "Why are you staying with them and not with me?" Such caring attitudes are common. Those familiar with Tibetan life and customs will know that I am not exaggerating. The Tibetan people show great respect and care for their older members. Caring for seniors is regarded as both a great honor and a source of abundant merit. A home with an older adult is viewed as especially blessed.

In Tibetan regions, the passing of an elderly family member is a deeply emotional time, often leaving their children heartbroken. When my mother, a devout Buddhist, passed away a few years ago, my three younger sisters wept at her deathbed. In their grief and helplessness, they turned to a deeply held Tibetan tradition.

They made heartfelt and powerful vows in my mother's presence: "We vow to be lifelong vegetarians. We will make a pilgrimage to see the Jowo Shakyamuni Buddha in Lhasa..." For my sisters, who had always enjoyed meat, this was a significant sacrifice. Making such virtuous aspirations is a common way for children in Tibetan regions to honor a dying parent, offering commitments and good deeds in the hope of bringing them benefit.

I did not cry when my parents passed away, probably because I have long contemplated the impermanence of life and understand that weeping does not benefit the deceased. As *The Original Vows of Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* states,

The great ghost of impermanence can come to one at any time.

After death, a person enters the intermediate state, known as the bardo,⁷⁸ which typically lasts forty-nine days. During this crucial period, if loved ones or others perform virtuous deeds—such as Buddhist pujas—and dedicate the merit to the deceased, they can help transform negative karma. Even if due to the accumulated negative karma, the deceased was bound for an unfortunate rebirth, this merit can significantly improve their circumstances. Therefore,

when our parents pass away, it is far more beneficial to engage in virtuous activities in their behalf than to simply weep.

Some people are unable to cry at their parents' funerals and may even hire professional mourners to cry on their behalf, perhaps influenced by cultural norms. There is a story from the Tibetan region about this: A man's parents had passed away, but he could not bring himself to cry. So, he secretly dipped his hands into a nearby bucket and rubbed the liquid onto his face to simulate tears. However, he had not realized that the bucket actually contained animal blood, not water. At dawn, during the funeral procession, as the light was just beginning to rise, people saw his blood-covered face and were shocked: "You did not just cry tears—you cried tears of blood!"

A well-known saying in Tibetan tradition posits that a failure to cry aloud at a parent's death is a sign of being unfilial. This cultural expectation for expressive grief is often visible at our academy, where nuns may mourn with open wailing while lamas typically remain more composed. Naturally, it is understandable to feel deep sorrow at the loss of one's parents. However, if one truly understands impermanence, one will come to realize that it is not necessary to grieve uncontrollably. Some Dharma friends are able to maintain their composure, which is appropriate. On the other hand,

some go to the opposite extreme, appearing almost excessively cheerful. After losing a parent, they may act overly casual, joking and laughing as if nothing significant has happened, which is not appropriate.

Presenting True Respect During Ancestral Rites

Finally, to “present true respect during ancestral rites” means to maintain a serious and respectful attitude while being mindful of one’s words and behavior throughout the ritual. According to traditional customs in Han regions, children typically observe a three-year mourning period following the death of their parents. Additionally, on the anniversary of their parents’ passing each year, children perform rituals to honor them. Similar commemorative practices exist in Buddhism as well, although the terminology and rituals differ. Instead of calling it a “sacrifice” or “rite,” Buddhists typically refer to it as a “nirvana dharma assembly.”

For instance, to commemorate the great master Tsongkhapa, Buddhists hold nirvana dharma assemblies every year on the anniversary of his passing—the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month in the Tibetan calendar. Similarly, the omniscient Mipham Rinpoche entered nirvana on the twenty-ninth day of the fourth month in 1912 according to the Tibetan calendar, and each year on this

day, disciples gather to hold nirvana dharma assemblies in his memory.

In the future, when teachers or spiritual friends who have bestowed the Dharma upon us pass away, it is also important and appropriate to hold a memorial ceremony for them. At our academy, we conduct an annual seven-day Nirvana Dharma Assembly in memory of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. During these seven days, we recite guru prayers, engage in guru yoga practice, and chant the Vajrasattva mantra—all offered with heartfelt remembrance and devotion to our root guru.

To summarize, the five types of filial actions that embody true filial piety essentially encompass the full range of a child's filial duties toward their parent—how they should treat their parents in daily life, how to serve them, how to care for them during illness, what to do when they pass away, and how to honor them through memorial rituals. This chapter addresses all these aspects comprehensively.

The cultivation of filial piety in the next generation requires a dual approach from parents. On one hand, parents should serve as role models by honoring their own parents. On the other hand, they should instill these values in their children from an early age. The power of this parental example is significant. Children who observe

their parents disregarding their own elders will likely replicate that behavior. In contrast, those who witness consistent devotion and respect are far more inclined to adopt these virtues themselves.

Society is composed of countless families, each forming part of the larger whole. The harmony of society depends on the harmony within each household. And that harmony, in turn, relies on children understanding and practicing filial piety. Children who are able to fulfill these five forms of filial conduct can be considered filial in the fullest sense.

The Greatest Form of Filial Piety

Certain Dharma friends may have already entered the monastic life and might feel they are unable to carry out the five actions of filial piety mentioned earlier. However, becoming a monastic is itself an expression of profound filial piety. In *Jottings Under a Bamboo Window*, Master Lianchi outlined different levels of filial conduct. The first is to care for one's parents. The second is to establish oneself through virtuous conduct—contributing to society, earning a good reputation, and bringing honor to one's family—this is considered the accomplishment of great filial piety. The third, and the most supreme form of filial piety, is to guide one's parents to recite the Buddha's name and help them attain rebirth in a pure

land, thereby liberating them from the sufferings of cyclic existence. This is known as the highest of the great filial acts.

Therefore, for those of you who have taken monastic vows, there is no need to doubt or question yourselves by thinking, “Am I being unfilial for not being physically present with my parents?” Physical proximity is not the most important factor in fulfilling filial duty. What truly matters is guiding your parents to turn away from harmful actions and cultivate virtue. As I have mentioned before, even some laypeople—due to their profession or other reasons—may not be able to spend much time with their parents. In truth, if one can help their parents develop faith in buddhas, recite buddhas’ names, and subsequently attain rebirth in a pure land, that represents the highest form of filial devotion.

Ordination is not only an act of devotion toward one’s parents; it also brings immeasurable benefit to all relatives. During the Tang dynasty, the great Chan master Huangbo Xiyun once said:

*When one child becomes a monastic,
Nine generations of ancestors will be reborn in the celestial realm.
If this were not true,
All buddhas would be speaking falsehoods.*

This well-known statement has a touching backstory. After Master Huangbo became a monk, his mother was so heartbroken that she cried herself blind. Despite losing her sight, she continued to long for a reunion with her son. She built a small rest pavilion at a roadside to serve passing monks, washing their feet as a way to identify her son, since Huangbo had a distinctive mole on his left foot.

One day, Master Huangbo came to that very pavilion and received her hospitality. However, he did not extend his left foot, and so his mother did not recognize him. After he departed, a kind neighbor, feeling sympathy for the mother, revealed the truth: "The monk who just left was your son." Upon hearing this, the mother rushed after him and chased him all the way to the riverbank. But by that time, the boat he took had already set sail. In her desperation, she leaped into the river and tragically drowned.

When Master Huangbo learned of his mother's death, he was overcome with grief and sorrow. In tears, he uttered the famous verse. Later, when his mother was cremated, people witnessed her ascending into the sky within the flames. His mother may have been reborn in a celestial realm or perhaps even in a pure land.

This extraordinary act of filial piety may be difficult for ordinary people to comprehend. Many might think, “How could she raise her son so painstakingly, only for him to leave the household life?” Regardless of how it is perceived, from the ultimate perspective, taking monastic vows truly does benefit one’s relatives in ways that go far beyond worldly understanding.

In many parts of the Han regions, being a monastic is still not seen as an honorable path. However, in Theravada Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Myanmar, people feel great pride when their children ordain. In those cultures, it was common for individuals to undertake a short period of monastic life at least once in their lifetime. There is even a saying: “A person must become a monk or a nun at least once in their life, otherwise they have failed in filial piety.” That said, I have recently spoken with some monks from Thailand and Myanmar who mentioned that this tradition is no longer as widely observed as it was in the past. Nowadays, many people in those countries have never been ordained, especially adult males.

To summarize, this chapter primarily teaches the “Five Duties”—the acts of filial piety one should perform and the “Three Prohibitions”—the behaviors one must avoid. Having covered the “Five Duties,” we now turn to the “Three Prohibitions.”

Three Prohibitions

“Those who are truly able to serve their parents are not arrogant when in high positions, do not act unlawfully when in middle positions, and do not engage in conflict when in low positions.

This means that a truly filial child, regardless of their social status, should follow these guidelines: If in a high position, be free from pride or arrogance; if in an intermediate status, avoid illegal or immoral acts; and if in a lowly position, refrain from conflict and violence.

Let us first examine the prohibition against arrogance in high positions. A child who has attained power or prominence should never become overbearing or conceited, especially toward their parents. Such arrogance rarely leads to favorable outcomes. Historical accounts and dramas often depict even emperors—the highest authority in the nation—regularly paying respects to the empress dowager. The emperor, dressed in imperial yellow robes, would greet her with deep respect, even as she sat with an air of unshakable authority. This exemplifies “not being arrogant when in high positions.” It is worth noting, however, that emperors often

reserved this respect primarily for the empress dowager and seldom extended it to others, such as their national teachers.

I have noticed that some leaders who gain social or political standing begin to act arrogantly, even toward their parents. I sometimes worry about this among Dharma teachers as well. If some of you become successful in the future, will you still treat your parents with the same respect and care that you do now? Of course, this dynamic is a two-way street. I have also known parents who refuse to let go. In their eyes, no matter how old their children get, they remain immature and incapable of making sound decisions. These parents maintain a firm grip on their children's lives, refusing to relinquish control even until their final breath.

The second prohibition states that children in a middle rank of society—such as ministers below the highest ruler—must not engage in wrongdoings or illegal activities. The third prohibition applies to those in humble or low positions, for whom it is especially important to avoid disputes or physical altercations, which can quickly escalate into violence.

The ancients demonstrated remarkable insight into human nature, describing the mind's inclinations with great precision. Generally, arrogance is the dominant affliction of those in the upper echelons;

those in the middle class are more prone to misconduct such as theft; and those in lower positions often fall into conflict and brawling among their peers. In real life, we usually see that people at the lower rungs of society can easily become embroiled in fights, sometimes over trivial matters, while those with greater power or wealth are less likely to argue over small issues.

Consequences of Engaging in Prohibited Conduct

“To be arrogant in high positions leads to destruction; to act unlawfully in middle positions faces punishment; to engage in conflict in low positions results in violence.

Those in high positions who become arrogant are destined for downfall and ruin. Those in middle positions who break the law will inevitably face legal consequences or punishment. Those in low positions who fight with others are likely to encounter violence and may even be harmed or killed.

From my own experience visiting several prisons, I have found that many inmates come from the middle social strata, having committed crimes such as theft, sexual assault, or even murder. This supports the ancient observation. Among those in lower social classes, limited

resources or lack of education can make disputes more frequent and intense. For example, in Tibetan regions, common verbal disagreements over pastureland can escalate into physical violence, sometimes with fatal outcomes.

“If these three behaviors are not eliminated, even daily offerings of the three animals’ meat cannot be considered filial.”

In ancient times, meat was regarded as a luxury, and providing it to one’s parents was seen as a sign of filial devotion. However, if a person engages in one of the three prohibited behaviors and uses ill-gotten gains to provide their parents with the finest meats—pork, beef, and lamb—every day, they cannot be deemed truly filial.

Bringing Peace of Mind and Joy to Parents

What parents truly long for, above all else, is the peace of mind that comes from knowing their children are good people. A respectful and well-behaved child gives parents the least cause for worry. Even if children cannot make extraordinary contributions to the family, at the very least, they refrain from causing harm. In my experience with Tibetan families, including my relatives and fellow villagers, I have noticed that some children are exceptionally well-behaved, while others are not. The reasons for this difference are not

entirely clear, but it may be related to upbringing and the karmic connections within each family.

Some disobedient children constantly fight, misbehave, or break the law. When such a child is imprisoned, parents often exhaust their savings to pay fines and seek their release, sometimes ending up destitute and in tears. If their tears were collected, they would fill several buckets. Others may provide for their parents' material needs but still cause constant anxiety—one day caught in corruption, the next in a fight, and soon back in prison. I know a family whose son has been jailed four times for petty crimes. Each time, his parents vow not to help again, yet their resolve softens when he is in trouble, and they continue to support him, trapped in a cycle of distress.

In contrast, some families have children who, though not wealthy, lead honest lives and do not cause their parents worry. In truth, a child's ability to provide their parents with mansions, luxury cars, designer clothing, or gourmet meals is not the real measure of filial devotion. The most essential aspect of filial piety is giving them peace of mind and freeing them from constant worry. Some children truly bring their parents this peace. Whether the child is living abroad or domestically, the parents know with certainty: "My child is a good person. He will not engage in wrongdoing."

Whether you are a monastic or a lay practitioner, honoring your parents means doing everything within your ability to care for them and bring them peace of mind and joy, even in the smallest ways. This is especially important while your parents are still with you. In Tibetan regions, we have many folk songs on this subject, but I will not sing any today. Instead, I will quote a teaching from the *Mahayana Sutra on the Contemplation of the Mind-Ground of Essential Nature*:

“When the compassionate mother is present, it is called wealth; when the compassionate mother is absent, it is called poverty.”

If one’s loving mother is still alive, one possesses true wealth. If she is gone, even with great riches, one still lives in a state of poverty. Having our parents with us represents our greatest fortune and the happiest time of our lives. Those who have lost their parents become orphans and are more likely to experience a sense of loneliness and coldness.

As for the benefits and importance of filial devotion, the same sutra further states,

To care for one's parents in reverence is equal in merit to making offerings to the Buddha."

The Treasury of Abhidharma also teaches that making offerings to one's parents—along with the sick, Dharma teachers, and Bodhisattvas who will achieve Buddhahood this life—generates boundless merit, even though they may not be enlightened beings.

Everyone's relationship with their parents is unique, and regular visits are not always possible. But in today's digital age, distance is no longer a significant barrier. Children who are truly devoted to their parents will frequently call or video chat with them. Yet, I have seen some people who rarely reach out to their parents, even though they video chat all the time with their friends. Perhaps they have no desire to see their parents. This, too, can be seen as a sign of diminished filial piety. If your parents are still with you, it is best to keep in regular contact. Even a weekly or monthly call, just to have a heartfelt conversation, can mean a great deal.

Some parents even purchase mobile phones to stay in touch with their children. My own mother did this. At that time, our academy had a landline, but it was often out of service, so my mother insisted on having a mobile phone. To this day, her number remains in my phone's contact list; I have never been able to bring myself to delete

it. Sometimes, when I scroll through my contacts and see her name, I might even press the number, and a wave of emotion arises as I remember: “She is no longer in this world. The call will not go through.”

Among those of us here, I imagine all were born from a mother’s womb, not miraculously from a lotus flower.⁷⁹ Since we are all born from our mothers’ wombs, it is natural for us to feel a deep and instinctual affection for our parents. Yesterday, I listened to many of you share your thoughts on reverence and love toward parents during the oral presentation session, and I found your speech well-delivered. You were truly speaking from the heart, with genuine feeling. This is the right way to explore the text.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE FIVE PUNISHMENTS

Severity of Filial Impiety

Confucius said, “Among the 3,000 offenses subject to the Five Punishments, none is more egregious than filial impiety.

According to Confucius, ancient Chinese legal codes identified 3,000 offenses that could be punished by what were known as the Five Punishments. Of all these offenses, none was considered more serious than failing to fulfill one’s filial duties. The Five Punishments in ancient China were tattooing, nose amputation, foot amputation, castration, and the death penalty. The tattooing was not decorative; it was a permanent mark of shame, created by carving characters into a criminal’s face and filling the wounds with ink. Surprisingly, similar practices persist today, albeit unintentionally, in the treatment of animals. For example, during life-releasing activities, some people carve characters onto the bodies of frogs, hoping the mark will protect them from being recaptured. While the intent is protective, the act itself is cruel.

Another severe punishment was nose amputation, which involved cutting off the criminal's nose. In certain remote areas of the Tibetan plateau, remnants of such practices may have lingered into the recent past, often targeting women. For example, if a wife left her husband for another man, she might be punished by facial disfigurement, such as having her nose cut off. I recall once seeing an older woman without a nose; people said that she had engaged in immoral behavior in her youth, and this was the punishment.

In case of marital discord, the threat of nasal mutilation was sometimes used to intimidate wives. According to the autobiography of the great dakini Kunzang Dekyong Wangmo, also known as Sera Khandro, when she left her former partner Gyelse, his family threatened to cut off her nose. This experience deeply affected her, instilling in her a strong sense of renunciation and leading her to resolve to leave this world entirely. Fortunately, favorable conditions allowed her to recover and continue her spiritual journey.

The remaining three punishments were equally severe. Foot amputation involved cutting off an offender's feet. Castration refers to the destruction of the reproductive organs. The final punishment was the death penalty, often carried out by beheading.

Historical records give us a sense of the scale of this ancient legal system: of the 3,000 distinct crimes, 1,000 were punishable by tattooing, 1,000 by nose amputation, 500 by foot amputation, 300 by castration, and 200 by death. These brutal penalties were gradually abolished over time.

Today, each country maintains its own legal system, governing through the implementation of criminal, civil, and constitutional laws. This diversity extends within nations as well. For example, in the United States, federal laws can differ from state laws, and one state's laws can vary greatly from another's—what is a crime in one state may be legal in another. In contrast, China's legal system is more unified: its criminal law comprises 452 articles, and its constitution, after five amendments, now includes 143 provisions.

To sum up, among those 3,000 offenses once subject to the Five Punishments, filial impiety was considered the gravest. If such harsh laws were still enforced today, many people would likely not escape unscathed.

The Three Gravest Forms of Unfilial Conduct

Confucius said: “Those who threaten rulers recognize no authority above them; those who slander sages acknowledge no law; those who denigrate filial conduct recognize no parents. These three lead to great chaos.”

In ancient times, to coerce one’s ruler was to disregard rightful authority. To slander the great sages was to reject moral and legal principles. To denigrate filial culture, or to criticize others for honoring their parents, was to turn one’s back on one’s own parents. These three forms of disrespect were the very root of social disorder.

Let us first consider the phrase, “Those who threaten rulers recognize no authority above them.” Those who intimidate or coerce a ruler—or any leader—clearly do not respect the position of authority. In many traditions, we are taught to honor our leaders with a sense of respect similar to that we have for our own fathers. A person who disrespects or threatens their leader cannot be considered to act with filial respect. In fact, by doing so, they place themselves in a precarious position.

As I have advised before, whether you like a leader or doubt their competence, to survive and thrive in a particular group or society, it is crucial to learn to follow and accommodate their leadership. If you cannot, your only real choice is to leave and seek opportunities elsewhere. Unless there is a specific reason, a wise person does not needlessly oppose their leader. If you wish to remain in a particular place, it is necessary to maintain a respectful and cooperative attitude toward those in authority. Simply turning your back and refusing to acknowledge them will not serve you well in the long run.

Humility and reverence are also vital for great leaders. To address occasional signs of arrogance and to better equip our Dharma teachers, we recently invited some professional instructors to give a training session on effective leadership and management for our khenpos and khenmos. This kind of knowledge is genuinely worthwhile.

To the arrogant, my middle school teacher would say, "Do not think you are the best in the world!" At that time, he was teaching us Sakya Pandita's *Treasury of Good Advice*. I was doing well in this subject, and I must admit that I had developed a bit of pride. I thought, "Surely there is nothing in this text that I do not already know." So I started chatting with the student next to me. The teacher

noticed and called me out: “You there! Do not assume you are the best in the world—there is always a second and a third!” We did not dare reply openly, but we whispered to each other under the table: “Even if there is a second and a third, they are still not better than the first!” (Audience laughing)

Honestly, it would be beneficial for us as Dharma teachers to engage more with the wider world. Some may worry, “If I study too much, I will develop too many conceptual thoughts, which will obstruct my practice.” In truth, worldly learning does not harm practice. Most of us are still on the path and have not yet attained great realization, our minds already filled with conceptual thoughts—extra knowledge will not suddenly block or perfect our spiritual path.

Now, the second point: “Those who slander sages acknowledge no law.” This refers to disparaging virtuous figures like the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, as well as their teachings. Those who speak ill of such individuals are essentially lawless. They lack respect for the foundational spiritual and ethical teachings that guide humanity. *The Just King* also advises against opposing authority, as it makes survival difficult. Similarly, for those with religious faith, it is especially unwise to criticize the teachings of enlightened beings. These individuals have realized profound truths about both

worldly and transcendent matters. Slandering their wisdom leads to nowhere good.

The third point: “Those who denigrate filial conduct recognize no parents.” Individuals who refuse to appreciate or praise the culture of filial piety, or who disparage the acts of filial devotion, are unlikely to truly acknowledge their own parents, let alone show them respect.

As Confucius concluded, “These three lead to great chaos.” Disrespecting leaders, sages, and one’s parents sows societal disorder. Conversely, revering them and their teachings fosters harmony and good fortune. Therefore, we should never engage in behaviors that could lead to social disorder. Instead, we need to cultivate a mind of gratitude and reverence in how we relate to leadership, sages, and our parents. *The Buddha Speaks the Mahayana Bodhisattva Treasury of True Dharma Sutra* teaches:

Let caring for your parents be your highest duty;

Let honoring and serving your teachers be equally so;

Carefully contemplate the Three Jewels and the Dharma gates—

Herein lies the true meaning and benefit.

Honoring our parents, revering our teachers, and reflecting deeply on the teachings and qualities of the Three Jewels—these are among the most meaningful and beneficial endeavors we can undertake in this life.

A heart of reverence is the foundation of stability and harmony. Arrogance, on the other hand, benefits neither ourselves nor others. Not long ago, a former teacher of mine—someone who had taught me for a few classes—contacted me. He said that his family was going through difficult times and asked whether our charitable foundation might be able to help. As per the foundation’s internal policy, an interview must be conducted to verify the situation before financial aid can be granted. We did our best to arrange a visit, but every time our team tried to conduct a home visit, his daughter refused: “I am not available today. Tomorrow will not work either...” Her tone was incredibly arrogant. Her family was the one in need of aid—and yet she was never available! (Audience laughing)

No matter your social status or background, humility is essential. Many truly remarkable individuals around the world are deeply humble. No one enjoys being around people with an arrogant appearance and an empty inner world. If one’s heart is full of wisdom and compassion, one’s outward demeanor naturally becomes

modest, harmonious, and accommodating. Such a person is a true source of inspiration wherever they go.

