



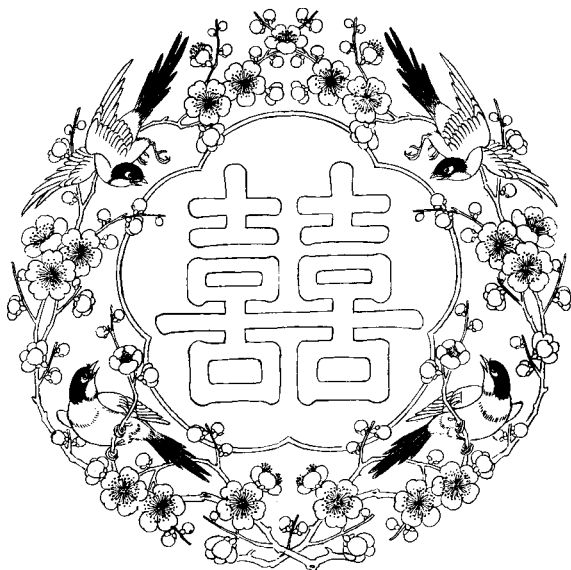
200 CHINESE MORAL  
MAXIMS

TRANSLATED BY

SIR JOHN F. DAVIS

**“Good sayings are like pearls, strung together.  
“Inscribe these on the walls of your dwelling,  
“and regard them night and day as wholesome admonitions.”**

**— Ming-sin-paou-kien**



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200 CHINESE MORAL MAXIMS

translated by Sir John F. Davis  
Macao, China, 1823

(1)

The man of first rate excellence is virtuous independently of instruction; he of the middling class is so after instruction; the lowest order of men are vicious in spite of instruction.

(2)

By a long journey we know a horse's strength; so length of days shows a man's heart.

(3)

The spontaneous gifts of heaven are of high value; but the strength of perseverance gains the prize.

(4)

The generations of men follow each other, as the waves in a swollen river.

(5)

The heart of a worthless man is as unfixed and changeable as a mountain stream.

(6)

In the days of affluence always think of poverty; do not let want come upon you, and make you remember with sorrow the time of plenty.

(7)

Let us get drunk today while we have wine; the sorrows of tomorrow may be borne tomorrow.

(8)

The mind is it's own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

(9)

Prevention is better than a cure.

(10)

Modesty is attended with profit; arrogance brings on destruction.

(11)

As the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.

(12)

The same tree may produce sour and sweet fruit; the same mother may have a virtuous and vicious progeny.

(13)

It is equally criminal in the governor and the governed, to violate the laws.

(14)

Prosperity and misfortune are common to all times and all places.

(15)

As the scream of the eagle is heard when she has passed over; so a man's name remains after his death.

(16)

Questions of right and wrong (with reference to men's characters) are every day arising; if not listened to, they die away of themselves.

(17)

If the domestic duties be duly performed, where is the necessity of going afar to burn incense?

(18)

Doubt and distraction are on earth; the brightness of truth, in heaven.

(19)

Meeting with difficulties, we think of our relations; on the brink of danger, we rely on our friends.

(20)

Among mortals, who is faultless?

(21)

In learning, age and youth go for nothing; the best informed takes the precedence.

(22)

Do not love idleness and hate labor; do not be diligent in the beginning, and in the end lazy.

(23)

Against open crimes, punishments can oppose a barrier; but secret offences, it is difficult for the laws to reach.

(24)

If there be no faith in our words, of what use are they?

(25)

If riches can be acquired with propriety, then acquire them; but let not unjust wealth be sought for with violence.

(26)

If there be a want of concord among members of the same family, other men will take advantage of it to injure them.

(27)

The world's unfavorable views of conduct and character, are but as the floating clouds, from which the brightest day is not free.

(28)

Wine and good dinners make abundance of friends; but in the time of adversity, not one is to be found.

(29)

Let every man sweep the snow from before his own doors, and not trouble himself about the frost on his neighbor's tiles.

(30)

Though a tree be ten thousand cubits in height, its leaves must fall down, and return to its root.

(31)

He who can suppress a moment's anger, will prevent lasting sorrow.

(32)

The human relations are five in number, but that of husband and wife is the first in rank; the great ceremonies (or rites) amount to three thousand, but that of marriage is the most important.

(33)

Worldly reputation and pleasure are destructive to virtue; anxious thoughts and apprehensions are injurious to the body.

