

# Bringing Buddhist Teachings to Family Education

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I have dedicated more than three decades to the field of education, but I have not engaged much in family education. In recent years, I've noticed that many parents are exhausting themselves over their children's education, leading to struggles for both parents and children. Where exactly does the problem stem from? It begins with the social environment. Today, we live in an era flooded with information and endless temptations, leaving many feeling restless and unsettled. This, in turn, creates an environment in which children's development is shaped by a multitude of uncontrollable factors. Meanwhile, parents are confronted with an unprecedented level of complexity.

Educating children is not only a major matter for families but also a crucial concern for society as a whole. Children represent the future of the world, and their physical and mental well-being play a decisive role in shaping a harmonious and stable global community. However, the current education system tends to prioritize knowledge and skills, yet it lacks a clear vision of the kind of individuals children are meant to grow into. This, I believe, is the root cause of many problems.

From the perspective of Buddhist teachings, how do we understand a person's growth? How can we effectively educate our children? I believe there are several vital aspects to consider.

## I

### **Understanding Family Bonds Through Causes, Conditions and Causality**

As parents, we must recognize the causes, conditions and causality within family relationships and establish a correct view of familial bonds.

The view of familial bonds refers to defining the parent-child relationship and identifying an appropriate way to engage with your children. Many parents treat their children as an extension of themselves. On one hand, they devote themselves fully to their children, even to the point of giving up their own careers and hobbies. On the other hand, they place all their hopes on their children, expecting them to live according to their own ideas. As a result,

children may feel passive, sometimes to the point of suffering. Years later, these feelings often come back to the parents themselves.

There is a Chinese saying: “Raising children to ensure support in old age.” The ideas of “raising” and “ensuring support” inherently carry a sense of investment and return. As in many aspects of society, where there is investment, there is an expectation of reciprocation. When parents pour all their time and energy into their children, they risk losing their independence, and becoming heavily reliant on their children. They hope their children will become successful and filial to repay their efforts.

In the past, large families with three or four generations lived under one roof. Children generally viewed filial piety as a duty and an obligation they must fulfill because they were instilled with a strong sense of filial piety through traditional teachings, societal norms, the guidance of elders and their role modeling. Today, however, with the absence of such teaching and environment, once children start working and become independent, they may not meet their parents’ expectations of providing care and maintaining a close connection. As a result, there are now a considerable number of empty-nest elderly.

If these elders lack their own spiritual pursuits or life goals, they tend to rely entirely on their children for emotional fulfillment, eagerly expecting their reciprocation. If their expectations are unmet, they are likely to feel disappointed, sad, or even deeply hurt.

Is it fair to place all the blame on the children? Once, it was reported that a couple poured their efforts into raising their daughter, even financing her education abroad. At first, she sought their financial support, but later, she severed ties for more than two decades, avoiding to see them entirely—even when she returned to her hometown. In an interview, she shared that her parents used to control her too much, leaving her no freedom. She became so afraid of them that, after finally breaking free from their control, she resolved never to see them again.

While this example might be extreme, it mirrors many similar phenomena commonly seen in China. If parents treat their children as extensions of themselves, the children will live under pressure, feeling like they are living for their parents rather than for themselves. Meanwhile, parents will create unnecessary afflictions for themselves. When their children fail to follow their ideas or meet their expectations, they will feel anxious, disappointed, and miserable. In fact, these afflictions are made by themselves.

Therefore, it is particularly important to establish a correct understanding of family bonds. Some parents believe that since they gave birth to their children, they can impose any demands, as if the children belong to them. In reality, each life is an independent individual. Although they are connected by blood, it does not mean one is part of the other. As a couplet puts it, “Husband and wife are bound by past karmic ties—whether good or bad, no bond arises without karmic ties. Children represent debts from past lives—whether to collect or repay, they come because of karmic ties.” Whether between spouses or parents and child, such relationships often have deep karmic ties, but they are not always wholesome—they can also be unwholesome.

In life, we can see that some children, with little parental intervention, study diligently, achieve top grades, and become exceptionally filial when they grow up. By contrast, some children cause their parents endless worries from a young age and may even face serious issues later in life, including unimaginable acts like patricide and matricide. Such differences arise from a range of factors, including the influence of past karmic ties. Only by becoming a family do they have more opportunities to repay kindness or seek revenge, to collect debts or repay them.

In summary, we should view family bonds through the lens of dependent origination rather than self-attachment, which binds each other with possessive affection. By embracing this mindset, we become grateful, cherish the karmic ties that connect us in this life, respect each child’s individuality, and continue to foster wholesome karmic conditions in the present. By doing so, we not only reinforce past wholesome karma but also transform unwholesome karma. As parents accompany their children’s growth, they can benefit in the process as well.

