

Chinese Folklore: Zhuge Liang's Cultivation Practice

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(Clearwisdom.net) Zhuge Liang was the military strategist for the Han state in the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 A.D.). He was the most famous and ingenious military strategist in Chinese history. He was often pictured wearing a robe and holding a fan made of crane feathers.

When Zhuge Liang was 9 years old, he still was unable to speak. His family was poor. His father asked him to herd the sheep at a nearby hill on a mountain. Up on the mountain there was a Taoist temple where an elderly Taoist with a full head of gray hair resided. The Taoist took a leisurely stroll outside the Taoist temple every day. When he ran into Zhuge Liang, he would try to communicate with the boy with hand signs. Zhuge Liang also enjoyed "talking" back to the Taoist with hand signs. The Taoist grew very fond of the smart and adorable Zhuge Liang. He started to treat the boy's muteness problem. Before long, Zhuge Liang was able to speak!

Zhuce Liang was delighted when he finally was able to speak. He went up to the Taoist temple and thanked the Taoist in person. The elderly Taoist told him, "When you return home, tell your parents that I am taking you as a disciple and I will teach you to read. I will also teach you the art of astronomy, geography and the applied theories of Yin and Yang in military strategies. If your parents agree, you must come attend school every day and you must never skip a class!"

From that day on, Zhuge Liang became the elderly Taoist's disciple. Rain or shine, Zhuge Liang would climb up the mountain to receive his

education. He was a very smart and diligent boy who took his studies seriously. He also had a photographic memory. The Taoist never had to teach him anything twice. Naturally, the Taoist became all the more fond of him.

Eight years passed quickly and Zhuge Liang became a teenager.

One day while Zhuge Liang was coming down the mountain as usual, he passed by a deserted nunnery located in the middle of the mountain. Suddenly there came a gust of wind, followed by a thunderstorm. Zhuge Liang had no choice but to flee to the deserted nunnery to escape the storm. There a young woman he had never met came out to meet him. She had a large pair of eyes and thin eyebrows. She was so beautiful that Zhuge Liang almost mistook her for a goddess. He was immediately attracted to the young woman.

When the storm stopped, the beautiful woman saw him off at the door and said to him with a smile, "Now that we have met each other. You are free to come by and have a cup of tea whenever you wish to take a break in your trip up or down the mountain." As Zhuge Liang was walking out of the nunnery, he felt suspicious. "Why didn't I notice that someone lived in this nunnery before?" he thought.

From that day on, Zhuge Liang began to frequent the nunnery. Each time the beautiful woman would entertain him with warm hospitality. She cooked him delectable meals and always encouraged him to stay longer. After dinner they would chat heartily and play chess. Compared to the Taoist temple, the nunnery appeared to be a paradise.

Thoughts about the woman often diverted his attention from his education and he began to lose interest in studying. He paid less and less attention to the Taoist's lectures. He also became forgetful and had difficulty in learning new textbooks.

The elderly Taoist discovered his problem. One day he summoned

Zhuge Liang and let out a long sigh. "It is easier to ruin a tree than grow a tree!" he said. "I have wasted many years on you!"

Zhuge Liang lowered his head in shame and said, "Master, I will never disappoint you again or waste your education!"

"I don't believe you," said the elderly Taoist. "I knew you were a very smart boy, so I wanted to treat your illness and give you a proper education. For the past eight years you have been very diligent in your study, so I thought it was worth the hard work of educating you. But now you are neglecting your education. No matter how smart you are, you will never get anywhere if you continue to carry on like this! You are now promising me to never disappoint me again. How can I trust your words?"

The elderly Taoist continued, "Everything has its cause." Then he pointed at a tree wrapped up by many thick vines in the courtyard. "Look at that tree," he said. "Why do you think the tree is half alive and is struggling in its growth?"

"The vines binding the tree are keeping it from growing!" answered Zhuge Liang.

"Precisely! This tree had a tough time growing up in this rocky mountain with little soil. But it keeps growing because it is determined to develop its roots and branches. It fears neither the heat nor the cold temperature. However, when the vines wrap around it, it cannot grow up any taller. It is funny how 'soft' vines can defeat a tall, robust tree!"

Zhuge Liang was smart, so he immediately knew what his Master was referring to. He asked, "Master, you know about my visits to the nunnery""

The elderly Taoist said, "Living near the water, a man will learn the fish's nature. Living on the mountain, a man will learn the birds'

language. I have been observing you and your actions. How can your romantic affair escape my attention?"