(34)

Better to be upright with poverty, than depraved with an abundance. He, whose virtue exceeds his talents, is the good man; he, whose talents exceed his virtue, is the mean one.

(35)

In a field of melons, do not pull up your shoe under a plum-tree, do not adjust your cap; (i.e. be very careful of your actions under circumstances of suspicion).

(36)

The man of worth is really great without being proud: the mean man is proud without being really great.

(37)

Time flies like an arrow; days and months like a weaver's shuttle.

(38)

It is said in the I-Ching, that "of those men whose talent is inconsiderable while their station is eminent; and of those whose knowledge is small while their schemes are large; there are few who do not become miserable."

(39)

When a man obtains a large sum without having earned it, if it does not make him very happy, it will certainly make him very miserable.

(40)

Though a man may be utterly stupid, he is very perspicacious when reprehending the bad actions of others; though he may be very intelligent, he is dull enough while excusing his own faults. Only correct yourselves on the same principle that you correct others; and excuse others on the same principle that you excuse yourselves.

(41)

The figure of men in ancient times resembled that of wild beasts; but their hearts contained the most perfect virtue. The outward appearance of the present race of men is human, but their dispositions are utterly brutish.

(42)

The artful are loquacious, the simple are silent; the artful toil, the simple enjoy ease; the artful are rogues, the simple virtuous; the artful are miserable, the simple happy. Oh ! that all in the empire were artful and simple; punishments would then be abolished. Superiors would enjoy tranquility, and inferiors would be obedient. The manners would be pure, and vile actions become extinct!

(43)

Do not anxiously hope for what is not yet come: do not vainly regret what is already past.

(44)

If your schemes do not succeed, of what use is it to regret their failure? If they do not flourish, what is the use of noisy complaints? When a heart devoted to gain is intent on any object, then virtue is set aside. Where interested views exist, there a regard for the public welfare is extinguished.

(45)

Men's passions are like water. When water has once flowed over, it cannot be restored. When the passions have once been indulged, they cannot be restrained. Water must be kept in with dykes; the passions must be ruled by the laws of propriety.

(46)

Low courage is the resentment of the blood and spirits; noble courage is the resentment of propriety and justice. The former of these, no man should possess; the latter, no man should be without.

(47)

Without ascending the mountain, we cannot judge of the height of heaven. Without descending into the valley, we cannot judge of the depth of the earth. Without listening to the maxims left by the ancient kings, we cannot know the excellence of learning.

(48)

In making a candle we seek for light, in reading a book we seek for reason; light to illuminate a dark chamber, reason to enlighten man's heart.

(49)

By learning, the sons of the common people become public ministers; without learning, the sons of public ministers become mingled with the mass of the people.

(50)

If you have fields, and will not plough them, your barns will be empty. If you have books, and will not give instruction, your offspring will be ignorant. If your barns be empty, your years and months will be unsupplied; if your offspring be ignorant, propriety and justice will not abound among them.

(51)

Though an affair may be easily accomplished, if it be not attended to, it will never be completed; though your son may be well disposed, if he be not instructed, he will still remain ignorant.

(52)

Of those, who at home are destitute of virtuous parents and elders, and abroad have no rigorous instructors and friends, and, notwithstanding this, can perfect themselves (in wisdom), there are very few !

(53)

A meager soil produces late flowers. "Slow rises worth by poverty depressed." But let no man despise the snake which has no horns, for who can say that it may not become a dragon?

(54)

If you love your son, give him plenty of the cudgel; if you hate your son, cram him with dainties.

(55)

The small birds look around them and eat; the swallow goes to sleep without apprehension. He who possesses an enlarged and sedate mind will have great happiness; but the man whose schemes are deep will have great depth of misery.

(56)

Past events are as clear as a mirror; the future as obscure as varnish.

(57)

What exists in the morning, we cannot be certain of in the evening. What exists in the evening, we cannot calculate upon for the next morning. The fortunes of men are as uncertain as the winds and clouds of heaven.

(58)

When you are happier than usual, you ought to be prepared against some great misfortune. When joy is extreme, it precedes grief. Having obtained the imperial favor, you should think of disgrace; living in peace, you should think of danger. When your glory is complete, your disgrace will be the greater. When your success is great, your ruin will be the deeper.

(59)

When the mirror is highly polished, the dust will not defile it; when the heart is enlightened with wisdom, licentious vices will not arise in it.

