

Essential Knowledge of Dao Study

English translation of 道藏 . Translated via the distill pipeline.

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1. Roots of the Tree, Source of the Waters: The Heart-Method of the Three Treasures

Congratulations to all of you -- today you have received the Heavenly Dao. This is entirely a matter of affinity. As the old saying goes: "Those with affinity can meet across a thousand miles; those without affinity will not encounter each other even face to face."

What does it mean to have affinity or to lack it? A person with affinity possesses good roots and moral virtue. Even from a thousand miles away, such a person can come to seek and obtain the Great Dao. A person without affinity, even if they live right next door -- even the very closest of kin -- cannot be ferried across. Because their conduct is not upright, even if you bring them here, they will refuse to kneel and seek. For this reason, the distinction between those with affinity and those without arises.

What have we sought today? We have sought the primordial Great Dao descended from Heaven -- the True Transmission of Nature and Principle. This Heavenly Dao did not come into being only now. It has existed since antiquity. In ancient times, however, the Great Dao was transmitted singly and bestowed upon one person at a time. It was not given universally.

Now, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, people's conscience has changed from what it was in ancient times. Because too many sins have been committed and too much evil done, Heaven is wrathful, and eighty-one kinds of heavenly disasters descend upon the world all at once. All the immortals and buddhas of the heavens, unable to bear this in their hearts, knelt and implored the God of Luminous Radiance to save the good and faithful. Therefore Heaven opened its grace: the True Dao descended into the world, and the great universal ferrying was opened wide. Heaven specially commanded the Holy Teacher and Yuehui Bodhisattva to descend in reverse incarnation into the earthly realm, to receive the Heavenly Mandate, and to universally ferry the Three Realms. Good men and faithful women who have affinity may all receive and hear the Heavenly Dao.

That we are able to seek and obtain the Great Dao today is truly the fortune of three lifetimes and the accumulated cultivation of many past lives. Since antiquity, those who cultivated the Dao abandoned their families, gave up their livelihoods, traveled a thousand miles to visit an enlightened master, and journeyed ten thousand miles to seek the oral formula. They cultivated merit and established virtue. Only when three thousand merits were fulfilled and eight hundred fruits completed would Heaven secretly dispatch immortals and buddhas to offer guidance. Of those who could attain the Dao, out of a hundred, it was difficult to find even one.

Nowadays, seeking Dao is far too easy. In the past, Patriarch Lü once said: "A human body is hardest to obtain; to be born in the Central Land is harder still. The True Dao and an enlightened

master are yet harder to encounter. Having obtained a human body and heard the Great Dao, one must cultivate early and ascend early." These were originally the Four Difficulties, but now they have become the Four Easies. Today we spent a little money, bowed a few times, and obtained the Great Dao. But what everyone must understand is this: the primordial Great Dao cannot be bought with money. Because all of you possess this portion of buddha-affinity, your Introducer and Guarantor Masters expended countless words to persuade you, guide you, and ferry you here. Today they led you to seek the Great Dao, to kneel before the altar, to establish your great vows, and to guarantee that you are a person of upright conduct and clean standing -- a good person. You yourself, just now before the altar, also established a vow. Only then could you receive the pointing of the enlightened master. Without Introducer and Guarantor Masters to take their vows and provide their guarantee, even if you brought ten thousand taels of gold and wished to seek the Great Dao, it would be impossible.

This Great Dao does not require money. It seeks to save people -- to enable them to transcend birth and death, to escape catastrophe and avoid calamity. This is the Great Dao that since antiquity has never been lightly transmitted. Unless the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras arrives, it does not descend. Unless one is a royal embryo, a primordial seed, one cannot receive the pointing transmission. Now the Third Era has arrived in accord with destiny. Good and evil must all be distinguished and judged. Dao and catastrophe descend into the world simultaneously. Maitreya, the Ancestral Teacher, presides over the Heavenly Governance. The Holy Teacher and Yuehui Bodhisattva together hold the Heavenly Mandate, universally ferrying the Three Realms and carrying out the Great Gathering on a grand scale. This is the primordial Great Dao, come in response to the time and in accord with destiny.

The Three Treasures

Today we have received Dao. What have we received? Three treasures: the Pass, the Formula, and the Seal.

First Treasure: The Mysterious Pass

The first treasure -- the place that was pointed to -- is called the Mysterious Pass. This is the gateway through which our spirit enters at birth and departs at death. It is also called Spirit Mountain, Spirit Platform, and the Seamless Lock. The Daoist tradition calls it the Gateway of the Mysterious Female. Jesus called it the Cross. Long ago, Zigong sighed and said: "The Master's literary refinement can be heard, but the Master's words on human nature and the Way of Heaven cannot be heard." Therefore the saying goes: "Reading through a thousand scriptures and ten thousand classics does not compare to one pointing from an enlightened master."

