

Confucius Teachings On Building A Happy Life (21)

- a foundation for Mahayana Buddhism practice

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The Etiquette of Answering Phone Calls

Hello my friends, good evening! In the morning we mentioned the proper ways of receiving guests and giving greetings, as well as the etiquette of sending off guests. On the part of receiving guests, there's another etiquette which also cannot be ignored; that is the etiquette for answering the telephone. Let's see if children today know how to respond to phone calls. I once made a phone call to a friend and it was answered by his son. I said, "Is your father at home?" He replied, "No!" I asked, "Where has he gone to?" He said, "Don't know." Then he just hung up the phone. So, if children don't even know the proper way to answer the phone, other than being disrespectful, they have also brought shame to their family. So, we must also teach children the etiquette for answering phone calls.

In this regard, we have to let children practice answering the phone. Let's say I pick up the phone and introduce myself, "Hello, I'm Tsai Li Hsu." Tell them who you are. "May I know who you are looking for?" Suppose I ask, "Is your father at home?" If his father is around, he should say, "Please wait a moment." Then he should go and get his father to answer the phone. If his father is not at home, children must know how to handle it. He can then ask the caller, "I'm sorry, my dad isn't around. May I know who's calling? Is there any message you need me to convey to my dad?" You can ask like this; after all, people must have called for a reason. We must ask clearly so that people don't make the call in vain. You can also ask the other party, "Do you have anything urgent?" If it's something urgent, you can give him your father's mobile number. If children know how to deal with phone calls since young, their ability in dealing with tasks will keep improving. There's one last action in making phone calls: after talking to an elder on the phone, you must wait for him to hang up first. Only then can you do so. Because the elder may have something more to say, if we hang up immediately, the line is already cut off before he can say anything. So, this action also reflects our constant respect for elders.

One Single Statement Can Cause A Nation to Prosper or Perish

The third chapter is on "cautiousness." We must be prudent with our speech and behavior because one single statement can cause a nation to prosper or perish. When we are careful in these aspects of life, we can avoid a lot of mistakes and even disasters.

A friend had invited three good friends to his house for a dinner. Eventually two of his friends came, but the other friend hadn't arrived yet. While waiting at the entrance, the host said, "Why has the person who is supposed to be here not arrived yet?" One of the friends sitting in the house started thinking, "Does he mean to say that I'm not supposed to be here?" So, he was a bit unhappy and left. When the host saw his friend leaving, he said, "Why has the person who wasn't supposed to leave left?" As a result, the last friend in the house thought, "Am I the one who is supposed to leave?" So, who ate the dinner that night? He alone.

Even though it's a joke, we should also look before we leap and increase our sensitivity when we speak. We must be highly alert as to whether our words will hurt others' feelings. There is a saying, "When facing people who are frustrated, we must not brag about our own achievements." This is to always show consideration for others in our speech. So, we must be cautious with our speech and behavior.

And the root of our speech and behavior is in our mind. A true practitioner will be cautious with his every thought. When he can mindfully watch his thoughts, his speech and behavior would not be too deviated. For example, in this chapter on "cautiousness," We must always be prudent by not wasting time and spoiling food. As soon as thoughts of extravagance, greed, laziness, or disrespect arise, we must quickly subdue them.

In Which Three Aspects Can Cautiousness Foster One's Ability?

We can summarize the teaching of "cautiousness" into three aspects that can train a person's ability: the first one is self-restraint; the second aspect is being able to lead an independent life; the third one is the ability to accomplish tasks. Do children today lack these three abilities? They must be taught in order to know them.

We have also mentioned previously that there was a seven-year-old child in Shantou who had learned *Dizigui* for one to two months. The teacher thought of letting the students share their feelings and progress from their recent learning, so she invited the parents to come and listen. The first sentence that the child said on stage was, "Only after learning *Dizigui* did I know that we, as humans, must be filial to our parents."

Is this sentence insightful? The key word is "must be." We adults often say that children are already grown up and they should be aware of this. The word "should" needs further discussion. Since the teachings of ancient Chinese saints and sages have been neglected for generations, we must not blame children for their misbehavior in the first place. The elders must first reflect whether they taught the children properly. And it isn't verbal teaching that counts; more importantly, we must lead them by example.