In this regard, Western education places greater emphasis on children’s independence. Once children come of age, they become independent individuals, like their parents. However, they can still care for and accompany each other, free from possession or excessive demands. This practice is worth adopting. If parents build relationships rooted in independence, mutual respect, and equality—rather than excessive control and dependency—they can still maintain their own independence even as children grow independent. This way, they won’t feel empty, lost, or bored when their children move on in life.

If, instead, they view children as extensions of themselves, they foster a relationship of mutual dependency.

Such an overdependence traps both parties in passivity and stunts the child's healthy growth. If a family orbits entirely around the child, catering to every whim and overindulging their needs, this inadvertently encourages self-centered behavior. Upon entering society, such a mindset, coupled with a lack of respect for others, often lead to setbacks.

This excessive attention also leads to overindulgence. For example, some parents assist with their homework and manage all their affairs. As a result, many grow up into adults lacking emotional maturity and practical competence. This widespread issue has drawn attention from educators, psychologists, and social workers. In contrast, in our neighboring country, Japan, children from a young age are encouraged to carry their own school bags, wear shorts during winter, and swim in cold water, fostering both physical and mental resilience.

Therefore, true love must be rooted in wisdom. It requires a correct understanding of family bonds as the foundation, rather than blindly indulging or imposing on the children based on personal feelings.

## II

### **Weighing Parenting Priorities**

When it comes to educating children, what is the most important, and what comes second? In other words, what qualities and abilities do you expect your children to grow into? I have a few thoughts on this.

First is their mindset: to be optimistic, positive, and filled with light, rather than falling into pessimism, negativity, or apathy. Second is their character: to be kind, generous, and loving, steering clear of selfishness, greed, aversion, or moral decline. Third is their health: prioritizing exercise and balanced nutrition, rather than allowing them to become frail or overnourished at a young age. Fourth is their abilities: developing diverse interests and artistic literacy, rather than limiting them to schoolwork alone. Fifth is their academic performance, primarily reflected in their grades.

Among these five aspects, which would you place first, and which second? For most parents, grades are their top priority—they pay close attention to whether their children score 90 or 100 and how they rank in class or school. Some parents project their unfulfilled dreams onto

their children, pushing them into pursuits like piano or painting until these hobbies become pressures, triggering rebellion. Others see their children as extensions of their personal image, only caring if the children bring them honor.

Under external influences, many parents fall into the habit of comparing their children with others, saying things like, “Look at so-and-so; they do so well and are so capable.” They may not realize that such comparisons can easily burden children with pressure, causing anxiety, low self-esteem, and other psychological issues. If these problems are not identified and addressed in time, the ongoing stress can lead children to spiral into deeper negative emotions. In recent years, we have frequently heard that children become so anxious that they lose interest in study, leading to depression, social isolation, or even tragic outcomes.

Many tragedies, in fact, can be prevented. This is why parents must understand what genuinely benefits their children’s growth. It’s much like those who neglect their health by leading irregular lives and eating without restraint. Only when their bodies are on the verge of collapse do they realize that without health, everything else is meaningless. By then, wealth and status gained at the expense of health cannot reverse the damage. Likewise, parents should prioritize the five aspects of their children’s development—mindset, character, health, abilities, and academic performance—focusing on what truly matters, rather than regretting missed opportunities once issues arise. By then, it is too late to make meaningful changes.

The root of these misconceptions lies in the fact that many parents themselves have not received relevant education or developed the necessary mindsets. In the past, Confucian teachings emphasized learning how to be a virtuous person, how to conduct oneself in society, and how to establish the “three views” (worldview, life perspective, and values), which we will delve into later. The current education system, however, neglects these aspects, leaving many to grow up unprepared. When they become parents, they naturally do not know how to properly educate their children, often resorting to following trends or pursuing whatever is popular.

The saying, “Don’t let your children lose at the starting line,” has driven many parents into a frenzy of competition. Determined not to fall behind, they keep shifting the starting line earlier—from middle school to primary school, to kindergarten, and even to baby classes. Yet, what their children learn is merely the same material, just at an earlier age. What does this kind of education achieve? Often, it only places undue pressure on children, depriving them of the joy of childhood. By the time they reach university—when they should truly invest in their studies—they are already burned out and disengaged.

Parents must carefully reflect on what truly matters in education. Only then can they provide proper guidance, ensuring their children start at the right place and at the right time. Especially with the emergence of artificial intelligence, much of today's knowledge and skill sets are becoming obsolete at an alarming rate. With estimates suggesting that AI could replace up to 80% of jobs in the future, how can children equip themselves to thrive and maintain a firm footing in such an unpredictable world?