(60)

In security, do not forget danger; in times of public tranquility, do not forget anarchy.

(61)

The fishes, though deep in the water, may be hooked; the birds, though high in the air, may be shot; but mans heart only is out of our reach. The heavens may be measured, the earth may be surveyed; the heart of man alone is not to be known. In painting the tiger, you may delineate his skin, but not his bones; in your acquaintance with a man, you may know his face, but not his heart. You may sit opposite to and converse with him, while his mind is hidden from you as by a thousand mountains.

(62)

Forming resentments with mankind may be called “planting misery”; putting aside virtuous deeds instead of practicing them, may be called “robbing one’s self.”

(63)

Riches are what the good man considers lightly; death is what the mean man considers as of importance.

(64)

When the man of a naturally good propensity has much wealth, it injures his acquisition of knowledge. When the worthless man has much wealth, it increases his faults.

(65)

In enacting laws, rigor is indispensable; in executing them, mercy.

(66)

Do not consider any vice as trivial, and therefore practice it; do not consider any virtue as unimportant, and therefore neglect it.

(67)

If men's desires and wishes be laudable, Heaven will certainly further them.

(68)

Following virtue is like ascending a steep; following vice, like rushing down a precipice.

(69)

All events are separately fated before they happen. Floating on the stream of life, it is in vain that we torment ourselves. Nothing proceeds from the machinations of men; but the whole of our lives is planned by destiny.

(70)

A vicious wife and an untoward son, no laws can govern.

(71)

With the years of his parents, a man must by all means be well acquainted; first, as a cause of joy and again as a source of sorrow. (Joy, that they have lived so long; sorrow, that they are so old.)

(72)

Those who have discharged their duties as children, will in their turn have dutiful children of their own; the obstinate and untoward will again produce offspring of the same character. To convince you, only observe the rain from the thatched roof, where drop follows drop without the least variation.

(73)

He who tells me of my faults, is my teacher; he who tells me of my virtues, does me harm.

(74)

Let your words be few, and your companions select; thus you will avoid remorse and repentance, thus you will avoid sorrow and shame.

(75)

If a man's wishes be few, his health will be flourishing; if he has many anxious thoughts, his constitution will decay.

(76)

Be temperate in drinking, and your mind will be calm; restrain your impetuosity, and your fortunes will remain uninjured.

(77)

Honours come by diligence; riches spring from economy.

(78)

The mild and gentle must ultimately profit themselves; the violent and fierce must bring down misfortune.

(79)

Do not precipitate yourself into legal quarrels; but let concord and good understanding prevail among neighbors.

(80)

Do not ascend the hills to ensnare the birds in nets; do not descend to the waterside to poison the fish; do not slay the laboring ox; do not treat letters with irreverence by casting away written papers.

(81)

If you wish to know what most engages a man's thoughts, you have only to listen to his conversation.

(82)

Do not rely upon your wealth to oppress the poor; do not trust to your power and station to vex the orphan and widow.

(83)

Let no man for a private enmity cause disagreement between father and son; let no one for trifling gain breed dissension among brothers.

(84)

Draw near to the virtuous that their virtue may be imparted to you; flee away from the vicious that misfortune may be kept far from you.

(85)

Cut away the brambles which obstruct the path; remove the bricks and stones which lie in the way; repair the roads which are injured by the lapse of years; build the bridges which may be crossed by multitudes.

(86)

Propagate good instruction to correct men's vices; part with your wealth to effect men's happiness.

(87)

In our actions we should accord with the will of Heaven; in our words we should consult the feelings of men.

(88)

If a man be not enlightened within, what lamp shall he light? If his intentions are not upright, what prayers shall he repeat?

(89)

Throughout life, beware of performing acts of animosity; in the whole empire, let there not exist a revengeful minded man. It is very well for you to injure others, but what think you of others returning those injuries on yourself? The tender blade is nipped by the frost; the frost is dissipated by the sun; and worthless men will always suffer rubs from others as bad as themselves.

(90)

Man perishes in the pursuit of wealth, as the bird meets with destruction in search of its food.

(91)

Knowing what is right, without practicing it, denotes a want of proper resolution.

(92)

There are plenty of men in the world, but very few heroes.

(93)

Poverty and ruin must in the end be proportioned to a man's wickedness and craft; for these are qualities which Heaven will not suffer to prevail. Were riches and honors the proper result of crafty villainy, the better part of the world must fatten on the winds.

