

Character Matters More Than Reputation



Worry and dread are a waste of time and do not set a good example for others. This is especially true regarding your reputation and influence. Why live in fear about things such as whether you will gain public recognition in your profession or community? Or whether you will get the opportunities and perquisites that others do?

Don't be bothered by such concerns as "People don't think well of me," and "I'm a nobody." Even if your reputation were really to matter, you're not responsible for what others think of you. What real difference does it make to your character and well-being if you have a powerful position or get invited to fancy parties? None at all. So how is there any discredit in not being a power broker or a celebrity? And why should you worry about being a nobody when what matters is being a somebody in those areas of your life over which you have control and in which you can make a real difference?

"But without power and repute I won't be able to help my friends," you might say. It's true that you won't give them access to money or the halls of power. But who really expects that such assistance is yours to give and not for others to provide? Who can be expected to give anything that they don't have? "Still, it would be great to have money and power and to be able to share them with my friends." If I can get rich and powerful while preserving my own honor, faithfulness to family, friends, principles, and self-respect, show me how

and I'll do it. But if I have to sacrifice my personal integrity, it's stupid and silly to urge me on. Besides, if you had to choose between having a certain amount of money and having a loyal and honorable friend, which would you choose? It's better if you help me become a good person than to push me to do things that threaten my good character.

"Well, what about my obligations to my country?" What do you mean? If you're talking about making grand charitable donations or putting up fancy buildings, is that really an issue? A metalworker doesn't make shoes, and a shoemaker doesn't make weapons. It is enough if everyone does well what he or she is supposed to do. "Well, what if someone else were to do the same thing as me?" That's fine. It doesn't make your contribution any less valuable. "But what about my position in society?" you ask. Whatever position you can hold while preserving your honor and your fidelity to your obligations is fine. But if your desire to contribute to society compromises your moral responsibility, how can you serve your fellow citizens when you've become irresponsible and shameless?

It's better to be a good person and fulfill your obligations than to have renown and power.

All Advantages Have Their Price



Is someone enjoying the privileges, opportunities, or honor you desire? If the advantages that person has secured are good, then delight in that person enjoying them. It is his or her time to prosper. If those advantages actually turn out to be bad, then don't be troubled that they didn't come your way.

Remember: You will never earn the same rewards as others without employing the same methods and investment of time as they do. It is unreasonable to think we can earn rewards without being willing to pay their true price. Those who "win" at something have no real advantage over you, because they had to pay the price for the reward.

It is always our choice whether or not we wish to pay the price for life's rewards. And often it is best for us not to pay the price, for the price might be our integrity. We could be forced to praise someone whom we don't respect.

Make the Will of Nature Your Own



Learn the will of nature. Study it, pay attention to it, and then make it your own.

The will of nature is revealed to us through everyday experiences common to all people. For example, if a neighbor's child breaks a bowl, or some similar thing, we readily say, "These things happen." When your own bowl breaks, you should respond in the same way as when another person's bowl breaks.

Carry this understanding over to matters of greater emotional import and worldly consequence. Has the child or spouse or other dear one of another person died? Under such circumstances, there is no one who would not say, "Such is the cycle of life. Death happens. Some things are inevitable."

But if our own child or dearly beloved dies, we tend to cry out, "Woe is me! How miserable I am!"

Remember how you feel when you hear the same thing concerning other people. Transfer that feeling to your own current circumstances. Learn to accept events, even death, with intelligence.

Self-Mastery Is Our True Aim



Evil does not naturally dwell in the world, in events, or in people. Evil is a by-product of forgetfulness, laziness, or distraction: it arises when we lose sight of our true aim in life.

When we remember that our aim is spiritual progress, we return to striving to be our best selves. This is how happiness is won.

Treasure Your Mind, Cherish Your Reason, Hold to Your Purpose



Don't surrender your mind.

If someone were to casually give your body away to any old passerby, you would naturally be furious.

Why then do you feel no shame in giving your precious mind over to any person who might wish to influence you? Think twice before you give up your own mind to someone who may revile you, leaving you confused and upset.