In the absence of faith or spiritual pursuits, many see work as the centerpiece of life—a means to survive, pass the time, achieve success, and realize their values. However, it won't be long before we see the skills we take pride in are mastered by AI in moments, far surpassing human capabilities. Unless we are exceptionally outstanding and creative—irreplaceable by artificial intelligence—Many ordinary jobs may not remain secure for long.

Therefore, future generations may fall into two categories. The first group includes those with spiritual pursuits, who, regardless of the changes in the world, can find contentment, self-sufficiency, and inner joy. The second group lacks a spiritual anchor. Confronting a surreal world, they are likely to feel lost, confused, and directionless, unsure of how to navigate life. When faced with setbacks, they may succumb to depression, anxiety, or even resort to destructive actions against society.

Over a century ago, Nietzsche declared, “God is dead, and we must re-evaluate all values.” In much the same way, people today must reassess their understanding of themselves and the world. Our traditional notions of value, meaning, and happiness were rooted in the material world, but this foundation is now faltering. Why, despite enjoying far better living conditions than previous generations, are modern people still plagued by confusion, anxiety, and insecurity? This is because the world we once trusted is now rife with uncertainty, unraveling at a visible pace. In a sense, “witnessing history” has become an everyday reality.

In the relentless torrent of our times, how can we stand firm? The answer lies in embracing impermanence and releasing our grip on personal assumptions, expectations, and attachments. This calls for inheriting Eastern culture, especially the wisdom of Buddhism, which equips us with the ability to remain grounded amid change, embodying a supermundane mind while actively engaging in the world. Such a mindset is more crucial than any external achievement, such as scores or abilities.

# III

## Understanding the Key to Education with Dependent Origination

Creating high-quality products in a company requires meticulous design. But have we ever considered that life itself is also a product? During a talk I gave in Shanghai at a venue called “Xiāng,” on the *Art of Awakening*, I posed this question: Is your life an ordinary product or a carefully crafted work of art? Now, I ask you again: What has shaped who you are today? Is it the result of careful cultivation, or have you been swept along by societal currents? Do your daily thoughts, words, and actions add meaningful value to your life, lifting it to greater heights?

In reality, many lives are just a tangle of emotions and misguided thoughts. Day after day, year after year, they become occupied by these fragmented emotions and ideas. Why does this happen? It stems from ignorance—a failure to see the true nature of life and the world. Without the wisdom of Buddhism or the mentorship of enlightened teachers, we are left to navigate life within the limits of our current cognitive patterns, simply following our feelings wherever they lead. Such an existence is passive, dictated by habitual patterns ingrained in our minds.

Buddhism offers profound wisdom about life. It teaches us that life is an endless accumulation, built through the actions of our minds, words, and bodies. Each day, we generate countless thoughts, utter many words, and engage in various activities, all of which not only impact the world around us but also leave an imprint on our lives. These actions are rooted in the family, education, work, social environment, and relationships. Together, they mold us into who we are today.

According to Buddhism, life does not begin with this lifetime. We are not born as blank slates but as the sum of our accumulated past. Our actions—whether through body, speech, or mind—continue to shape our present and perpetuate the cycle of rebirth. Life flows like a river, stretching from an infinite past toward an endless future. This journey can either be unconscious or deliberate. Only by embracing Buddhist wisdom and understanding the causes,

conditions and causality of life can we discern which qualities to nurture and what to relinquish.

Since life carries forward the accumulations of the past, each child is born with unique talents. As the ancients remarked, “Beginning one’s studies in this lifetime is already too late.” This suggests that even decades of learning in a single lifetime cannot rival the abilities of someone who has honed their skills over many lifetimes. Prodigies like Mozart demonstrated extraordinary talent in composition from a young age, far surpassing ordinary people.

Aside from exceptional cases, everyone has their own unique strengths. Some lean toward emotional expression, while others favor rational thinking; some excel in the humanities, while others in the sciences; some are gifted in the arts, while others in research. Recognizing a child’s talents and interests is therefore vital.

Parents often approach this with a subjective perspective, focusing more on “what interests their children should pursue,” rather than understanding their inherent talents and genuine preferences. However, talent is what truly sets a person apart, offering a head start and a distinct advantage in their development. That said, interest plays an essential role as well. As the saying goes, “Interest is the best teacher.” When fueled by interest, learning becomes both enjoyable and self-sustaining, driven by continuous motivation.