The seven-year-old child then continued, "Before I learned *Dizigui*, I had been thinking of ways to murder my parents every day." These words came from a seven-year-old

child! His mother, sitting there, was suddenly dumbstruck. She definitely couldn't believe that her son had actually intended to kill his own parents.

My friends, do we know what is in our children's minds? Do we know what they are doing and saying every day? Do we know? When we have no idea what they are thinking, how can we teach them properly? So, education really requires much effort and patience. We must spend more time to understand and care for our children. Only then will they slowly follow the social decorum.

Why did a seven-year-old child want to kill his parents? Because the parent-child relationship wasn't close. If they were close enough, would it be possible for the child to harbor such ill thoughts? Why are parents and children today not close to each other? What is the reason? His parents had been working so hard to earn a living that they didn't have time to spend with him. Whom was he closer to? He was closer to his tutor and maid. How about his mother? For vanity's sake, his parents sent him to many extracurricular classes, so he became more and more annoyed and bored.

Were his parents aware of his feelings? Perhaps not. We must really exert some effort to understand a child's emotions, thoughts, and perspectives. We must find the reason behind their problems before we can further teach and guide children with ease.

As children today lack self-restraint, the chapter on "cautiousness" begins with this phrase: "I will rise early in the morning and go to sleep late at night. Old age arrives readily, I must cherish the present moment." It teaches us to lead a disciplined life and never make it a habit to oversleep. This is also considered self-control. "When it comes to eating and drinking, I will not be picky; I will only eat the right amount and not overeat." They must also know how to control their diet. This is training children to have self-control.

The second aspect is the ability to live independently: "I will always place my hat and clothes away in proper places; I will not carelessly throw them around for that will get them dirty." Even though only two things are mentioned here, can we just teach children to put away their clothes and hats? What should we teach them? Each and every thing, even time, has its place and should always be orderly. As people always say, "Whatever is moved must be returned to its original place." We should always put things back when we have finished using them. By acquiring these abilities, he will then avoid making his life messy.

I heard that many college students now hire servants to wash clothes and clean the house for them. Whose money are they spending? Their parents'. So, it's true that today's students really need to strengthen their living ability. When he is unable to take care of himself, will he be able to take on his career and family responsibilities in the future? That will be very difficult.

As parents, if we don't let children do more work, but shoulder all the responsibilities by ourselves, may I ask how long can you persevere with it? So, to whom do many young couples send their children to be taken care of nowadays? The grandparents would normally help them look after the children. When will the grandparents be free? I think they may never be able to take a rest until they close their eyes forever. Is such a life good? It seems that you have helped your son, but in fact, he didn't meet his parental responsibilities, and neither did he acquire these skills nor fulfill his own duties. We should revert these tasks and duties to our children so that their lives would be fulfilling, guiltless, and complete.

The third ability is being able to accomplish tasks. So, it is stated that, "I must avoid doing things in a hurry, as acting in haste will lead to many mistakes; and I must neither be afraid of difficulty nor be perfunctory. I must not agree to do something inappropriate, if I do, I will put myself into a dilemma." These are all abilities for dealing with matters. So, in this part on "cautiousness," these several aspects can improve children's abilities. We will continue to discuss them sentence by sentence.

An Inch of Gold Cannot Buy an Inch of Time

"I will rise early in the morning, and go to sleep late at night. Old age arrives readily, I must cherish the present moment. When I get up in the morning, I will wash my face and brush my teeth. After using the toilet, I will always wash my hands."

Talking about time, the Chinese sages value time the most. The most familiar saying is, "An inch of time is as precious as an inch of gold, but an inch of gold cannot buy an inch of time." While saying this, do you have such a feeling? Do you feel so? Yes. Let's ask the teenagers if they have the same feeling. Very difficult!

Why does a person cherish time so much? If we look at the ancient scholars who left a name in history, they all cherished time a lot. For example, the great historian Sima Guang(1019-1086, Song Dynasty) spent nineteen years to complete a very important classic. It is titled, *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*. Being afraid that he would oversleep, he made a round pillow out of wood. What is it like sleeping on a round pillow? If you slightly turn your body, your head would slide down. So, once he woke up, already having taken some rest, he would immediately continue his work. Owing to such an attitude and spirit, he wholeheartedly completed this masterpiece.