I hope that each of you may cultivate a kind and humble attitude toward others and strive to maintain harmonious relationships with those around you. Some people only show kindness toward those they like. When they meet those they admire, they embrace them and say, “Ah, you are here! I have missed you so much.” But when they encounter those they dislike, their demeanor instantly changes—they will not even offer a simple hello. In reality, whether you like a person or not, every being has been your caring mother across countless lifetimes. Even if you cannot befriend someone you dislike, do not show your dislike openly. Strong attachments to likes and dislikes create stark divisions: warmth for favorites, coldness for others. Many real-life stories have shown that such divisive attitude often does not lead to positive consequences. After all, all relationships are impermanent, and even the closest bonds can quickly deteriorate. There are many examples of this, but since time is short today, I can share them next time—perhaps they will offer some inspiration for your spiritual journey.

Lecture Twelve

August 18, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

While the authorship of *The Classic of Filial Piety* remains a subject of debate, the principle that honoring and caring for one's parents brings boundless merit is universally affirmed—not only in the Confucian Classics, but also in Buddhist scriptures. Next Saturday marks the Ullambana Festival. On the morning, we will recite the *Ullambana Sutra* and other prayers, dedicating the merit to our parents and all mother-like sentient beings.

Both Confucianism and Buddhism offer valuable perspectives on filial piety, though their emphases differ. Confucian texts, such as *The Classic of Filial Piety*, focus primarily on honoring one's parents in this present life, without addressing future lives. Buddhist teachings, on the other hand, take a more profound view: we are encouraged not only to fulfill our filial duties while our parents are alive—by cultivating gratitude, remembering their kindness, and repaying their love—but also to plant the seeds of virtue that will benefit them in future lives as well.

If, perhaps out of ignorance or arrogance, we have acted in ways that were disobedient or caused our parents distress, it is important to

offer a sincere confession directly to them. We might gently say, “In the past, due to my immaturity and stubbornness, I did things that hurt you. I truly regret it and ask for your forgiveness.” As taught in Vajrayana Buddhism, if our guru is still living, confess in person; if the guru has passed away, confess before the guru’s image. We can apply this approach when confessing to our parents. Speaking personally, I was not a child who caused my parents excessive worry or constantly disobeyed them. Still, when certain memories arise, I sometimes feel that if I had handled certain matters differently, the outcome might have been better.

CHAPTER TWELVE: EXPOUNDING THE VITAL WAY

“Expounding” means promoting or spreading, while “vital way” refers to the most important principle—in this context, the essential path of supreme filial culture. This chapter outlines four major ways through which filial culture can be disseminated: filial devotion, fraternal respect, music, and ritual propriety. Similarly, in the Buddhist text *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, Master Tsongkhapa identified three essential elements of spiritual practice: renunciation, bodhicitta, and the wisdom of emptiness.

Filial Devotion

Confucius said, “To teach the people mutual respect and love, nothing is better than filial devotion.”

Confucius taught that if a ruler wishes to guide the people toward mutual respect and love, the best approach is to practice filial devotion personally—showing respect for their own parents and teachers. In other words, anyone in a position of leadership must

first embody these values themselves, setting a positive example for others to follow.

Actions speak louder than words. A hundred directives issued by a project manager from his office are far less effective than one visit to the construction site in person. This principle is echoed in Mahayana Buddhism's teaching of the four ways of attracting beings, one of which is "practicing what one preaches."⁸⁰

The moral atmosphere of any community—be it a school, monastery, village, or country—is closely tied to the conduct of its primary leader. In a school, this is the principal; in a monastery, the abbot; in a village, the village chief; and in a country, the head of state. Those in charge play a decisive role, and their behavior greatly influences the actions of everyone else in the team. If the leader acts as a model, even without many words, others will naturally follow suit. *The Analects* states:

If a man is correct in his own person, then there will be obedience without orders being given; but if he is not correct in his own person, there will be disobedience even though orders are given.⁸¹

If leaders' actions are morally upright, those they lead will naturally follow the right path without being commanded. But if leaders lack moral integrity, even their most insistent commands may go unheeded.

Elder Care in Ancient and Modern Society

Throughout Chinese history, emperors placed significant importance on filial piety. For example, it is recorded that Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty, Liu Heng, issued general amnesties and elder care decrees during his reign. The elder care policies stipulated that citizens aged eighty and above were entitled to receive monthly rations from the government, including rice, meat, and wine. Those aged ninety and above received additional support, such as silk and cotton. At that time, the government took an active role in supporting older adults.

As Buddhist practitioners, we have a clear responsibility to address the issue of elder care, particularly for the parents of those who have dedicated their lives to our communities. Leaders of monasteries and Dharma centers should be especially mindful of the parents of resident monastics, proactively inquiring into their well-being and offering support when needed. I have emphasized this in recent years, and it is heartening to see so many compassionate

individuals taking action. Across various regions, there is a growing commitment to establishing nursing homes for the parents of both monastics and lay practitioners. I sincerely hope these efforts are well-coordinated to maximize their benefits.

The elder care issue is especially relevant in the context of broader societal changes. China has implemented a family planning policy for over thirty years and, like Japan, is now facing the challenges of an aging society. One of the apparent issues at hand is the growing number of elderly individuals who are left unattended. Many children are unable to care for their aging parents because they live far from home for work or have entered monastic life. There are also some people who lead a quasi-monastic lifestyle—abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. They are like practitioners who have taken what is known as a gomi lay ordination, as described in the *Commentary to the Ascertaining the Three Vows*. These social trends further highlight the need for Buddhist communities to step forward and provide support, ensuring that elderly residents are cared for. There are a great number of people in society with abundant resources who wish to do good—some have financial means, others have time, and still others can offer space or services. What is truly needed now

is a selfless and compassionate leader to bring these resources together.

When I first began exploring the establishment of charitable foundations, I struggled to find a clear starting point. But over time, the path became clear. I noticed that some underprivileged university students needed financial assistance to complete their studies. At the same time, I knew there were people willing to contribute money, some eager to volunteer, and others with great wisdom and organizational skills. At that point, we created a shared platform to bring these resources together and completed all the required legal procedures. Since the organization's establishment, it has been benefiting numerous individuals. Seeing this fills me with joy. Moreover, such an organization can continue to serve and bring comfort to many more people in the future, long after we have passed from this world. Around the globe, there are nonprofit organizations that have endured for over a century, steadily bringing warmth and light to society.

In summary, filial devotion cannot remain an abstract idea—it must be expressed through our actions. I encourage each of you here at the academy to first consider how you can benefit your own hometowns following your graduation. I hope you will strive to give back and make a meaningful impact in the places where

you were born, for these places are karmically connected to you, hold your memories, and have shaped who you are today. If your circumstances truly prevent you from doing so, then perhaps you can redirect your efforts toward Africa or other places in need, spreading the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings. That, too, is a noble and necessary undertaking.

Fraternal Respect

“To teach the people propriety and compliance, nothing is better than fraternal respect.

Earlier, we discussed filial piety, which primarily refers to the respect we owe to our parents and teachers. Now, let us turn our attention to fraternal respect, which is about cultivating love and affection among siblings. Confucius taught that if a ruler wishes to guide people toward proper etiquette and obedience, the most effective way is to demonstrate sincere love and respect toward their own brothers and sisters.

Of course, moral customs can vary from place to place. In areas where traditional ethical education may be less accessible, we sometimes see these fundamental principles less strongly upheld. Sadly, it is not uncommon to hear stories of siblings who no longer

speak to each other due to disputes over inheritance or other matters.

Ideally, brothers and sisters should show deep affection for one another and live together in harmony. As stated in the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*:

The elder brother should be kind;

The younger brother should be respectful.

When brothers are harmonious,

Filial piety naturally follows.

Elder siblings should care for their younger siblings, who in turn should show them due respect. This harmony among siblings embodies not only filial piety toward one's parents but also a broader filial culture.

Elder Care in Ancient and Modern Society

A family struggles when siblings lack love and respect for one another, while a family built on these values thrives. I recall a story from my own relatives that illustrates this point. I once told this story during a lesson on the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*.

One family has more than ten children, and their household is always filled with discord and noise. The parents themselves set a poor example—even giving their children rather unpleasant names. The oldest child constantly bullied his younger siblings, who would then take out their frustrations on those even younger. The eldest son, who is my age and also born in the year of the tiger, has nine visible scars on his head, likely from all their fighting—we once counted them together. As these children grow up, they lead troubled lives, frequently engaging in theft and other unethical behavior.

By contrast, another relative's family, also with many children, is marked by exceptional politeness and harmony among all siblings. The parents treat each child with genuine love, and the older siblings care for the younger ones, who in turn show great respect and affection for their elders. It is a loving and peaceful household. As these children grow up and enter society, they become capable and successful individuals in our region.

A Story of Fraternal Devotion

Those who grow up without respect for their parents or affection for their siblings may find it difficult to develop upright character. Conversely, the virtuous ones who demonstrate sincere devotion to

both parents and siblings will reap positive outcomes. *The Storehouse of Sundry Valuables* recounts a story that illustrates this point.

There was once a king named Dasharatha, who had four wives. The son of his first wife, Rama, was the crown prince—renowned as the eldest and most gifted of all the princes and the possessor of a miraculous weapon capable of subduing any enemy with ease. King Dasharatha had a special fondness for his third wife. One day, he promised her, “Whatever you desire, I will grant it.” She replied, “I have no requests for now, but when I do, I will let you know.” Later, the king fell gravely ill and was nearing the end of his life. Before passing, he installed Rama as his successor. At that moment, the third wife came forward and said, “I now ask that you fulfill your promise—let my son inherit the throne and revoke Rama’s succession.”

The king was torn. On one hand, he had already publicly declared Rama as his heir, and reversing this decision would be improper. On the other hand, he had sworn to fulfill his third wife’s wish. In the end, he decided to honor his promise, removing Rama from his position and naming the third wife’s son, Bharata, as the new crown prince.

After this happened, the second prince, Lakshmana, said to Rama, "You possess the treasure weapon. Why not use it now? Why did you suffer such humiliation?" Rama replied, "First, this is our father's command. To disobey him would be disrespectful and unfilial. Second, though Bharata's mother is not my birth mother, our father cherished her deeply, so I regard her as my own mother. Moreover, our younger brother Bharata is a good and capable person. I trust he will govern the kingdom well."

At the urging of the third wife, the king not only stripped Rama of his inheritance but also exiled both him and Lakshmana, forbidding them from returning for twelve years. Bharata, who had been abroad, was summoned back to be crowned king. However, Bharata had always been at peace with his two elder brothers and held them in deep respect. Grieved by the situation and disappointed with his mother, he insisted that Rama should be the king. Determined to set things right, Bharata traveled into the mountains to find his elder brothers and to request them to return.

When Bharata found Rama and Lakshmana and made his request, they replied, "We cannot return before the twelve years are over. To do so would violate our father's command." Seeing their unwavering resolve, Bharata asked Rama for his shoes. He then returned to the palace and placed Rama's shoes on the royal throne. Each

time he attended court, he would bow to the shoes as a gesture of deep respect for his brother. Though he repeatedly sent messengers to request their return, Rama and Lakshmana did not come back until the full twelve years had passed. When they finally returned, Bharata was overjoyed and immediately handed the throne to Rama. Because of their mutual respect and sincere devotion, the entire kingdom enjoyed harmony, prosperity, and many other auspicious signs.

The story shows how remarkable all three brothers were. It reminds us that human character varies significantly. In some families, every child turns out well; in others, even one troubled child can bring constant strife to the entire family; and in still others, every child may struggle—just like the children of the relative I mentioned earlier. Every time I pass through their town in Drango, I remember the unpleasant experience of staying at their house as a child.

Each of us plays a different role in our families. It is worthwhile to ask ourselves: “Do I really understand my siblings? What are their personalities like? Have I shown proper respect to my elder siblings? Have I truly cared for and protected my younger ones?” In any case, we should always strive to respect those older than us and care for those who are younger.

Reflecting on filial cultures, we might notice a difference in emphasis in some modern cultures, particularly in the West. There can be a strong focus on the idea that “we are all just human—everyone is equal,” which can sometimes be interpreted as making formal gestures of respect unnecessary. But when we overlook filial duties of respect and care, we risk reducing our family and society dynamics to a cold competition for power, losing the warmth that comes from kindness and love.

A respectful mind is truly a precious quality. In both Confucianism and Buddhism, respectful devotion is emphasized as a cornerstone of ethical and spiritual life. Today, the custom of bowing remains a living tradition in certain Eastern countries such as Japan, where it is common to bow before greeting someone with “Konnichiwa.” This simple gesture of etiquette is a lovely reflection of an excellent and enduring tradition of respect.

The Vajra-Like Bond of Spiritual Companionship

The principle of fraternal respect extends far beyond our biological families. It is equally—if not more—important in our relationships with vajra brothers and sisters, our spiritual companions on the Dharma path. Not long ago, I had the opportunity to gather with

some of our senior Dharma friends. I noticed how genuinely respectful they were toward one another. Each of them is truly remarkable, having made significant contributions to the spread of the Dharma. Yet, whether they were esteemed tulkus or learned khenpos, their respect for one another was heartfelt, and they sincerely rejoiced in each other's accomplishments.

A person's inner attitude is often revealed through their outward behavior. Sometimes, I notice a certain distance among practitioners, even a subtle sense of arrogance. When some encounter fellow Dharma friends, instead of approaching with warmth, they may keep their distance. It is important to remember that we are vajra brothers and sisters who share the same mandala, belong to the same lineage, and have studied and practiced together. At the very least, we should treat our vajra Dharma friends with respect and devotion—even those with whom we may not feel a strong karmic connection, or even those we find personally challenging. In the secular world, people often form deep and lasting friendships simply from attending school together for a few years. Yet among many Buddhist practitioners, this sense of connection can sometimes be lacking—a phenomenon that gives me pause and leaves me somewhat puzzled.

Of course, not all Buddhists are like this. Last year, a group of Dharma students in Sichuan who had been studying *The Way of the Bodhisattva* together for four years told me about the strong bond that had formed. At their graduation ceremony, they made a heartfelt vow to support one another through any future difficulties. They even sent me group photos from that day, and the joy on their faces was plain to see.

Strong friendships are also common in the secular world. For example, I have seen civil servants from Tibetan areas travel together to Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities for professional training. After spending time together, they often develop very strong relationships. You will hear them say things like, “You are my dear classmate. If you ever need anything, just let me know—I will take care of it.” Or, “I have classmates from all over the country. No matter where I go or what I do, they will always support me wholeheartedly.”

Students who spend just a few years together often form deep bonds that last a lifetime. My own high school experience lasted only three years, yet the friendship I formed with my classmates has endured for decades. Even now, more than thirty or forty years later, we still get together regularly.

In contrast, it sometimes seems that we as Buddhists are becoming more reluctant to connect with others. Perhaps some of us have reached such an advanced realization, nearing the attainment of a rainbow body—in which case, it is understandable to avoid social contact. But if we have not yet reached that level, and we find ourselves lacking even the ordinary warmth of friendship, it is worth reflecting: Are we, as Buddhists, falling behind worldly people in our cultivation of kindness and compassion?

It is my sincere hope that all of us studying the Dharma together can also form meaningful and lasting friendships. We have so many classes here at the academy—Buddhist Logic, Madhyamaka, and many others. Yet sometimes, with a touch of gentle concern, I notice that after graduating from, say, the Madhyamaka class, some students do not maintain even the ordinary friendships you would find in the secular world. Perhaps it is because they have studied Madhyamaka so deeply that they have thoroughly analyzed and deconstructed all conditioned phenomena, including relationships. Maybe they have all become great Prasangikas, abiding in the state of no-self and no assertions. (Audience laughing)

Music

“To transform societal norms and customs, nothing is better than music.

If a ruler wishes to reverse negative social trends or change undesirable customs, the most effective method is through music.

Transmitting Noble Ideals through Various Cultural Forms Such as Music

Throughout history, the transformation of social norms has often been led by culture and the arts. During times of political reform, nations have used songs to criticize perceived outdated ideologies, helping to phase them out of daily life. Likewise, music has been used to praise and promote new values and cultures. Today, music is not the only medium—television, film, and animation also serve as powerful vessels for culture, subtly shaping people’s thinking and choices. Therefore, employing music, film, or other cultural forms to communicate meaningful values is both necessary and impactful.

As Dharma practitioners, it is essential for us to utilize music and other forms of cultural expression to promote bodhicitta, praise the Buddha, and highlight the significance of virtuous actions such as

life release. I remember when we were first establishing a charitable foundation, a friend advised, “You should start with the song for the foundation. Music is an excellent way to touch people’s hearts.” Taking that advice to heart, I began composing songs even before the foundation was officially established. One lyric I wrote was, “To offer a rose is to leave fragrance on your own hand.” This simple line expresses a profound truth about virtue.

Buddhist liturgies are often chanted with a soothing, sonorous cadence. It is said that the origin of Buddhist chanting in Han Buddhism is connected to the songs of celestial beings. According to *A Grove of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma*, Cao Zhi, the son of the famous Cao Cao, once heard celestial beings singing while traveling through Mount Yu. He memorized their melodies, and from his transcription, the foundational tunes for Buddhist chanting were born. These sacred melodies have been passed down through generations and are still in use today. The graceful tones of morning and evening chants in Han monasteries are said to derive from these very voices of celestial beings, or yidams.

In the same way, the Tibetan tradition features countless vajra songs sung in calming, melodic tones. I am reminded of a story about one of the vajra songs composed by the Karmapa. Once, during a difficult crossing of the snow mountains, the Karmapa heard a

song sung by a celestial maiden in the night. The melody seemed to embrace him like a protector, soothing his fatigue and anxiety while inspiring courage and strength. He later transcribed this melody and composed a beautiful and moving song based on it. Similarly, in the biography of my own root teacher, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, it is recorded that he once heard a song sung by dakinis during a feast offering in a celestial pure land. Upon his return, he faithfully transcribed both the lyrics and the melody. To this day, we continue to sing this profound vajra song during feast offerings at Larung Gar.

Embedded with special blessings, when we chant prayers like the *Aspiration of the Great Perfection* or *The King of Aspiration Prayers* in resonant tones, they can touch the hearts of even those who may not share our spiritual beliefs. I have seen tourists, upon hearing the group chanting, exclaim, “Wow, that is so beautiful!” Through the blessing of the prayers and the simple beauty of sound, a seed of faith and joy in the Dharma is planted in their hearts.

For Buddhists, while study, contemplation, and meditation are the foundation of our spiritual practice, we must also, like the buddhas and bodhisattvas, apply a variety of skillful means to benefit others. In all our future efforts to share the Dharma, I believe we should consider art as a powerful vehicle. I once remarked during a lecture

at Peking University: “Why is art so compelling? Because it is the crystallization of wisdom that flows from the heart.” Perhaps the reason singers and celebrities are so widely admired is that through their melodious tones and performances, people find a certain kind of contentment. If secular art can achieve this, just imagine the profound power and immense benefits that could be realized when art is imbued with the wisdom and compassion of the sacred Dharma.

Ritual Propriety and Reverence

“To bring peace to the nation and govern its people well, nothing is better than ritual propriety. The essence of ritual propriety is simply reverence.

If a ruler wishes to govern the people and establish peace in the nation, there is no method more effective than the cultivation of ritual propriety. At its core, ritual propriety is an expression of reverence. In fact, not only ritual propriety, but also the virtues discussed earlier—filial devotion, fraternal respect, and music—ultimately stem from a heart of reverence. At their essence, they are all manifestations of this quality.

Reverence toward Dharma Teachers

Reverence is of fundamental importance. Buddhism emphasizes the significance of cultivating deep respect for one's parents and teachers. As disciples, we should hold our spiritual teachers in the highest regard. Venerable Yin Guang said that one part of sincere reverence brings forth one part merit and wisdom; ten parts of sincere reverence bring forth ten parts merit and wisdom. Likewise, Patrul Rinpoche pointed out that the blessings one receives from one's teacher and the Three Jewels directly mirror the depth of one's faith and reverence. Reverence is not about outward displays—such as making full prostrations the moment one sees their teacher on the road. The essence of reverence lies in the heart. True reverence is the heartfelt respect and admiration for the qualities and virtues someone embodies.

Speaking from my own experience, whenever I stand before a teacher from whom I have received Dharma teachings, I am naturally filled with a deep sense of reverence. The sacred teachings they have bestowed upon me are incredibly precious—what I have gained from them far surpasses anything I could receive from anyone else in the world, including my parents and academic teachers. Without the guidance from my Dharma teachers, I might still be lost in confusion and suffering, and in future lifetimes, I could even

find myself trapped in lower realms, enduring immense pain for countless eons.

I often reflect on this: even if we do not feel we have gained profound insight, attained any special realization, or reached enlightenment after encountering the Dharma, at the very least, our body, speech, and mind have come under some measure of discipline. We have come to understand the importance of abandoning negative actions and cultivating virtue. Had we never encountered the Dharma, our lives today might be quite different. Perhaps we would still consider it perfectly normal to harm other creatures for our own consumption, believing that our meals required the sacrifice of other lives. Without having studied the Dharma, taken refuge, or received ordination, we might continue to be responsible for the deaths of countless sentient beings, all for the sake of our indulgence.

Now that we have encountered the Dharma, even if not everyone attains high realization, at the very least, we have learned to stop taking life deliberately. We now hold the precious opportunity to purify the negative karma we created in the past. When we consider this transformation alone, how can we not feel a deep and natural reverence for our gurus and lineage masters?

Let me offer an analogy. Imagine a man who once lived in rags and hunger, wandering without a place to stay. One day, he met a compassionate benefactor who rescued him, offered him food, clothing, and a stable job. From that point on, his life has been transformed—he no longer wanders but finds refuge and security in his daily existence. If this man possesses even a small sense of gratitude, he surely holds deep reverence and heartfelt appreciation for the person who saved him.

Reverence Should Be Extended to All Beings

Reverence should not be reserved only for those who have directly benefited us. From the Mahayana perspective, Buddhas and sentient beings are fundamentally equal, and thus, reverence should be extended to all beings. In *The Lotus Sutra*, the bodhisattva Never Disparaging famously declared, “I would never dare disparage you, because you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!” He treated every being with the same respect he would offer a Buddha.

Furthermore, as stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

Thus the state of Buddhahood depends

On beings and on Buddhas equally.

What kind of practice is it then

That honors only Buddhas but not beings?⁸²

In terms of the causes and conditions needed to attain Buddhahood, sentient beings are just as essential as the buddhas. How, then, could it be reasonable to revere only the buddhas and not the sentient beings who make the attainment of enlightenment possible? Ideally, we should strive to develop the kind of reverence taught in the Mahayana tradition—an attitude of equal respect toward all sentient beings. If this is beyond our current capacity, we can strive to at least cultivate sincere reverence for our kind teachers and our parents.

