

Hexagram 21 – Life Lessons



Gnawing and biting through

Spiritual influence nourishing all.

Benefit from clear judgement of what benefits all.

Structure:

- Clarity of fire ☲ above, and action ☳ below: energetic and effective action with clarity, acting only after clear understanding.
- Movement and clarity. Union of thunder and lightning.

The hexagram has the image of an open mouth with an obstruction (4th line) between its jaws. The mouth can close only by energetically biting through the obstacle. Within nature, a thunderstorm bites through the disturbing tension that precedes the storm.

We face obstructions in uniting with the wholeness of Earth Interbeing when stubborn beliefs and attitudes block us. The hexagram advises us to first understand what underlies our experience of disconnection: a belief in our superiority, arrogance, or a willingness to harm others for self-benefit. We explore our negative reactions to others and recognize that we see in them what we cannot bear about ourselves. This recognition of what obstructs our union with the whole may take time, but we must resolutely persist biting through these obstructions.

Once we understand what obstructs us, we have bitten through it. We have learned about how we harm others and ourselves, but, also, how we can further the well-being of all. We can now curb what causes harm, transform it into what furthers wholeness, or simply learn to live with it but not allow it to oppress us. Once free of what tormented us, we know how to respond to this kind of situation in a balanced and harmonious manner without confusion whenever it should arise again. Those open to correction gain discernment and wisdom.

These life lessons motivate us to bite through our harmful beliefs and delusions by imposing ever greater levels of suffering until we finally exert ourselves to identify what we have avoided and learn the lesson that life insists on teaching us about wholeness. The suffering we experience results from transgressing the moral and physical bounds of the Earth Interbeing. If we ignore the lesson, then our torment will only grow.

For example, if we neglect the responsibility to care for our physical well-being and persist in unhealthy habits, we gradually experience increased suffering caused by failing health. However, if we finally decide to master the lesson of caring for ourselves, then we can begin to heal. In the world, we collectively confront the life lesson to live within the ways of Wholeness¹, lesson with the steepest

¹ **Ways of Wholeness:** Sages relate to all their sacred Earth Interbeing relations with love and care, serving the well-being of all. Sages live within Earth and moral limits to sustain the sacred balance and harmony, reciprocate for the gifts they receive from the Earth Interbeing, and hold themselves accountable for their actions. Sages take responsibility for their own wholeness and fulfill their responsibilities to the wholeness of Earth Interbeing, creating opportunities for others to do the

penalties should we continue to ignore it. Stopping what harms and lovingly caring for Earth Interbeing frame the challenge of our time.

Every life lesson has a similar pattern. A harmful belief or habituation resists the ways of the spirit. Once we understand what blocks us, we can then energetically remedy it. Failure to solve and move through life lessons leads to irreversible harm and to loss of our spiritual path.

The wise transform these negative behaviors by experiencing their tangle of reactive thoughts, bodily sensations, beliefs, prejudices, emotional projections, stories, agendas, uncomfortable feelings, hopes, confusions. We strip off layer after layer of whatever separates us from the Wholeness of Earth Interbeing until we can bite through it and deeply rest with it within the loving spirit.

Indulging in harmful behaviors keeps us complicit with corrupting influences and undermines our resolve to free ourselves from our dangerous cultural conditioning. Negative behaviors do not vanish on their own as they emerge out of cultural conditioning. We must vigorously act to overcome our inherent resistance to change and bite through what harms us and the Earth Interbeing.

The wise vigorously remove inner obstructions to unite with the spirit. Yet that does not mean gritting our teeth and pushing through to the other side. We stay lovingly present with what obstructs us, which takes tolerance and courage. We naturally want to maintain the status quo, but we must make every effort inwardly to apply the Ways of Wholeness to effectively transform ourselves.

Once sages know what to do, they act. Action without knowing would be too harsh. Knowing without action would not remove the obstruction. When balanced, the sage brings the force of action together with the knowing in the ways of wholeness.

Life, the great teacher, constantly offers lessons on the principles of life in the form of challenges or problems for us to solve. When we successfully master one lesson, life reliably presents another set of problems and challenges. The deeper we move into the spiritual path, the more difficult the lesson becomes, but our success with these lessons depends upon an ever growing understanding of life and capacities to respond well to whatever we encounter.

The sage remains hard as metal and straight as an arrow and does not weaken even when tempted to indulge. The spiritual path depends upon us remaining firm and straightforward, applying the knowledge that we have gained from one life lessons to the next, persistently biting our way through our harmful cultural conditioning to benefits all.

Lines: Lines 1 and 6 suffer the punishment. The others lines inflict the punishment.

Line 1: The line gets caught as soon as it begins to harm and receives a light punishment. Applying self-discipline at the beginning of wrong-doing restrains behavior and prevents further harm.

same. Sages know the sacred within all their interactions and situations and open to the loving path through problems and dangers.

Confucius: “Inferior people are not ashamed of unkindness and do not shrink from injustice. If no advantage beckons, they make no effort. If not intimidated, they do not improve themselves. But if they are made to behave correctly in small matters, they are careful in large ones. This is fortunate for these people.”

Line 2: In this situation, the line acts as the judge and easily discerns right from wrong. Facing a great injustice, the line self-righteously goes too far in correcting it. No great harm results as the wrongdoing justifies the harsh penalty, but line did not see the subtle hidden with the obvious.

Line 3: When abuses of human freedom have persisted for a long time, people blindly accept the harmful cultural norms. The line’s efforts to end these abuses stir up poisonous hatred against it. Yet, in small ways, the blameless line persists in this great work even though it has a low position and weaknesses.

Line 4: Upon investigating principle, the line sees the truth and understands what it must do. The line succeeds in the arduous effort to transform great obstacles and harmful cultural conditions. It remains hard as metal and straight as an arrow to bite through injustices both within itself and in the world.

Line 5: The line faces the need to make a decision, made difficult because of its ambivalence about whether to yield to the expectations of others or to do follow the path of wholeness, the correct but harder thing to do. It wisely chooses to further the Earth Interbeing despite its anticipated disapproval of others.

Line 6: The accumulated harms of the line are so great that release from them proves impossible. The line, deaf to warnings, receives a severe punishment.

Confucius says, “If good does not accumulate, it is not enough to make a name for someone. If evil does not accumulate, it is not enough to destroy someone. Therefore, inferior people think goodness in small things has no value and so neglects them. They think small sins do no harm and so do not give them up. Thus, sins accumulate until they can no longer be covered up, and their guilt becomes so great that it can be no longer wiped out.”