Today everyone must understand where this original nature resides. The sages of the Three Teachings all began their cultivation from this point and only then succeeded. Confucius said: "If one hears Dao in the morning, one may die in the evening and it is enough." What does "enough" mean here? It means one may be freed from the suffering of the cycle of rebirth. If people of the

world do not encounter the pointing of an enlightened master, their spirit cannot exit through this aperture. Therefore it is said: "The Mysterious Pass, the Isle of Penglai -- once opened by the touch, it is a priceless treasure."

The True Dao has true proof. In the future, when one reaches old age, at the time of passing and returning to emptiness, the face will appear as it did in life. The body and limbs will be soft as cotton. In winter the body will not stiffen, and in summer it will not decay. Having received this one aperture today, everyone can truly say they have gained a priceless treasure -- in one step, directly transcending to the Realm of Non-Ultimate Principle.

Second Treasure: The Oral Formula

The second treasure, the oral formula, is the true words. The Great Dao is the wondrous Dao of the Three Ultimates. It universally ferries the Three Realms. Only because Maitreya, the Ancient Buddha, has come in accord with destiny do we receive this true word of Buddha.

Should you encounter great disasters or great calamities, silently recite the true words in your heart. Lao Mu will naturally command the immortals and buddhas to protect and shelter you, turning misfortune into blessing and transforming disaster into good fortune. (Lao Mu is the true sovereign of all spirits, who gave birth to heaven, to earth, and to all things.) Having received this formula today, you must not take it lightly. To take it lightly is to take lightly your own life and destiny. Guard it strictly. You must never casually speak it aloud.

Third Treasure: The Combined Seal

The third treasure is the Combined Seal. "Zi and Hai interlocking, held embraced at the breast -- it can deliver one through the eighty-one great catastrophes." This is the ancient Combined Seal that Maitreya Buddha received from Lao Mu, and it can deliver one from the eighty-one great catastrophes.

Why are there such numbers? Because since the creation of heaven, it was established that ten buddhas would come in accord with destiny: seven to govern the world, and three to carry out the Gathering. Among the three, the first was Dipamkara Buddha, who descended into the world to universally ferry all beings. This was in the era of Fuxi, during the Blue-Green Era. He presided over the Heavenly Governance for fifteen hundred years, ferrying two hundred million buddha-children back to heaven. Because people's hearts were upright at that time, only nine catastrophes were sent down. The second universal ferrying came when Shakyamuni Buddha descended at the end of the Zhou Dynasty. People's hearts had greatly changed, and eighteen catastrophes were sent down. This was the Red Era. He presided over the Heavenly Governance for three thousand years, ferrying another two hundred million buddha-children to the West.

Now, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, Maitreya the Ancient Buddha presides over the Heavenly Governance, while the Holy Teacher and Yuehui Bodhisattva preside over the Dao

Governance -- universally ferrying the Three Realms. Because the people of the world have accumulated too much evil karma, eighty-one catastrophes are sent down. Adding the numbers from the Blue-Green and Red eras, the total comes to one hundred and eight catastrophes. The one hundred and eight beads of the Buddhist rosary -- that is the number of catastrophes.

Our Patriarch and Matriarch received the Heavenly Mandate and universally ferry the Three Realms. Above, they ferry the stars of the Milky Way. Below, they ferry the ghosts and spirits of the netherworld. In the middle, they ferry the good men and faithful women of the human world. If we had not encountered this time of the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, how could ordinary people like us ever have obtained such a supremely noble and precious Dao?

Closing

In the more than sixty thousand years since heaven was opened, earth was separated, and humans were created -- living and dying, dying and living, turning in the cycle of rebirth -- the sins and karmic debts owed across accumulated lifetimes have become too many. Now Heaven has come to settle humanity's karmic debts. After receiving Dao, we must constantly study and understand its meaning. We must diligently cultivate merit and establish virtue in order to clear and repay the debts of many lifetimes. In the future, we may even elevate nine generations and redeem seven ancestors, all returning together to the Heavenly Hall.

We have received the Three Treasures today -- the Pass, the Formula, and the Seal. Remember this absolutely: upward, do not transmit them to parents; downward, do not transmit them to spouse or children. You must never casually reveal Heaven's secrets.

“ The time has come -- the White Era under the Third-Era heaven, universally ferrying the Three Realms, what excellent affinity! The enlightened master, in accord with destiny, hurries east and west, everywhere establishing altars, pointing the wondrous mystery. We earnestly urge those with affinity: awaken quickly! Swiftly seek the Great Dao and illuminate your original source. Receive Heaven's Three Secret Treasures; with a sincere heart cultivate and practice -- and become a sage or worthy.

2. The Meaning of Seeking Dao

What does it mean to seek Dao? To seek is to pursue — to pursue and understand what this Dao truly is, where its source and origin lie, what its essential nature and true substance are, whether it possesses form and appearance, where within our own bodies it resides, what bearing it has upon humanity and all beings, how precious it is, how profound and subtle. One must earnestly and thoroughly pursue this understanding until everything becomes clear. Only then can one seek Dao with a sincere heart, hold firm faith in Dao, cultivate Dao with proper method, practice Dao with constancy — and the attainment of Dao will naturally become something one may anticipate with certainty.