He paused for a moment before telling his disciple with a stern look, "Let me tell you the truth about the beautiful woman. She is not a human being. She is a divine crane in heaven. She was kicked out of the heavenly palace as a punishment after she stole and ate the Queen of Heaven's peaches. She came to the human realm and assumed the appearance of a beautiful woman. She is a depraved divine crane that knows only to seek pleasure. You have been beguiled by her appearance, but you have wasted more than your time. If you allow yourself to lose your will, you will lose everything! Moreover, if you refuse to comply with her wishes, she will hurt you eventually."

It was not until then that Zhuge Liang realized the seriousness of his escapade. He anxiously asked his Master for a solution.

The elderly Taoist said, "The divine crane has a habit of returning to her original form at midnight and flying up to the heavenly river for a bath. While she is away from the nunnery, you will enter her room and burn her robe. She stole the robe from the Heavenly Palace. Without the robe, she can no longer assume the shape of a beautiful woman."

Zhuge Liang promised to follow his Master's instructions. Before he took off, his Master handed him a cane with the carving of a dragon's head on the top. He told Zhuge Ling, "When the divine crane notices the fire in the nunnery, she will fly down from the heavenly river right away. She will realize that you have burned her robe and will attack you. When that happens, you must hit her with the cane! It is important that you remember and do what I have told you!"

At midnight, Zhuge Liang went to the nunnery quietly. He opened the woman's room and found her robe on the bed. He immediately set the robe on fire.

While the divine crane was bathing in the heavenly river, she felt a sudden heartache. She checked the direction of the nunnery and saw the fire. She immediately flew down and saw that Zhuge Liang had set her robe on fire. She came at Zhuge Liang and tried to attack his eyes with her beak. Zhuge Liang had quick reflexes. He raised the cane and knocked the divine crane down to the ground. Then he grabbed the crane by her tail. The divine crane struggled and was able to escape, but she lost her tail feathers to Zhuge Liang.

She became a crane with a bald tail. She was embarrassed by her looks, so she stopped bathing in the heavenly river. She dared not enter the Heavenly Palace to steal another robe either, so she had no choice but to remain in the human realm forever and live among ordinary cranes.

In order to remind himself of this lesson, Zhuge Liang kept the tail feathers of the crane.

From that day on, Zhuge Liang became even more diligent. He would memorize everything his Master taught him and every textbook. He truly absorbed what he had learned and was able to apply it freely. Another year passed. On the very day he had burned the divine crane's robe a year ago, the elderly Taoist told him with a big smile, "My disciple, you have been studying under my tutelage for nine years. I have taught you everything you need to learn and you have learned every textbook here. There is an idiom, 'Master takes you through the entrance, and it is up to you to practice cultivation.' You are now 18 years old. It is time for you to leave your home and develop your career!"

When Zhuge Liang heard that he had completed his education, he begged his Master for more. "Master! The more I learn, the more humble I feel. I feel there is more I need to learn from you!"

"True education comes from real life. You must learn to apply your knowledge to life and design different solutions for different situations!"

For example, you have learned an important lesson from your visits with the divine crane that one must not be tempted by lust or emotion. This is a practical lesson from a life experience. With that in mind, you must not be confused by this illusionary surface of the world. Take great caution in everything you do. You must see everything in its true form. This is my farewell advice to you! I will be leaving you today."

"Master, where are you going?" Zhuge Liang asked in astonishment. "Where can I find you or visit you from now on?"

"I will wander around the world and will not settle down again."

Suddenly Zhuge Liang found warm tears filling his eyes. He said, "Master! Before you leave, you must give me an opportunity to kowtow to you and thank you for giving me an education!"

Next Zhuge Liang kowtowed to his Master. When he got up, the Taoist had disappeared.

The Taoist left him with a robe with the print of the Eight Trigrams. Zhuge Liang thought of his Master very often; therefore, he often wore his robe with the print of the Eight Trigrams because it gave him the feeling that his Master was right beside him.

Zhuce Liang never forgot his Master's advice, especially his parting advice. He made a feather fan out of the divine crane's tail feathers to remind himself to take great caution for the rest of his life. This is the story behind the famous feather fan that Zhuge Liang carried.

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