“Therefore, respect the father, and the sons are happy; respect the elder brother, and the younger brothers are happy; respect the lord, and the subjects are happy. By honoring one individual, countless others are made joyful. The object of respect may be few in number, yet those who feel pleased by that respect are many. This is what is meant by ‘vital way.’”

When we show respect to a father, his children are uplifted; when we honor an elder brother, his younger siblings feel content; when we revere a ruler, the people of the nation experience happiness. This principle extends into our spiritual lives as well: when we express genuine respect to a spiritual teacher, their students are delighted. Honoring just one person can bring joy to countless others. The object of our reverence may be a single individual, but

because of their central role in the lives of many, the positive effect ripples outward—the number of people uplifted by our respect can be vast. In the original text, the “vital way” refers to filial piety or filial culture—the most essential path and a person’s most valuable moral quality.

Conversely, the opposite also holds true. If we fail to show respect to a father, his children are likely to feel hurt or unhappy. If we are disrespectful to an elder brother, the younger siblings may become upset. If we show disrespect toward a head of state, the citizens and ministers of that country will not be pleased. For example, when the leader of one nation speaks ill of the leader of another, it is common for the people of that country to feel collectively offended. Similarly, if a spiritual teacher is criticized or disrespected, their disciples will be deeply distressed. By treating others with sincere respect, we cultivate an environment of goodwill, which in turn fosters mutual respect and brings joy to individuals and their communities. This reflects the natural law of human connection. Therefore, cultivating reverence in our daily lives is essential.

The principle of equality, a central tenet of contemporary society, is sometimes rigidly interpreted to mean that all individuals are identical. In this view, traditional displays of deference and respect

are often misconstrued as acknowledgements of superiority. Consequently, the virtue of reverence has sometimes been sidelined as incompatible with modern ideals. It is crucial, however, to distinguish between equality in human worth and the diversity of roles and responsibilities. While people may stand on equal footing, their functions within a society are not the same.

In my own experience, I have found that even the strongest advocates for equality appreciate being treated with courtesy and respect. For example, in my interactions with Western university professors and scholars, I have observed that approaching them with pride or a condescending attitude is usually met with displeasure. In contrast, when I engage with humility and respect, they tend to respond warmly and appreciatively. This suggests that, regardless of our commitment to equality, the importance of respect in human interactions remains unchanged.

Reverence—The Key to Successful Interpersonal Relationships

In his *Treasury of Good Advice*, the great master Sakya Pandita offered us a profound insight that I referenced in our previous session:

Good personal qualities are ruined by pride;

One's sense of shame is ruined by desire.

*When he always criticizes his subjects,
The ruler has gone to ruin.*⁸³

Arrogance undermines our wisdom and other virtues, while greed erodes our sense of propriety and shame, making us insensitive to the consequences of our actions. In leadership, those who view subordinates with contempt cannot enjoy long-lasting success—their downfall is inevitable. Conversely, managers who respect and care for their teams thrive like towering trees, with prosperous endeavors and a bright future.

This principle applies not only to leadership but to all our relationships. When we approach others with genuine respect and care, we create the conditions for mutual flourishing and lasting harmony. With this in mind, I would like to offer some thoughts on how we can apply this wisdom within our own community of volunteers. It is essential for volunteers to respect department heads and communicate properly with superiors. Some volunteers may have strong personalities and may even criticize their supervisors openly or gossip behind their backs, but such behavior deviates from ethical conduct. Even if a department head seems lacking in certain areas, they likely excel in others that surpass your own strengths.

Volunteers benefit from understanding organizational harmony and respectful collaboration. Our academy maintains a tradition of showing deep respect for the rotator supervisors of the year. Even if we hear guidance from them that seems challenging or unreasonable, our practice is to receive it graciously in their presence. Of course, if a leader acts selfishly or inappropriately, it is perfectly acceptable to speak with them directly or privately. However, when their conduct is proper, we should offer respect, as one would to any superior guiding collective efforts. Through mutual reverence, our work for the benefit of all beings can truly flourish.

Some volunteers find it challenging to communicate effectively and work harmoniously with their leaders. When we seek to understand the source of such difficulties, two common causes often emerge. The first relates to educational conditioning. Many people have grown up with the ideal of “equality for all,” believing it means absolute sameness. As a result, they may think, “What is so special about a department head? We are all equal—who are you to manage me?” While this sentiment stems from a noble ideal of equality, its application here is misguided and unreasonable. To illustrate, imagine a son saying to his father, “Old man, what is so great about you? If you cross the line, I will beat you up!” Physically, a strong young son could certainly overpower his aging father, but morally,

it is clearly inappropriate for a son to raise his fists against his father.

A second, and very common, source of disharmony is arrogance. Once people acquire even a little knowledge or capacity, they often become arrogant. In any organization, there are managers who provide guidance—such as a homeroom teacher in a class—and members who are expected to cooperate, like students. It is natural and proper for students to respect their teacher. Yet, certain arrogant students might think, “I am smarter, speak better Mandarin, and am taller and better-looking than the teacher—what is so great about him?” Such an arrogant mindset fixates on personal strengths, blinding one to others’ virtues and fostering disdain—an unhealthy state of mind.

We must cultivate a wiser, more comprehensive perspective, avoiding narrow judgments. Leaders hold their positions for a reason, possessing qualities worthy of respect that may not be immediately apparent. The Dharma teacher of a class, much like the ruler of a small domain, deserves respect as the highest authority in that setting. Even if they have shortcomings, they are worthy of our esteem for imparting the precious Dharma—a vast and profound act of kindness. Similarly, department heads merit reverence in

accordance with societal norms of courtesy and the core values of traditional culture.

However, some volunteers resist showing reverence, countering a leader's single statement with ten opposing ones. This reflects not wisdom but a need for deeper character cultivation, including respect. Ironically, these individuals may struggle to recall a single scriptural reference in an oral presentation on the Middle Way, yet unleash harsh words effortlessly in arguments. Their "skill" in quarreling—always "winning" arguments—is nothing to pride oneself on.

We are living in a time of transition, a period marked by tensions between ancient and modern concepts, as well as between Eastern and Western cultures. In this climate, many people seem caught in between—they lack both the moral character, tolerance, foresight, and wisdom emphasized in Western traditions, and the traditional values rooted in the East. During volunteer department meetings at the academy, I often observe the expressions of participants to see how they respond to their leaders. In general, it is essential that we follow the management guidance. There is no need to harbor constant dissatisfaction with those in leadership. If you lack the merit to become a leader yourself, yet always find fault with those who are, this indicates an issue of personal integrity.

At the same time, I would like to gently remind some leaders not to become arrogant simply because they hold a supervisory position. One should not think of oneself as inherently superior, like the brahma, who developed pride in considering all beings as his children. Leaders who have no intention to serve others, and who instead see everyone as existing to serve them, may become autocratic, using selfishness and pride to suppress or even expel those they dislike. If a manager develops this kind of harmful mindset, the entire team is sure to suffer.

My root guru, His Holiness Jigme Punksothk Rinpoche, once gave a precious teaching on how to be a virtuous person. He said,

A person with good characteristics is respectful to those of higher status, compassionate to the less privileged, and gets along harmoniously with those who are their equals.

We all must navigate a world of relationships. If we do not learn how to conduct ourselves and relate to others, our interpersonal relationships will bring us much suffering. But if we do know how to behave properly, we will feel at ease no matter where we are—like fish in water, able to navigate and respond to any situation with confidence.

Perhaps in the past, many of us were not very skilled in dealing with others. But after studying teachings like this classic, we will surely grow and improve. Personally, I do not claim to have attained any great realization, but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, I believe I have passed the basic test. I maintain good relationships with people from various backgrounds, including both Tibetan and Han Chinese communities. Toward those above me, I show respect; toward peers, I maintain harmony; and toward those who may be less capable in certain aspects, I sincerely do my best to support them.

In short, if you have merit or qualities, do not allow them to become a source of arrogance. And if you lack such qualities, do not let yourself sink into hopelessness or despair. I have heard how some people tend to collect every negative label they can find and affix them to themselves, complaining, “I am so pitiful, so miserable, and so full of sorrow. I feel utterly hopeless. What is the point of my existence? Fate has been unfair to me. Everyone hates me. Even the crow I just saw does not like me...” Constantly attacking and tormenting yourself with such dark thoughts serves no purpose at all. We have been born into this world, and for that reason alone, we ought to cherish this life. Let us all try our very best to fill our days with light and meaning.

Moral Character—The Foundation of Spiritual Practice

Many teachings found in traditional culture closely align with those in Buddhism, especially in their shared emphasis on the crucial importance of moral character and respect. In Buddhism, the frequent use of honorific language demonstrates the high value placed on respecting others.

As we interact with those around us, it is normal for conflicts and disputes to arise from time to time, and addressing these through skillful methods can not only help us resolve the challenges effectively but also support our overall spiritual practice. I have noticed that some practitioners find it challenging to make progress on their spiritual path, not due to a lack of intelligence, but because they have not yet built a strong foundation in basic human character. They may find it difficult to conduct themselves appropriately or to get along with others. When they struggle to manage interactions with fellow practitioners, Dharma teachers, or disciplinarians, they may eventually feel the need to leave our academy. Sadly, such situations occur more often than we might hope.

Some individuals possess great wisdom and a strong sense of renunciation, and yet frequently clash with others or quickly identify faults in those around them. As a result, they move from one class

to another, never finding a sense of belonging, and each Dharma teacher they study with is left with an unfavorable impression. In time, they decide to leave Larung Gar and search for another Dharma center. Upon arriving at a new center, they might affectionately address the teachers there as “papa” and “mama,” placing all their hopes in these new mentors. Yet, even these “parents” cannot resolve their difficulties, and before long, they set off again, looking for other “brothers” and “sisters.” Observing this recurring pattern is truly saddening.

To conclude, I strongly advise that our spiritual practice begin with the basics: cultivating virtuous character. We must uphold sound moral principles and maintain integrity in our conduct. With this solid foundation, our spiritual practice will bear fruit.

Lecture Thirteen

September 1, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Today, we will continue our study of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, a cornerstone of Confucian thought. The work is composed of eighteen chapters, and in this session, we will be delving into Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen. As a result, today's class may run slightly longer than usual.

Lifelong Learning with a Joyful Mind

Given the vital importance of education, our love for learning should remain steadfast and enduring. I truly believe that everyone should cherish the opportunity to study. Yet, from what I observe, many people today are captivated by their phones, spending countless hours immersed in the digital world and absorbing a constant stream of fragmented information. It is wise for us to pause and reflect: Does this endless flow of information truly nourish our minds and add meaningful value to our lives?

Learning is essential throughout our entire lives—it shapes our character and enables us to become authentic spiritual practitioners.

However, due to habitual tendencies from past lives and other influencing factors, some people are naturally drawn to learning, while others feel discouraged at the mere mention of “study”—yet their spirits are instantly lifted at the prospect of a vacation. Regardless of our individual tendencies, it is important for each of us to cultivate a genuine enthusiasm for learning. No matter what stage of life we are in, we should never abandon our commitment to study.

Some people, at the height of their success—when they enjoy fame, status, and emotional well-being—may become complacent and neglect their studies. To give up learning simply because life is going well is truly unfortunate. In fact, it is during times of prosperity and ease that we should be even more diligent in our studies. Conversely, others may abandon learning when they are struggling—facing failure, moral decline, or suffering—because they feel too discouraged or overwhelmed to continue. Yet it is precisely in these difficult moments that learning can support us most. Through study, we may gradually experience joy and find our way out of life’s low points.

Whether we are studying spiritual teachings or secular knowledge, perseverance in learning is crucial. Some people stop learning after earning worldly diplomas or monastic degrees—this is not a healthy approach. To cease learning is to halt contemplation and

inner growth, and when that happens, our progress in life comes to a standstill. Therefore, we must not only develop a love for learning but also embrace the spirit of lifelong education. This ongoing commitment to study equips us to overcome life's challenges and helps us address emotional afflictions such as jealousy and pride. It is my sincere hope that we all keep this principle firmly in our hearts: "Lifelong learning, lifelong practice, and lifelong benefit to others."

Although this text falls under worldly knowledge, much of its content is extremely practical for daily life and deeply relevant to spiritual practice and the path of liberation. It is therefore well worth our careful study. Even if you consider yourself an accomplished spiritual practitioner, you are still a human being, and it is essential to know how to conduct yourself properly. Without a foundation of basic human decency, your spiritual practice—whether it is hearing, contemplation, or meditation—can be undermined, as can your ability to truly benefit others.

I encourage everyone to maintain a joyful and healthy attitude toward learning each day. Learning should be a source of pleasure, not a burden. Judging by the diligent efforts of our practitioners during daily morning recitations and their disciplined demeanor before and after class, I can see that many of you genuinely enjoy

your studies. When I give lectures at universities, I always feel a sense of delight when I visit campuses with a rich atmosphere of learning. On the other hand, certain institutions seem to lack this spirit, focusing instead on trivial matters driven by fame and personal gain. While such pursuits may seem meaningful, from a Buddhist perspective, they do not nourish the mind or offer real value for this life and future lives.

The Importance of a Broad Perspective

As we study a classical text like this, it is helpful to cultivate a broad perspective. Just as different companies have their own unique missions and goals, various cultural traditions emphasize different values. To truly understand the meaning of a text, we must consider its cultural background and historical context.

For instance, Confucius lived during the late Spring and Autumn period, a time when China was not yet unified. Over centuries, the country gradually evolved into its present form. Broadly speaking, Confucian thought emphasizes family values and governance within the state—at that time, most likely referring to the Zhou Dynasty—with a focus on happiness and harmony in the present life. In this context, the phrase “all under heaven” in the original

text primarily refers to the domain of the Zhou Dynasty. In comparison, Western culture often adopts a more global perspective, so a Western reader might interpret “all under heaven” as referring to the entire world. In Mahayana Buddhism, our perspective expands even further, as we aspire to benefit all sentient beings—not only humans, but also all other beings, including animals, and those who are invisible to the human eye.

For many Chinese people, traditional culture has been deeply ingrained for generations. In today’s interconnected world, we can benefit greatly from learning about both Eastern and Western traditions, as well as from understanding ancient philosophies alongside modern technology. The broader our knowledge, the more adaptable and confident we become in facing life’s challenges. As the omniscient Mipham Rinpoche wrote in *The Treatise on the Modes of Being*,

*Therefore, when it comes to positive and negative actions,
One needs an extremely wide scope of perception,
And especially, it is very important to have a broad understanding
And experience with the ways of one’s country, its customs and
states of affairs.*⁸⁴

In this spirit, it is helpful for us to understand the culture, politics, economy, ideologies, and historical contexts of various countries, and to remain attuned to the broader environment in which we live.

In everything we do, we should try to maintain an inclusive perspective. Whether in our spiritual practice, in promoting cultural values or the Dharma, or even in handling personal matters such as family or work, it is essential to keep the larger picture in mind. If we lose sight of the greater whole and instead become entangled in petty details, personal grievances, or afflictions such as greed, hatred, and ignorance, our efforts will be misguided and ultimately unfruitful.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: EXPANDING THE HIGHEST VIRTUE

Let us turn to Chapter Thirteen, titled “Expanding the Highest Virtue,” meaning the broad promotion of supreme moral values—namely, the culture of filial piety. The previous chapter explained the essential ways to advocate for this virtue. Chapter Thirteen further elaborates on the methods for spreading it throughout society.

Improper Method

Confucius said, “The way a noble ruler teaches filial piety is not by visiting each household or meeting people daily face-to-face.

According to Confucius, a leader’s role is to make filial devotion a core part of education, promoting it as a foundational value for everyone. When this principle of deep respect and care for one’s family takes root in people’s hearts, their lives naturally become more joyful and meaningful, and society as a whole finds peace. For

this reason, a nation's leaders need to take the lead in championing a culture of filial piety. The method does not involve visiting every household or instructing people face-to-face in filial behavior on a daily basis.

A great number of classic texts—such as *The Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Classic of Filial Piety*, and *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*—all place heavy emphasis on filial piety. In our modern society, there is a growing interest in reviving the wisdom of traditional cultures. The approach taken by national leaders to promote filial culture stands in contrast to that of certain religious traditions, which often involve individuals canvassing door to door or distributing flyers on the street. It is neither practical nor necessary for a leader to meet every citizen to personally explain how to practice filial devotion.

This reminds me of an experience at a school I founded. One day, I saw the principal standing in the sports field, calling out to several hundred students one by one: “Hey, you over there! That is not acceptable behavior!” “You! Do not throw your trash on the ground—pick it up!” and, “What are you wearing? Dress properly next time!” Later, I suggested to him, “Perhaps it would be more effective to establish clear policies on cleanliness and attire, and then have all the homeroom teachers implement them in their classes.

With hundreds of students, trying to correct each one individually may not bring the results you hope for.”

That said, sometimes face-to-face conversations are uniquely effective. When handling particular matters, meeting in person can yield far better results than simply sending a text or making a phone call. Certain individuals possess a unique presence or charisma that enables them to quickly foster understanding and resolution when meeting with others directly. There are times when those in management positions, such as class teachers, do need to instruct subordinates or students in person. I remember how Khenpo Depa personally guided us when teaching *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Every morning, he would stand at the door and inspect our appearance. On one occasion, he grabbed Lama Zhoki by the robe and asked, “Is this lay clothing or monastic clothing that you are wearing?” From that day on, the first thing we did each morning was to carefully tidy up our robes and ensure we were properly dressed. So, personal instruction is sometimes necessary, especially when a leader wishes to stress a point or address specific matters directly.

However, the principle being expressed here is somewhat different. From the perspective of a ruler or a high-level leader, if the goal is to foster a society-wide culture of filial piety, the recommended

approach is to first establish a comprehensive educational policy and then implement it systematically across the country. This is similar to how many provinces today promote policies such as “controlling dropout and ensuring compulsory education,” which aims to prevent children from leaving school and to guarantee that all children complete the nine-year compulsory education. The government first formulates these policies at the highest level, and then they are carried out through each level of administration. When I was a boy, similar policies were in place. At the time, once a child reached school age, it was mandatory to attend school. That is how I got the opportunity to attend school. Without that policy, I might never have had the opportunity to learn Mandarin Chinese or study other subjects.

In the future, when we find ourselves managing a class, a monastery, or a business, we may sometimes need to speak personally with individuals under our care. If our goal is for a large group of people to accept our guidance in a short amount of time, the most effective path is often to adopt this layered educational approach, working through hierarchical levels of implementation.

A ruler’s promotion of filial piety centers on three core duties: honoring one’s father, respecting one’s elder siblings, and revering the sovereign.

Honoring One's Father

“Filial piety is taught so that all fathers in the nation are respected.

By setting a personal example—honoring his own parents on behalf of all children—a ruler inspires the entire nation to respect their parents. In this way, all parents throughout the land receive the reverence and filial care they deserve.

The Five Ways of Practicing Filial Piety Toward One's Parents

Many Buddhist scriptures also emphasize the importance of filial piety and offer practical guidance for cultivating it. For instance, the *Dirgha Agama* outline five essential ways to honor one's parents. First: “Provide for them without allowing any lack.” As children, we must ensure our parents' material needs—such as food and clothing—are fully met. Second: “Seek their counsel before undertaking important matters.” When facing major life decisions, it is wise to consult our parents first. Unfortunately, some make significant choices—such as accepting a job or getting married—without informing their parents, which can appear disrespectful. Even if our parents are not highly educated or especially capable, seeking their guidance on important matters is a meaningful gesture of respect.

Third: “Follow their wishes with humility and refrain from disobedience.” This line encourages us to be adaptable and considerate of our parents’ wishes, rather than constantly disagreeing with them. Fourth: “Do not disobey their righteous instructions.” When our parents offer genuinely beneficial and ethical guidance, we should try our best to follow their advice. Fifth: “Continue the wholesome endeavors undertaken by one’s parents.” This means ensuring that the family’s virtuous traditions or professions are not discontinued. Many people hope that their children will carry on their work or values. For example, doctors may expect their children to also study medicine, and civil servants may encourage their children to follow a similar path. In India, the historical influence of the caste system has made the continuation of family professions especially significant.

Despite the emphasis on filial piety in both classical and Buddhist texts, it is often neglected in today’s world, and emotional ties between parents and children are weakening. For some, parents no longer hold a central place in their lives. However, I truly believe that as sons and daughters—whether laypeople or monastics—we have a responsibility to maintain a connection with our parents. To become indifferent to them is difficult to justify, not only from

a spiritual perspective but also from the standpoint of human conscience and decency.

Good Leadership as Collective Merit

When a ruler promotes filial culture and personally exemplifies respect for parents through their own conduct, it benefits all parents and brings great joy to all subjects in the nation. In truth, the well-being of any group—whether a nation, a company, or a family—is deeply connected to its leader. A leader who is committed to learning and who cares compassionately for those under their charge indicates the collective merit of the entire community. To have such leadership is a blessing.

Among the many excellent teachings of the omniscient Mipham Rinpoche in *The Just King*, there is a relevant verse:

To educate the ignorant, the king upholds the principles of ethics

Using proper laws.

When a ruler is good, living beings will be happy;

When a ruler is evil, the retinue and subjects are bound to suffer.⁸⁵

When a community is guided by a wise leader who delights in learning what to accept and reject, and who conducts themselves

in full accordance with the Dharma, the people experience immense happiness and security. Conversely, when a leader is morally corrupt, the people experience suffering.

While we may not be monarchs, each of us takes on a “kingly” role in different contexts—a head of household leads the family, a group leader guides the team, and a department head oversees the department. In each case, we assume some measure of leadership. As we take on such roles, bear in mind to first value learning, as highlighted in the treatise. Yesterday, in a meeting with Dharma friends who manage our study groups, I reminded them: “As managers, we must first prioritize learning and understand the rules relevant to our roles. Anyone who fails to achieve this probably cannot effectively lead others. People might think, ‘This person does not seem to understand their own work, let alone anything else.’”

The second principle of good leadership is to be fair and impartial in handling matters. Acting justly brings satisfaction and happiness to those under our care. On the other hand, a manager who is hot-tempered and lacking in virtue is unlikely to remain unbiased, which can lead to hardship and dissatisfaction among subordinates. Some leaders are genuinely difficult to work with. Due to the ripening of past karma, some people may find themselves suffering

under their authority with no easy way out. They must face the leader's cold, harsh demeanor every day, witnessing a constant display of negative emotions such as sorrow, arrogance, jealousy, and anger. Positive qualities, on the other hand, are as unattainable as the child of a barren woman, flowers in the sky, or hair on a tortoise.

Both filial devotion and effective leadership rest upon the same foundation: the virtue of character. A ruler who honors his own parents sets an example that inspires the entire nation to be filial, ensuring that all parents receive the respect and care they deserve. Likewise, in any sphere of leadership, one's conduct becomes the model for others to follow. Leadership rooted in learning, fairness, and compassion brings collective happiness and harmony. Thus, whether as children toward our parents or as leaders toward those in our care, we must cultivate virtue as the basis for all our actions.