(94)

The duration of wealth ill-gotten, is as that of snow on which hot water is poured. The possession of lands improperly obtained, endures as long as the sands heaped up by the waves. If you make craft and deceit the rule of your life, you will be like the flower which blows in the morning and in the evening drops.

(95)

The best cure for drunkenness is, whilst sober, to observe a drunken man.

(96)

(Three subjects of consideration for the wise man.) If he does not learn in his youth, he will be good for nothing when grown up; if he does not give instruction in his old age, his posterity will have nothing by which to remember him; if he is possessed of wealth and does not make good use of it, should he become poor, no one will relieve him.

(97)

The opening flower blooms alike in all places; the moon sheds an equal radiance on every mountain and every river. Evil exists only in the heart of man; all other things tend to show the benevolence of Heaven towards the human race.

(98)

Of things defective, there is nothing more so than ill-obtained wealth; of the destitute and orphaned, there are none more so than the self-sufficient man.

(99)

Confucius said, "A man, without thought for the future, must soon have present sorrow."

(100)

When you put on your clothes, remember the labor of the weaver; when you eat your daily bread, think of the hardships of the husbandman.

(101)

Would you understand the character of the Prince, examine his ministers; would you know the disposition of any man, look at his companions; would you know that of father, look at his son.

(102)

A man is ignorant of his own failings, as the ox is unconscious of his great strength.

(103)

A man, by the cultivation of virtue, consults his own interest; his stores of wisdom and reflection are every day filling up.

(104)

Confucius says, "The capacity for knowledge of the inferior man is small and easily filled up; the intelligence of the superior man is deep, and not easily satisfied."

(105)

Though the screen be torn, its frame is still preserved; though the good man be plunged in want, his virtue still remains to him.

(106)

Without the wisdom of the learned, the clown could not be governed; without the labor of the clown, the learned could not be fed.

(107)

The cure of ignorance, is study; as meat is that of hunger.

(108)

The poverty of others is not to be ridiculed, for the decrees of destiny are in the end equal; nor are the infirmities of age a fit subject for laughter, since they must at last be the portion of us all. When the day that is passing over us is gone, our lives are proportionately contracted; what reason, then, have the fish to be merry, when the water in which they swim is ebbing away.

(109)

An immoderate use of dainties generally ends in disease; and pleasure, when past, is converted into pain. It is better to avert the malady by care than to have to apply the physic after it has appeared.

(110)

Though the white gem be cast into the dirt, its purity cannot be sullied; though the good man live in a vile place, his heart cannot be depraved. As the fir and the cypress withstand the rigors of the winter, so resplendent wisdom is safe in situations of difficulty and danger.

(111)

If you do not entreat their assistance, all men will appear good-natured; if you do not want to drink, it makes little difference whether the wine be dear or cheap; it is easier to seize the tiger in the hills, than to obtain the good offices of men.

(112)

It is not easy to stop the fire, when tile water is at a distance; friends at hand are better than relations afar off.

(113)

Though the sun and moon be bright, their rays cannot reach under the inverted bowl; though the sword of justice be swift, it cannot slay the innocent man; nor can sidelong mischance penetrate the doors of the careful.

(114)

If a man wish to attain to the excellence of superior beings, let him first cultivate the virtues of humanity; for if not perfect in human virtue, how shall he reach immortal perfection ?

(115)

Man is born without knowledge, and when he has obtained it, very soon becomes old; when his experience is ripe, death suddenly seizes him.

(116)

Let those, who are the instructors of mankind, cherish their virtuous feelings and vice will of itself vanish; let the rulers of the people teach them mutual respect and deference and contentions will of themselves cease.

(117)

There are only three great rules to be observed by those who hold public situations; viz., to be upright, to be circumspect, to be diligent. Those who know these three rules, know that by which they will ensure their own safety in office.

(118)

A man's prosperous or declining condition, may be gathered from the proportion of his waking to his sleeping hours.

(119)

Unsullied poverty is always happy, while impure wealth brings with it many sorrows.

(120)

The goodness of a house does not consist in its lofty halls, but in its excluding the weather; the fitness of clothes does not consist in their costliness, but in their make and warmth; the use of food does not consist in its rarity, but in its satisfying the appetite; the excellence of a wife consists, not in her beauty, but in her virtue.