Discovering children’s talents and interests, creating supportive conditions, and offering proper guidance can transform learning into a self-driven activity. However, if parents impose their expectations on their children—dictating who they should become or what abilities they should have—without considering their preferences, they are forced into passive compliance, leading to burnout, emotional distress, and even collapse under pressure. This dynamic also leaves parents feeling exhausted and unhappy.

Western education places great emphasis on fostering creativity in students. I suppose many of you came to Chiang Mai to accompany your children during their study because of the international schools here. Learning in an open environment enables a receptive and relaxed mind, allowing children to unlock their creative potential. In the future, as artificial intelligence takes over many knowledge-based tasks, creativity will become vital. While AI can produce “creations” based on instructions, these are merely recombinations of existing elements. True creation arises from our original mind and the boundless potential of life—qualities beyond the reach of AI.

# IV

## Establishing a Healthy Educational Ecosystem

Education is holistic and multifaceted. To support the children's growth, we must understand the factors that shape their development and create a nurturing educational ecosystem. This involves three key elements as follows: parents, society, and schools.

### 1. Family Education

Parents create the first classroom for their children and, in many ways, have the most profound influence as their primary educators. While prenatal education is highly valued in modern times, its significance was recognized as early as the Western Zhou period in ancient China. Guidelines for behavior, lifestyle, and mental well-being during pregnancy highlighted how a parent's thoughts and emotions can affect the unborn child. Therefore, it is essential for parents to stay kind and calm. A well-known example is the mother of King Wen of the Zhou Dynasty, celebrated for her dedication to prenatal care.

As such, creating a warm, kind, and positive environment at home is crucial for both parents and children. Although children are born with their own traits, they must adapt to their surroundings. Their earliest experiences come from their parents' responses to every action they make. How parents react—whether to soothe a crying baby immediately or observe for a while, to carry them often or encourage them to walk independently—becomes their earliest and nearly instinctive lessons. Just as animals learn from interacting with nature, animal parents guide their young with various methods, teaching them what to do and what to avoid in different situations.

Once children become aware, they must also be nurtured by cultural influences. In the past, overseas Chinese families placed great emphasis on preserving traditions. For example, I have seen Chinese families in Australia and Europe still upholding traditional customs—children cannot sit while their parents stand, or they must wait for their parents to begin eating before starting themselves. In contrast, such practices are now less common in China. Perhaps for overseas Chinese, being far from their homeland, these customs serve as a spiritual connection to their roots.

Even more significant are the values, attitudes, and expectations that parents subtly instill in their children. Do you emphasize grades and abilities, or do you value mindset and character? Are you responsible and compassionate, or do you believe in “every man for himself”? Such values silently shape the principles by which children live and grow.

Children are often described as mirrors and photocopiers of their parents, reflecting their virtues and flaws alike. As such, it is vital for parents to develop a sound worldview, life perspective, and values, as these not only shape their own lives but also those of their children. While Confucian teachings provide valuable insights into this, the past century has disrupted traditional Chinese education. While its revival is gaining traction, it has yet to reach society as a whole. Thus, it requires parents themselves to consciously learn, practice, and embody these principles. By transforming ourselves, we also reshape the environment in which our children grow.

## 2. Social Education

Children’s social education is deeply influenced by their environment, and the most famous story of Mencius’ mother moving three times is a timeless example. After Mencius’ father passed away, his mother struggled to raise him alone. Initially, they lived near a cemetery, where funeral processions frequently passed by. As a result, Mencius and other children began imitating funeral rites in their play, prompting his mother to relocate to the city. Soon, she realized that their home was not ideal, as it was surrounded by small traders and peddlers. Finally, she settled near a school, where the intellectual environment inspired Mencius to embrace learning, conduct himself, and practice good manners. Later, he truly lived up to his mother’s expectations and became one of the foundational thinkers in Confucianism. In ancient times, life was very challenging for a widow raising a child, and moving homes was no small feat. Despite the hardships, Mencius’ mother tirelessly moved three times, demonstrating her foresight and the significant impact of the environment on personal development.

Moreover, choosing friends is also crucial. The *Analects of Confucius* highlights three qualities of beneficial friends: those who are upright, sincere, and knowledgeable. In modern society, people often value networking for career benefits and resources they can gain. However, a friend’s virtues are the true treasure we can benefit from. Parents should be mindful of their children’s companions—are they lazy, idle, and aimless troublemakers or virtuous and motivated friends? Even the nature of neighbors matters, as their subtle yet

lasting influence can shape a child over time. The saying, “Proximity to good makes one good; proximity to bad makes one bad,” underscores the power of association.