Respecting One's Elder Siblings

"Fraternal respect is taught so that all elder brothers in the nation are respected.

When a ruler educates the people in the principles of harmonious relationships among siblings, all elder brothers throughout the nation receive the respect they deserve. The actions of a sovereign

have far-reaching effects on the entire nation. When a ruler actively promotes a culture of fraternal harmony—encouraging siblings to live in peaceful accord—it naturally inspires younger siblings across the country to love and revere their older brothers. This, in turn, fosters noticeably better relationships among siblings.

Vajra Brothers and Sisters Should Remain Closely United

The culture of fraternal respect primarily concerns relationships between siblings. However, due to China's one-child policy, most children born in the 1980s and 1990s grew up as only sons or daughters. As the sutra says,

Alone they go through life and death, and alone they drift,
hither and thither.

While many people may not have siblings by blood, they do have numerous Dharma brothers and sisters, connected through the vajra-like bond of the sacred Dharma. In fact, this spiritual relationship can be even closer and more enduring than that of siblings by blood. Like the flame and the wick of a lamp, this connection continues until the attainment of full enlightenment. It is essential to regard all Dharma friends—including our closest vajra friends,⁸⁶ near Dharma friends,⁸⁷ distant Dharma friends,⁸⁸ and the general Dharma friends⁸⁹—as our siblings.

I believe it is of utmost importance for Buddhists to maintain strong and heartfelt connections with one another. The bond between vajra brothers and sisters who have received vajrayana teachings from the same guru, within the same mandala, should far surpass that of classmates in worldly institutions. Yet, just yesterday, a practitioner said to me, "Nowadays, Dharma friends seem to have no feelings for one another. Everyone feels cold and indifferent." I replied, "If you feel cold, then you must be the one to light the fire!" Simply complaining suggests we are not doing our part. When we recognize a problem, we should work toward a solution rather than blaming others or standing by with a critical eye. If the room is cold, everyone should contribute ideas to warm it up, but the person who first feels the chill should take the initiative. If you do not, who will?

Being an only child is just one possible factor behind the current strained relationships. In some families, even with multiple children, the emotional bonds between siblings are weak. They may only come together when their parents pass away and it is time to divide the inheritance, rarely staying in touch otherwise. This, too, is deeply unfortunate.

Whether our bonds are formed through worldly ties of blood or through transcendent spiritual connections rooted in wisdom and

compassion, the fact that we have become “siblings” in any form means we should cultivate and sustain a close relationship. For example, if you learn that a Dharma friend has fallen ill, you should care for them as you would your own brother or sister. We must not neglect someone simply because they are not a blood relative. In fact, taking good care of our Dharma friends and treating them as our siblings is a great way of practicing filial piety.

In the *Dirgha Agama*, the Buddha teaches that we should practice three forms of loving-kindness: loving-kindness in body, loving-kindness in speech, and loving-kindness in mind. Loving-kindness in body means getting along well with others. It is not helpful to withdraw from social contact or avoid others; instead, actively engage with those around us and strive to live in harmony. Loving-kindness in speech involves praising others’ good qualities through gentle and kind words. Loving-kindness in mind refers to maintaining a heart free from anger, jealousy, and other afflicted emotions.

In the Mahayana tradition, we are encouraged to relate to all sentient beings through these three kinds of loving-kindness, treating them as our own parents and siblings. After all, throughout our countless lifetimes in samsara, all sentient beings have been our parents, our brothers, and our sisters. When we truly reflect on this and meditate

with this perspective, our compassion and loving-kindness will naturally expand and deepen.

Revering the Sovereign

“Ministerial deference is taught so that every lord in the nation is respected.

When a ruler educates the people in the principles of loyal service and ministerial deference, it fosters a society in which all leaders are honored. At the heart of ministerial culture lies respect and loyalty toward those in positions of authority. When the spirit of loyal service is widely upheld, people naturally defer to and respect their leaders. Confucian philosophy, in particular, emphasizes reverence for one’s parents, elder brothers, and superiors. Buddhism extends this principle further, stressing the importance of devotion and respect toward one’s spiritual teacher—especially the guru from whom one has received vajrayana teachings. When a disciple cultivates genuine reverence, joy, and pure perception toward their teacher, blessings arise spontaneously, leading to a state that transcends ordinary conceptual thought and language.

Balancing Individuality with Filial Respect

When we examine the idea of respect through a cultural lens, we notice some significant differences between Eastern and Western perspectives. In cultures influenced by Confucian values, deference or obedience is considered an essential virtue. Children are expected to listen to their parents, younger siblings to heed their elders, and subordinates to follow the direction of their leaders. In such a context, even if someone is less capable or a bit slow, their obedience often earns them the affection of their parents and the recognition of their leaders. However, a disobedient person—no matter how talented or unique—may struggle to gain approval and is often viewed as problematic by those in authority.

By contrast, Western cultures, shaped by individualism, egalitarianism, and a spirit of critique, place a strong emphasis on individuality. People are encouraged to develop their own voice and express their thoughts openly, even if it means challenging parents, teachers, or employers. I recall visiting a Western country and hearing a small child who, with great seriousness, explained his critique of the president, declaring that he would not vote for him when he grew up.

The cultivation of a strong personal identity and critical thinking skills is one of the great strengths of many Western societies. However, a potential challenge arises when this celebration of individual autonomy leads to the dismissal of traditional filial duties, thereby weakening essential family bonds. Our parents and elders, having already traveled further along the path of life, usually possess more experience and insight. Much of their advice comes from a place of deep understanding and sincere concern for our long-term well-being. Although we may not always immediately grasp the wisdom in their guidance, it can be profoundly helpful. If, from an early age, we develop disdain for our elders—resisting everything our parents and teachers suggest and refusing to learn from their experience—we may end up facing undesirable consequences.

The stark differences between Eastern and Western cultures can sometimes create a wide gulf between traditional Chinese parents and their children who have studied in the West, often leading to frequent conflicts. I have occasionally observed similar tensions between departmental supervisors and volunteer staff members at our academy. Tibetan culture and Confucian values share many similarities, especially in their emphasis on reverence and deference. As a result, some of our leaders, shaped by this tradition, may evaluate volunteers primarily on their compliance. If a person

follows directions, they may be kept on the team even if their skills are not fully developed. Conversely, someone perceived as too individualistic or noncompliant might be asked to leave, regardless of their valuable abilities.

Of course, this dynamic is not solely the responsibility of parents or leaders. People are shaped by diverse cultural backgrounds, which influence their perspectives and decision-making in unique ways. In the face of these tensions, it is important to consider both the cultural differences between East and West, as well as the deeper causes of disharmony. Often, conflict between parents and children arises from a combination of factors, such as a child's growing independence and a parent's well-intentioned but sometimes excessive desire for control. Some parents assume they must always be the best teachers in their children's eyes. Yet, from the child's perspective, the opposite may be true. Some children may find their parents the most difficult people to be around, as they constantly impose their own ideas and experiences, leaving the children feeling they have no freedom. In some cases, parents become overly involved in their children's lives—even when their children are in their thirties or forties, they may still be reminded daily to wash their face, brush their teeth, or eat their meals. Such persistent interference over trivial matters—repeated endlessly—can lead to frustration.

When a parent's desire for control meets a child's growing need for independence, the relationship can begin to fray, sometimes to the point of cold indifference. At that stage, parents feel deep disappointment and heartbreak, lamenting, "I have devoted my whole life to raising this child, and now he has abandoned me in a nursing home and never visits." For parents in Eastern cultures, placement in a professional facility can feel like the ultimate abandonment. Yet in the West, providing excellent care for one's parents in a professional facility might be seen as a responsible and dignified choice.

In short, a stable social order—both in families and in professional settings—relies on reciprocal duties: nurturance and concern from those in authority should be met with deference and respect from younger generations and subordinates.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

"The Classic of Poetry states, 'The kind and compassionate lord is the parent of the people.'

A ruler who is compassionate, benevolent, and approachable comes to be regarded as a parent to the people. Though there is no blood relation, such a person earns this title through their loving care and

concern for others. Whether one is a monarch ruling a nation or a leader managing a small group, compassion remains an essential quality. Even if a leader does not possess great wealth, it is still vital to show genuine concern for those under their care. For the people, this attention and kindness from their leader is deeply meaningful. Without the expression of wisdom and compassion, even those with power, merit, and ability may fail to truly win the hearts of others.

As Sakya Pandita wrote in the *Treasury of Good Advice*:

*Rulers especially must be even-tempered;
It is petty to be angered by trifles.
Even if a snake had a gem on its head,
What sensible person would stand before it?*⁹⁰

In other words, if a ruler's temperament is unpleasant, people will distance themselves and, in time, may leave altogether. Just as a sensible person would never approach a venomous snake, even if it bore a wish-fulfilling jewel on its head, people will not follow a leader whose disposition is harmful.

Conclusion

“Without supreme virtue, how could one possibly bring such remarkable accord to the people?”

Without the highest virtue of kindness and compassion, how could a ruler possibly win the hearts of the people in such a profound way? And without winning the people’s hearts, how could one achieve such great accomplishments in guiding and transforming them?

There is an ancient saying, “Those who win the hearts of the people win the world; those who lose the hearts of the people lose the world.” Only those who possess a truly compassionate heart can earn the deep respect, love, and support of others. In contrast, those who lack compassion and instead cause harm will inevitably lose their positions and influence.

For us as Buddhists, compassion is, of course, central to our spiritual practice. Yet its importance extends equally to our worldly affairs, especially in any role of leadership. Whether we are secular managers or spiritual teachers, it is essential to care for those around us. This care cannot be a hollow gesture or a superficial display; it must be rooted in genuine compassion and expressed through

concrete actions that help resolve people's difficulties and alleviate their sufferings.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: WIDELY SPREADING ONE'S NAME

The Role of “Face” in Eastern and Western Cultures

The first chapter of this text teaches us to “spread our good name to posterity, and thereby bring honor to our parents.” Here, Confucius expands on this idea, focusing on how to earn a reputation that endures across generations. In Buddhism, reputation is one of the eight worldly concerns that practitioners are encouraged to avoid chasing, as it can lead to attachment and suffering. Yet, from a worldly perspective, a good reputation and noble social standing do hold significant value. Confucianism places great emphasis on reputation—both personal honor and the family name.

This concept of “face”—or preserving dignity and public standing—is deeply familiar to me, as it is woven into the fabric of my Tibetan culture. In my homeland, people hold their “face” in such high regard that its loss can feel worse than death. For example, if two people engage in a heated dispute and one is publicly shamed,

onlookers might murmur something that sounds startling to Western ears: “To lose face so completely...he might as well be dead.” Similarly, when a child’s dishonorable actions shame the family, the parents may feel “too ashamed to remain in this world.” While these statements may seem hyperbolic, they reveal a cultural truth: for many, honor is more precious than anything else—even life itself.

This collective sense of honor does not appear to be as prominent in Western countries. In countries like Germany and Sweden, an individualistic worldview often prevails. A child’s actions are typically seen as their own responsibility, and their misdeeds are not necessarily considered a reflection on the family’s honor. This distinction highlights a fundamental divergence between the Eastern and Western ways of thinking.

Cultural Differences in Perceptions of Honor and Disgrace

Nevertheless, when someone possesses an exceptionally virtuous character that is universally admired, their achievements can bring honor not only to their family but also to their entire community, regardless of cultural background. However, the qualities that

define such virtue—and what it means to bring honor to one’s family—can vary greatly from one culture to another.

For example, when a child from a rural place in the Han regions is accepted into a university, their parents may break into joyous celebration. On one hand, they see this achievement as a promise of a brighter future for the entire family. On the other hand, as a rare accomplishment in their community, it brings immense pride and “face” to the parents. Now, imagine that the same child chooses a different path and decides to become a monk. The parents’ reaction is often the complete opposite. Many monastics have shared that, as the Lunar New Year approaches, their parents warn them repeatedly: “Please do not come home for the holidays—it would be too embarrassing for us.” But what is there to be embarrassed about? Some parents may even proudly accept their children joining gangs or engaging in morally questionable professions, yet feel ashamed when their child takes ordination and follows the bodhisattva path. This mentality certainly warrants deeper reflection.

Naturally, people are shaped by the traditional cultural beliefs they are born into, and those from different cultural backgrounds most certainly think and act in very different ways. In Tibetan areas, for example, the reaction is often the reverse. Parents feel overjoyed and deeply honored when their child becomes ordained. If that

child later returns to lay life, the parents may feel so ashamed that they say things like: “It would have been better if this child had died young. If they had passed away earlier, I would not be so heartbroken now.” This, too, reflects a culture’s deeply held values. What is celebrated in one society may be a source of embarrassment in another. Comparing these perspectives side by side reveals just how profoundly culture shapes our understanding of honor and shame.

The First Form of Filial Piety

Confucius said, “A noble person is filial in serving his parents, and so his loyalty can be transferred to serving his ruler.”

Confucius taught that an enduring reputation across generations is achieved through the practice of three forms of filial piety. Let us first consider the idea of “transferring loyalty to one’s ruler.” When a virtuous person has cultivated a strong sense of filial devotion and loyalty toward his parents, this quality can be redirected toward his leader. For example, filial children might cook for their parents, do their laundry, or wash their feet. However, in modern China, it is concerning that many young adults do not even know how to cook. The other day, I asked why compared to the number of female practitioners, there are fewer male practitioners residing at our

academy on a long-term basis. Some Dharma friends responded, “Many of them do not know how to cook, so they find it difficult to live here long-term. If we had a wonderful dining hall, perhaps more of them would have stayed and grown to love hearing, contemplating, and meditating.”

When the same diligence, reverence, and loyalty shown to parents is extended into the workplace, a person becomes a dedicated and trustworthy employee. It is not uncommon to hear a manager remark during recruitment, “I have heard this young person is very respectful at home; he will surely do well at our organization.” Diligent and filial young people are welcomed wherever they go. Leaders especially appreciate subordinates who are hardworking, loyal, and considerate. Certain staff members fully embody these qualities. When accompanying a supervisor, they might proactively carry the supervisor’s bag or teacup. In the same way, I have seen Buddhist practitioners thoughtfully carry whatever their teacher might need. Based on the level of meticulousness in their care, I believe these actions are not mere gestures; they are an outward expression of sincere reverence.

The Second Form of Filial Piety

“He is respectful in serving his elder brothers, and so his obedience can be transferred to serving his elders.

Among the three forms of filial piety, the second is “transferring deference to elders.” A noble person can carry over the love and respect shown toward an elder sibling into respect for elders in general. For instance, a younger brother who listens to his older brother at home, perhaps offering him gifts or serving him with care, develops the quality of reverence and deference. When this same quality is extended to the workplace, it leads to courtesy and respect toward senior coworkers and mentors.

The Third Form of Filial Piety

“He is well-organized in managing his household, and so his governing ability can be transferred to official duties.

The third principle is “transferring governance to public office.” A noble person who can skillfully manage the affairs of their household can apply that same ability to public office. A household is like a nation in miniature, with its own internal politics, culture, and finances that require careful management. For example, if a family includes members from different religious or cultural

backgrounds, there may be frequent tension and conflict. If one can manage one's family successfully, one can also govern effectively within the scope of one's authority in society.

Summary

“In this way, noble qualities are cultivated at home, and one's name is honored for generations to come.”

These three principles, while appearing simple, hold immense significance. When we embody these noble qualities with our families, they naturally extend to our interactions in society. This builds an honorable reputation that can last for generations—a legacy that, I believe, most people deeply desire. While few may achieve lasting fame, nearly everyone wishes to avoid the shame of being remembered unfavorably.

Filial Piety in This Life and Future Lives

Both Confucianism and Buddhism place great value on filial piety, though their perspectives differ. Confucianism emphasizes the benefits of filial devotion and the negative consequences of being unfilial within this lifetime. Buddhism, however, extends this view by considering the impact of filial or unfilial behavior on future

lives as well. As stated in the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra*,

If there are living beings who are not filial toward their parents, who even kill them, they will fall into the Incessant Hell, and for thousands of myriads of millions of kalpas, be without a time of release despite their wishes.

In other words, an unfilial person will not only encounter misfortune in this life, but also suffer torment in the lower realms in future lives. By contrast, a child who reveres their parents will enjoy peace and happiness in this life and experience joy in countless lifetimes to come.

Ju Mipham Rinpoche gave a teaching in *The Just King* that I often quote and deeply cherish:

*It is the king's responsibility to encourage respect
For parents, ascetics, brahmins, and so forth,
To encourage the worship of the three jewels,
And to bring an end to the stream of suffering, both in this life
and the next.*⁹¹

It means that rulers—and by extension, all people—should cultivate reverence toward their parents, toward monastics, and toward

learned teachers. Through acts of generosity toward the Three Jewels, one eliminates much of the suffering in this and future lives. Another teaching in this text states:

*As a way of honoring
Parents and the clan elders,
He makes sure that all fashions, jewelry, and manners
Follow the traditions of the righteous.⁹²*

Whoever honors their parents will receive protection from celestial beings like Brahma and Indra, and tulkus and great masters may choose to take rebirth in their family lineage. Through the merit of making offerings to worthy recipients, one can gain widespread fame in this life and be reborn in higher realms in future lives.

This echoes Confucius's words: "In this way, noble qualities are cultivated at home, and one's name is honored for generations to come." While Confucius did not speak explicitly of an afterlife in the way Buddhism does, his emphasis on an enduring legacy suggests a profound concern for what continues after we are gone. He certainly did not endorse the view that nothing matters after death.

The quotes I have shared are the distilled wisdom of great masters from the past. These are precious life instructions—essential teachings we should reflect on again and again. Our root guru, His Holiness Jigme Puntsok Rinpoche, had memorized many of these scriptural quotes and frequently cited them in his teachings. He placed great importance on the moral education of his disciples and often spoke on how to cultivate a virtuous character. As his disciples, it is essential that we study these teachings with sincerity. Even a believer of another faith or a non-religious person would benefit from learning them. Through such study, our minds will be transformed. As our minds become gentler and more tamed, our study and work will improve, and every aspect of our lives will begin to move in a more positive direction.

These teachings also help us cultivate self-discipline. At our academy, the Han College has a specialized discipline committee that focuses on precepts related to conduct, attire, and other such matters. I know that for some, the very word “discipline” can sound intimidating, and they may wish to avoid hearing about it altogether. Yet, if we look closely, we see that discipline is a fundamental principle of life. Whether we speak of worldly discipline, the ethical precepts of Buddhism, or the natural laws of the universe—such as a wholesome mind leads to happiness and an unwholesome mind

leads to suffering—each form of discipline is vitally important for our well-being.

Lecture Fourteen

November 14, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

The Importance of Studying This Text

It has been a great joy to witness the attentiveness and enthusiasm with which everyone has engaged in our study of *The Classic of Filial Piety*. Among you, I see many individuals of great wisdom, talent, and merit. What is especially heartening is that, rather than letting these qualities give rise to arrogance, you have approached these teachings with even greater sincerity, reverence, and joy. I am also aware that some of you, due to scheduling conflicts, have not yet had the opportunity to join us. I hope you will find a chance to study this precious text in the future.

Whether you are a Buddhist or follow no particular spiritual path, I believe there is immense value in studying *The Classic of Filial Piety*. Through it, we gain knowledge that benefits our work, daily life, and social relationships. This text primarily teaches us how to relate to our parents, leaders, spiritual teachers, and others worthy of respect. Often, it is only after engaging with these principles that we realize how much room we have for improvement in our attitudes and interactions with these key figures.

Skillful Means in Studying and Propagating the Dharma

In different settings today, some religious studies, practices, or activities are permitted, while others may be less convenient or appropriate to pursue openly. Due to rules and regulations governing religious activities, formal Dharma transmissions and empowerment ceremonies are not always feasible. However, the study of traditional culture faces no such restrictions—in fact, it is encouraged nationwide in China and can be explored almost anywhere, including in universities.

For this reason, I encourage you to employ skillful means on your spiritual path by embracing classical texts like *The Classic of Filial Piety*, *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects*, and *The Thousand Character Classic*. In a sense, these classical works can serve as Dharma protectors or protective talismans, safeguarding our Dharma journey.

I have read several Chinese classics myself and find them deeply meaningful. This reminds me of my middle school Chinese language teacher, who was passionate about traditional culture. During the 1970s, when such traditions were suppressed in China, he would

still share stories of historical figures like Sima Qian and Yue Fei, along with tales from *Dream of the Red Chamber* or principles from *The Classic of Filial Piety*.

People everywhere are generally open to traditional culture, but most countries approach religion with caution, likely because it involves faith. Some beliefs may be deemed in alignment with the governing authority, while others may not. We can see, for example, that certain international conflicts are closely related to religious extremism.

When I give Dharma talks at different universities around the world—including in countries with high levels of religious freedom—there are often specific guidelines regarding religious topics. Additionally, teaching and propagating the Dharma in places like Africa is not without any challenge. On one occasion, after giving a Dharma talk in an African prison, the authorities asked me to help build a Buddhist shrine there, and I agreed. However, a member of the Islamic faith strongly objected, saying, “Why should you build a Buddhist shrine here?!” Understandably, certain religious traditions can sometimes exhibit a degree of mutual exclusivity. His tone made it clear that he sincerely believed his own faith was the only correct one.

On the one hand, human beings have a deep need for religious faith; on the other hand, it is important to recognize that not everyone accepts religion. For this reason, many experienced Buddhist masters and scholars—both Eastern and Western—have chosen to set aside the outer “shell” of religion and instead teach the universal principles of compassion and loving-kindness. These values can be fully embraced by people of any faith or none at all. This is one of the main reasons I have been speaking to you about traditional culture.

Modern people are skilled at adapting to circumstances. In the current environment, adopting skillful means is essential for Buddhists, as it helps prevent and dispel obstacles during our Dharma practice. I hope that wherever you study, you have access to books on traditional culture and, if possible, invite teachers to instruct on these traditions. When planning a curriculum, remember that both traditional culture and the Mahayana teachings can be beautifully integrated.

As Buddhists—and especially as Dharma teachers—when we spread the Dharma and benefit sentient beings, it is essential to use skillful means tailored to our audience’s capacities. We should not assume, for example, that because the Madhyamaka view is the highest, we should teach only on that, regardless of

the context. New Dharma teachers often make this mistake due to inexperience. I had a similar experience about a year after I first arrived at Larung Gar. In 1986, while staying at a monastery in Barkham for the summer retreat, I taught *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. I invited all the local villagers to attend, but not many came. I remember saying, “Even just hearing the recitation of the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* before the Dharma teaching brings inconceivable merit; why do the villagers not come to hear it?” An experienced elder lama told me, “Khenpo, please do not say that. While the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* do offer great merit, it is farming season, and the villagers are very busy with work.”