(121)

In disposing of his daughter in marriage, let a man choose for her a husband superior to herself (in rank and fortune); she will then serve her husband with respect and awe. In choosing his own wife, let a man take care that she be his inferior (in those respects); she will then serve her new relations as a woman should.

(122)

He who receives a benefit and is not ungrateful — as a son will be dutiful — as a minister will be faithful.

(123)

The fame of men's good actions seldom goes beyond their own doors; but their evil deeds are carried to a thousand miles' distance.

(124)

Tae-kung says, "In the practice of hospitality, no difference should be made between relations and others; all who come must be well received."

(125)

The sincerity of him who assents to everything, must be small; and he who praises you inordinately to your face, must be altogether false.

(126)

If sincerity be wanting between the prince and his minister, the nation will be in disorder; if between father and son, the family will be discordant; if between brothers, their affections will be loosened; if between friends, their intercourse will be distant.

(127)

Petty distinctions are injurious to rectitude; quibbling words violate right reason.

(128)

Though powerful medicines be nauseous to the taste, they are good for the disease; though candid advice be unpleasant to the ear, it is profitable for the conduct.

(129)

To show compassion towards the people by remitting the severity of the taxes, is the virtue of the prince; and to offer up their possessions, sinking their private views in regard for the public, is the duty of the people.

(130)

Though the life of man be short of a hundred years, he gives himself as much pain and anxiety as if he were to live a thousand.

(131)

The advantages of wise institutions can be sought for only in an inflexible observance of them.

(132)

If a man does not receive guests at home, he will meet with very few hosts abroad.

(133)

Where views and dispositions agree, the most distant will unite in friendship; where they disagree, relations themselves will soon be at enmity.

(134)

Without a clear mirror, a woman cannot know the state of her own face; without a true friend, a man cannot discern the errors of his own actions.

(135)

A man should choose a friend who is better than himself; if only like himself, he had better have none. There are plenty of acquaintances in the world, but very few real friends.

(136)

The evidence of others is not comparable to personal experience; nor is "I heard," so good as, "I saw".

(137)

We should make it the business of our lives to control our temper; and whenever we find it becoming unruly, that instant bring it into order.

(138)

The three greatest misfortunes in life are; —in youth, to bury one's father; —at the middle age, to lose one's wife, — and being old, to have no son.

(139)

In her accomplishments, it is not requisite for a woman to display talents of a famous or uncommon description; in her face, it is not requisite that she should be very handsome; her conversation need not be very pointed or eloquent; her work need not be very exquisite or surpassing.

(140)

A virtuous woman is a source of honor to her husband; a vicious one causes him disgrace.

(141)

It being asked, "Supposing a widowed woman to be very poor and destitute, might she in such a case take a second husband." It was answered, "This notion arises merely from the fear of cold and hunger but to be starved to death is a very small matter compared with the loss of her respectability."

(142)

When offences proceed from inadvertency, let gentle remonstrances be used to inculcate a better knowledge for the future; where they are willful, make use of severer denunciations, to prevent a repetition.

(143)

Those who promote disputes and instigate to legal discussions (for their own profit), convert the pen into a sword as the means of a livelihood and regard quarrels which affect the dearest interest of others as mere child's play.

(144)

Those who cause divisions in order to injure other people, are in fact preparing pit-falls for their own ruin.

(145)

Though the Mow-tan be beautiful, it is supported by its green leaves.

(146)

A man's patrimony must suffer by trifling and idleness, as it must flourish by diligence. The chief rule to be observed in one's plan of life, is to be strenuous in the beginning and to increase one's exertions to the last.

(147)

Even the carriers of burdens may, by honesty and diligence, obtain a sufficiency. The proverb says, "Every blade of grass has its share of the dews of heaven" and "though the birds of the forest have no garner, the wide world is all before them."

(148)

Wisdom and virtue and benevolence and rectitude, without politeness are imperfect.

(149)

He who fears the laws will not be likely to violate them. The dread of punishments is the best method of avoiding them.

(150)

Do not think lightly of crimes and fancy that they may be trifled with; for to every crime there is a law adapted for its punishment.

(151)

He who wishes to know the road through the mountains, must ask those who have already trodden it.

(152)

Rich men look forward to the years that are to come; but the poor man has time to think of only what is immediately before him.

(153)

It is better to believe that a man does possess good qualities than to assert that he does not.

(154)

The mischiefs of fire or water or robbers extend only to the body; but those of pernicious doctrines, to the mind.