The modern social environment is quite unfavorable for children’s education. Smartphones, for instance, have become increasingly accessible and addictive. Some parents, whenever their children start crying, just hand them phones. They feel at ease in the moment, but the children start to play games at the age of two or three. In just a few years, they’ll become heavy users, with no interest in learning at all. It is sad that in some Western countries, stricter controls are in place, prohibiting elementary and even middle school students from using phones independently. Smartphones also pose an additional threat through unfiltered internet content. For impressionable young minds, the internet offers a myriad of temptations that can lead to dependency. Since all kinds of desires can be fulfilled online or through games, over time, this can lead to mental health issues. The children become completely immersed in the virtual world, unable to break free and establish normal, healthy social relationships.

In the past, children grew up amid fewer temptations, spending time in nature and fostering uncomplicated, healthy interests. Today, however, the environment presents unprecedented challenges that previous generations never faced, leaving many parents without a clear roadmap for guidance. To navigate these challenges, parents must focus on two key aspects: improving their own learning to provide positive guidance for their children, and carefully choosing an environment that supports their children’s development. In today’s world, the latter has become more important than ever.

### **3. School Education**

Many parents go to great lengths to secure spots for their children in good schools, from buying property in school districts to leveraging personal connections, sparing no cost or effort. When choosing a school, they often prioritize the admission rate. However, what truly matters is whether the school offers constructive guidance and supports a child’s healthy development. Nowadays, competition is fierce across all fields—some with open, fair practices, while others breed unfair ones. Many unhealthy trends have already infiltrated schools, leading some children to engage in networking with ulterior motives, such as, currying favor with teachers through gifts, or comparing family wealth and status, including the cars used for drop-offs and pickups.

You have come here not only for your own benefit but also to provide your children with a relaxed, open, and nurturing environment. However, this alone is not enough, especially for

Chinese people who are rooted in a rich traditional culture. Confucianism emphasizes the cultivation of character, while Buddhism focuses on the education of life—these are precisely what modern education lacks the most.

In light of this, we are introducing the family-version Dhyana Tea Space. Family harmony must be rooted in a shared cultural bond; otherwise, each member may live in their own perceptions, centered around their own feelings. Just as businesses require a corporate culture to foster shared beliefs, families need shared values to stay connected. Without them, couples may drift apart despite sharing the same bed, and parents and children may fail to understand each other. Just as a saying goes, the greatest distance between two people is when they sit side by side, each absorbed in their phones. Everyone is connected to their phones, not to the family members right in front of them. They share the deepest affections with their phones, not with the family bound by blood. How absurd!

So, what connects family members? In traditional families, we all receive the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, sharing the spiritual beliefs and moral guidelines. This remains essential today. I propose families can create Dhyana Tea Spaces where members, friends and relatives, can gather regularly to read classics like the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Analects*, or the Mindful Peace Academy Collection. They can also enjoy Dhyana tea, practice mindfulness, and engage in wellness activities. Such practices enrich the family culture, create a positive atmosphere, and fill the gaps left by conventional schooling.

## V

### **Inheriting Confucian Culture: Learning How to Conduct Oneself and Handle Matters**

We come into this world with only our innate human qualities; it is through education that we grow into qualified individuals. An authentic Chinese identity, in my opinion, embodies two aspects: genetic inheritance and cultural inheritance. Black eyes, black hair, and yellow skin symbolize our genetic lineage, while traditional values are the cultural inheritance. Many overseas Chinese worry that their children may become “bananas”—yellow on the outside but white on the inside. Raised in Western educational systems from a young age, these

children often adopt Western values, thinking, hobbies and habits. Despite their Chinese appearance, they may lack the inner essence of Chinese culture.

How can we truly embody an authentic Chinese identity, both inside and out? We must inherit the excellent traditions of Chinese culture. From a Buddhist perspective, every life carries karma accumulated over countless lifetimes. As the saying goes, “A child’s future can be seen at the age of three.” It implies some people are born wise, others foolish; some are inherently kind, while others are naturally violent. Given these vast differences, education becomes essential to nurture the good and correct the bad.

Western societies place equal emphasis on morality and law. Morality helps to address the root causes of criminal intentions, while law serves to regulate actions. When immoral thoughts and behaviors are curbed, there would be little to worry about in this world. Thus, these two systems have always been running in parallel in the West. In these societies, religion is deeply embedded in daily life. Christians are guided by clergy from birth through marriage to death, and even presidential inaugurations involve swearing an oath on the Bible. In this context, regardless of the depth of your faith, the moral principles of religion will influence and restrain your actions. Without morality, laws can only react to events after they occur, often too late to prevent harm. Moreover, there are gray areas beyond the reach of law, where morality and self-restraint become essential.