As a young Dharma teacher, I was enthusiastic but lacked experience in skillful means. My thinking was quite simple: if a teaching is supreme, surely everyone should come and listen. To help you avoid similar errors, I urge you—when sharing the Dharma outside the valley—to first carefully observe your surroundings, understand the situation, and then decide what and how to teach.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: ON REMONSTRANCE

The Right and Responsibility to Remonstrate

Today, we turn to Chapter Fifteen, “On Remonstrance.” The term “remonstrance” refers to the act of those in subordinate positions speaking honestly and offering constructive criticism to those in authority. In previous chapters, the teachings have primarily flowed from the top down—parents and rulers providing guidance, with the expectation of acceptance from those below. This chapter shifts the focus: it addresses the importance of advice, or even disagreement, moving from the bottom up. If parents, rulers, or other authorities make incorrect statements or decisions, their children or subordinates not only have the right to point them out but are encouraged to do so.

Some people believe that traditional culture is outdated because it demands unquestioning obedience, even in the face of mistakes. They argue that objecting is seen as a violation of social norms. However, this is a misunderstanding. The chapter clearly states

that reasonable demands or instructions from authorities should be accepted, but if they are unsound, a respectful rebuttal is both permissible and necessary.

In this respect, the principle is quite similar to what we see in democratic systems. In certain democratic countries, if a leader makes an inappropriate statement, subordinates can immediately offer a counterpoint. Some people find this approach reasonable, while others worry that if subordinates are always looking for faults, it may lead to constant arguments and unrest. They suggest it might be better to simply accept the leader's views with respect. Perspectives on this issue vary, and it is up to each person to use their wisdom and discernment.

The principle of remonstrance is invaluable. There is a common saying: "Those involved are often confused, while bystanders see things more clearly." Often, those not directly involved in a situation can see things more objectively than those who are. A leader without candid advisors to highlight their errors is in a precarious position—they risk falling prey to arrogance and other blind spots. Therefore, those in high positions truly need subordinates who are willing to point out faults. Likewise, children, subordinates, and others have both the right and responsibility to remind those in power, helping them avoid mistakes.

Zeng Zi's Inquiry and Confucius's Reaction

Zeng Zi said, “Regarding compassion, respect, caring for one’s parents, and bringing honor to one’s family for generations—these principles I have already heard from you. But may I venture to ask, if a son simply obeys every command from his father, can that be considered true filial piety?”

Confucius replied, “What are you saying! What are you saying!”

Here, Confucius’s emphatic repetition expresses his strong disagreement. He rejected the notion that filial piety is simply blind obedience. Some instructions from parents may be reasonable, while others may not. When a parent’s command is unreasonable, a child should not follow it mindlessly. Instead, it is the child’s responsibility to gently and respectfully help their parents recognize and correct their mistakes.

This wisdom is echoed in the classic text *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*, which we have studied together. It states:

*When parents are doing something wrong,
Counsel them to help them change.*

When our parents make mistakes, it is our duty to guide them toward what is right, but always with a kind face and a gentle tone. If, after repeated advice, our parents still do not change, what should we do then? The same text advises:

If the counsel is not accepted,

Wait until parents are in a better mood, then try again.

Weeping and wailing should follow,

And beatings are borne without complaint.

The Value of Remonstrance Across All Levels of Society

“In ancient times, when the Son of Heaven had seven types of remonstrating ministers, even if he lacked virtue, he would not lose his empire.

As the Son of Heaven, the emperor wielded immense authority, ruling over a vast realm consisting of smaller states. Much like modern leaders surrounded by many followers, ancient emperors were supported by a large retinue of officials. Among these were seven types of ministers renowned for their willingness to offer honest counsel: the Three Dukes—the Grand Preceptor, the Grand Guardian, the Grand Mentor, and Four Assistants—the Bulwark

on the Left, the Supporter on the Right, the Front Assistant, and the Rear Aide. These ministers carefully observed the emperor's words and actions and provided candid advice. Even if the emperor, due to a lack of wisdom and compassion, enacted unreasonable or unethical policies, these ministers urged him to correct his course. Their honest feedback served as a safeguard, preventing him from losing his realm. This shows how invaluable sincere advice and constructive criticism are to good governance.

The principle of remonstrance is not unique to Confucian thought; it resonates deeply with Buddhist teachings as well. Ju Mipham Rinpoche, in his treasured text *The Just King*, advised:

*If he does something that contravenes the Dharma,
They exhort him, "That is improper."⁹³*

His meaning is clear: if a leader's actions go against the Dharma or righteous principle, it is the duty of those around him to point this out honestly, not to flatter or conceal the truth. The same text further notes that while it is appropriate to praise those who truly possess good qualities, insincere flattery is never advised.

The Gift of Criticism: Receiving with Humility, Offering with Care

This chapter points to a universal truth: there is profound wisdom in learning to accept criticism. For many of us, the immediate reaction to critical feedback is discomfort or even resentment. Yet, in the long run, sincere criticism is far more valuable than praise. Constant flattery can be poisonous, fostering arrogance and intolerance for dissent. As a result, fewer people offer truth, and mistakes—whether from ignorance, pride, or carelessness—go uncorrected. When improper behavior is finally exposed, one might lament, “Why did no one warn me when they knew I was wrong?” True wisdom lies not in avoiding criticism, but in embracing it as a precious gift.

Of course, people from different cultures and backgrounds may have varying degrees of openness to criticism. Some grow up in environments where feedback is encouraged and learn to use it for their own growth. However, sometimes what is presented as “criticism” is actually malicious slander, intended to harm the reputation of virtuous individuals for personal gain.

A truly wise person is not only open to receiving feedback but is also skillful in offering it. Those who lack wisdom may offer misguided

criticism, or, as the saying goes, “judge the heart of a noble person with the mind of a petty one.” Virtuous individuals often act with deep, subtle intentions that others with limited understanding may not grasp, which can lead to wrongful public accusations. Therefore, when offering feedback, strive for objectivity and fairness, avoiding extremes in judgment and action.

“When a feudal lord had five types of remonstrating officials, even if he lacked virtue, he would not lose his state.

In ancient times, a feudal lord was supported by five types of upright advisors who spoke truthfully and offered direct guidance. These included the three junior ministers collectively known as the Gu Ministers,⁹⁴ the three chief ministers,⁹⁵ and the highest-ranking great officers. When the feudal lord enacted unreasonable or unethical policies, these officials spoke up to correct him, greatly reducing the risk of losing his kingdom.

In contrast, certain corrupt officials today convince themselves that their illegal actions are justified, surrounded only by flatterers too timid to provide genuine feedback. Without honest counsel, they stray further down the wrong path until ruin strikes. Thus, those in authority must remain open to voices from below. Likewise,

subordinates witnessing unreasonable behavior in superiors should speak up rather than blindly comply.

We should also avoid being two-faced—acting deferentially in front of our managers while behaving differently behind their backs. I recall a disciplinarian who responded to everything I said with repeated “La so, la so, la so...” (a polite way to say yes in Tibetan), bowing deeply each time. His humility impressed me. However, I later heard that in my absence, he acted with great arrogance, boasting to others, “Khenpo has clearly heard my instructions. Now he must follow them.”

The Leader’s Mirror

True counsel acts as a mirror, reflecting a leader’s strengths and weaknesses. Minister Wei Zheng, who served Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, was such a mirror. Though his remonstrations often seemed blunt, his honesty helped the emperor avoid grave errors. After Wei Zheng’s death, Emperor Taizong grieved deeply, saying he had lost a mirror that revealed both his virtues and faults.

Wise leaders not only tolerate such mirrors but actively seek them. A famous story from Chinese history, “Zou Ji Persuaded the Monarch of Qi to Accept Criticism,” illustrates this perfectly. This story is

included in middle school textbooks in China. Zou Ji, a minister of Qi, was confident in his appearance. One day, after dressing neatly and admiring himself in the mirror, he asked his wife, "They say Xu Gong from the north is very handsome. Compared to him, who looks better?" His wife replied, "How could Xu Gong possibly compare with you?" Zou Ji then asked his concubine, who gave the same answer. The next day, a guest visited, and again, Zou Ji posed the same question and was told he was better looking. Coincidentally, Xu Gong himself came to visit the day after. When he met Xu Gong in person, Zou Ji saw at once that he was not nearly as good-looking.

That evening, Zou Ji reflected: "I clearly do not look better than Xu Gong. Why did my wife, concubine, and guest all say I did? My wife is biased because she loves me. My concubine is afraid of me. The guest wants something from me." The next day, Zou Ji went to court and recounted this experience to the King of Qi. He then said, "This has taught me an important lesson. As the sovereign, Your Majesty is loved by all the palace concubines, feared by all the court officials, and sought after by all the common people. Because of this, you are even more likely to be surrounded by flattery and deception. I humbly suggest that you listen carefully to what people say around you—what sounds pleasant may not always be beneficial."

The King of Qi was a wise ruler. Upon hearing this, he immediately issued a decree: “Those who point out my faults face-to-face will receive the highest reward. Those who submit written criticisms will receive the second-highest reward. Those who discuss my faults in public, if their words reach me, will receive the third-highest reward.” When this decree was first announced, numerous people came forward to offer advice—the palace buzzed with advisors like a marketplace. Months later, criticisms dwindled. After a year, even those who wished to advise the king found they had little to say, as the king’s conduct had become exemplary. According to historical records, during that period, the state of Qi became strong and prosperous, earning the respect of neighboring states. The states of Yan, Zhao, Han, and Wei each sent envoys to visit the King of Qi.

The Burden of Power: A Leader’s Duty to Dissent

Of course, not all negative feedback is constructive. Some people are consumed by negativity and find fault with everything. This is not genuine advice; it is merely “emotional dumping.” I recall a female practitioner who constantly pointed out the shortcomings of her Dharma teachers. When she complained about the first one, I wondered if she had a point. When she joined a new class and criticized a second teacher, I became suspicious. By the time she

moved to a third class and reported the same problems, I realized the issue was not with the teachers. No matter where she went, she complained. The problem was her own perspective.

A responsible leader would filter out chronic negativity while still inviting honest feedback. Those in leadership—such as those responsible for volunteer teams or study groups—should not casually dismiss someone just because they personally dislike them. Whether a monarch, a manager, or a group leader, their authority is considerable. They have the power to elevate someone to great heights or cast them out.

When we visited Africa, a local tribal chief told us, “In my tribe of sixteen thousand people, all must obey me. If I say someone must leave, they must leave. If I say someone may enter, only then can they enter. Aside from the king, I am the most powerful person here!” Reflecting on ourselves, within our Buddhist communities, khenpos, khenmos, and disciplinarian leaders may not hold the title of “chief,” but they exercise comparable authority. While this gives them the power to administer certain groups, using it to reject dissenters or those they dislike—without first reflecting wisely on their feedback—abuses that power.

“When ministers and high officials had three types of remonstrating officials, even if they lacked virtue, they would not lose their households.

In ancient times, ministers and high officials were often advised by three types of upright counselors: the family steward, the elder of household officials, and the regional governor. When these leaders acted without virtue or principle, these honest advisors spoke openly, urging them to correct their course. This guidance helped safeguard their households from decline and ruin.

As the saying goes, “No one is a sage; who can be without faults?” Buddhist teachings also remind us that human beings are inherently imperfect, and it is natural for us to make mistakes from time to time. Just as the weather changes, so too do our moods—good one moment, unsettled the next. When our state of mind is poor, we are more prone to misjudgments. At such times, receiving honest reminders and guidance from others can be of great benefit, both to ourselves and to our families.

“When common people had friends who offered sincere advice, they would not lose their good name.

For ordinary individuals in ancient society, friends who provided open and constructive criticism could prevent actions that might tarnish one's reputation or lead to infamy. As noted earlier, our own faults are often more apparent to others than to ourselves. When someone points out our shortcomings, even if their words sting, it is important to be mindful of the adage: "Bitter medicine cures sickness, and unpalatable advice benefits conduct." Such sincere counsel can guide us toward positive change.

Not Alone on the Path: Choose Counsel Over Isolation

Ju Mipham Rinpoche wrote in *The Just King*:

The most fitting advisors

Have keen intellects and pure intentions.

They increase merit and expand good fortune,

And are surrounded by gods and protector deities.⁹⁶

People with kindness, wisdom, and abundant merit—who are blessed by their yidam deities and Dharma protectors—make the ideal companions or counselors. These blessings come naturally to those diligent in their meditation on their yidam deities and making regular offerings to Dharma protectors. When we discuss and collaborate with such individuals, any endeavor becomes easy

to accomplish. His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted this scriptural teaching, remarking, “This person seems to have great merit. If you work with him, things will go smoothly.” Indeed, those with abundant merit often succeed in their pursuits.

Thus, it is wise not to sever ties with friends or spiritual companionship. People often say: “The more friends, the better; the fewer enemies, the better.” I believe it is not necessary to have a great number of friends, but having none at all is unwise. When faced with important decisions or challenges in life, it is essential to have a few trusted companions for advice and support.

Sooner or later, we all need help. Few people are so self-sufficient that they never require the comfort, encouragement, or support of others. Friendship is built on meaningful communication and sincere emotional bonds. Those who are warm, kind, and attentive to others naturally attract many friends and will find help when they need it. Conversely, those who treat others coldly and are unwilling to help will likely find others reluctant to help them in return. In my hometown, warm-hearted and generous individuals who readily lend a hand never lack support for events like weddings or funerals—people come from afar to assist. But arrogant, isolated types may receive no visitors even when ill. Therefore, while we are

healthy and happy, it is preferable to avoid neglecting friendship with others.

Among Buddhist practitioners, a regrettable tendency sometimes arises: at a certain point in their practice, they may view everyone around them as an obstacle to their spiritual path and withdraw entirely. For highly realized masters who have spent years in solitary mountain retreats, such seclusion is admirable. But for most of us, meaningful interactions are necessary. If we isolate ourselves completely, others may distance themselves in turn. Then, if we fall ill, we might have no one to help except perhaps an ambulance driver. As the Chinese saying warns: "Pitiful people often have their own faults." If you find that everyone avoids you or treats you as if you have a contagious disease, it may be a sign that there are some shortcomings in your own conduct worth reflecting upon.

Human beings are, by nature, emotional creatures. If you have been kind to others in the past, people will remember. When you are in trouble, they will think, "When I was sick, lonely, or struggling, that person helped and comforted me. One time, I slipped on the road and he helped me up. Now that he is in trouble, I should go and help him." Except for a small number of people who are emotionally numb or morally confused, most people understand the importance of gratitude and reciprocity. In short, I encourage you to use your

wisdom and skillful means to maintain good relationships with those around you, in all walks of life.

When Counsel Falls on Deaf Ears

What should we do when we offer constructive advice to a friend—speaking with kind intentions and gentle words—yet they still refuse to listen? In such situations, there is no need to become upset or discouraged. In *The Analects*, Confucius advised:

Offer loyal counsel and guide them properly. If they still do not accept it, then stop. Do not disgrace yourself by continuing.

Speaking to his disciple Zigong, Confucius emphasized that if a friend has faults, we should advise them with kindness and skillful means. But if they remain unwilling to change, it is best to let go without burdening ourselves with frustration.

Buddhist texts offer similar wisdom. For instance, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* instructs that when you see someone harming the Three Jewels, you should do your best to stop them. But if you are unable to, reflect: “The Three Jewels are unconditioned and beyond harm.” At that point, it is appropriate to walk away.⁹⁷ Similarly, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind* advises that if someone is slandering

your teacher, you should first try to dissuade them. If you cannot, then reflect on your teacher's virtues, cover your ears, and walk away with compassion.⁹⁸

“When a father has a son who will remonstrate with him, he will not fall into unrighteousness.

When a father has children who can offer sincere and helpful advice, he is less likely to act wrongly. As we discussed earlier, from emperors to common people, all benefited from having loyal advisers or sincere friends who offered honest feedback. Similarly, when our parents make mistakes, it is genuinely in their best interest for us to point these out to them respectfully.

The Young Moonlight Offers Counsel to His Father

A story from the *Shrigupta Sutra* illustrates the importance of a son advising his father. There was once an elder named Shrigupta who, following his father's example, practiced a non-Buddhist tradition. At that time, some followers of this tradition were displeased with the growing influence of the Buddha, saying, “Ever since the Buddha appeared in the world, our offerings have greatly diminished. We must find a way to protect our livelihood.” Shrigupta agreed to help them. Their plot was to invite the Buddha for a meal at

Shrigupta's house and harm him using a fire pit and poisoned food.

Shrigupta's son, a devoted follower of the Buddha, learned of his father's plan and tried to dissuade him: "Even if all three realms were to erupt in flames, not even a corner of the Buddha's monastic robe could be burned. Even if one were to gather enough poison to rival the size of a snow-capped mountain, it would still be powerless to harm the Buddha. Father, please do not engage in such harmful actions!"

Despite his son's heartfelt warning, Shrigupta sent a messenger the next day to formally invite the Buddha to their home. During the offering, the Buddha displayed miraculous and awe-inspiring powers. Witnessing this, Shrigupta was overcome with deep remorse. He wept and repented to the Buddha, saying: "My son, Moonlight, advised me not to harm you. But in my ignorance, I refused to listen. Now, with the deepest regret, I confess my wrongdoings to you. I vow never to commit such an evil deed again. Please protect me with your boundless compassion."

This story demonstrates that when parents make mistakes, it is the role of a filial child to use wisdom and compassion to counsel them, helping to prevent them from going astray.

Do Not Condone Unlawful Acts

Some may wonder, “Doesn’t Buddhism teach us to follow our teacher’s instructions? If so, does this mean we can question our parents but not our spiritual teacher?” The *Fifty Verses on Guru Devotion* addresses this concern directly:

*The wise disciple joyfully follows
The teacher’s reasonable instructions,
But if something is beyond your capacity,
Explain respectfully why you cannot comply.*

If the task assigned by our teacher is reasonable and in accordance with the Dharma, but we genuinely lack the ability to fulfill it, we should explain our limitations respectfully. In such cases, even if we cannot complete the task, we have committed no fault.

However, if a teacher asks us to do something that—after careful and wise reflection—seems improper or inconsistent with the Dharma, we should also explain our reasons for not complying. It is crucial to analyze a teacher’s instructions with wisdom. Sometimes, a teacher’s instructions carry a profound meaning that is not immediately apparent, and without wisdom, a disciple may misinterpret the deeper intent behind the guidance.

Ju Mipham Rinpoche also emphasized that one must refuse any inappropriate request to commit negative actions, even if it comes from a spiritual teacher or a parent. As he wrote in *The Just King*,

*If his mother, father, or even his lama
Requests something that is inappropriate,
The king politely refuses.
There is never an excuse for acting illegally.⁹⁹*

If a national advisor or a parent were to instruct a king to kill living beings, the king would be right to refuse and explain, “To harm sentient beings contradicts the Dharma; therefore, I cannot do this.”

Unfortunately, some so-called “teachers” might not truly understand the Dharma and might instruct their students to solicit donations for personal gain or to commit harmful acts, such as killing animals. There is no need to follow such unreasonable demands in the name of “guru devotion.” As I have shared when teaching the *Fifty Verses on Guru Devotion*, Sakya Pandita advised:

If a teacher’s words contradict the Dharma, they should be set aside.

That is to say, if a command goes against the core principles of Buddhism and widely recognized truths in the secular world, it should not be followed, even if presented as the “vajra speech” of a guru.

Some people sense from the beginning that something is amiss, yet force themselves to comply, thinking, “My teacher is a Buddha; there must be a profound hidden meaning in his words. I must follow them no matter what.” Only when everything falls apart do they feel regret. As Buddhist practitioners, we should refrain from blindly following anyone’s instructions and instead accept advice that is both reasonable and lawful. If a request is irrational or violates the Dharma—even if it comes from our teacher, parent, or superior—we can offer a gentle and well-reasoned explanation for declining.

As the analysis of classical and Buddhist texts shows, Dharma and worldly ethics are not contradictory but share many commonalities. While Buddhist teachings do include transcendent elements—like the blessings of a spiritual teacher—there are numerous areas where they align closely with secular principles.

True Filial Piety Includes Moral Remonstrance

“So when there is unrighteousness, a son cannot refrain from remonstrating with his father, and a minister cannot refrain from remonstrating with the ruler.

When parents engage in—or are about to engage in—improper conduct, it is the children’s duty to speak up. Similarly, when leaders act unjustly, their subordinates are obligated to offer honest counsel. By this same principle, if disciples notice their teacher acting inappropriately, they should communicate their concerns respectfully.

As children, if you see your father or mother doing something improper, you might say, “Father, you should not do this, because it will cause harm in these ways...” Some may hesitate, fearing that speaking so directly shows a lack of filial piety. However, from the perspective of both Buddhism and traditional culture, children are actually obligated to help correct their parents’ inappropriate actions.

“One must speak up against immorality. How could simply obeying the commands of one’s father be deemed filial?”

When we witness others' unethical actions, it is our duty to speak up. Mindlessly following the orders of one's parents, without discerning right from wrong, cannot be considered true filial piety. What is reasonable should be followed; what is not should be respectfully declined. In the West, children are often raised with this understanding from an early age. Their attitude tends to be, "So what if they are my parents, spiritual teachers, leaders, or even the president? If they say something wrong, they should still be criticized." During one of my visits to the West, I found their portraits of famous figures quite thought-provoking—perhaps these reflect elements of their own traditions.

To conclude, this chapter presents two key teachings. First, blind obedience is not true filial piety. Whether it is an emperor, a noble, a parent, a teacher, or a superior, if their actions are improper, those around them should offer honest and constructive advice. Second, when someone offers us criticism or a differing opinion, respond with openness instead of defensiveness or dismissal, and listen with humility.

Lecture Fifteen

December 1, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Today, we will cover two chapters: “Feeling and Responding” and “Serving One’s Lord.” In our next class, we will study the final chapter, thus concluding this text and marking the completion of a significant undertaking for the year.

Although *The Classic of Filial Piety* is a work of traditional culture rather than Buddhist scripture, it nonetheless offers valuable guidance on what to embrace and what to abandon. It is essential that we approach these teachings with an attitude in harmony with the Dharma—one of joy, gratitude, and bodhicitta. Why joy? A precious human life is hard to obtain, and the true Dharma is difficult to encounter. Not only do we possess a human life endowed with freedoms and advantages, but we also have the opportunity to hear authentic Dharma amid our busy lives. This is truly a cause for joy. Why appreciation? In our fast-paced modern world, even the intention to listen to the Dharma is rare and precious. Consider how fortunate we are: we are free from external obstacles such as war and famine—circumstances that prevent countless beings from

accessing the teachings. We are also spared from personal adversities that could hinder our learning, such as blindness, muteness, or serious illness.

