

Youth, Health and Poverty

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With youth, we have more time to fulfill our wishes; with health, we have vital energy to utilize our wisdom in life; with poverty, we are more driven to succeed.

As time passes by and we reflect on our life, we see that humans live in space and diminish with time. Everyone's lives and accomplishments are completed with space and time. So all of us must cherish time and use it wisely to accomplish great things in our academic and professional life and in our spiritual cultivation.

If there is another life

In the United States, there was a very wise scholar. When he was over 80 years old, he sighed at the boundless knowledge in the universe. Although he had spent decades doing research, he still felt that he was not well-learned. And he regretted that he could never fully comprehend the secrets of life.

He said: "if there is another life, I only wish for three things -- youth, health and poverty." Youth and health are desired by many, but why did this scholar wish for poverty? He had his reasons.

Praying for youth is a hope for more time. A human's health and spirits always wear out and weakens with time. After middle age, a person starts to feel that time is running out; his body is weak and his memory deteriorates. When we are young, we have unlimited hopes and drive and a long time to fulfill our ambitions. With old age, humans always realize the value of youth and start to wish that they were younger and could live longer.

The second prayer is for health. If a person is young but his health is poor, he will not have sufficient wisdom and memory. We must wisely adjust our daily schedule and live with moderation in sleep and appetite. With a healthy body, we will have great energy to utilize our talents and wisdom in life.

Buddha said that, of all sufferings, the suffering of being sick is the worst. Sickness is more painful than aging and more upsetting than death. So good health is extremely important.

Next, the scholar prayed for poverty.

This is puzzling -- everyone prays for a smooth and wealthy life, so why did this scholar pray for poverty?

A wealthy life makes us complacent. Many accomplished scholars and noble characters in history have risen out of poverty. They found their motivation and determination in circumstances of destitution. For example, Siddhartha Gautama was born into wealth but gave it up in order to complete his spiritual quest for the truths of the universe. He willingly chose a

hard life of spiritual cultivation that most people could not bear.

Being at peace with poverty and eager in spiritual pursuits

Not only this scholar but many religious people, including Christians, have done the same thing. For example, Mother Theresa, the pride of Catholicism, someone whom I admire deeply myself, was a simple nun who earned praise and esteem from all over the world. Why? Because she was dedicated to upholding the three precepts of Catholicism - chastity, sacrifice and poverty.

In chastity, she gave up a family life and entered the monastery as a Catholic nun. This is their precept.

The next thing is sacrifice. I often say that true cultivation is letting go of the ego. Buddha practiced for all living beings and was enlightened for all living beings. Mother Theresa also sacrificed herself for mankind. She gave her heart to the Lord and the people and walked in places of great suffering and destitution. Where there were poverty and sickness, she gave her love and energy to relieve the suffering of people. This is helping the poor.

Her third precept was poverty. Because she had no possessions, her heart was not troubled or distracted. Without the distractions of a professional career and of the accumulation of wealth, our spirits are clear and free. These are the vows and discipline that saints keep and scholars pursue.

Seeing how they are dedicated to the mission of saving the world, we have to have a mindset that sees beyond this world, be persistent and have the spirit of giving all our strength as long as we breathe; we will serve our mission every day as long as we can still be active and never seek to avoid work. We should live in a state of joyfully pursuing truths and lacking in material wealth. Confucius has praised Yen Yuan for this -- his peaceful and joyful cultivation and lack of material wealth.

So a wise person does not seek material wealth or luxury. He is brave enough to accept all challenges; through them, his character will be tested and strengthened. A piece of iron ore will melt when it is thrown into the casting oven. But merely melting will not make it a tool. It must be beaten and hammered many times to be made into different kinds of tools and equipment. Therefore, to achieve a life of excellence, we must accept harsh challenges and suffer many setbacks in order to complete this process of training.

We must seize the moment and make the best of our environment, time and health. Apart from awakening to our true nature, we must quickly utilize our abilities for good and serve humanity with a love that is pure and unconditional.

Excerpt from: Master Cheng Yen's book: 人間佛教、慈悲、智慧

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