China’s cultural tradition leans towards the concept of “rule by man,” with Confucian thought focusing on moral norms for personal conduct and social interactions. Reflecting this, the World Congress of Philosophy, held in China a few years ago, adopted the theme “Learning to Become Human.” It underscores that becoming a virtuous person, much like mastering any skill, requires learning. Mencius said, “If one is fed and clothed but not taught, they live an idle life, no different from animals.” This suggests that if a person, after having enough food and clothing, spends each day in indulgence without receiving proper education, they are not much different from an animal. However, he also affirmed that, “Everyone can become a sage like Yao or Shun.” The key difference lies in whether one has received a moral education.

Confucianism also highlights the “three great accomplishments” as the hallmarks of a meaningful life: the highest is to set a moral example, the second is to perform great deeds, and the third is to advocate noble ideas. Setting a moral example entails perfecting one’s morality and becoming a virtuous person; performing great deeds involves achieving significant success and contributing to society; and advocating noble ideas is about inspiring the world with one’s thoughts. In a discussion with Professor Zhu Hanmin, Dean of the

Confucian Academy at Yuelu Academy, on “How to Set Spiritual Values and Life Purpose,” we found that Confucianism and Buddhism align in their missions. In terms of self-cultivation, both emphasize becoming sages or exemplary individuals; in terms of social responsibility, Confucianism focuses on rectifying the mind, sincerity, self-cultivation, family regulation, and ultimately governing the country and achieving world peace, while Buddhism emphasizes the journey from self-enlightenment to enlightening others, and from benefiting oneself to benefiting all beings.

To achieve this, we must first set an aspiration, which Buddhism refers to as making a vow—giving life a goal and direction. Today, many live without a clear sense of purpose, plagued by “hollow heart disease” or sense of meaninglessness, which have nearly become the norm. Why is this? The root cause is the absence of noble goals and aspiration. For most, their goals are purely pragmatic: gaining admission to a good university, landing a well-paying job, or earning millions. Once these are achieved, they continually raise the bar—seeking tens or hundreds of millions in wealth or upgrading their careers, homes, and cars. When things go well, they feel proud and unbeatable, imagining an endless upward trajectory. Yet if goals are not met, they experience such unhealthy emotions as setbacks, anxiety, depression. This is the common state of ordinary people.

The Confucian idea of setting aspirations focuses on defining profound life goals, epitomized by Zhang Zai’s Four Sentences: “To ordain conscience for Heaven and Earth”—Cultivating a mind that resonate with the moral order of the universe; “To secure life and fortune for the people”—Assisting others in finding peace and purpose in life, rather than merely living for oneself; “To continue the lost teachings of the sages”—Preserving and passing down the wisdom and culture of past sages; “To establish peace for all future generations”—Working toward the betterment of the world, humanity, and the generations to come.

The bigger the goal, the less one is affected by temporary successes or failures. In a Weibo post, I outlined five advantages of pursuing ambitious goals. First, it is hard to fail because success is equally hard to achieve. Second, it is hard to become unemployed because the work is enduring. Third, it’s hard to become attached because there’s no specific point to cling to. Fourth, it is easier to find excuses for not doing well because it is inherently difficult to succeed. Finally, there is no need to hurry; without the right conditions, rushing is futile as progress unfolds naturally with causality. Therefore, I always feel that monks suffer from neither success nor failure. This balance is exemplified in monastic life: when conditions allow, they dedicate themselves to spreading the Dharma and benefiting others; when conditions do not, they engage in self-cultivation, which is equally vital.

In our daily practice, we recite the Four Great Vows: “Sentient beings are countless, I vow to save them all; afflictions are endless, I vow to end them all; teachings are infinite, I vow to learn them all; the Buddha’s way is unsurpassed, I vow to attain it.” Do we take these as our life’s goals and unshirkable responsibilities? Similarly, there are the Forty-eight Great Vows of Amitabha Buddha and the Twelve Great Vows of the Medicine Buddha. If we embrace these vows as our aspirations, we commit to a path of continuous progress—not only in this life but across all future lives—shielding ourselves from the anxieties.

The *Analects* say, “The commander of a large army can be captured, but the will of an ordinary man cannot be taken away.” This underscores the importance of aspirations. Small aspirations are easily fulfilled, often leaving one without a clear direction. Therefore, Confucianism advocates setting grand aspirations, and Buddhism promotes making vows. Both are grounded in high moral standards, encouraging us to become virtuous individuals who aspire to benefit the world.

