

7. Virtues for Success in Life: The Four Tenets of Chung Tai

Great is the kindness that is unconditioned;
great is the compassion when all is one.

The Four Tenets of Chung Tai

Life presents us with many challenges at home, in our workplace, and in the daily pursuit of meeting our goals. We learn that everything is constantly changing, and changing at a faster pace than ever before with all the technical advances of the day. To be able to ride the waves of change and sail through life smoothly, we need to grasp the correct principles on how to conduct ourselves, deal with people, and handle situations that are applicable and relevant across times and culture. These principles are captured in the Four Tenets of Chung Tai, introduced by Grand Master Wei Chueh, the founder of Chung Tai Chan Monastery in Taiwan.

The Four Tenets guide us to develop our intrinsic virtues and counteract our mental afflictions—arrogance, anger, rudeness, and pretense—in our daily interaction with others. Eliminating these bad habits will help us to achieve true success in our studies, careers, relationships, and spiritual cultivation. Though they are short and seemingly simple, the Four Tenets are profound principles for living a harmonious, peaceful, and joyful life.

The Four Tenets:

To our elders be respectful,

To our juniors be kind,

With all humanity be harmonious,

In all endeavors be true.

Respect

To our elders be respectful. “Elders” refers to our parents, teachers, supervisors, those who are senior to us, who have more knowledge or experience in life, who have guided us on our path and helped us grow. Therefore, we thank, honor and respect them for what they have taught us and inspired in us.

When we are respectful to our elders, our family, friends and all beings, we are actually dissolving obstacles, making good connections, and paving the way for a blessed life. As the ancient Chinese sage Mencius said: “One who loves others will always be loved. One who respects others will always be respected.”

Respect is an antidote to arrogance. When we think we are more important and better than others, we will easily reject their ideas or look down on their suggestions, or we blame others for our failures. Consequently, we will make more enemies than friends. Therefore, arrogance isolates us and blocks us from learning and developing our full potential.

Since the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha deliver us from the cycle of birth and death and lead us toward enlightenment, Buddhist disciples are especially mindful to cultivate respect toward the Three Jewels, which is also a way to remind ourselves to honor and follow our inherent pure mind.

In practice, by being mindful of what we think, say and do in our daily lives, we will naturally develop a sincere respect toward our elders and all other beings.

Kindness

To our juniors be kind. “Juniors” refers to our children, our younger siblings, or the younger generations. It can also refer to animals and suffering beings. Kindness overcomes anger and hostility. Mencius also said: “As we respect our elders, we should also respect others’ elders; as we take care of our young, we should also take care of others’ young.”

Buddhism goes further to embrace all beings equally: “Great is the kindness that is unconditioned; great is the compassion when all is one.” Not only are we kind to our friends and family, but also our enemies; not only do we care about people, but also animals and plants.

The ancients said: “Your appearance arises from your mind.” Compassionate people reflect kindness in their demeanor so people are naturally drawn to them. On the contrary, anger is the fire that damages our health, destroys our peace and merits, and hinders our true potential. War and disasters in the external world are but a reflection of our internal hostility. If we wish to have a safe and peaceful world, we must start to purify our minds of anger’s poison.

A Buddhist text says: “If the mind is pure, the land is pure.” As we gain momentum in meditation and mindfulness, we will notice how our practice is influencing our lives in subtle and more evident ways. By cultivating a mind of compassion, we will not

only develop loving-kindness toward others but also practice to be a bodhisattva.⁶

Harmony

With all humanity be harmonious. Harmonious behavior brings us together in a world free of conflicts and violence. When we interact with each other in harmony, being understanding rather than critical and argumentative, trying to get along with others rather than picking fights, we will bring in the right conditions for success.

When a family is in harmony, all its members will prosper; when the working environment is harmonious, production will increase; when a country is harmonious, it will be blessed with peace, strength and prosperity; when there is harmony in the monastery, the Dharma will flourish.

To avoid getting into arguments and to resolve conflicts are important disciplines in Buddhist cultivation. Friction and conflicts may easily arise from different points of views and habits when we lose sight of our common goals and values as human beings, or the fact that we are all inherently complete in our buddha nature. When we learn to be understanding, accommodating and cooperative, we can dissipate our violent and harsh temper and tendency for rudeness, thus reducing conflict and division.

⁶ Bodhisattvas are buddhas-to-be; they are infinitely compassionate beings who aspire to become buddhas, who cultivate to attain perfect enlightenment and to bring enlightenment to countless others.

Harmony unites us. In unity there is strength. Anywhere, any time, under any conditions, harmony becomes the primary goal in all our interactions with others.

Truthfulness

In all endeavors be true. Being truthful means clearing our mind of pretense and deceit.

To be truthful at work means doing every task with integrity, no cutting corners or trying to excel for our own gain. To be truthful in our studies means to sincerely seek the truth for the benefit of others and the betterment of the world rather than for fame and glory.

To be truthful in our spiritual cultivation means practicing with mindfulness and diligence. “Ignore not the smallest good, commit not the smallest evil.” When thoughts of greed, anger, delusion, pride, or doubt arise, we immediately practice inner reflection to overcome any unwholesome or negative thoughts.

To truly eradicate the mind of pretentiousness and deceit, we need to cultivate a mind of wholehearted sincerity. In our daily life, when we treat every person sincerely and do every task truthfully, we will make good connections and accrue a rich supply of merit and wisdom for a bright and blessed future.

Summary

Overcome arrogance with respect. Counteract anger with kindness. Dissolve rudeness and conflicts with humility, tolerance and harmony. Eradicate deceit with truthfulness and integrity.

Upholding the Four Tenets is a bodhisattva practice that purifies our own body and mind and benefits our family, workplace, and society. When we practice these tenets in our daily life, we will not only live a truly meaningful life, but also perfect our spiritual cultivation.

Reflection:

Contemplate how the Four Tenets can help you (1) resolve the obstacles or difficulties you are facing in life now, or (2) move forward to a higher level of spiritual cultivation. With that clarification, put the Four Tenets into practice and note the effect in your life.