What motivated him to do more work and sleep less?

My friends, what motivated him?

The drive to benefit the nation and future generations. Because history is like a mirror; as long as people are willing to familiarize themselves with this classic, we believe that many unnecessary mistakes can be minimized in life. As the saying goes, "By observing the past, you can deduce the future." Because he had this sense of mission, enthusiastically and diligently, he was driven to complete the compilation of this book.

Mr. Wang Yangming* once mentioned, (*A well-known Confucian scholar in the Ming Dynasty.) "A person without an aspiration will accomplish nothing." If a person doesn't set a goal in life, will he be able to accomplish a task well? Impossible. For a person to treasure time, he must first set an aspiration in life. Life is short; we must utilize this short-lived life wisely so that we can honor our parents' profound kindness and be worthy of our siblings' care. And we must not let down the many elders who have supported us as we matured, nor the country that has kept us secure. When a person can constantly imprint these kindnesses in his mind, he

will make the best effort to serve his parents with filial respect, to love and take care of his siblings, and will further contribute to society.

So, for a person to cherish time, he must first begin with respecting others. When he can respect his parents and the people who care for him, he will be unwilling to spoil himself and make those who love and care about him feel sad. When a person knows how to fulfill his duties and missions in life, he will also quickly move forward without anyone pushing him.

Yet people often ignore time; they are not sensitive enough to the fact that once time is gone, it will never return. A wise man once said, "From the time a person is born, there is only one thing which never stops." What is it? Since birth, the march towards death has never ceased. We have just finished celebrating the New Year; it means that another new year is here again and that the previous year has already passed. How many more important matters that ought to be done, have not been done yet?

During the Ming Dynasty, there was a painter called Wen Jia. He once wrote a poem which gives us expectations and reminders. He wrote, "Tomorrow after tomorrow, how many more tomorrows will there be? I live waiting for tomorrow, everything will slip away." If we always think that there is still a tomorrow and next year, time will slip away unknowingly. That would be a pity!

A Father Who Chopped A Stick

After being in Haikou for over four months, I suddenly had a deep understanding. There would be one regret in life: When you feel that there are many important things which need to be done and must be done, but you don't have the ability to accomplish them; at that time, you would feel much regret and pain. When we have the opportunity to promote sages' teachings to benefit people, yet we did not make good use of our time and consequently limited our ability to help out, how would you feel at that time? Very uncomfortable. It is as if you're seeing someone drowning but you don't know how to swim, so there's no way for you to save him. Likewise, when we see that our children must be properly taught, but we have neither knowledge nor wisdom to do so, that would be a great regret in life.

In order to not let our lives have such regrets, we must quickly and vigorously grow our wisdom, because as long as we have wisdom, the problems in life can definitely be solved readily. So, the foremost thing in life isn't about earning money, it is about uncovering and elevating our wisdom. Without wisdom, you will make many wrong choices in life. Just to mend these mistakes, you may consume more than half of your life.

The primary thing in career planning is to learn and grow our wisdom.

Will a person who has graduated from college work harder than when he was a student? Many people would bid farewell to books right after graduation. After stepping into society is actually the time for us to really learn and forge our skills and abilities, but our attitude is to stop learning. No wonder we feel it increasingly burdensome as we tread the path of life. You may start complaining that so many occurrences are beyond your expectations, and you don't know how to solve them. Every day, you would drown your

sorrows, but your worries would keep increasing; when the effect has worn off, you will still have to face your problems. There will be "give and take" in life, we must quickly spend more time to seriously learn from the saints and sages.

Therefore we must first cherish time ourselves, we can then instill this attitude in our children.

There was one parent with a child who disliked studying and always goofed around. He really hoped that he could guide his son to value time, so he found an 8-inch long wooden stick. What was it for? Many children said that it was used to hit his son. Using an 8-inch long stick to hit people is too scary! His father took the stick and said to his son,

"Life is just like this long wooden stick and eight inches represents eighty years old. When you're under twenty, you're not yet able to help the family and society as you can only accept everyone's service and contribution. During this period, you are of little contribution, so this part can be cut off." He took an axe to cut off the front two inches. This action shocked his son.