Decades ago, people often had a sense of responsibility to family and society, even without lofty aspirations. However, younger generations born in the 1990s and 2000s seem increasingly detached from this sense of responsibility. On the one hand, they may be more open-minded and less constrained. But, on the other hand, many live in a self-centered world, believing they don’t need to live for anyone else—if they’re happy, they live; if they’re not happy, they don’t have to. In fact, this is an irresponsible and neglectful attitude toward life, stemming from a lack of proper education and failure to truly reflect on life itself.

In the past, younger generations were often influenced by their elders. Our parents and grandparents taught us how to become a virtuous person and take on responsibilities. Today, however, many traditional virtues seem at odds with modern trends. For example, the ancient virtue of frugality seems out of place in today’s society that encourages consumption. In traditional Chinese society, almost every village had respected figures known for their morality, wisdom, and sense of responsibility. They served as living examples of ethical behavior. Even if people don’t grasp many teachings from books, they can still learn how to conduct themselves and handle matters by observing these role models.

However, after the economic reforms, society underwent a rapid shift, moving from valuing morality to longing for wealth and power, and chasing entertainment and sensual pleasures, even questioning, “What is morality worth?” Fortunately, as people gradually accumulated wealth, they became aware of new problems. Without wealth and power, these seemed like

the keys to everything. Yet, once attained, they realized that these did not bring greater happiness or fulfillment. What, then, is the most important in life? What is truly worth pursuing? Where can we find security and life purpose? More people are reflecting on and pondering these questions, especially after three years of the pandemic.

Thus, the values we uphold, the character we pursue, and the kind of person we aspire to become are fundamental to our lives, shaping how we conduct ourselves and interact with others. In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in Confucian virtues: “benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness; gentleness, kindness, respectfulness, frugality, and forbearance.” Yet, for many, these virtues remain abstract concepts; they fail to delve into their deeper meanings or integrate them into their personal character.

Everyone aspires to beauty, but we often pursue external forms of beauty—such as appearance, clothing, and status—without realizing that true beauty comes from within. Inner beauty cannot be separated from wisdom and morality, which require an understanding of the causes, conditions and causality of life.

From this perspective, what is morality, and where does its value lie? In fact, morality serves as the substance from which our character is formed. Will we construct it with virtues or flaws? If you haven’t thought about this, consider it this way: a kind, honest, friendly, compassionate, and warm-hearted person is universally liked and welcomed. Conversely, no one wants to befriend someone who is narrow-minded, confrontational, angry, jealous, or selfish. Although many people may not fully realize the role of morality, the choices we make about whom to associate with or distance ourselves from in daily life reflect our recognition of morality and our longing for a beautiful life.

How to build a beautiful life? If life consists of twenty elements—ten positive and ten negative—how would we choose? Are we in control of this choice, or do harmful elements grow unnoticed?

Confucianism teaches self-cultivation, family regulation, governance of the state, and bringing peace to the world. Of these, self-cultivation is the foundation and, in many ways, the most difficult to achieve. Without the wisdom of Buddhism and an understanding of life’s causes, conditions and causality, how can we fully grasp the value of morality and practice self-cultivation? In a discussion with Professor Zhu Hanmin, Dean of Yuelu Academy, I pointed out that while Confucianism emphasizes morality, it lacks the concept of causes, conditions and causality. So, what is the value of morality? Some people may think, “Being a

good person only brings benefits for a few decades—such a short time. Why should I go through so much effort to be good?” However, if we understand the causes, conditions, and causality of life, we’ll realize that following morality benefits not only this lifetime but also countless lifetimes to come.

Learning traditional Confucian culture primarily teaches us how to conduct ourselves and handle matters. This is embodied in the virtues of “benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness; gentleness, kindness, respectfulness, frugality, and forbearance,” mentioned earlier. Simply put, benevolence is cultivating a loving heart; righteousness is following moral behavior; ritual propriety is engaging with others appropriately; wisdom is perceiving everything as it is; trustworthiness is consistently practicing honesty; gentleness refers to a mild temperament; kindness involves a warm and good heart; respectfulness is being courteous and polite; frugality means being diligent and valuing resources; forbearance reflects modesty and thoughtfulness. These are all excellent virtues that benefit oneself and others. The key lies in internalizing them through consistent practice.

The learning approach we advocate is “Contemplative and Abiding Meditations.” First, we need to reflect: why should we pursue these virtues? Why should we cultivate gratitude and rejoice in others’ virtues? Following this reflection, practices such as *Metta Sutta* meditation can help us develop loving-kindness and compassion for ourselves and all beings. Through such practices, we shift from a self-centered perspective to one that embraces all sentient beings, fostering a positive and proactive state of mind.