Given this good fortune, let us listen to each class attentively, with joy and appreciation. With such a mindset, even a single lesson becomes deeply meaningful. Before each class, let us generate the supreme bodhicitta: "I listen to this teaching for the benefit of all sentient beings. Even if I can only temporarily benefit the body and mind of a single being, I will exert myself to the utmost." Please maintain this motivation throughout our study.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: FEELING AND RESPONDING

“Feeling and Responding,” or spiritual resonance, primarily concerns the mind’s subjective dimension; it is difficult to manifest in objective, material forms. This concept corresponds to what we often call “blessings,” “inspiration,” or “spiritual power.” As Chan Master Yongming Yanshou explained in his hundred-volume compendium, *Records of the Source Mirror*:

‘Feeling’ refers to the capacity to evoke; it belongs to sentient beings. ‘Responding’ refers to what responds; it belongs to the Buddha.

In other words, Buddha and sentient beings come into attunement through a relationship of “bestowing” and “sustaining.” This is the essence of spiritual resonance for a Buddhist practitioner. Followers of other religions—such as Christians (including Catholics) and Hindus—also describe direct, heart-to-heart communication with the sacred. This, too, can be understood as a form of spiritual

resonance. Moreover, resonance is not limited to connections between humans and celestial beings; it can arise between teacher and student, or between close friends.

Some materialists insist that nothing mysterious or supernatural exists beyond physical substances and psychological activities. Such a view, however, may be overly simplistic and absolute. While modern science has greatly advanced our understanding of the external world, the study of traditional cultures reveals that earlier generations articulated foundational and profoundly influential frameworks for understanding the physical world, consciousness, ethics, and morality—frameworks that remain central today.

Many people today—especially those who revere what they perceive as “freedom,” “equality,” and “liberation”—do not acknowledge transcendent forces. They tend to interpret the world as they please and act accordingly. I once heard of an author who had a few misspelled words in his article; when others pointed them out, he replied, “Do people in the twenty-first century not even have the freedom to make spelling mistakes?” His reaction is revealing: rather than acknowledging an error, he invoked the grand concept of “freedom” to defend it. There are likely many others who, in a similar way, reject any authority or truth beyond personal preference.

Filial Sovereignty Recognized by Heaven and Earth

Confucius said, “In ancient times, wise kings served their fathers with filial piety; seeing this, the deities of Heaven recognized them as filial sovereigns. When rulers served their mothers with filial devotion, the deities of Earth likewise recognized them as filial sovereigns.

While their parents were alive, wise rulers attended to them with reverent care. They conscientiously followed their parents’ instructions except in matters that violated fundamental principles. After their parents departed this world, they continued their filial devotion by performing rituals at the circular altar outside the capital. The filial conduct these sovereigns demonstrated—both during their parents’ lifetimes and after their passing—was clearly perceived by the deities of Heaven and Earth, who recognized them as truly filial rulers. The deities were moved and rejoiced.

In addition to the deities of Heaven and Earth, there are many other spiritual beings. The sea has sea deities; the mountains have mountain deities; roads have road deities; and cliffs have cliff deities. Where springs flow, the lords of nagas often dwell. Though invisible to the naked eye, there are indeed many sacred beings in this world,

including Dharma protectors, local land deities, devas, and various spirits and ghosts. Some of them belong to the realm of hungry ghosts, some to the celestial realm, and others to classes of yakshas, rakshasas, and similar beings.

“The elders and the juniors were harmonious with each other, and therefore proper order prevailed among those above and those below.

When rulers demonstrated respect for elder siblings and showed kindness to younger ones, all citizens in the nation would treat each other with mutual respect, bringing peace and stability throughout the land. According to traditional culture, a ruler’s governance of the nation begins with properly managing their own family—serving parents with filial piety and maintaining harmonious and loving relationships with siblings. As stated in the *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*:

The proper way for the elder brother is kindness;

The way for the younger is respect.

When brothers dwell in harmony,

They honor their parents by this act.

When brothers and sisters live in harmony and affection, filial devotion to their parents is embodied.

When a leader practices filial piety and fosters harmony within the family, their example naturally influences those around them. In time, this spirit of respect spreads throughout the nation, nurturing a peaceful society. Through such conduct, a filial ruler can shape the realm in profound and lasting ways.

“When Heaven and Earth observe with clarity, divine blessings become manifest.

A wise sovereign who practices filial piety toward their parents and honors their deceased ancestors, as well as the deities of Heaven and Earth, receives blessings from the divine. Likewise, one who steadfastly cultivates virtue naturally draws the protection and blessings of all divine beings, including the deities of Heaven and Earth. Such a person’s deeds not only amass abundant merit but also bring joy to those around them and even summon timely winds and rains for the entire nation.

The Daoist text *Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution* states:

Therefore, blessed is the man who speaketh what is good, who thinketh what is good, who practiceth what is good. If but each single day he would persevere in these three ways of goodness, within three years Heaven will surely shower on him blessings. Unfortunate is the man who speaketh what is evil, who thinketh what is evil, who practiceth what is evil. If but each single day he would persevere in these three ways of evildoing, within three years Heaven will surely shower on him curses.¹⁰⁰

Both the original texts of *The Classic of Filial Piety* and *Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution* suggest that ancient Daoists and Confucians believed that specific celestial beings were responsible for rewarding virtue and punishing wrongdoing, bestowing fortune upon the wholesome while imposing hardship upon the non-wholesome.

Good Begets Good; Harm Brings Harm

“Good begets good; harm brings harm” is not just a spiritual belief but a natural law. A host of ancient texts express related ideas, such as the “unity of humanity and heaven.” According to ancient traditions, human beings, heaven, and earth are linked by an invisible and mutual influence. This also explains why misfortune

often befalls those who do evil; sooner or later, they experience the bitter fruits of their negative karma. Conversely, if we consistently practice virtue, even when adversity arises—whether from past-life causes or other conditions—its dark clouds will eventually disperse. Like the sun emerging from behind the clouds, our lives will become increasingly auspicious and joyful.

As Buddhism teaches, our intention is paramount:

If the intention is good, the levels and paths are good.

If the intention is bad, the levels and paths are bad.¹⁰¹

Religious or not, it is best in daily life to cultivate wholesome intentions and actions and to abandon unwholesome ones. As ordinary beings, perfection is hard to attain on the spiritual journey. Even great Indian masters like the Venerable Atisha, when he traveled to Tibetan regions, appeared—at least to ordinary perception—at times nearly to violate vows, to give rise to negative thoughts, and to momentarily lose bodhicitta. If such a great master faced these challenges, we can expect negative thoughts to arise even more frequently. The key is to work on this gradually—there is no need to be overly anxious. If every negative thought plunges us into self-reproach and gloom until we verge on depression, that only harms our practice.

The passage here teaches us that virtuous deeds naturally invite good fortune and divine protection. As the “Song of Life Release” sings, freeing birds moves the celestial kings; and releasing fish moves the naga kings. Conversely, killing and other grave misdeeds inevitably result in negative consequences. These can manifest as physical ailments—an imbalance of the body’s four great elements¹⁰²—or as terrible calamities like famine and war. In borderlands I have visited where local people make their living through killing, people indeed experience various kinds of suffering. Beyond the apparent harsh natural conditions, unseen negative karmic forces proliferate.

Ancestral Reverence and Its Far-Reaching Power

“Thus, even the Son of Heaven must revere someone—namely, his father; and must defer to someone—namely, his elder brothers.

Even someone as exalted as an emperor has those he must respect—his father and other parental elders. Some commentaries explain that “father” here refers not only to one’s biological father but also to all paternal elders, such as uncles. Likewise, the emperor must defer to those who came before him—his elder brothers and sisters.

The Chinese translation of this passage uses the particle "也" (*ye*) multiple times to denote phrasal pauses, a linguistic feature that does not carry over into the English version. Similarly, the Tibetan version also contains a character indicating such pauses.

In many traditions, while the parent reigns, the heir is known as a prince or princess. Only upon the parent's passing does the title change to king or queen. A well-known example of this principle of succession and deference is The Prince of Wales, Charles III, who remains a prince at the age of seventy because his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, is still living. A prince of such an advanced age is quite rare in British history.

Confucius taught us that even when one is exalted as an emperor, one should still respect elders and honor elder siblings. Even with the immense power of an emperor, one must not become arrogant. This is a caution against the mindset that says, "I am the leader of all, and therefore superior to everyone." Such an attitude, which looks down on others, is precisely what Confucianism seeks to prevent.

I cannot speak with certainty about how widely the tradition of deference is followed in Han regions today, but in our Tibetan communities, it remains very much alive. We see it, for example,

in family life: an older sibling naturally holds a position of greater respect than a younger one. If a younger brother speaks disrespectfully to his elder brother, others would gently remind him, “Please, show some manners and be respectful to your brother.” This dynamic also applies between parents and children. It is understood that parents guide and, if necessary, correct their children. For a child to regularly instruct their parents—unless the parents’ actions are truly harmful or unethical—is often seen as a breach of filial respect.

In the West, while some communities may observe similar traditions, the prevailing approach is often quite different. Many Westerners place a strong emphasis on openness and egalitarianism. Age or generational seniority tends to carry less weight, with greater attention given to the validity of an argument—whoever presents the more reasonable point is heard. This reflects how Eastern and Western traditions have evolved along distinct paths, shaped by different—though not necessarily conflicting—values.

The Art of Understanding: Embracing Diverse Cultures

The wise path, I believe, lies in avoiding extremes. We should not cling rigidly to one perspective, believing that traditional Eastern culture is the only reasonable way and that all modern ideas are

flawed. Nor should we fall into the opposite trap of thinking that only modern Western thought is enlightened, while all ancient traditions are merely obsolete.

This brings us to a very important practice: the practice of reflection and analysis of both Eastern and Western cultures, of both the traditional and the modern. It is much like preparing for a journey. Before traveling to a new place, it is wise to learn about its local customs so we can easily adapt to them when we arrive. As an Easterner myself, if I were to live in the West and want to be a harmonious part of the community, I would need to understand and respect Western ways of life.

In the same way, I understand that the teachings I share today, which may seem natural to those raised in a traditional Eastern culture, might be less familiar or even challenging for a Western audience. This is why it is so valuable for all of us to learn from one another, to seek understanding of different traditions and ways of being.

“At the ancestral temple, sacrifice rituals are performed, and offerings are made in remembrance of parents and ancestors.

Ancient emperors and other nobles usually maintained their own ancestral temples. In these sacred sites, they would reverently perform rituals or make offerings to honor the spirits of their departed parents and ancestors, as well as the great forces of Heaven and Earth. This practice demonstrates a heart full of reverence and gratitude—ancient people would never forget their family lineage. Such customs are truly meaningful.

Now, when we hear the word “sacrifice,” it can sometimes bring to mind unsettling images of slaughtering animals to offer their flesh and blood to the gods in hopes of winning divine favor. In the contemporary world, we can simply interpret sacrifice to mean offering, prayer, or the seeking of blessings.

The Full Measure of Science: Material and Mystical Inquiry Alike

From numerous historical records and traditional classics, including *The Classic of Filial Piety*, we can observe that the ancients acknowledged more than just what is visible and tangible. They also recognized a kind of subtle, powerful force that exists beyond the reach of our ordinary senses—what they often referred to as heavenly deities and other spiritual presences.

To some young people today, and perhaps even to certain modern scholars, this may sound like mere superstition. However, we should recognize that the deep, underlying currents that have shaped human history and civilization are fundamentally tied to the religious or spiritual quest. Additionally, generally speaking, only religious teachings offer detailed explanations of supernatural forces.

A common sentiment in our modern world is: “I believe only in science, not in religion.” However, if upon close examination, such a view may reflect an incomplete understanding of both science and religion. Often, science is narrowly associated with fields like quantum physics, while religion is subconsciously dismissed as outside the domain of legitimate inquiry. Yet, for much of human history, the study of the natural world—what we now call science—was deeply intertwined with spiritual and religious thought. In those times, theology was frequently considered the highest form of knowledge, and many religious principles are in full harmony with the laws of the mind and nature.

In its broadest sense, science encompasses not only the study of material phenomena but also the exploration of the mind, cognition, and belief. Systems of inquiry have existed in both ancient and modern forms, across Eastern and Western traditions throughout

history. It is a mistake to assume that science is only a few centuries old, that only modern experimental science is valid, or that all prior thought and civilization were “unscientific.” Such a view limits our understanding of what science truly is.

While getting to know the full measure of science, we need to understand that modern science is still in a continual process of discovery and exploration. Its conclusions are shaped by the limitations of current instruments and methods, and are not necessarily the ultimate truth.

“One cultivates one’s character and is careful in one’s conduct out of concern that one might bring dishonor to one’s ancestors.

A filial ruler cultivates both body and mind, acting with restraint and exercising caution in both speech and behavior. The motivation is simple: to avoid any careless actions that might reveal personal shortcomings and thereby tarnish the dignity of their parents and ancestors.

Of course, if one’s parents have already passed away, it is difficult to say with certainty whether a child’s improper conduct would, in any real sense, bring them shame. Yet, in Confucian culture, the

concept of “face,” or honor, is especially cherished. When children act dishonorably, they are seen as not only disgracing themselves but also disgracing their entire family, making it hard for other members to hold their heads high in society.

This cultural emphasis on family honor is not unique to Han regions, where traditional culture is deeply rooted; it can also be found in Tibetan areas. For example, imagine a situation where two people get into a fight. The one who is defeated might return home only to be scolded by his parents, who might say, “If I had heard today that my son was beaten to death, I would not have been sad. But to hear that my son was defeated—now I feel I cannot go on living in this world.” While these are extreme words, they reflect a common mindset: the need to succeed and to win. For many, preserving face or social standing can seem more important than life itself.

“When offerings are made with reverence at the ancestral temples, the spirits and deities will manifest.

When an emperor made offerings with great respect at the ancestral temples or at the circular altar, it was believed that the spirits of the ancestors, along with deities such as those of Heaven and Earth, would descend and become present, attaching themselves to the memorial tablets.

On The Continuity of Consciousness

In my view, certain Confucian teachings—such as this one—approach what might be called a form of spiritual science. They reflect an observation, or perhaps an intuition, that a continuity of consciousness, or a soul, persists after death. This view rejects the notion that “after death, a person is extinguished like a lamp going out,” and instead maintains that life continues in some subtle form.

However, I find it somewhat difficult to rationalize the tradition’s apparent belief that everyone who passes away automatically becomes a kind of ghost or spirit, summoned and provided with offerings during rituals. Unlike Buddhism, Confucian tradition does not provide extensive descriptions of how consciousness, after death, is driven by the winds of karma through the six realms of existence, nor does it offer a clear explanation of how such consciousness can attain ultimate liberation. In this respect, while Confucian texts hint at an afterlife, the account of the journey of consciousness is not as extensively mapped out as it is in Buddhism.

Regarding the matter of past and future lives, I have found—through decades of study—that very few religions attempt to describe consciousness with precision. And among those that do, none matches

the extraordinary clarity found in Buddhism. In my efforts to understand various perspectives, I have examined the sacred texts of many different faiths and engaged in dialogue with distinguished leaders from various traditions. My conclusion is exactly as expressed in *Praise of the Exalted One*: the more I explore the texts of other traditions, the more unshakable my confidence becomes in the teachings of our fundamental teacher, the Buddha Shakyamuni.¹⁰³

“When filial piety and fraternal love reach their utmost perfection, their power connects with the divine, illuminates the four seas, and penetrates everywhere without obstruction.

When an emperor serves and honors his parents with the utmost sincerity and treats his siblings with the deepest love and respect, he establishes a profound connection with the deities, including those of Heaven and Earth. These divine beings support and bless such persons in their cultivation of virtue. Over time, the radiance of these virtuous deeds shines forth in every corner of the realm—east, west, south, and north—without hindrance or limitation. In other words, the power of practicing virtue, especially filial piety, extends far beyond one’s family, bringing well-being and joy to the entire world.

This idea is very much in accord with the teachings found in the *Ekottara Agama*. In Volume Sixteen, it is taught that on the eighth, fourteenth, or fifteenth days of the lunar month, when a person engages in virtuous practice—such as caring for one’s parents with reverence or observing the eight one-day vows—the Four Great Kings¹⁰⁴ and other celestial beings will be present. Thus, when we dedicate ourselves to virtuous actions, blessings and spiritual resonance will naturally follow.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The Classic of Poetry states, ‘From west to east, from south to north, there is no one who does not show respect.’”

According to this ancient text, when an emperor truly embodies these virtues we have been discussing—practicing goodness, including fulfilling filial duties—people throughout the realm, in every direction, respond with reverence, offerings, and praise. Both humans and celestial beings will admire such a ruler, saying: “This emperor not only treats his own family with warmth and kindness, but also loves his subjects as if they were his kin. He is truly remarkable.” This principle is not limited to great rulers; the virtuous actions of any individual create ripples that are recognized by both humans and celestial beings.

From our study of the chapter on “Feeling and Responding,” we see that beyond our familiar world of mental activities and material concerns, there exist deeper levels of interaction—including subtle connections between humans and celestial beings. This naturally leads to further questions: How does such spiritual resonance occur? What are these deities truly like? For those interested in exploring these questions more deeply, Buddhist texts like the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and the *Yogacarabhumi Shastra* provide detailed and clear explanations. Only through careful study of these works can we gain a clear understanding of these profound principles.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: SERVING ONE'S LORD

This chapter explores the art of serving one's lord—or, in modern terms, leader. The word “lord” here carries a dual significance: it evokes the traditional image of a monarch while also referring to contemporary figures of authority. Similarly, the “king” in the title of the well-known Buddhist text, *The Just King*, embodies both senses, making the title especially apt. In the course of our professional life, we often alternate between these roles: sometimes leading, and at other times supporting those whose positions merit our respect.

Loyalty, Self-Reflection, and Harmony

Confucius said, “When a noble person serves his superior, he should contemplate carefully and be loyal. Upon leaving office, he should continue to reflect on any errors and make amends where needed. He supports the superiors’ policies while helping correct their faults. Thus, those above and below can maintain harmony.

In other words, a person of integrity, when serving spiritual teachers or organizational leaders, would contemplate carefully and diligently fulfill their responsibilities with respect and loyalty. This is the rightful and natural way. In addition, assisting in the implementation, improvement, and promotion of the leader's policies or plans is essential. If the leader makes mistakes, it is one's duty to help correct them. Even after leaving one's post, it is beneficial to continue reflecting on any errors made and to offer restitution or correction where needed. In this way, those above and those below can live with mutual respect, goodwill, and harmony.

In reality, around the globe—whether in the East or the West—human society tends to have some degree of hierarchical structures. In the workplace, each person holds a specific position, with superiors above and teammates below. In Buddhist communities, there are also different levels of responsibility and authority. For example, the *Pratimoksa Sutra* describes in detail the distinct responsibilities and roles of various types of acharyas (spiritual preceptors).

Once taking on a role, a person of virtue serves the leader respectfully, often reflecting on how best to contribute and remaining wholly committed to that loyalty—even to the point of personal sacrifice, if necessary. In Chinese culture—perhaps for historical

reasons—this way of thinking has long been common. Such individuals would never behave one way in their managers' presence and another behind their back. I once hoped that the heads of our study groups could be chosen openly through democratic means. Yet, as time passes, it often happens that a person in charge becomes the supreme authority of the group—the unshakable “number one.” This tendency may be deeply tied to the traditions and history of certain regions.

Working Harmoniously with Leadership

Although these are worldly teachings, I believe they hold great significance even within Buddhist communities. Take, for instance, volunteer teams: those who do not understand how to work harmoniously with leadership and frequently offend their supervisors may risk dismissal. Sometimes, even if a subordinate has not committed any serious fault, a displeased leader may—rightly or wrongly—find reasons to justify formally removing that person.

A lack of harmony with leadership can be a sign of insufficient wisdom. Many people fail to realize that a key factor of their professional development is their supervisor. I have seen young people who, shortly after starting their positions, manage to offend

every one of their supervisors. Once you have alienated all your leaders, how can you expect to thrive in that environment?

So, whenever a young person asks me for practical worldly advice, I tell them this: even if your leader is seriously flawed—even if you feel strong resistance to their instructions or are privately dissatisfied—it is better, outwardly, to demonstrate respectful compliance. You might say, “Yes, yes, I will definitely do as you have instructed. I will follow your guidance carefully.” This approach helps maintain peaceful relations throughout the hierarchy.

Scriptural Teaching from the *Classic of Poetry*

“The *Classic of Poetry* states, ‘My heart is filled with love and reverence for him—where is too distant that I cannot speak to him directly. Deep in my heart I treasure him—when will I ever forget him?’”

As this passage from the *Classic of Poetry* illustrates, a virtuous and noble leader is deeply respected and cherished by all. Even when such a leader is far away and there is no opportunity to express admiration face-to-face, people still hold him close in their hearts and remember him always.

The Unique Nature of Longing for One's Spiritual Teacher

When a noble soul departs, the sense of loss is shared by all; when an unkind person passes, their absence is soon forgotten. Yet the remembrance of one's spiritual teacher transcends ordinary longing—it is a sacred form of memory that time cannot erase. The teacher's voice, their very countenance, their instructions, and the quiet power of their example become deeply and permanently engraved in the hearts of their disciples, never fading away.

Our root guru, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, has been apart from us for about fifteen years now. Many lineage disciples may never have met him in person, and of course, we no longer have the chance to converse with him directly. Yet our longing for him remains carefully preserved in our hearts. With the passing of time, far from diminishing, this yearning has only grown more intense.

Longing for one's guru is unlike longing for anyone else. The memory of departed relatives, for example, often softens and eventually fades over the years. I recall that when my own mother passed away, I dared not even mention her name in front of my younger sisters, as it would cause them to burst into uncontrollable tears. Now, when they hear her name, their grief is no longer

so overwhelming. Such is the nature of worldly emotions: time gradually washes them away. By contrast, the longing for a guru endures because it is bound to us through the authentic Dharma. In this way, it differs profoundly from ordinary familial bonds.

When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche relied upon his own guru, the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Thupga Rinpoche (Khenchen Thubten Chopel), he was in his early twenties and spent only six years by his side. Yet forty or fifty years later, when His Holiness was already in his sixties or seventies, he would be moved to tears every time he spoke of Thupga Rinpoche. This simple fact alone allows us to sense the greatness of Thupga Rinpoche and the unique place he held in the heart of His Holiness.

The Proper Motivation in Relying upon a Spiritual Teacher

The principle articulated in the primary text applies not only to our worldly interactions but also to our spiritual relationships, especially how we Buddhist practitioners rely on our teachers. When auspicious circumstances present to allow us to be near our teacher, we should serve sincerely. Even if we later part ways, it is important to maintain honesty and respect in our hearts. Unfortunately, some people approach this relationship with a purely pragmatic mindset: while in their teacher's presence, they are attentive and deferential,

but once separated, they begin to criticize and focus on perceived faults. Such behavior is clearly not the proper way of following a spiritual teacher.