He continued, "people get old and weak after sixty and don't make much contribution to the family and society. So, this part must be removed too." He chopped off another part. The father divided the next section into three parts and said, "For the remaining time, you spend one third of it sleeping, so it must be chopped off." This child started to get a bit nervous. The father continued to say, "You have to eat, take a shower, and do many chores every day. This slot of time cannot be saved, so this part must be cut off as well."

The child said, "Dad, please stop chopping! I've got the message." The father said, "You don't know! A lot of the time, people get sick and lie in bed. So this part must also be cut off." His son went to grab his hand and said, "Dad, I will not squander my time again in the future." His father continued, "Son, you don't get it, do you know how much nonsense you would say every day?"

Indeed, we must guide children to have proper concepts. It requires us parents to use various skillful and convenient methods, because children today dislike listening to adults' preaching. So, we must also carefully grasp the appropriate time.

A Mother Who Requests Teacher to Criticize Her Child

Also, there was a mother whose child was in the first grade and always dawdled when he got up in the morning. Seeing this, his mother knew that he would surely be late for school, but she didn't stop him from dallying. Is that okay? She should let him bear the results of his procrastination. So, his mother didn't stop him, and watched to see how long he would continue to dawdle.

Children nowadays have beautifully designed toothbrushes and toothpaste, don't they? They would play with them for a while when they brush their teeth. As expected, this child was late for class. All the students had gone to the Flag Raising Ceremony. After the mother dropped her son off, she saw that he had already been late for the ceremony. As the students went home to rest at noon his mother saw him jumping happily with a smile on his face. She

thought it must be because the teacher didn't punish him. Otherwise, why didn't he show the slightest shame on his face?

If you were the mother, what would you do? What would you do? So, we must always remember these few words when educating children: make a cautious start. If a child's mistakes are not rectified at the beginning, you will get tired of playing tug-of-war with him when he has formed them into habits.

This mother took the initiative to give his homeroom teacher a call. She began by telling the teacher, "My son was late for school today." The teacher said, "Oh! That's okay, I am aware of it." The mother said, "How could that be alright?" Then the homeroom teacher replied, "The reason I said it's okay is because I thought you were going to explain on your son's behalf why he was late."

From the teacher's response, it can be seen that when children make mistakes now, who is helping them cover up the mistakes? This is harming the child! Then this mother said to the teacher that being late is a great matter and requested him to discipline her son strictly in the afternoon. The teacher burst out laughing and said that it was rare now to have a mother requesting a teacher to criticize and exhort her child. So, what happens if you dote on the child? You are putting him at a disadvantage.

When this little boy came home in the afternoon, what kind of appearance did he have? Not so good. When he entered the house, he went to get the alarm clock he had bought; the clock had finally come in useful. He was very nervous and immediately set the clock for half past six. Then he felt more at ease and placed the clock there. His mother saw it and laughed. She quickly went over and said, "Setting the alarm for 6:30 will make it ring during dinner." The child was thinking that by setting the clock for 6:30, it would wake him up the next day. It never crossed his mind that there are twenty four hours a day. There are two 6:30's in a day. When his mother told him, he suddenly realized that it was true; he should only set the clock after dinner.

This mother didn't scold her son. She only grasped the right time to teach him. Since then, the child has brought his alarm clock with him wherever he goes. After developing that good habit, he has neither been late for school nor lazed in bed. So, to educate children, we must always grasp these important timings.

Aspiration, Plan, and Living in the Present Moment

How does a person cherish time? From the stories that I just told you, we must first let children set an aspiration, then we have to make a plan on how to teach them well; just like we set short, medium, and long-term career goals, only then will we know how to move forward and how to use our time wisely.

Next, we also have to minimize irrelevant speech. How long do people spend chatting once they open their chatter-box? One hour, two hours... Time would quickly be squandered away. So, it's better to speak less than talk too much because we can use this time for serious learning. Besides, if we speak too much and our words spread, there will be a lot of troublesome rumors, then you will be gravely vexed.