## VI

### **Learning Buddhist Wisdom to Cultivate a Healthy Character**

When it comes to how we conduct ourselves and handle matters, it is not enough to study Confucian culture alone; we also need the profound wisdom of Buddhism. This is because the mind must truly change through practice; it cannot be transformed just by talking about it. Merely understanding concepts does not integrate them into life or make any difference.

Children today often face psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, reclusiveness, selfishness, and self-centeredness, which can lead to behavioral problems like school aversion, rebellion, poor self-discipline, and smartphone addiction. When a child exhibits these problems, many parents become anxious and resistant, thinking, "How could my child be like this?" In reality, this anxiety and denial only exacerbate the problem, offering no help to the child.

As parents, how should we handle these situations? Whether from a psychological or Buddhist perspective, the first step is acceptance. Earlier, we explored the proper understanding of family bonds, which reminds us that a child is an independent being, born with their own karma, and not an extension of their parents. The parent-child relationship spans only a few decades before both individuals follow separate paths, so what we can do is limited. How can we make these years meaningful? No matter how a child behaves, we should not become overly attached to our own desires or impose too many preconceptions. If we do, we will become anxious and restless, imposing unnecessary pressure on the child, which will eventually reflect back on us. As this cycle of mutual pressure builds, the stress escalates.

In fact, when we examine ourselves, we too have many flaws that are not easily changed. Therefore, we should not place unreasonable expectations on our children. The first step is to accept our own imperfections, and then, extend that acceptance to theirs. Parents and children are brought together by causes and conditions in this life. Regardless of the past karmic connection, what we can do now is focus on guiding them toward positive change rather than pushing them to conform to our expectations. Only by accepting them fully without opposition can we approach their behaviors calmly and guide them properly.

Moreover, some psychological issues do require intervention. In addition to traditional psychological therapy, mindfulness meditation has proven to be an effective tool for adjustment and has been widely embraced in the West. Guiding children to develop mindfulness and abide in it can help them address negative mentality, enabling the mind to break free from unhealthy patterns. However, this requires parents to first practice mindfulness themselves and experience its benefits. When parents embody mindfulness, their presence can foster a calming atmosphere in the home.

Additionally, parents should guide their children to develop a positive mindset. If a child lacks gratitude, help them understand that everything they receive is not to be taken for granted, and they should feel grateful. If they are self-centered, help them realize that survival

in this world relies on the contributions of others, and only by serving others can we expect the same in return. Therefore, they should adopt an altruistic mindset and treat those around them with kindness. In fact, every negative mindset can be countered by its positive counterpart, and the key is to identify the problems promptly, consciously cultivating the positive traits. Equally crucial are cognition and values—parents should guide their children in setting life goals and understanding what kind of person they aspire to become. Life needs direction and role models so that they can continuously progress toward their goals.

Beyond personal guidance, it's essential to create a positive environment at home by organizing group learning activities with your children or those around you, subtly instilling the principles of good character. For instance, you could organize youth book clubs, where they read books such as the Mindful Peace Academy Collection, share their insights, and discuss how they apply these learnings in daily life.

Once a foundation has been built, meditation can be incorporated into practice. Our approach to meditation consists of two types: mindfulness meditation and altruistic meditation. Mindfulness meditation enhances concentration and awareness, helping to resolve mental issues. Altruistic meditation involves understanding others, empathizing with them, and accepting what we are unwilling to accept. At the same time, it helps us cultivate gratitude and rejoice in others' virtues, thereby transforming a self-centered mindset.

In summary, parents should offer proper guidance rather than imposing pressure with demands such as "I want you to do this," "Get this score," or "Achieve this ranking." They should also refrain from comparing their children to others, as every child begins their journey from a unique starting point.

As parents, the first step is to change our misconceptions. With the correct worldview, outlook on life, values, and a wholesome character, the family environment will naturally transform. Only then can we provide positive guidance and nourishment for our children. Since most of our character and behaviors are formed unconsciously, only through learning Buddhism can we fully understand ourselves, identify negative traits to eliminate, and positive ones to develop. By practicing precepts, concentration, and wisdom, we can transform ourselves, making our lives meaningful. Buddhism offers us the hope for this transformation; without it, change is very difficult. As the saying goes, "Rivers and mountains are easier to change than one's character." If we can't even see ourselves clearly, how can we talk about change?

Family education is a vast topic, and due to time constraints, I can only address some prominent issues with a few preliminary thoughts. There remains much room for deeper exploration. What I shared today is merely a modest contribution, intended to inspire greater insights. I hope that more insightful individuals will draw nourishment from the richness of traditional Chinese culture, grounded in the wisdom of Buddhism, rooted in Confucian teachings on personal conduct, and supplemented by psychological insights, to nurture a healthy and outstanding next generation for both families and society.