

The Duties of Parents and Teachers

Translated and Enlarged From the Notes of SEAH Leang Sean

养不教父之过
教不严师之惰

*“ 'Tis the father's fault to bring up a child without instruction.
'Tis the teacher's negligence (laziness) not to be strict. ”*

It was the established principle of the ancient sages of China that education was indispensable to a nation. In our classical writings, manhood means more than maturity. With the completion of bodily growth there should be a corresponding development of the understanding. We even value moral and intellectual powers higher than physical strength.

Bearing this in mind, we may see what the ancients aimed at when they taught that manhood could never be reached without education. It is easy to praise the merits of education and to see its value in the improvement and progress of a people: but it is not so easy to faithfully carry out a course of education so that every faculty of the body and mind may be exercised and influenced for good. The difficulty lies in the putting into practice the rules and opinions of sages and men of experience on this subject. The ancients knew better than we do how to avoid this stumbling block of insincerity – perhaps. I ought to say, of inability. They knew wherein they were weak, and studied how to escape the pitfalls. They saw that the parent was above all a teacher – the best teacher of his children, and that the first requisite of a teacher was firmness and faith in himself. Such an idea is still applicable to ourselves. A man may be quite fit to teach, but if he is not quite sure of his own powers, then his pupil will not make rapid progress. Strict discipline cannot come out of want of confidence on the part of the teacher.

Hence arose the ancient practice among parents, who were both wise and learned, of sending their own children to become the pupils of others. It was held that a man to the extent he was a tender father was to that extent unfit to be the teacher of his own children.

The Chinese have always regarded filial piety as the basis of all moral conduct. They have always loudly praised the merits of the duties which children owe to parents. It is often forgotten that the Classics, which enjoin the duty of filial obedience and devotion, also lay down the obligation of parents to their children. On parents, naturally falls the guardianship of

the young; and the career of young people depends largely on the surroundings and influences of early life. It would be idle to expect a youth to feel enthusiasm and warmth in carrying out filial duties unless he were made to appreciate as early as possible the debt he owed to his parents. And yet he must not look upon his duties as a mere repayment of indebtedness. Our Chinese masters lay stress on reverence and affection, for, without these, no amount of filial devotion could earn for the son the title of “filial.”

Looked at from, one point of view, a son’s ingratitude and impiety to his parents are a disgrace both to the son and to his parents. But we are human beings – indeed, we are mere creatures of our intellect and our mind. But we Chinese think that man’s nature is good, or rather contains in it the element which may develop into goodness and benevolence. We are therefore always hopeful that by proper education, the son may and must become a better man than the father. If, knowing the evil results of allowing the passions a free hand, we apply the remedies provided by education, then probably we shall be successful and our children will not be what they would become, if untrained. Therefore, a father’s duties are quite clear: so that if we look upon filial piety as a service of love, continuing even after death, we must regard the failure of a parent to provide a decent education for his children as the highest form of impiety.

A father should train up his children in the ways of honesty, truth and righteousness; so that they may learn not to do unto others what they do not wish to be done to themselves. Such is the ideal of our Chinese system.

The duties of a teacher are not finished when he has merely imparted knowledge; for intellect without wisdom is sure to give rise to mischief. We wish rather to have the combination of understanding, wisdom and heart. A teacher is the father of his pupils. His responsibilities are great; so are his rewards. In China, all scholars have to obey their teachers as much as they have to obey their parents. The teacher has this advantage over a parent in that he is not likely to be swayed by parental tenderness. He must be strict and severe in order to be obeyed. The best medicines, as old people say, are the most bitter.

Now let us briefly apply these general principles of the Chinese to our educational system here. We have a good Government which looks after the welfare of the rising generation. We have all sorts of schools, and all sorts of encouragement are offered. The teachers are efficient; and we hope they all believe in the noble work they are engaged in. We are sorry they are not well paid, but the best reward they can get will be the good men they turn out into the world, putting aside all questions of gratitude of pupils. Parents ought to give their children the benefit of the schools, and in giving them education, they are performing duties which they owe to the helpless charges Nature has placed in their hands. A father ought to give his children the best education, while a teacher must regard his pupils as tender plants very easily spoiled and influenced. Our Chinese schools teach only the classical works of the Chinese, but the teachers enforce sufficiently the duties of filial obedience.

In the English schools, equal treatment is shown to the rich and the poor. This is hardly possible in private schools, but in the Government and public schools, all are equally treated. The same teaching is given, and therefore there is no excuse for any parent to keep his children away from school.

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