

蜀諸葛亮誠子曰：

In Shu [today's Sichuan] Zhuge Liang advised his son [by letter]:⁵

夫君子之行，靜以修身，
儉以養德。

The practice of a cultivated man is to refine the self by quietude,
and develop virtue by frugality.

非寧靜無以致遠。
非澹泊無以明志。

Without serenity, there is no way to get far. Without detachment, there is
no way to clarify the will;

夫學須靜也；
才須學也。

If you wish to learn, you must be serene;
to become accomplished, you must study.

非學無以廣才；
非志無以成學。

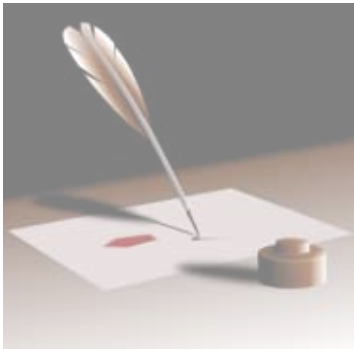
Without study, you will not broaden your abilities;
without strength of will, you will not attain knowledge.

慆慢則不能勵精
險躁則不能治性

If you are arrogant and lazy, you will not achieve excellence.
If you are impetuous and impulsive, you cannot govern your nature.

年與時馳。意與歲去。
遂成枯落。悲歎窮慮。
將復何及。

The years run off with the hours, aspirations flee with the years.
Eventually one ages and collapses. What good will it do to
lament over poverty?



Nan Huai-Chin discusses Zhuge Liang's **Letter to my Son**

Excerpted from the book *Chan yu Shengming de Renshi* (Understanding Chan and Life)¹ – a transcription of a series of lectures delivered at Taihu Great Learning Centre in 2006.

Translated by Steven Clavey

MASTER NAN HUAI-CHIN is a very influential author of books in Chinese and English. While most of his works remain in Chinese, several excellent ones have been translated into English, notably by J.C. Cleary. Master Nan is unusual in being thoroughly versed in the schools of Vajrayana Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Chan Buddhism, and thus able to express realisations in a wide variety of ways, not encumbered by sectarian limitations.²

Zhuge Liang was a famous strategist at the end of the Han dynasty, as China entered

the period of the Warring States. Portrayed as one of the prominent and colourful characters in *San Guo Yan Yi* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms)³ Zhuge is the ideal of Confucian statesmanship. Yet, at the same time, he is spoken of quite seriously as a Daoist Celestial who chose to return to the world of men to assist the re-ordering of a chaotic world.⁴

Nan Huai-Chin introduces the discussion

If you want to learn refinement, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism or Zen are all equally valuable. Remember, if you can return to normal life after this half hour and maintain the spirit and energy we had here, then you are truly talking learning and refinement.

[The first lines of Confucius' *Da Xue* – *The Highest Order of Cultivation* – say:]

“The Way of self-cultivation, at its highest level, is a three-fold path:

it lies in causing the light of one’s inner moral force to shine forth,
in bringing the people to a state of renewal,
and in coming to rest in the fullest attainment of the good.

“Only when one comes to understand this point of rest can one reach a state of unwavering stability.

Having reached this unwavering state, one can then enjoy an unruffled quietude;
having attained this state of quietude, one can then achieve an inner calm;
once one has achieved this inner calm, one is then in a position to exercise one’s capacity to deliberate clearly.

“And it is the capacity of deliberation that provides the basis for all moral attainment.

“Just as all existing things have, by definition, both a fundamental core and peripheral aspects – their ‘roots’ and ‘branches’ – so too, all human affairs have their endings as well as their beginnings. To grasp fully the grounds for the proper sequential ordering of things, from first to last, is a precondition for coming closer to the Way.”⁶

The first step in this *Great Learning* is to teach sons, younger brothers and later generations that they should learn the skill of stopping in quietude.

Zhuge Liang’s famous letter

This is the reason that I have, for a number of decades, brought up Zhuge Liang’s *Jie Zi Shu*. Zhuge Liang is not a Daoist, he is completely a Confucian. The essence of his life of study and learning is in that letter to his son. As always, he himself was still at the front, leading the troops, and all of his instruction for his [seven-year-old] son is contained in one letter. How many times have I discussed this over the past decades! Who among you can completely recite the letter from memory?

*The practice of a cultivated man is to refine the self by quietude
and develop virtue by frugality.*

Seeking for quietude is the refinement of self. Our present practice of meditation is

just to learn this *jing*: internal calm.

Without detachment, there is no way to clarify the will; without serenity, there is no way to get far.

This encapsulates the learning of Confucius, Buddha and the Dao.

If you wish to learn, you must be serene.

To seek for learning requires the practice of settled quiet, the study of serenity.

Zhuge Liang admonished his son: *To become accomplished, you must study.* Whatever you choose to do in life, whether it is business, or government, or anything, one will only have ability if one has searched out knowledge. His letter, his essay, is very simple; although the knowledge Zhuge Liang had gathered over his life was so vast, all we have left of it after two thousand years are the two memorials to the young emperor and this letter.