In addition, we must reduce our afflictions. There is experimental research showing that 50% of our afflictions are worries about the future and 40% are about the past. Only 10% of worries come from the present moment. They did an experiment by asking everyone to write down all their current troubles and put them in a drawer. A week later, they returned to the class. They were asked to take out all their worries from the previous week. After taking a look, 90% were found to be unnecessary. Then they were asked to put it back in the drawer. Two weeks later they took it out again and what was the result? All the worries were needless.

So, there is a Chinese idiom which goes, "The man of Qi worries the sky might fall." Worrying too much will use up a lot of our time and money. So, what we need to put considerable effort into is to grow our wisdom and make correct choices. Then, we will make less mistakes in life. We must never reduce time spent learning. Mentioned here are some of the concepts of cherishing time.

Respect Oneself Before He Can Earn Others' Respect

Let's look at the next verse:

"When I get up in the morning, I will wash my face and brush my teeth. After using the toilet, I will always wash my hands." Here it mentions our habit of tidiness and cleanliness. There is a proverb which reads, "Personal hygiene is the key to good health." Only by practicing good hygiene can your body be free from harmful viruses and bacteria.

When a person really takes good care of his body, he is actually practicing filial piety too. As the *Classic of Filial Piety* states, "Our body--from every hair and bit of skin--is received from our parents, we must not carelessly injure or harm it. This is the beginning of filial piety." *Dizigui* also states, "When my body is injured, my parents will be worried." The verses in this chapter may seem to be talking about our own affairs, but in fact, we are closely related to others. When our health is compromised, we will surely make our loved ones worry about us.

In *The Analects*, Confucius said, "Parents are anxious lest their children should get sick." Parents' biggest worry is simply their children taking ill. The word "illness" here can be regarded as falling sick and bad habits. Only by observing hygiene can we prevent our body from getting hurt. Leading a disciplined and routine life is also an important factor for good health. Furthermore, when we are careful in carrying out tasks, we will not easily make a lot of mistakes. This will give our parents peace of mind too.

So, this "illness" can be broadly interpreted; other than keeping good physical health, we must also avoid bad habits and mistakes when interacting with people, as that would make our parents worry for us. Taking good care of one's body and favoring cleanliness are also manifestations of respect for others. There is a saying which goes, "One must first respect oneself before he can earn others' respect." When we attach importance to tidiness and cleanliness by wearing our clothes neatly, others will respect us more. When we have disheveled hair and a dirty body, how will others perceive us? Before they start interacting

with us, they would probably already disdain us. They would look at us with utter contempt. So, when others look down upon us, we cannot blame them in the first place. What should we do first? We should introspect ourselves and see if we are lacking in these etiquettes.

"When I get up in the morning, I will wash my face and brush my teeth." This is to maintain our oral hygiene. As people are engaged in a lot of verbal conversation every day, we must pay attention to this. If children don't brush their teeth, they will have bad breath. When they go to school, what will happen to their interpersonal relationships? They will be greatly affected. When children have bad relationships since childhood, it would negatively affect their self-confidence. In our experience, we have found that very dirty children are always rejected by all the classmates. The formation of this habit is indeed affected by the family. Moreover, if we adults have bad breath, it will also influence our interpersonal relationships.

A person has foul breath because there are many toxins in the body which overflow to the mouth. Why do people have so many toxins? It's related to food intake. As the saying goes, "Illness enters through the mouth." It's also closely related to one factor: late night supper. My friends, do you often have late night supper? Not frequently. Good! People who eat late night supper have a very high percentage of bad breath. Why is that so? Think about it, when people take the meal between ten and eleven at night or even at midnight, especially if they eat seafood or plenty of meat and go to sleep one or two hours after eating, what will happen?

As we all know, only two organs would continue functioning once they lie down. Which two? The heart, if this organ stops beating, it would be trouble. And breathing will continue. Other internal organs would tell you that they will stop functioning to take a rest, and will only continue working tomorrow. Since the stomach has stopped digesting food, what would happen to the meat that you just ate? It would turn sour and give off a foul smell. Since there is gastric acid inside the stomach, the food will get spoiled easily. Moreover, the body temperature is 37 celsius, so these foods will rot very quickly. After decomposition, these toxins will circulate throughout your body. So, eating late night supper is really bad for your health; we should also pay attention to this.