(155)

The original tendency of man's heart is to do right; and if a due caution be observed, it will not of itself go wrong.

(156)

As it is impossible to please men in all things, our only care should be to satisfy our own consciences.

(157)

He who at once knows himself, and knows others, will triumph as often as he contends.

(158)

One man's good fortune is the good fortune of his whole family.

(159)

Though brothers are very near relations, the difference of fortune widely separates them.

(160)

Eat your three meals in the day and look forward to sleeping at night.

(161)

A man's countenance is a sufficient index of his prosperity or adversity, without asking him any questions.

(162)

Adversity is necessary to the development of men's virtues.

(163)

He who neglects to study diligently in his youth, will, when he is old, repent that he put it off until too late.

(164)

He who studies ten years in obscurity, will, when once preferred, be known universally.

(165)

It is too late to pull the rein, when the horse has gained the brink of the precipice; the time for stopping the leak is passed, when the vessel is in the midst of the river.

(166)

The scholar is acquainted with all things, without the trouble of going out of doors.

(167)

He who advances may fight; but he who retreats may take care of himself.

(168)

Those who respect themselves will be honorable; but he who thinks lightly of himself, will be held cheap by the world.

(169)

Do not believe that all are honest who appear to be so; but beware, lest the semblance of goodness turn out to be the reverse.

(170)

Walls have ears and there are listeners under the window.

(171)

Among principals, there may be distinctions of rank; but among subordinates, none.

(172)

Expression for “He has met with his match.”

(173)

Great promises are not followed by corresponding actions.

(174)

Neat compositions and elegant hand-writing; skill in drawing pictures or in playing at chess; are nothing more than a species of mechanical skill. What great value is there in them ?

(175)

As the behavior of the world towards men of learning is respectful, learned men should have a due respect for themselves.

(176)

Expel pernicious doctrines, that the true code may be duly honored.

(177)

If the stream be not confined, it will soon flow away and become dry; if wealth be not economized, there will be no limits to its expenditure and it will soon be wasted.

(178)

It is easy to convince a wise man; but to reason with a fool is a difficult undertaking.

(179)

To meet an old friend in a distant country may be compared to the delightfulness of rain after a long drought.

(180)

Speak of men's virtues as if they were your own; and of their vices as if you were liable to their punishment.

(181)

The slow horse is fated to receive the lash; the worthless man will ultimately get his deserts.

(182)

Diligence is a treasure of inestimable price; and prudence is the pledge of a security.

(183)

Mencius said, "All men concur in despising a glutton, because he gives up everything that is valuable, for the sake of pampering what is so contemptible."

(184)

Him, whose words are consistent with reason and whose actions are squared by the rule of rectitude, what man shall dare to oppose?

(185)

Inattention to minute actions will ultimately be prejudicial to a man's virtue.

(186)

To the contented, even poverty and obscurity bring happiness; while to the ambitious, wealth and honors themselves are productive of misery.

(187)

As the light of a single star tinges the mountains of many regions; so a single unguarded expression injures the virtue of a whole life.

(188)

The evidence of a single glance should not be relied on as true; nor are words, spoken behind a man's back, deserving of much credence.

(189)

If a horse goes slowly, it is only because he is weak; if a man is not luxurious, it is only because he is poor.

(190)

Though a poor man should live in the midst of a noisy market, no one will ask about him; though a rich man should bury himself among the mountains, his relations will come to him from a distance.

(191)

Knowledge is boundless; but the capacity of one man is limited.

(192)

Plausible words are not so good as straightforward conduct; a man, whose deeds are enlightened by virtue, need not be nice about his expressions.

(193)

A single hair of silk does not make a thread; one tree does not make a grove.

(194)

A single conversation across the table with a wise man, is better than ten years' mere study of books.

(195)

Virtue is the surest road to longevity; but vice meets with an early doom.

(196)

By a single day's practice of virtue, though happiness may not be attained, yet misery may be kept at a distance; by a single day of ill doing, though misery does not immediately follow, happiness is prevented.

(197)

If in the way of riches, do not use improper means to possess them; if in the way of misfortune, do not use improper means to avoid it.

(198)

No medicine can procure long life, even to the ministers of the emperor; no money can purchase for any man a virtuous posterity.

(199)

A single false move loses the game.

(200)

Prudence will carry a man all over the world; but the impetuous find every step difficult.