The Avatamsaka Sutra uses several powerful metaphors to illustrate the right attitude when relying on a spiritual teacher. Among these are: a diamond-like mind—unbreakable and steadfast as a diamond during the process of relying upon the teacher; an earth-like mind—able to bear any burden without complaint, just as earth supports all things; and the mind of a loyal dog—a faithful dog never harms its master. Personally, I find this last metaphor especially important. A good family dog never turns on its master, regardless of how it is treated. Whether greeted with kindness or frustration, the faithful dog responds with joy and loyalty.

Some disciples stay close to their spiritual teacher only when the teacher possesses prestige, power, and wealth, following him everywhere and serving with great courtesy. But once the teacher's circumstances decline or their reputation diminishes, these same disciples may join in slander or even harm their teacher. This is not the correct way to rely on a spiritual teacher. Sadly, such situations have occurred in some countries. In my view, as Buddhists, our reliance on spiritual teachers should be guided by the authentic Dharma, including the precious teachings in *The Avatamsaka Sutra*.

To summarize, whether we are relying on spiritual teachers or serving worldly leaders, we should give our wholehearted effort while in their company. After parting ways, we should not speak of their faults. Instead, we should engage in self-reflection: “Did I make any mistakes while serving this leader or teacher? If so, I must sincerely confess them and strive to act more conscientiously in the future.” This is the genuine way to rely upon a guru, and likewise, the proper way to serve a worthy leader in everyday life. I regard this as an especially precious teaching.

Temples as Research Institutes into the Mysteries of Mind and Body

A close study of classical texts like *The Classic of Filial Piety* reveals the deep connection between traditional culture and religion, especially in their shared recognition of invisible forces and realities beyond the material world. The faith of ancient rulers—in this case, their expressions of filial piety—was often closely tied to ancestral temples. While the original text primarily describes temples as places of ritual offerings, history shows that temples have served many additional purposes, including as centers for the propagation of Dharma and as hubs for scholarly research, much like modern research institutes.

As an aside, I have lately been studying the life of the great monk Faxian and the history of his era over 1,600 years ago. Through this exploration, I have developed great admiration for him and plan to deliver a lecture on his life in the future.

Historically, many monasteries in China preserved vast collections of rare and valuable manuscripts, and some functioned as centers for translation and scientific inquiry. Even today, especially within Tibetan Buddhism, monasteries are not only places for Dharma practice but also serve as research institutions for a wide range of knowledge.

For example, logic classes specialize in Buddhist philosophy and reasoning; cosmology and geography classes mainly study texts like the *Yogacarabhumi Shastra* and *The Treasury of Abhidharma*, which teach the nature of beings; Tibetan medicine classes primarily focus on medical knowledge in the *Four Medical Tantras*; and astrology and calendar classes mainly research the calendrical sciences taught in the *Kalachakra Tantra*. Additionally, there are classes dedicated to the arts, craftsmanship, and sacred painting and sculpture. In our Nyingma tradition, for example, the Guru Rinpoche feast offering on the tenth day of each month often features the vajra dance, which is also performed at certain Dharma assemblies. Its melodies, chanting styles, and movements all fall within the domain of art.

Architectural design, statue-making, and sacred painting belong to the science of craftsmanship.

For those unfamiliar with Buddhism, the term “Academy of Sciences” suggests a place focusing on advanced research. But when they see a sign for a “Monastery,” they may think: “Oh, a temple—probably just some monks inside, counting big prayer beads all day.” In the case of Tibetan monasteries, perhaps they picture monks turning large handheld prayer wheels, like the one I have. There is a common misconception that monastics are somehow removed from wisdom or science—a perception perhaps shaped by portrayals in films and television from the 1970s and 1980s. This, however, is far from the truth.

In reality, monasteries have always been—and continue to be—centers for profound research, particularly into the mysteries of the human body and mind. Through dedicated study, one can discover truths that even modern science has yet to fully explain. In this way, the Dharma remains a field of immense value, worthy of learning and research for all.

Lecture Sixteen

December 8, 2018

WORDS BEFORE THE TEACHING

Today, we will discuss the final chapter of *The Classic of Filial Piety*—"The Passing of a Parent." After I finish teaching this class and you have completed your oral presentations, we will conclude our study of this classic. I am very pleased to be wrapping up this sixteen-session course with you all. My hope is that, after studying this work, each of you will earnestly share these teachings with those who are karmically connected to you. From a secular perspective, this course is similar to a training program in Chinese classical studies. I have heard that some high schools, universities, and other institutions offer similar programs during school breaks, awarding certificates to students who complete them.

In our exploration of Chinese classical texts, we have previously studied *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child* in addition to *The Classic of Filial Piety*. If you come across other important works on Chinese traditional culture, please feel free to recommend them to me. If opportunities arise, we can study additional Chinese classics, especially those that are relatively concise. Given the increasingly

strict regulations on religious activities, teaching traditional culture can be an effective and skillful way to share the Dharma.

Although I do not hold a formal lineage transmission of these Confucian classics, I still believe it is valuable for us to study them together from time to time. In the same spirit, we can selectively learn from the texts of other religions and draw wisdom from their teachings. It is far more beneficial to have some understanding of traditional culture and other religions than to remain entirely unfamiliar with them. Through studying several classical texts, including this one, and observing contemporary society, I have found that the spirit of Confucian thought still runs deeply through the cultural veins of the Han society today. A great number of people continue to put Confucius's ideas into practice in their daily lives.

The teachings we discussed today include elements that align with Buddhist principles, as well as others that differ. I do not think it is necessary to insist that only Buddhist or only Confucian thought is correct; each person can follow the ideas that best suit their own preferences and circumstances.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE PASSING OF A PARENT

The final chapter of *The Classic of Filial Piety* centers on fulfilling filial duties through properly mourning and the handling of affairs after a parent's passing, including the performance of memorial rites. For a devoted child, carrying out these responsibilities marks the culmination of filial piety.

Genuine Expressions of Grief

Confucius said, “When a filial child mourns the loss of a parent, they weep without melodic inflection, perform rituals without elaborate makeup, speak plainly without eloquence, feel uncomfortable in fine clothing, find no joy in music, and taste no flavor in delicious food. These are genuine expressions of grief and sorrow.

Confucius outlines the proper conduct for a filial child after a parent's death. First, the bereaved cry aloud, but not with prolonged, melodious tones—no rising and falling cadences resembling

singing. Second, elaborate makeup is inappropriate during memorial ceremonies. Third, speech remains simple and unadorned, not poetic or exaggerated. As Confucius implies, when one has just lost a parent, there is no mood for poetic, flowery words. Fourth, attire is plain, without ornaments such as earrings or necklace—a practice also observed in Tibetan culture. Fifth, even if beautiful music is played, the bereaved do not indulge in it or sing along. Sixth, at meals, one does not seek out delicacies or eat excessively, as if at a celebration. These six aspects are not rigid rules, but natural outward expressions of the deep grief and sorrow felt by a truly filial child.

The phrase “weep without melodic inflection,” taken literally, could be interpreted as a call for composure rather than excessive sorrow. However, this interpretation is not confirmed by the commentaries I have studied, so I cannot say for certain that it represents Confucius’s original intent.

To Cry or Not to Cry?

According to Han tradition, if children do not cry when their parents pass away, it is seen as a sign of unfilial behavior. I have heard that in some parts of southern China and elsewhere, if children cannot bring themselves to cry, they may even hire professional mourners

to weep on their behalf—sometimes using eye drops to make the tears appear genuine. In certain Tibetan regions, too, it is commonly believed that one must cry loudly when a loved one dies.

Yet, these are worldly customs. From a Buddhist perspective, especially among advanced practitioners, the approach is quite different. Jetsun Milarepa, in one of his songs of realization, wrote:

*No-one to ask me if I'm sick,
No-one to mourn me when I die:
To die here alone in this hermitage
Is everything a yogi could wish for.¹⁰⁵*

His message is clear: at the time of death, it is better if no one is weeping and wailing nearby.

I have previously talked about the near-death experience recorded in a renowned dakini Lingza Chokyi's journals of traveling to the bardo. Once, she experienced what we would call clinical death. Her relatives, believing she had passed away, wept loudly. In her experience, her children's tears fell upon her like drops of pus and blood that turned into hail, striking her continuously and causing intense suffering. When she revived and returned from the bardo, she told her relatives that in the future, when someone passes away,

it is best not to cry, but to restrain one's emotions. Otherwise, the sound of crying can disturb the consciousness of the deceased. A being newly separated from life, wandering in the bardo, already faces terrifying visions and immense fear and sadness. If, on top of this, they must endure the "hail of pus and blood" caused by the grief and tears of loved ones, their suffering becomes even greater.

Recently, I have been reading the *Sutra on Impermanence*. This sutra was highly influential in ancient India, comparable in cultural prevalence to *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* in Tibetan regions. The *Sutra on Impermanence* was customarily recited for the deceased by families of all social classes. The sutra, preserved in several Tibetan versions, was translated into Chinese around 701 CE by the Tang-Dynasty Tripitaka Master Yijing. A few readers may find portions of his translation a bit difficult to understand. *Sutra on Impermanence* counsels:

Filial children, restrain your grief; do not continue weeping.

In other words, dutiful children should temper their grief and refrain from prolonged or uncontrollable sobbing.

Han Buddhism also discourages excessive crying during mourning. For instance, a well-known Buddhist encyclopedia, *A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden*, states:

There is nothing about death that warrants weeping.

Moreover, the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* says:

Those who hear the sounds of mournful weeping will be driven by the karmic winds and take rebirth in different places.

The cries of relatives can thus be detrimental to the deceased, potentially causing them to lose mindfulness and be blown by karmic winds to lower realms.

From a worldly perspective, it is natural to express the pain of losing one's parents through weeping. The Dharma, however, offers a different view. All phenomena are impermanent, and when death arrives, crying cannot change that reality. Weeping does not benefit the deceased; instead, composure and the dedication of merit are far more beneficial. I often advise people to maintain control of their emotions when loved ones pass away, and not to be overly saddened or weep uncontrollably. Yet, I understand that for many, this is extremely difficult. Losing one's closest loved ones is deeply

painful, and outsiders can never fully share in that grief. We may feel sorrow when another person's parents pass away, but the pain is never as sharp as when we lose our own.

So, while refraining from tears is best according to the Dharma, in worldly terms, shedding some tears is understandable. What is essential is to avoid laughter at such times. When parents pass away, it would be inappropriate to laugh loudly, for that would be very disrespectful. I recall the intense sorrow I felt when His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche passed into nirvana. That year, I was teaching *Opening the Door to the Dharma*. During one class, I struggled to maintain my composure and told everyone, "Although our guru is no longer with us, we should pull ourselves together and not cry." A few students began to giggle, so I quickly added, "That does not mean you should laugh either."

In Tibetan society, when a person's spiritual teacher or parent passes away, if that person dresses up, wears heavy makeup, sings, dances, and openly enjoys themselves, people may not say anything to their face, but behind their back, criticism will certainly follow. Such social norms correspond with the six aspects Confucius emphasized here.

Words, Conduct, and Bearing Should Suit the Occasion

There is another point I would like to remind everyone of: when you find yourselves in sorrowful or solemn settings—such as attending a funeral or visiting victims in disaster-stricken areas—even if you do not personally feel especially sad, it is essential to be mindful of your demeanor. Such occasions are not appropriate for making jokes or lighthearted remarks. When my mother passed away, I invited several khenpos to our home to recite prayers. Normally, there is nothing wrong with chatting and laughing, but in that particular setting, as the host, I felt quite uncomfortable seeing them joke around.

I have heard that some of our end-of-life care volunteers conduct themselves with great propriety when visiting others' homes to chant prayers, which is commendable. However, I have also heard that a few volunteers can be careless, continuing to joke and laugh even in the house of the deceased. In such circumstances, your laughter will certainly be perceived as offensive and disrespectful by the bereaved family. At the very least, when in the presence of the deceased's family, your demeanor should reflect the gravity of the situation.

It is important to adapt our behavior to the circumstances; otherwise, we risk falling short of basic social etiquette. I try to be mindful of this myself. At joyful occasions, such as a banquet, I avoid wearing a gloomy expression, as it can dampen the atmosphere for others. Even if I do not feel particularly cheerful, I make an effort to smile so others may enjoy themselves. Conversely, in serious settings, I adjust my demeanor accordingly, ensuring that I do not appear playful, lighthearted, or disrespectful.

Proper Limits in Mourning

“After three days of mourning, one is expected to resume normal eating. It is the emperor’s responsibility to teach the people not to harm their own lives through excessive grief over death, and not to violate human nature by mourning beyond what is reasonable. Such is the policy established by the sages.

In ancient times, when their parents passed away, some people were so overwhelmed by grief that they stopped eating altogether. However, it is essential to resume eating after three days of mourning; otherwise, the body cannot endure it. The monarch was responsible for instructing the people not to harm themselves out of excessive grief for their parents. If children jeopardize their health to the

point that basic survival is threatened, such behavior is contrary to human nature and should be avoided. These teachings were passed down by the ancient sages.

It is difficult to say whether people today still mourn their parents so intensely that they cannot eat. In both Eastern and Western societies, the grief over a parent's death seems less overwhelming than in the past; for some, it may even bring a sense of relief from a heavy burden. In fact, the death of other family members—especially a spouse—may cause greater sorrow than the loss of a parent.

The standard set forth in the original text is one that I, myself, find difficult to meet. As I have mentioned before, in the immediate aftermath of my father's passing, faced with numerous and pressing arrangements, my response was one of pragmatism. I recall saying, "Let us eat first; there is much to attend to." I did not observe even a single day of fasting, let alone the traditional three. This practical approach drew criticism from my family at the time, who felt I was failing to display the proper grief expected of a filial son.

When one's parents pass away, it is natural to feel heartbroken and to grieve deeply. However, it is important not to fast indefinitely or become so overwhelmed by sorrow that it leads to depression. At times, one may even feel that life is no longer worth living, but

suicide is never a wise solution. Remember that all phenomena are impermanent, and that obtaining a human life—endowed with freedoms and advantages—is both rare and precious.

Buddhist teachings offer many practical and helpful insights. When conditions permit, I want to teach the *Sutra on Impermanence*. Having received the oral transmission of this sutra, I feel well-grounded to share it. Before doing so, I plan to complete a comparison between the existing Tibetan versions and the Chinese translation.

“Mourning does not exceed three years; this teaches the people that grief has its proper limits.

The three-year mourning period suggests that while grief is considered natural and necessary, it should not be prolonged indefinitely. After three years, children are expected to bring their mourning to a close and gradually return to the rhythms of daily life. This tradition is mentioned in *The Analects*, where Confucius discusses the matter with his disciple Zai Wo. When Zai Wo suggested that one year of mourning should suffice rather than three, Confucius replied, perhaps with some displeasure: “If you believe one year is enough, then follow your own judgement.” It is said that, perhaps as a result of this attitude, Zai Wo did not achieve great success in his family or career. According to Confucian thought, observing a

three-year mourning period for a parent is an essential expression of filial piety.

In Tibetan culture, mourning customs are quite similar. For example, after the passing of our root guru, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, our academy refrained from holding any vajra festivals for three years. When a parent or close relative passes away, it is customary to invite a group of monastics to recite prayers for the deceased for forty-nine days immediately following the death. On the first and second anniversaries, monastics are again invited to recite prayers for three days. After this, it is generally no longer customary to hold such ceremonies annually.

Beyond the Three-Year Mourning: A Buddhist Perspective on Remembrance

While Confucianism prescribes a formal three-year limit for mourning, Buddhist commemorations for accomplished masters often continue for generations. This enduring practice is evident in many traditions. For instance, the Gelug sect has honored Je Tsongkhapa for centuries with the annual Butter Lamp Festival on the anniversary of his nirvana. Likewise, many Nyingma monasteries in Tibetan regions, India, and Nepal continue to hold nirvana Dharma assemblies on the anniversary of the Omniscient

Longchenpa's passing—Longchenpa having entered nirvana even before Tsongkhapa.

At our academy, we offer butter lamps every year in honor of Ju Mipham Rinpoche and hold the annual Nirvana Dharma Assembly in memory of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of His Holiness's nirvana, commemorated by the fifteenth consecutive Dharma Assembly—a tradition that far exceeds the three-year convention. Han Buddhist communities also share the tradition of organizing commemorative gatherings to honor their eminent masters. These ceremonies serve a dual purpose: they are a way to remember and honor our teachers and an opportunity to accumulate tremendous merit.

Honoring and praying to one's guru is of paramount importance. The story of Ramapala, who attained realization while praying to his guru, is a powerful testament. As recorded in Taranatha's *The Miraculous Lives of Tantric Adepts* (which I translated from Tibetan to Chinese), Ramapala was a devoted disciple of the prominent Mahasiddha Maitripa. He trained under Maitripa for twelve years until the master passed away. Overcome with grief, Ramapala made a pilgrimage to his guru's stupa, where he remained in silence for three years, praying single-mindedly. One day, Maitripa appeared to him in a pure vision and bestowed his supreme blessings. The

master's wisdom poured into Ramapala's mind like water into a vessel, and in that moment, he attained realization. His long silence ended, Ramapala set out for southern India to spread the Dharma.

For lineage disciples, participating in the nirvana Dharma assemblies on their teachers' anniversary brings special blessings and accomplishments. Such dates are imbued with unique spiritual significance, and auspicious conditions easily come together. Therefore, as disciples of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, it is especially meaningful to take part in the Nirvana Dharma Assembly, even if only for a few days. It is not necessary to travel to the academy; one can hold such ceremonies at home.

On the anniversary of His Holiness's passing (the fifteenth day of the eleventh month in the Tibetan calendar), set up an image of His Holiness on your shrine, arrange offerings, and wholeheartedly pray to him while practicing Guru Yoga. If possible, recite the *Offering to the Guru* as well. At the conclusion, dedicate the merit through reciting *The King of Aspiration Prayers*. Practicing Guru Yoga on such a day brings extraordinary blessings, allowing the guru's wisdom, compassion, and power to merge naturally with your mindstream. While ordinary worldly people may perform rituals or observe mourning for a limited period after the passing of their

parents or teachers, the Buddhist perspective and practices differ in this regard. I invite you to reflect deeply on these distinctions.

Funeral Rites and Ancestral Temple

“Prepare inner and outer coffins, burial garments, and shrouds for one’s deceased parent, and carefully place the body within the coffins. Offering vessels are arranged to express the grief and sorrow of the living.

When one’s parent passed away, the ancients typically prepared both an inner coffin and an outer casket, along with appropriate burial garments and shrouds. The body was carefully placed inside the coffin, and in the memorial hall, square and round vessels filled with food and other offerings were arranged as an expression of the living’s grief and mourning. The outer casket is a large, box-like container that encases the inner coffin. In ancient times, great importance was attached to the quality of coffins. Emperors and the wealthy often had coffins crafted from gold, silver, or precious jewels, while those of humble means sometimes went so far as to sell themselves into servitude to afford a proper coffin for their parents.

Archaeological evidence suggests that ancient people in Tibetan regions had a tradition of using coffins for burials. In my hometown of Drango, during road construction, many ancient remains and massive stone coffins were unearthed—something I personally witnessed. Excavated from depths of five to six meters, these sites contained largely intact skeletons alongside burial items like clay pots and teapots. These findings reveal that people of that era were of remarkable height. The burial sites are said to date back to the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE) and Warring States (475-221 BCE) periods.

In addition to coffins, the ancients also provided the deceased with fine garments and shrouds—a tradition that persists today among Han families who choose earth burial over cremation. However, the Buddhist perspective on this matter differs significantly. According to the *Sutra on Impermanence*, a person's possessions should be offered to the Three Jewels after their death, rather than used to craft exquisite burial garments for the corpse. The sutra explains that “there is no benefit in doing so.” Once a person has died, what meaning is there in adorning a lifeless body with luxurious clothing? For those interested, the sutra offers further detail on this subject.

The practice of preparing food and other offerings for the deceased also warrants closer examination. According to Buddhist teachings, after death, a person's consciousness is typically reborn into a higher or lower realm within forty-nine days. Unless the consciousness remains in the intermediate state or is reborn as a hungry ghost, it is unlikely to linger in the memorial hall to receive these offerings.

As *A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden* states, only those reborn into the realm of hungry ghosts can receive food offerings from the living. If the deceased is reborn into any of the other five realms, they cannot partake. Beings in the hell realm are consumed by immense suffering and cannot eat, while those in the celestial realm already enjoy an abundance of exquisite food and have no need for earthly provisions.

“Beating their chests and stamping their feet, weeping and wailing, the mourners escort the deceased with deep sorrow.

Some commentaries explain “beating the chest” as a gesture men use when overwhelmed by grief, while “stamping the feet” is traditionally how women express deep sorrow. These actions—beating the chest, stomping the ground, weeping, and wailing—are traditional ways for children to express profound mourning during a funeral procession.

Divination is used to determine the timing of the final send-off and the location of the proper gravesite. The body is then interred in peace.

Before burial, it was customary to select an auspicious date and burial site through divination, after which the coffin was properly placed in the cemetery.

On Proper Funeral Arrangements: Please Do Not Rush to Cremate!

This ancient wisdom finds a powerful echo in Tibetan culture, where the handling of the deceased is never done carelessly. When a family member passes away, the family typically consults calendrical calculations from the *Kalachakra Tantra* to determine the most auspicious time for the funeral. If a favorable date is near, the body need not remain at home for long. But if the auspicious date is further away, the body is kept at home until then—even during the summer. Regardless of the circumstances, the body is usually kept at home for at least three days. It is advisable to carefully select a favorable date for the funeral, since holding the funeral on an auspicious day benefits the family, while conducting it on an inauspicious day can have negative effects. This is not mere

superstition, but a rigorous and systematic calculation, similar in some ways to the methods found in the Chinese *I Ching*.

In the past, Han communities also observed funeral practices with great care, but the influence of modern ideologies has likely weakened these customs. While some in the West still place great importance on proper funeral arrangements, more and more young people—valuing modern ideas such as personal rights and freedom—choose not to follow traditional practices. In modern cities, bodies are usually sent for cremation immediately after a doctor declares death, and are reduced to ashes within hours. This practice has become the norm, partly because many people feel uncomfortable keeping a body at home, even that of their own parent. From this perspective, parents are truly to be pitied: after a lifetime of raising their children, their bodies are not even allowed to be brought home for a final farewell, but are left in a sterile hospital morgue to be cremated shortly after death.

From a spiritual perspective, this haste is deeply concerning. I believe it is best to leave the body undisturbed for at least three days, allowing the consciousness to transition peacefully. If you share this view, it is wise to discuss your wishes with your family in advance to ensure they are honored. In fact, the consciousness of a delog¹⁰⁶ may remain in the intermediate state for several days. If

they return and find that their bodies have already been cremated, it would be truly unfortunate. A compelling account is found in the *Autobiography of Sera Khandro*, which records that Dakini Sera Khandro journeyed to the bardo. During this period, her body appeared unconscious, as if in a deep faint. After her consciousness returned, her body gradually awoke.

