



*If you keep a green bough in your  
heart, the singing bird will come.*

Chinese proverb



## The First Principle

# Courtesy

*The little clearing in the grove where the class met each day was empty when the students arrived that morning. The leaves of the birch trees rustled in the springtime breeze, and the grass was soft and green. Just beyond the trees rippled a stream carrying the fresh, cold water of melted snow, with which the students brewed their tea each dawn and washed their faces each night. Above them, sparrows and wrens chattered as they flitted from branch to branch.*

*It was peaceful here among the birch trees—peaceful, beautiful, and safe. But the student-warriors knew very well that not all the world was so serene. Beyond their idyllic classroom lay a world often torn by greed, jealousy, anger, and war. It was because of this strife that they were here now, preparing themselves for lives of action, lives of noble deeds both large and small. With their teacher, Master Yi, they studied the principles of an ancient art and an ancient path—the path of the warrior.*

*As they waited for their teacher, two students practiced their sparring skills together. A third recited her poetry and a fourth sketched the pleasant scene before him. Others simply sat on the sun-dappled grass and meditated, breathing slowly and deeply.*

*Finally, their teacher appeared. His flowing robe was the same as always; his long white beard as gleaming as ever. But*



something seemed different. In his brow was a new wrinkle—wasn't there? Or was there, perhaps, a touch more silver in his beard? Each student glanced around at the others in the group, wondering if they too sensed a change.

The master smiled at his students, whom he had come to know well in the recent months. He cleared his throat and said softly, "In one week, I will leave you."

The glances among the students now grew swifter, more urgent. Leave? So soon?

Before they could protest or question, Master Yi went on, his voice quiet but very firm. There was no room in his tone for argument.

"It is best that I do leave you. The greatest learning often takes place after the teacher has left. I have taught you, and I have asked you to practice. In my absence, you must determine for yourselves how much you have learned—and how well.

"Before I go, I have seven lessons to share with you. Remember that my words will never substitute for your living. Always make words real by your actions.

"Let us begin. Come, gather around me. Sit, and listen.

"Today we consider the principle of courtesy," Master Yi told his students. "First, honor all things and all beings in your heart. Recognize that you are greater than no other. When you see yourself connected to the world and to others, you will know respect. The depth of your feeling will show itself through the depth of your action.

"Greet the world with a soft palm, not with a fist. Bow low to your neighbor. The sound of one unkind word from your lips will echo in your ears and return to the source: your own heart."

The teacher looked around the grove, studying the faces of his pupils to see if they understood him.

*“Your souls already carry the seeds of courtesy and deep respect,” he continued. “We all wish for these things, after all. But when you show courtesy, do not say, ‘I will do this so that I may receive courtesy in return.’ Too often we worry about receiving it rather than giving it. When we begin to seek something, we cannot know where we should look for it. And the more we try to seize something for ourselves by force, the more elusive it becomes. Instead, you must give freely and openly. Only then will the seeds grow: when you water them with compassion and nurture them with soft hands.”*

*At this, one of the students scoffed—though he did not allow the master to hear him. He stood up, tall and proud, and asked, “What do soft hands have to do with us? We are warriors. We toughen our hands and our feet to make them into great weapons.”*

*The master replied, “Weapons to fight against whom? Before you do battle, you must always remember that the greatest enemy is within yourself. You cannot use a sword to fight the enemy inside your own heart. But if you learn respect, you may one day make this enemy your ally and your friend.”*

*Some of the students appeared puzzled. Master Yi continued, “Think hard. You must know that a respectful heart is a peaceful heart. If the heart is not at war with itself, why would it want to fight others? If you are kind to yourself, you will be kind to others, and if you are kind to others, you will be kind to yourself.”*

*One student asked, “But what is the great enemy within ourselves?”*

*“Fear,” replied Master Yi. “Fear is born of ignorance. So is cruelty. The true warrior is never cruel. He or she is kind—and secure in inner strength. Remember that all people are your brothers and your sisters, and you will never be ignorant. Then you will never be afraid, the enemy will fade away, and you will begin to share your knowledge with others.”*

*The old teacher paused and said slowly, “If you demand kindness from others, you will not hear the music. Give kindness and you sing the song. The ice in yourself must thaw before you can drink the cool water.”*

Another student-warrior rose. She asked, "What is the difference between courtesy and respect?"

The teacher answered, "Respect is the root. Courtesy is the tree. Let your courtesy grow out of respect, and let these two ideals harmoniously guide your spirit. What is on the surface must reflect what is within."

Master Yi pondered deeply for a few moments. Finally he continued, "Touch the flower lightly. Do not crush its stem. While you may seem to be courteous in action, the body that acts without the heart's warmth caresses with a cold hand."

Master Yi motioned for his students to stand. Then he said:

Looking is good. Seeing is better. Listening is good.  
Hearing is better. Hear this poem with your hearts:

Looking over the side of this old boat,  
I see my image in the blue-green deep.  
This quiet water holds  
my silent words,  
my tender strength.

I can see the depths through the shallows,  
as I rise to greet the world.

Dipping my palm  
into the slippery coolness,  
I know the truth at last.

I bow my head,  
respecting my breath,  
and your breath,  
and row toward the trees,

toward the branches  
that will shelter us all.

The students waited, watching Master Yi closely to be certain that he was finished with his lesson. When they saw him give a slight nod, they bowed to their teacher and filed silently out of the clearing.