Consider What Comes First, Then What Follows, and Then Act



Cultivate the habit of surveying and testing a prospective action before undertaking it. Before you proceed, step back and look at the big picture, lest you act rashly on raw impulse. Determine what happens first, consider what that leads to, and then act in accordance with what you've learned.

When we act without circumspection, we might begin a task with great enthusiasm; then, when unforeseen or unwanted consequences follow, we shamefully retreat and are filled with regret: "I would have done this; I could have done that; I should have done it differently."

Suppose you wanted to be victorious at the Olympic Games. That's fine, but fully consider what you're getting yourself into. What does such a desire entail? What needs to happen first? Then what? What will be required of you? And what else follows from that? Is this whole course of action really beneficial to you? If so, carry on.

If you wish to win at the Olympic Games, to prepare yourself properly you would have to follow a strict regimen that stretches you to the limits of your endurance. You would have to submit to demanding rules, follow a suitable diet, vigorously exercise at a regular time in both heat and cold, and give up drinking. You would have to follow the directions of your trainer as if he or she were your doctor. Then, once you are actually in competition, there's a good chance you'd be hurled into a ditch. You might injure your arm, sprain your

ankle, get your face slammed in the mud; and after going through all this, you might still be defeated.

After you have contemplated all these possibilities—mindful of all the things that might happen and their consequences—and if your resolve is still strong, then exercise your judgment. If the overall picture still seems beneficial, then do enter the Games—wholeheartedly.

By considering the big picture, you distinguish yourself from the mere dabbler, the person who plays at things as long as they feel comfortable or interesting. This is not noble. Think things through and fully commit! Otherwise, you will be like a child who sometimes pretends he or she is a wrestler, sometimes a soldier, sometimes a musician, sometimes an actor in a tragedy.

Unless we fully give ourselves over to our endeavors, we are hollow, superficial people and we never develop our natural gifts. We've all known people who, like monkeys, mimic whatever seems novel and flashy at the moment. But then their enthusiasm and efforts wane; they drop their projects as soon as they become too familiar or demanding.

A half-hearted spirit has no power. Tentative efforts lead to tentative outcomes. Average people enter into their endeavors headlong and without care. Perhaps they meet with an exemplary figure like Euphrates and become inspired to excel themselves. It is all well and good to do this, but consider first the real nature of your aspirations, and measure that against your capacities.

Be honest with yourself. Clearly assess your strengths and weaknesses. Do you have what it takes to compete at this time? To be a wrestler, for instance, requires extraordinary strength in one's shoulders, back, and thighs. Do you have the physical prowess and agility to be among the best in this sport? It is one thing to wish to be a champion or to do something skillfully; it is another to actually do it and to do it with consummate skill. Different people are made for different things.

Just as certain capacities are required for success in a particular area, so too are certain sacrifices required. If you wish to become proficient in the art of living with wisdom, do you think that you can eat and drink to excess? Do you think you can continue to succumb to anger and your usual habits of frustration and unhappiness? No. If true wisdom is your object and you are sincere, you will have work to do on yourself. You will have to overcome many unhealthy cravings and knee-jerk reactions. You will have to reconsider whom you associate with. Are your friends and associates worthy people? Does their influence—their habits, values, and behavior—elevate you or reinforce the slovenly habits from which you seek escape? The life of wisdom, like anything else, demands its price. You may, in following it, be ridiculed and even end up with the worst of everything in all parts of your public life, including your career, your social standing, and your legal position in the courts.

Once you have given due consideration to all of

the constituent details that compose the effort to live the higher life, venture forth with your utmost effort. Make the necessary sacrifices that are the price for the worthiest of goals: freedom, even-mindedness, and tranquility. If, however, upon honestly appraising your mettle, you are not fit or ready, free yourself from delusion and tread a different, more realistic road.

If you try to be something you're not or strive for something completely beyond your present capacities, you end up as a pathetic dabbler, trying first to be a wise person, then a bureaucrat, then a politician, then a civic leader. These roles are not consistent. You can't be flying off in countless directions, however appealing they are, and at the same time live an integrated, fruitful life.