“Prepare an ancestral temple to place the spirit tablet and make offerings so that the departed can enjoy them.

Following the completion of funeral rites, the spirit tablet or portrait of the deceased was installed in the family’s ancestral temple, where, through rituals, the departed were believed to be able to receive offers.

It is reassuring to see that many shrines still remain in Han regions. As the government has restricted traditional burials, ancestral temples or shrine rooms can provide a final resting place for the ashes and spirit tablets of the departed. I have noticed a decrease in cemeteries in certain places. When I first visited the vast hillside cemeteries in southern areas like Xiamen and Shantou, I was struck by their immense scale. I even remarked in one of my books that these “cities of the dead” seemed to rival the cities of the living.

On later visits, I observed that these cemeteries had contracted—a trend that is likely to continue.

Are Graves and Memorial Halls the Homes of the Departed?

According to Confucianism, the departed—existing as spirits or ghosts—can enjoy the offerings if the living place the ancestral tablet in the family shrine and perform rituals. Buddhist scriptures also contain similar teachings, with a more detailed explanation.

In *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra*, Ananda asked the Buddha if a deceased person's spirit resided in their grave. According to the Buddha's reply, there are several possibilities. If a person's actions while living were neither particularly virtuous nor especially harmful—what we might call 'middling karma'—then after death, such a person may exist as an intermediate being within the grave and can indeed partake in the offerings made by the living. One who has accumulated significant merit will be reborn in higher realms; they may even take rebirth in pure lands, attaining liberation. Conversely, one who has committed grave misdeeds will fall directly into the lower realms and experience immense suffering." This passage, and the sutra as a whole, deserve further exploration. The sutra provides various methods for benefiting the deceased and

notably its final volume includes the well-known *Medicine Buddha Sutra*.

For those on the Buddhist path, it is invaluable to compare different perspectives from a range of sources. If we consider ourselves Buddhists but remain unfamiliar with the teachings in our own scriptures and treatises, it would be a missed opportunity. Although this course centers on Confucian thought within traditional culture, I have also consulted a wide range of reliable Buddhist texts to compare the perspectives of Confucianism and Buddhism. I hope this approach will introduce you to diverse viewpoints and help broaden and deepen your understanding.

Benefiting the Deceased: Smoke Offerings and Dedication of Merit

The practice of making offerings to the deceased, as set forth in *The Classic of Filial Piety*, should not be dismissed entirely as mere superstition. From a Buddhist perspective, such acts are meaningful for beings in the intermediate state and the hungry ghost realm. As noted in *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra*, those with middling karma may remain as intermediate beings after death and can benefit from offerings. The intermediate state typically lasts up to forty-nine days, though exceptions exist. *Sutra*

of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma discusses situations in which the duration of the intermediate state is not fixed. His Holiness once mentioned that certain dakinis' travel journals describe beings who have remained in the intermediate state for over three years. These beings, known as "scent-eating spirits," subsist on the aroma of smoke offerings.¹⁰⁷

Therefore, it is important to perform smoke offerings and recite Buddhist scriptures, dedicating the merit to the deceased and to beings in the hungry ghost realm, especially on auspicious dates or during the Qingming Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day). In this way, both classes of beings can benefit from our actions.

Confucianism does not provide detailed explanations about the process of rebirth after death. Its rituals suggest a simple belief: while alive, one is human; after death, one becomes a ghost. While this view is unreasonable on certain aspects, it does correspond in some ways to the Buddhist understanding of intermediate beings and hungry ghosts who can benefit from ritual offerings. As I have mentioned before, to benefit the departed, it is necessary to submit their names to the monastic community, along with a small monetary offering, requesting prayers, rituals, and dedication of merit. Many people only make such offerings during the Ullambana

Festival, but in fact, it is beneficial to make offerings and request prayers for departed loved ones whenever visiting a monastery.

Traditionally, in Han regions, ancestral tablets in family shrines were meticulously arranged according to lineage, beginning from the earliest ancestors and continuing through successive generations—a structure reminiscent of the lineage trees of esteemed masters in the Dzogchen tradition. However, this practice has largely disappeared. Modern life tends to prioritize future aspirations and present enjoyment, often at the expense of precious traditions. Yet, many of these ancient customs possess profound significance and are worth preserving. Although the drastic transformation of contemporary mindsets and lifestyles present challenges to reviving these valuable customs, preserving traditions with deep cultural meaning remains an endeavor worthy of serious consideration.

“Conduct rituals annually to regularly remember the departed.

The tradition of honoring deceased loved ones through annual ritual offerings is widely observed among Han communities, especially during Qingming Festival, when families visit ancestral gravesites to make offerings and pay their respects. For Buddhists, such remembrance is equally important. On the anniversary of a loved one’s passing, if it is not possible to hold a formal dharma assembly,

we can invite the sangha to recite prayers. If that is also not feasible, we can personally recite sutras and mantras, dedicating the merit to the deceased. Recommended texts include the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*, the *Original Vows of Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, and the Avalokiteshvara mantra. Such practices are powerful and meaningful ways to benefit those who have passed away.

Personally, whenever I think of my parents, I immediately take up my prayer beads and recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra, “Om Mani Padme Hum,” at least one hundred times. As I have shared on my Weibo, when we deeply miss our departed parents or friends, reciting sutras and mantras is the best way to honor their memory and bring them benefit. However, if one’s guru has passed into nirvana, it is generally inappropriate to recite the Avalokiteshvara mantra. This mantra is typically used for the transference of consciousness, and for a disciple to perform such a transference for a guru whose realization surpasses their own may be considered disrespectful. In such cases, it is more appropriate to recite aspiration prayers, such as the *Aspiration of the Great Perfection*, and to wholeheartedly pray to the teacher, merging one’s mind into the teacher’s wisdom mind.

Serving Parents through Life and Death

“While parents are alive, serve them with love and respect; when they have passed away, attend to their affairs with sorrow and care. By fulfilling these fundamental and meaningful duties of humanity, which embrace life and death, filial children bring their service to their parents to its culmination.”

A truly filial child serves their parents with reverence and joy during their lifetime. After their parents pass away, they handle funeral arrangements with genuine sorrow and care. For Buddhists, this may also include inviting the sangha to perform the transference of consciousness, dedicating merit to benefit their parents in afterlives. In doing so, they fulfill their fundamental human responsibilities and complete the meaningful obligations of caring for their parents in both life and death. This is the true perfection of filial piety.

Unfortunately, many of us struggle with this. Some people, perhaps due to karmic connections from previous lives, feel closer to outsiders than to their own parents, leading to strained family relationships. They might quarrel with their parents constantly while they are alive, only to be consumed by regret and grief after their passing. It is essential to cherish and maintain harmony with our parents while they are still with us, for they will not be with

us forever. When their time comes, no matter how much we wish otherwise, they must leave this world; sometimes, a child may even predecease a parent.

Even more troubling are cases where adult children neglect their parents entirely. I know of three sisters who failed their parents completely: when their father died, they took no part in his funeral arrangements. They only appeared after their mother's death—not to mourn, but to claim her estate. This cold disregard for parents, motivated by a greed for inheritance, is a deeply regrettable phenomenon.

Fulfilling Filial Duties After Parents' Passing: The Example of the Buddha

Filial duty does not end with a parent's death; children continue to honor them by performing virtuous deeds on their behalf. This principle is rooted not only in traditional culture but also in core Buddhist teachings, with many texts offering guidance on how to practice filial piety for the benefit of deceased parents. A notable example is found in the *Sutra on the Nirvana of King Suddhodana*, which, though brief, recounts how the Buddha personally attended to the funeral arrangements of his father, King Suddhodana.

As King Suddhodana approached the end of his life, he longed to see the Buddha, Nanda, Ananda, and Rahula. King Suklodana remarked, "The Buddha is far away at Vulture Peak Mountain, and it is almost impossible to deliver the message to him." Yet, through his miraculous powers, the Buddha became aware of his father's impending death. He explained the situation to Nanda, Ananda, and Rahula, and together they traveled instantly to the king's side. Upon seeing his four beloved relatives, the king was overjoyed. The Buddha expounded the Dharma to his father and placed his hand upon the king's forehead. With palms joined at his chest, the king passed away peacefully.

To set an example for future generations in repaying the kindness of one's parents, the Buddha personally carried his father's coffin. At that moment, the earth trembled and many auspicious signs appeared. The Four Great Kings, wishing to repay the Buddha's kindness for his Dharma teachings, requested permission to carry the coffin themselves. The Buddha entrusted it to them and led the procession with an incense burner. After the cremation, he taught the Dharma to all who were present.

A Monastic's Filial Responsibility

As the Buddha's example shows, repaying the kindness of our parents is a fundamental duty—even for monastics. We should make every effort to be present with our parents at the end of their lives and personally attend to their final affairs. These affairs may last only a few days, but their significance endures.

Many monastic students at our academy have asked me, "My mother is gravely ill and wishes to see me. Should I return home?" Except in rare cases where obstacles are insurmountable, I always encourage them to go, even if it means missing important exams. The bond between parent and child is unique. Being present with one's parents at the end of their life is an act of filial duty and a way to bring them comfort and peace.

When my mother passed away, I was fortunate to see her one last time. I remember that night vividly: though I was ill and on an intravenous drip in Drango, I went at once to my mother's place when my younger brother called. She was very weak, but when she saw me, she reached for my hand, held it, kissed it, and smiled with a calm, radiant joy that filled the room. That final, gentle expression has stayed with me ever since; it is a memory I will never forget.

Some monastics believe that, having renounced worldly life, they must refrain from involvement in family matters—even when their parents are near death. Newly ordained monastics, in particular, may at times feel compelled to sever all worldly ties—an attitude that seemingly surpasses even the Buddha’s example.

While cultivating renunciation is important, it is equally essential to respect social norms. Additionally, genuine Buddhist practitioners demonstrate deep compassion not only toward their parents but also toward all sentient beings. When applying the Dharma in daily life, please be mindful of the essence of Mahayana Buddhism—compassion—and strive not to deviate from the authentic teachings.

Embracing Ancient Wisdom in a Modern World

In these lectures on *The Classic of Filial Piety*, I have integrated Buddhist perspectives into my discussion of Confucian culture. This approach may differ from that of other traditional teachers, but I chose it because my audience is primarily Buddhist. Though I cannot claim to have fully conveyed the profound intentions of Confucius, I believe everyone gains various degrees of benefits from studying this text.

I hope that all of you will continue to value traditional culture. The insights of the ancients may appear simple and are sometimes dismissed as “superstitious” or “outdated,” but they contain truths that remain deeply relevant today. This traditional thought, while not flawless or wholly scientific, contains essential wisdom, urgently needed yet often overlooked in our age, both in the humanities and in spiritual life. What matters is that we discern carefully and choose wisely which aspects to embrace.

Our study of *The Classic of Filial Piety* has now come to a close. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has participated in this journey of wisdom. This includes Buddhist practitioners; dedicated volunteers who have made these teachings accessible to all; teachers and students of traditional culture who cherish education and pursue wisdom; as well as certain non-human beings, such as asuras, rakshasas, and yakshas. May each of us embody filial piety, extending it not only to our parents but also to all sentient beings.

NOTES

1. Pointing-out instruction is a direct transmission given by a qualified master to students. It is a direct introduction to the true nature of the mind in advanced tantric practices.
2. The Cultural Revolution was a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 through 1976. It aimed to preserve Chinese socialism by purging remnants of capitalist and “old” ideas, including Confucianism.
3. “Kong Lao’er” refers to Confucius. Its literal meaning is “Kong the Second,” suggesting that Confucius was the second-born son in his family. It is a colloquial name used to delegitimize Confucius’s teachings during the Cultural Revolution.
4. The structure of the commune was such that households were organized into teams, then teams formed brigades, and brigades formed the commune. Each level of organization was responsible for certain activities.
5. Mani songs refer to chants of Avalokiteshvara mantra. They are usually set to melodic tunes. The full mantra is “Om Mani Padme Hum.”
6. “One layer of stigma” and “two layers of stigma” refer to classifications of individuals based on their social or political background during the Cultural Revolution. “One layer of stigma” is a classification of individuals from moderately undesirable backgrounds. “Two layers of stigma” is a more severe classification and can be assigned to people from counter-revolutionary families.
7. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, as ordered by the Chinese

- emperor Qin Shi Huang, almost all previously existing classic texts were burned, and more than four hundred and sixty scholars were buried alive.
8. Wei Zheng, *Sui Shu (Book of Sui)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1973), juan 27, “Jingji Zhi” (Bibliography of Classics).
 9. Ban Gu, *Han Shu (Book of Han)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1962), juan 30, “Yiwen Zhi” (Treatise on Literature).
 10. The exact lifespan of the Buddha is debated. In 1950, the World Fellowship of Buddhist reaffirmed and formalized widely accepted traditional dates of the Buddha’s birth (623BCE) and parinirvana (543BCE).
 11. The *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* records Confucius’s age as seventy-three, which is probably the age of traditional Chinese reckoning.
 12. Although the exact dates of Confucius’s birth and death have been debated, the dates cited in these lecture notes are generally accepted by scholars.
 13. Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi*) was the foremost of the five ancient Chinese emperors who shaped the history and identity of Chinese nation. He was revered as the founding ancestor of Chinese civilization.
 14. According to traditional Tibetan Buddhist customs, students typically do not sit on chairs when receiving teachings from a teacher. Students attending Khenpo’s lectures were sitting on carpets in the Dharma Hall of Larung Gar at the time.
 15. Nagarjuna, *Nagarjuna’s Letter to a Friend with Commentary by Kangyur Rinpoche*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 29.
 16. During the Yuan Dynasty, shaved heads—with a thin strip of hair at the front and long braids at the back—reflected the nomadic cultural traditions. To revive traditional Han culture, the Ming empire implemented the traditional Han hairstyle of tied hair. The Qing empire, enforced head shaving to assimilate the Han population, as the queue hairstyle was a defining symbol of Manchu identity.

17. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 87.
18. "Fertility rate, total (birth per woman)-world," World Bank Group, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=1W>
19. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, *Always Present: The Luminous Wisdom of Jigme Phuntsok*, ed. Khenpo Sodargye (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2015).
20. The *Classic of Poetry (Shijing)* is one of the Five Classics, which form the core of the Confucian canon. It is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry containing 305 poems. It is divided into three major parts: Feng "airs," Ya "odes," and Song "hymns."
21. The "Major Odes," as one of the sub-sections in the *Classic of Poetry*, consists of thirty-one poems.
22. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, *The Uttaratantra: A Treatise on Buddha-Essence*, trans. Ken and Katia Holmes (New Zealand: Zhyisil Chokyi Ghatsal Charitable Trust Publications, 2003), 135.
23. Ban Gu, *Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall*, trans. Dr. Tjan Tjoe Som (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1949), 218.
24. Qin Shi Huang (259–210BCE) was the first Qin emperor and the first emperor of China.
25. Mencius, *Meng Zi (Mencius)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2010).
26. Pi Xirui, *Xiaojing Zheng Zhushu (Zheng's Commentary on The Classic of Filial Piety)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2016).
27. *The Mahayana Sutra of Previous Lives and Contemplation the Mind-Ground*, trans. Rolf Giebel (California: BDK America, Inc., 2021), 42.
28. Khenpo Sodargye established several schools to provide education for children in remote areas.

29. "Lü Clan disturbance" refers to the political upheaval and subsequent downfall of Empress Lü Zhi's clan. After Lü Clan was ousted, Emperor Wen, a member of the Liu family, ascended the throne.
30. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 224.
31. "Fu on Punishment" or "Marquis of Lü on Punishments" is a chapter in the *Book of Documents*.
32. The *Vimalakirti Sutra*, trans. John R. McRae (California: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), 75.
33. *Shang Shu (Book of Documents)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2023).
34. Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 91.
35. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 30.
36. Other accounts say that Venerable Nanda was the lord's cousin.
37. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 35.
38. "Three Refuges" means taking refuge in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.
39. "Five Precepts" means five lay vows: do not kill; do not steal; do not lie; do not commit sexual misconduct; do not drink alcohol.
40. "Ten Virtuous Actions" are: do not kill—protect life instead; do not steal—practice generosity; do not commit sexual misconduct—uphold moral discipline; do not lie—always tell the truth; do not create conflict—help others get along; do not use harsh words—speak kindly; do not gossip or chatter—say meaningful words;

do not be greedy—practice generosity; do not wish harm on anyone—wish them well; do not hold onto wrong ideas—establish right understanding.

41. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 70.
42. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 173.
43. Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice*, trans. John T. Davenport (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 74.
44. Khenpo's Diamond — Living with Wisdom, Volume I, The Official Website of Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche,
<https://khenposodargye.org/books/ebooks/khenpos-diamond-living-with-wisdom-volume-i/>
45. Heaven of the Thirty-Three or Trayastrimsha Heaven is the second lowest of the six heavens in the desire realm. It is located at the top of Mount Meru and presided over by thirty-three gods.
46. Lhabab Duchon refers to the “Festival of the Descent from Heaven” which is one of the four major Buddhist holidays. It occurs on the twenty-second day of the ninth month of the Tibetan calendar, marking the descent of the Buddha from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three.
47. Ninth Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje, *Jewels from the Treasury—Vasubandhu's Verses on the Treasury of Abhidharma and Its Commentary Youthful Play*, trans. David Karma Choephel (New York: KTD Publications, 2012), 79.
48. Sukhavati literally means “The Land of Bliss.” It is the blissful buddha field of Amitabha Buddha.
49. I took ordination as a monk by Khenpo Depa in Domang Monastery.

50. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 215.
51. “The Six Perfections”—generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom—are essential qualities that bodhisattvas cultivate to achieve enlightenment and benefit sentient beings.
52. “Four Means of Attraction” refer to methods for drawing others to the Dharma: practicing generosity, uttering kind words, giving appropriate teachings, and maintaining consistency between words and actions.
53. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 21.
54. Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita’s Treasury of Good Advice*, trans. John T. Davenport (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 75.
55. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 79.
56. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 46.
57. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 51.
58. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 135.
59. Pi Xirui, *Xiaojing Zheng Zhushu (Zheng’s Commentary on The Classic of Filial Piety)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2016).
60. Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita’s Treasury of Good Advice*, trans. John T. Davenport, (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 124.
61. *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* are among the Four Great Classical

Novels of Chinese literature. The four novels are commonly regarded as the most influential of pre-modern Chinese fiction.

62. Ten stages are used in Mahayana Buddhism to describe the progression of a practitioner on the path to enlightenment or Buddhahood.
63. The Duke of Zhou, also known as Zhou Gong Dan, surnamed Ji and named Dan, was the fourth son of King Wen of Zhou, Ji Chang, and the younger brother of King Wu of Zhou, Ji Fa. The Duke of Zhou was an outstanding politician, military man, thinker, and educator at the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty, and is revered as a “Yuan sage” and a pioneer of Confucianism.
64. King Wen of Zhou, whose name was Ji Chang, was the leader of western vassals in the late Shang Dynasty who laid the foundation for the Western Zhou Dynasty.
65. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 22.
66. Qingming Festival, also known as Tomb-Sweeping Day, is a traditional Chinese festival. It is a time for honoring ancestors by visiting their graves and making offerings.
67. *The Rites of Zhou* is a Confucian classic that documents the laws and institutions of the Zhou Dynasty and elucidates political philosophy.
68. In the *Always Remembering*, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche established three types of equality in Larung Gar: equality of status, equality in work, and equality of income.
69. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 7.
70. Khenpo Ngawang Palzang, *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Dipamkara & Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 261-262.

71. Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice*, trans. John T. Davenport (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 38.
72. Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice*, trans. John T. Davenport (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 66.
73. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 35.
74. Assaji was one of the earliest and most esteemed disciples of Buddha. Renowned for his humility and composure, Assaji is best remembered for his pivotal encounter with Sariputta and Maudgalyayana, who later became two of the Buddha's chief disciples.
75. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 21.
76. The Five Great Treatises are Abidharma, Vinaya, Buddhist Logic, Madhyamaka, and Prajnaparamita.
77. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 24.
78. Bardo or intermediate state is commonly used to denote the transitional process between death and rebirth.
79. The hagiography of Padmasambhava states that he emerged miraculously from a lotus flower.
80. The four ways of attracting beings are generosity, kind words, meaningful actions, and practicing what one preaches.
81. *The Analects: Sayings of Confucius*, trans. D.C.Lau, 13:6.
82. Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2011), 82.

83. Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice*, trans. John T. Davenport (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 124.
84. Mipham Rinpoche, *The Treatise on the Modes of Being: The Jewel That Gathers Forth*, trans. The Ari Bhod Translation Committee, 7.
85. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 21.
86. Closest vajra friends refer to those who have entered the vajrayana path and have followed the same lama.
87. Near Dharma friends refer to those who have entered the vajrayana path.
88. Distant Dharma friends refer to those who have entered the path of Dharma.
89. General Dharma friends refer to all sentient beings.
90. Sakya Pandita, *Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice*, trans. John T. Davenport (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 211.
91. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 123.
92. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 111.
93. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 45-46.
94. The Junior Preceptor, the Junior Guardian, the Junior Mentor.
95. The three chief ministers refer to the Minister of Education, the Minister of War, the Minister of Works.
96. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. José Ignacio Cabezón, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 41.
97. Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 77.

98. Longchenpa, *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boulder: Shambhala, 2017), 62.
99. Jamgon Mipham, *The Just King: The Tibetan Buddhist Classic on Leading an Ethical Life*, trans. Jose Ignacio Cabezon, (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 45.
100. "Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution," Terebess, <https://terebess.hu/english/taishang.html>
101. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 215.
102. The four great elements of material form are earth, water, fire, and air (wind).
103. "Khenpo's Diamond—Living with Wisdom," The Official Website of Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, The deeper we go into the classics of the tirthika, The more devoted we are toward you— Lord Buddha. <https://khenposodargye.org/books/ebooks/khenpos-diamond-living-with-wisdom-volume-i/>
104. The Four Great Kings are four deities who live on the lower slopes of Mount Meru in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings and guard the four cardinal directions.
105. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 243.
106. Delog literally means "one who has returned from death." It refers to a person who is believed to have clinically died, had their consciousness journey through the intermediate state, and then returned to their body to share their experiences.
107. Smoke offering is a practice of offering fragrant incense smoke. It is a profound and versatile practice that embodies the core Buddhist principles of purification, generosity, and compassion.



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ཡི་གེ་ཉི་ཤུ་ཙུང་གཡེ་འདི་དཔེ་ཚའི་ནང་དུ་བཞག་གཞན་དཔེ་ཚའི་ཉི་འདྲར་
བསོམས་ཀྱང་རྟེན་པ་མི་འབྱུང་བར་འཇམ་དཔལ་ཙུང་གླུ་དཔལ་གསུངས་མོ།