The next phrase is, "After using the toilet, I will always wash my hands." We must first wash our hands after going to the washroom. We should always be mindful of our hands' hygiene. People normally use their hands while eating, so if there is bacteria on their hands, their body may easily be harmed. Other than after using the toilet, when do we need to wash our hands? Always wash our hands before meals.

My friends, we have to be more observant, because the more we explain to our children, the more alert they will be. Please don't ignore these little reminders here and there. Actually, children have excellent memory; they will remember what you have said. I often reminded children on some matters, and though I myself had already forgotten, the children would remind me. We often see many adults counting money, what do they do while flipping the bills? They would lick their fingers. This is setting a bad example and we must pay more attention to it. So, we must be mindful of maintaining cleanliness in such habits of life. Only then can we enjoy good health and be a good role model for children as well.

Straight in Three Areas When Wearing Clothes

Let's look at the next phrase and recite it together once:

"I must wear my hat straight and make sure to button my clothes. My socks and shoes should also be worn neatly and correctly. I will always place my hat and clothes away in proper places; I will not carelessly throw them around for that will get them dirty."

"I must wear my hat straight and make sure to button my clothes. My socks and shoes should also be worn neatly and correctly." It is mentioned here that a person's grooming has to be dignified. If today I'm giving my lecture here and I didn't fasten two buttons in front, how would you feel when you see it? Maybe half of the audience would have left the room. "He can't even dress properly, how is he qualified to teach?"

So, the ancient people attached considerable importance to grooming. They always reminded themselves to wear their clothes straight in three areas:

firstly, their hats must be straight;
secondly, their belts must be buckled straight;
thirdly, their shoelaces must be tied straight.

So, they would often check if their hats had become tilted. Then they would examine if their trousers were properly fastened. Otherwise, it would be embarrassing if they slid down. Next, they would ensure that their shoes were properly tied, lest they make noise when walking and cause people to disdain them.

Once, I was rushing to class because the time was quite tight. In Haikou, there's a mode of transportation called "motorcycle taxi." Have you heard of it? It's like a taxi, but it's a motorcycle. Many people would carry a passenger on their motorcycle. I quickly called a motorcycle taxi and rushed to the lecture venue. Upon arrival, I went straight to give the lecture and I was right on time, not late.

After finishing, I went to the bathroom. When I glanced in the mirror, I saw my hair was sticking up. Because when I was riding on the motorcycle, the wind kept blowing on me. I had been talking on stage for two hours but nobody told me about my hair. When I came out, I said to the teachers of our center, "Why didn't you tell me? It made me embarrassed for two hours." So, we must always be cautious with our appearance, then such embarrassment would not occur.

A Dignified Appearance Saved Zhao Xuanzi's Life

During the Spring and Autumn Period, there was a minister called Zhao Xuanzi. He was a great minister of the State of Jin. At that time, Duke Ling of Jin was the ruler of the state. As the Duke was still young, he didn't know how to love his people and refused to listen to others' advice. Zhao Xuanzi was a very loyal person. He often gave frank advice to his monarch without qualms. But Duke Ling gave rise to an evil thought and sent an assassin, Chu Ni, a very strong person, to assassinate Zhao.

Morning court was always held early, so Chu Ni went to Zhao Xuanzi's house very early in the morning. As Zhao rose very early, he was already neatly wearing his court uniform and sat in repose with his eyes closed to conserve his energy. When seeing his dignified appearance and manner, Chun Ni was deeply touched. He said, "Zhao Xuanzi is so respectful even in solitude, in the presence of other people he surely handles the state's affairs very seriously. He would certainly treat people with profound modesty and respect."

So he said, "Such a person must be the country's pillar and the people's master, I can't kill him. If I were to kill him, I would not be loyal anymore." But, it was the Duke's instruction, it would be a breach of credibility if he didn't perform the killing. So, he committed suicide by hitting his head against a locust tree.

From this story, we can derive that when a person is properly groomed, he would win the respect of others. And owing to this respectful attitude, Zhao Xuanzi had saved his own life. So, we also can't be reckless in such details of life. We will stop here for today. Thank you.