

# *Tapping the Potential for Wisdom Inherent in Humankind*

SATURDAY, AUGUST 20, EVENING PRESENTATION:

## ETHICS: FOUNDATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

MODERATOR: PROFESSOR SUSAN ROUNDS, Ph.D., U.C. Berkeley; Acting Director of Dominican College Off-campus Teaching Credential Program.

SPEAKER: PROFESSOR YI-PING MEN

### Women's Roles and Ethics

I have been involved in teaching ethics, especially women's ethics, and how to study virtue for several decades. In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in ethics. First I would like to define the "Study of Ethics," Ethics is the discipline dealing with the discernment between what is good and bad. It is a system of moral values to which an entire community subscribes, an accepted standard of conduct which provides meaning to our lives. Among the myriad creatures, people are the most gifted and efficacious beings. That is because people are endowed with the Five Elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) and equipped with the Five Constant Virtues (humaneness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness) in their nature.

As for moral obligations among human beings, there are five:

- 1) The parents should be kind; the children should be filial.
- 2) The husband should be righteous; the wife should be supportive.
- 3) The elder brother should be friendly; the younger brother should be reverent.
- 4) The ruler should be respectful; the minister (subject) should be loyal.
- 5) Friends should be trustworthy in their relationships with each other.

By conforming to those basic moral obligations we are putting ethical values into practice. "Study" in this case means the path, the course pertaining to each individual, the right track he or she should pursue. If people go against their proper course, they are like a car that veers out of its lane, or a boat that is lost at sea; accidents will occur. Therefore, if people comply with their proper ethical roles, their lives will naturally become harmonious. On the other hand, if they go against their ethical duties, they will encounter many obstructions and conflicts. In fact, departure from ethical values can lead to the breakdown of the family, confusion in the society, the dispersion of the citizens, and in the end, the destruction of nations.

When we look back on China which had a history of over five thousand years, we see that there were quite a few times when the country was on the verge of annihilation. The only reason the country was saved from total devastation was that loyal ministers and brave scholars came forth. They were willing to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of righteousness and principle. These noble individuals reversed the course of history by fearlessly standing up for their own people and nation. Where did these loyal ministers and brave scholars come from? They were their mothers' children. And that leads us to the topic of our discussion: the very root of moral training and ethical foundation starts with the mother.

From the 1920's to the 1940's, the Path of Virtue Society was extremely popular in Northern China. Its spiritual leader, the elder Mr. Wang Feng-yi, also known as "Virtuous Man Wang", understood the impact of women's education. He said, "without virtuous wives and mothers, families will be without filial offspring. Then the country will have no loyal ministers. Therefore, educating mothers should come before teaching children. Young maidens are the source of world trends. Women are the source of a country's citizens." Under his guidance, the Path of Virtue Society established over one thousand women's schools throughout Northern China. The Society's work had a tremendous uplifting influence on the moral trends of the time.

Nowadays, people are becoming more and more aware of the worldwide crisis in education. The most effective method for improving the situation is to rectify ethical standards. This is what Confucius meant when he said, "A ruler should act like a ruler; a minister should act like a minister; a father should act like a father; a son should act like a son." A firm moral foundation in the household provides a strong foundation for the country. That is why women have such an important role in society. By being a virtuous wife and mother, a woman can aid her husband to accomplish virtuous deeds; she can educate her children so they will go on to distinguish themselves in serving the people and the country. A good mother sets an excellent example for her children. Moral education begins at home. As the saying goes, "The citizens are the root of the nation. When the root is solid, the nation will be prosperous and peaceful." When law-abiding citizens result from happy families, how could a nation not enjoy peace and prosperity?

Therefore, women have very significant roles, starting in the home. They should embody the qualities of filiality, respect, loyalty and trustworthiness and teach their children to do the same. They should conduct themselves according to propriety, righteousness, incorruptibility, and a sense of shame. A woman should not enter a marriage with selfish motives or the desire for personal enjoyment and gratification. She should think in terms of the well-being of everyone in the world. She should fulfill her duty and moral obligation towards her family and society at large by following in the footsteps of the sages and worthy ones. She should seek to perfect her own humanity. By establishing a proper attitude towards life, she will derive true joy. In relation to those who are older, a woman should be filial to her parents and her in-laws, and take care of them so that these elderly people can enjoy their old age without care or worry. As to the young, a woman should inspire her children to virtue. She should also maintain a respectful and harmonious relationship with her husband. In the Book of Odes it is said,

Happy union with wife and children is like the concord of lutes and harps. When among brothers there is rapport, the joyful harmony is long-lasting. Thus may you regulate your household, and enjoy the pleasures of wife and children.

When families are brought to harmony, the country will prosper. When countries prosper, the world will enjoy true peace. Law-abiding, wholesome and healthy citizens afford the best protection to any nation. They are far more effective than any nuclear arms or "star wars" defense system.

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*Professor Men has been a lecturer and counselor for over forty years. At age nineteen, she joined the Path of Virtue Society in Manchuria (recognized by the League of Nations in the early 1920's). Over the years she has acquired a broad Asian Religious Studies background with a particular focus on the theory of the human nature based on Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. She evolved an elective method of teaching Ethics -- moral reasoning and its application — which she put into practice in hundreds of schools throughout Northern China. Professor Men is currently helping to establish a complete Ethical Studies Program at Dharma Realm Buddhist University. She has lectured extensively at universities in the western United States and in Canada. Her seminars have been well attended, not only by Asian studies specialists, but also by scientists, psychologists, and professionals who, from her words and actions, find invaluable guidelines for moral action and responsible ways of coping with, current social issues. In the recent Graduation Ceremony at Dharma Realm Buddhist University (Summer, 1988), Professor Men was granted an Honorary Doctorate in Chinese Culture and Philosophy.*