Everyone forgets, because his letter is so brief, and while he was so knowledgeable, he was so occupied dealing with affairs of state, that when he wrote this letter he could only write several simple clear sentences. But in those sentences there is a great deal of learning. *If you wish to learn, you must be serene, to become accomplished, you must study.* Your innate talents depend on study to bring them out from within.

Without study, you will not broaden your abilities.

You need to have a grasp of every type of learning, be it religion, philosophy, science, commerce, economics, finance, sociology or education, otherwise your talents will not reach their full expression.

Without strength of will, you will not attain knowledge.

In the search for knowledge, the first requirement is learning to be settled and quiet. Many of you have gained your PhDs, or studied overseas and returned, but your state of mind is not even a little bit calm, and thus your knowledge is not great. I am talking to you young people—who actually are now over middle-age—all of you great professors, renowned doctors, all of you are my old students, and I am scolding you. I am invariably polite to outsiders. But now I am reproaching you among my old students: pay attention to the line that says *if you are arrogant and lazy, you will not achieve excellence.* Several decades now you have been slothful, not exerting yourselves,



Many of you have gained your PhDs, or studied overseas and returned, but your state of mind is not even a little bit calm, and thus your knowledge is not great...



If you want to achieve great things, there is a certain method to be followed, you can't just flippantly play around and think you're clever.

too much empty talk, too many banquets, too much bragging. Lazy, disrespectful, haughty and full of yourselves: you achieve a little and think it is fantastic: *arrogant and lazy, you will not achieve excellence.*

This letter I have memorised since my teens, and have used all my life. When I was at the military college for officers, everyone was strictly required to memorise this letter before being allowed to lead troops. If you regard every word as gold, it has great power.

If you are impetuous and impulsive, you cannot govern your nature.

What is *impetuous*? Lack of patience, looking for the easy way all the time, you hear something and automatically assume you understand, taking risks, flighty and rash, not at all stable and peaceful, and utterly unrefined. Zhuge Liang warned his son to take care not to be this way.

Impulsiveness likewise prevents an ordering of your nature, and will make you unable to learn how to clear your mind and perceive your essence. The refinement of the mind cannot be accomplished by craft, or rashly; if you want to achieve great things, there is a certain method to be followed, you can't just flippantly play around and think you're clever. The word *impulsive* in Chinese has a *foot* radical, implying jumpiness or flightiness.

What he is saying to his son are crucial aspects of education and cultivation.

The years run off with the hours. Time flies, and we age; time is like a wild horse, hard to catch and hard to hold. *Aspirations flee with the years.* All of the hopes and dreams of our lives, our intentions, our will, all age with us; we get old and lose our courage. *Eventually one ages and collapses.* He directs his son to study well, because he will be old before he knows it, like a dried up leaf soon to fall. *What good will it do to lament over poverty?* Once you are old, looking back in regret, it is too late, there is no road left to travel.

There is a Tang poem that has the line *youth and strength not exerted lead to old age spent in vain sorrow.* This is based on the same concept. When I taught in university, the central military college, the very first assignment for the very first class would

always be for the students to memorise this letter. It expresses the aim and goal of Confucian and Daoist education in Chinese culture. I can still recite it perfectly for you now, all of you who call me *Teacher*, but who among you, men, women, young or old, can do it?

I never imagined that the whole class would come up with a great big “zero”! I have mentioned this many times in my books, you know. Go, and memorise it!

Endnotes

1. Nan Huai-Qin, 2009, *Chan yu Shengming de Renshi Chujiang* (禅与生命的认知初讲, Understanding Chan and Life, first lectures). Beijing: Dongfang Publishing. A transcription of a series of lectures delivered at Taihu Hall of Great Learning in 2006.
2. This ability is greatly welcomed in a world where sectarian differences are emphasised. Over 20 million of his books have been sold in a variety of languages. Nan, like Liu Yi-Ming and many Daoist and Buddhist authors, strongly emphasises the idea that “The Three Religions are One”, referring to Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.
3. A book well worth reading. One of my Malaysian Chinese classmates at language school in Taiwan was there only because his father insisted that he learn Chinese so that he could read this book before going into business.
4. Lin Tung-Chi. 1947. “The Chinese Mind: its Taoist Substratum.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 8:3, pp. 259-272. Also T. Cleary points out many instances of Zhuge's direct quotes from the *Dao De Jing* and other Daoist works, and concludes: “as this testament shows, there is a strong undercurrent of Taoist thought in Zhuge Liang's attitudes toward life and work.” (*Mastering the Art of War: Way of the General*). Thus when Master Nan declares that Zhuge Liang is not a Daoist, he is thoroughly a Confucian, he is simply emphasising a certain point of view important for the context of his lecture.
5. Translation of the following lines of Zhuge Liang's letter to his son is based upon that of Thomas Cleary in his *Mastering the Art of War*.
6. Translation from Andrew Plaks, 2003, *Ta Hsueh and Chung Yung* (The Highest Order of Cultivation and the Practice of the Mean), Penguin Classics, London.