You can only be one person—either a good person or a bad person. You have two essential choices. Either you can set yourself to developing your reason, cleaving to truth, or you can hanker after externals. The choice is yours and yours alone. You can either put your skills toward internal work or lose yourself to externals, which is to say, be a person of wisdom or follow the common ways of the mediocre.

Our Duties Are Revealed by Our Relations with One Another



You are not an isolated entity, but a unique, irreplaceable part of the cosmos. Don't forget this. You are an essential piece of the puzzle of humanity. Each of us is a part of a vast, intricate, and perfectly ordered human community. But where do you fit into this web of humanity? To whom are you beholden?

Look for and come to understand your connections to other people. We properly locate ourselves within the cosmic scheme by recognizing our natural relations to one another and thereby identifying our duties. Our duties naturally emerge from such fundamental relations as our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, our state or nation. Make it your regular habit to consider your roles—parent, child, neighbor, citizen, leader—and the natural duties that arise from them. Once you know who you are and to whom you are linked, you will know what to do.

If a man is your father, for instance, certain emotional and practical claims follow from this. That he is your father implies a fundamental, durable link between the two of you. You are naturally obligated to care for him, to listen to his advice, to exercise patience in hearing his views, and to respect his guidance.

However, let us suppose that he's not a good father. Perhaps he is fatuous, uneducated, unrefined, or holds views quite different from your own. Does nature give everyone an ideal father, or simply a fa-

ther? When it comes to your fundamental duty as a son or daughter, whatever your father's character may be, whatever his personality or habits are, is secondary. The divine order does not design people or circumstance according to our tastes. Whether you find him to be agreeable or not, this man is, when all is said and done, your father, and you should live up to all your filial obligations.

Suppose you have a brother or sister who treats you poorly. What difference does that make? There is still a moral imperative to recognize and maintain your fundamental duty to him or her. Focus not on what he or she does, but on keeping to your higher purpose. Your own purpose should seek harmony with nature itself. For this is the true road to freedom. Let others behave as they will—that is not within your control anyway, and thus it's of no concern to you. Understand that nature as a whole is ordered according to reason, but that not everything in nature is reasonable.

When you are faithfully occupied with performing the acts of a wise and decent person, seeking to conform your intentions and acts to the divine will, you do not feel victimized by the words or deeds of others. At worst, those words and deeds will seem amusing or pitiable.

Except for extreme physical abuse, other people cannot hurt you unless you allow them to. And this holds true even if the person is your parent, brother, sister, teacher, or employer. Don't consent to be hurt and you won't be hurt—this is a choice over which you have control.

Most people tend to delude themselves into thinking that freedom comes from doing what feels good or what fosters comfort and ease. The truth is that people who subordinate reason to their feelings of the moment are actually slaves of their desires and aversions. They are ill-prepared to act effectively and nobly when unexpected challenges occur, as they inevitably will.

Authentic freedom places demands on us. In discovering and comprehending our fundamental relations to one another and zestfully performing our duties, true freedom, which all people long for, is indeed possible.

The Essence of Faithfulness



The essence of faithfulness lies first in holding correct opinions and attitudes regarding the Ultimate. Remember that the divine order is intelligent and fundamentally good. Life is not a series of random, meaningless episodes, but an ordered, elegant whole that follows ultimately comprehensible laws.

The divine will exists and directs the universe with justice and goodness. Though it is not always apparent if you merely look at the surface of things, the universe we inhabit is the best possible universe.

Fix your resolve on expecting justice and goodness and order, and they will increasingly reveal themselves to you in all your affairs. Trust that there is a divine intelligence whose intentions direct the universe. Make it your utmost goal to steer your life in accordance with the will of divine order.

When you strive to conform your intentions and actions with the divine order, you don't feel persecuted, helpless, confused, or resentful toward the circumstances of your life. You will feel strong, purposeful, and sure.

Faithfulness is not blind belief; it consists of steadfastly practicing the principle of shunning those things which are not within your control, leaving them to be worked out according to the natural system of responsibilities. Cease trying to

anticipate or control events. Instead accept them with grace and intelligence.

It is impossible to remain faithful to your ordained purpose if you drift into imagining that those things outside your power are inherently good or evil. When this happens the habit of blaming outside factors for our lot in life inevitably sets in, and we lose ourselves in a negative spiral of envy, strife, disappointment, anger, and reproach. For by nature all creatures recoil from the things they think would do them harm and seek out and admire those things that seem good and helpful.

The second aspect of faithfulness is the importance of prudently observing the customs of your family, your country, and local community. Perform your community's rituals with a pure heart, without greed or extravagance. In doing so, you join the spiritual order of your people and further the ultimate aspirations of humanity.

Faithfulness is the antidote to bitterness and confusion. It confers the conviction that we are ready for anything the divine will intends for us. Your aim should be to view the world as an integrated whole, to faithfully incline your whole being toward the highest good, and to adopt the will of nature as your own.

Events Are Impersonal and Indifferent



When considering the future, remember that all situations unfold as they do regardless of how we feel about them. Our hopes and fears sway us, not events themselves.

Undisciplined people, driven by their personal antipathies and sympathies, are forever on the lookout for signs that build up or reinforce their unexamined views and opinions. Events themselves are impersonal, though judicious people certainly can and should respond to them in beneficial ways.

Instead of personalizing an event ("This is my triumph," "That was his blunder," or "This is my bitter misfortune") and drawing withering conclusions about yourself or human nature, watch for how you can put certain aspects of the event to good use. Is there some less-than-obvious benefit embedded in the event that a trained eye might discern? Pay attention; be a sleuth. Perhaps there is a lesson you can extract and apply to similar events in the future.

In any events, however seemingly dire, there is nothing to prevent us from searching for its hidden opportunity. It is a failure of the imagination not to do so. But to seek out the opportunity in situations requires a great deal of courage, for most people around you will persist in interpreting events in the grossest terms: success or failure, good or bad, right or wrong. These simplistic, polarized categories obscure more creative—and useful—

interpretations of events that are far more advantageous and interesting!

The wise person knows it is fruitless to project hopes and fears on the future. This only leads to forming melodramatic representations in your mind and wasting time.

At the same time, one shouldn't passively acquiesce to the future and what it holds. Simply doing nothing does not avoid risk, but heightens it.

There is a place for prudent planning and for making provision for situations to come. Proper preparation for the future consists of forming good personal habits. This is done by actively pursuing the good in all the particulars of your daily life and by regularly examining your motives to make sure they are free of the shackles of fear, greed, and laziness. If you do this, you won't be buffeted about by outside events.

Train your intentions rather than fooling yourself into thinking you can manipulate outside events. If you are helped by praying or meditating, by all means do so. But seek divine counsel when the application of your own reason hasn't yielded any answers, when you have exhausted other means.

What is a "good" event? What is a "bad" event? There is no such thing! What is a good person? The one who achieves tranquility by having formed the habit of asking on every occasion, "What is the right thing to do now?"

Never Suppress a Generous Impulse



Follow through on all your generous impulses. Do not question them, especially if a friend needs you; act on his or her behalf. Do not hesitate!

Don't sit around speculating about the possible inconvenience, problems, or dangers. As long as you let your reason lead the way, you will be safe.

It is our duty to stand by our friends in their hour of need.

Clearly Define the Person You Want to Be



Who exactly do you want to be? What kind of person do you want to be? What are your personal ideals? Whom do you admire? What are their special traits that you would make your own?

It's time to stop being vague. If you wish to be an extraordinary person, if you wish to be wise, then you should explicitly identify the kind of person you aspire to become. If you have a daybook, write down who you're trying to be, so that you can refer to this self-definition. Precisely describe the demeanor you want to adopt so that you may preserve it when you are by yourself or with other people.

Speak Only with Good Purpose



So much attention is given to the moral importance of our deeds and their effects. Those who seek to live the higher life also come to understand the oft-ignored moral power of our words.

One of the clearest marks of the moral life is right speech. Perfecting our speech is one of the keystones of an authentic spiritual program.

First and foremost, think *before* you speak to make sure you are speaking with good purpose. Glib talk disrespects others. Breezy self-disclosure disrespects yourself. So many people feel compelled to give voice to any passing feeling, thought, or impression they have. They randomly dump the contents of their minds without regard to the consequences. This is practically and morally dangerous. If we babble about every idea that occurs to us—big and small—we can easily fritter away in the trivial currents of mindless talk ideas that have true merit. Unchecked speech is like a vehicle wildly lurching out of control and destined for a ditch.

If need be, be mostly silent or speak sparingly. Speech itself is neither good nor evil, but it is so commonly used carelessly that you need to be on your guard. Frivolous talk is hurtful talk; besides, it is unbecoming to be a chatterbox.

Enter into discussions when social or professional occasion calls for it, but be cautious that the spirit and intent of the discussion and its content

remain worthy. Prattle is seductive. Stay out of its clutches.

It's not necessary to restrict yourself to lofty subjects or philosophy all the time, but be aware that the common babbling that passes for worthwhile discussion has a corrosive effect on your higher purpose. When we blather about trivial things, we ourselves become trivial, for our attention gets taken up with trivialities. You become what you give your attention to.

We become small-minded if we engage in discussion about other people. In particular, avoid blaming, praising, or comparing people.

Try whenever possible, if you notice the conversation around you decaying into palaver, to see if you can subtly lead the conversation back to more constructive subjects. If, however, you find yourself among indifferent strangers, you can simply remain silent.

Be of good humor and enjoy a good laugh when it is apt, but avoid the kind of unrestrained barroom laughter that easily degenerates into vulgarity or malevolence. Laugh *with*, but never laugh *at*.

If you can, avoid making idle promises whenever possible.

Avoid Most Popular Entertainment



Most of what passes for legitimate entertainment is inferior or foolish and only caters to or exploits people's weaknesses. Avoid being one of the mob who indulges in such pastimes. Your life is too short and you have important things to do. Be discriminating about what images and ideas you permit into your mind. If you yourself don't choose what thoughts and images you expose yourself to, someone else will, and their motives may not be the highest. It is the easiest thing in the world to slide imperceptibly into vulgarity. But there's no need for that to happen if you determine not to waste your time and attention on mindless pap.

Be Careful About the Company You Keep



Regardless of what others profess, they may not truly live by spiritual values. Be careful whom you associate with. It is human to imitate the habits of those with whom we interact. We inadvertently adopt their interests, their opinions, their values, and their habit of interpreting events. Though many people mean well, they can just the same have a deleterious influence on you because they are undisciplined about what is worthy and what isn't.

Just because some people are nice to you doesn't mean you should spend time with them. Just because they seek you out and are interested in you or your affairs doesn't mean you should associate with them. Be selective about whom you take on as friends, colleagues, and neighbors. All of these people can affect your destiny. The world is full of agreeable and talented folk. The key is to keep company only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best. But remember that our moral influence is a two-way street, and we should thus make sure by our own thoughts, words, and deeds to be a positive influence on those we deal with. The real test of personal excellence lies in the attention we give to the often neglected small details of our conduct.

Regularly ask yourself, "How are my thoughts, words, and deeds affecting my friends, my spouse, my neighbor, my child, my employer, my subordinates, my fellow citizens? Am I doing my part to

contribute to the spiritual progress of all with whom I come in contact?" Make it your business to draw out the best in others by being an exemplar yourself.

Take Care of Your Body



Respect your body's needs. Give your body excellent care to promote its health and well-being. Give it everything it absolutely requires, including healthy food and drink, dignified clothing, and a warm and comfortable home. Do not, however, use your body as an occasion for show or luxury.

Avoid Casual Sex



Abstain from casual sex and particularly avoid sexual intercourse before you get married. This may sound prudish or old-fashioned, but it is a time-tested way by which we demonstrate respect for ourselves and others. Sex is not a game. It gives rise to very real enduring emotional and practical consequences. To ignore this is to debase yourself, and to disregard the significance of human relationships.

If, however, you know someone who has had casual sex, don't self-righteously try to win them over to your own views.

An active sex life within a framework of personal commitment augments the integrity of the people involved and is part of a flourishing life.