Mencius said: "Benevolence is the heart of a person. Righteousness is the path of a person. To abandon that path and not walk it, to let one's heart loose and not know to seek it — how lamentable! People, when their chickens and dogs are lost, know to seek them; when their heart is lost, they do not know to seek it. The way of learning is nothing other than seeking the heart that has been let loose."

Seeking Dao is precisely this: to find and recover the lost Heavenly Principle and innate conscience.

The *Great Learning* says: "When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, thoughts become sincere; when thoughts are sincere, the heart is rectified; when the heart is rectified, the person is cultivated." This tells us that one must first investigate things and extend knowledge; only then can sincerity of thought and rectification of heart emerge. With thoughts sincere and heart rectified, only then can one cultivate the person and cultivate Dao. This is the testimony left by the sages. From this it is clear: to cultivate Dao, one must first seek Dao — one must first know where to rest.

A verse:

“ With firm faith and diligent practice, Dao can be illumined;
once illumined, knowing where to rest, the heart is rectified, the thoughts
sincere.
With persevering will and mindful devotion, the Buddha's light shines forth;
through sincere thought and reverent cultivation, one becomes a worthy or a
sage.

3. Why Must One Seek Dao?

Dao is the original nature of a person, the root-source of our nature and life-destiny. It resides within the human body and is something every person inherently possesses. Why, then, must one still seek it?

Because all human beings and myriad spirits, without exception, were born by receiving this wondrous Dao of Nature and Principle. From the very beginning of life, this nature-Dao was already bestowed upon them. Why then — in the first era, the Blue-Green Era; in the second, the Red Era; and now in the third, the White Era, amid the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras — has it been necessary for the Sovereign God to descend Dao into the world?

Because this nature-Dao is so subtly wondrous that it lies beyond words. Though it dwells within the human body, its going out and coming in has no form that can be seen; its coming and going has no sound that can be heard. And so, whether we speak of heaven and earth, human spirits, or the myriad kinds of beings, all possess it yet none know they possess it. Without the Heavenly Mandate of the Sovereign Emperor, specially descending the True Dao and conferring the mandate upon the enlightened master — who points out and transmits the True Transmission of Nature and Principle, opens the wondrous aperture, and elucidates the Great Dharma of the Heart-Seal hidden for ten thousand ages — then even if you surpassed Yan Hui and Min Ziqian in virtue, or exceeded Fan Zeng in wisdom, you would still have no way to know the source and origin of this wondrous Dao — the Mysterious Pass, that blessed ground. How could you know its profundity? Its preciousness? How could you know that it shares an intimate bond with heaven, earth, and all spirits and beings — a place of infinite mystery within creation itself?

This is why the ancient sage-king, the Yellow Emperor, bowed to seventy-two teachers. This is why Shakyamuni renounced the nobility of the royal palace and entered the Snow Mountains to cultivate Dao. This is why Confucius sought out Laozi and inquired about the rites. This is why Shenguang stood in the snow at Shaolin and severed his arm to prove his sincerity. All of them did so to seek the True Dao of the True Transmission of Nature and Principle.

How Original Nature Was Lost

Mencius said: "People, when their chickens and dogs are lost, know to seek them; when their heart is lost, they do not know to seek it — how lamentable!" From this we know that people of the world have long since let their original nature and innate conscience go astray, and have not known to seek them.

Yet if this nature-Dao and innate conscience dwell within our bodies, how could they be lost?

When the Realm of Principle bestowed this nature-and-principle upon human beings and the spirit entered the bewildering maze of the Great Ultimate, passing through its transformations as the

primordial fell into the acquired, the pure and pristine original nature was constrained by the endowments of yin and yang, and the purely good innate conscience was obscured by worldly sentiment and material desire. The primordial true wisdom — the prajna-wisdom — was transformed into acquired emotional cleverness. The Original Spirit was transformed into the conscious mind. The true spirit was controlled by the Five Phases. The nature of principle became the temperamental nature, and the temperamental nature further became the material nature. Through these transformations, the master of the house — the true heart that walks the Dao — was banished to a corner. The true sovereign abdicated. The blood-heart seized power. The conscious mind took charge. What the Lord Jesus called "God yielding authority" refers precisely to this.

From that point on, people treated this true heart like a sheep lost at a crossroads, not knowing where it had gone, altogether ceasing to seek it. In time they came to recognize the thief as their own father — mistaking the blood-heart for the true heart — and let it act without restraint or scruple, committing reckless misdeeds without ever examining themselves, growing ever worse. The Demon King held exclusive power within, while the six thieves ran rampant without. The will-horse slipped its reins and trampled wildly upon the precious field of the heart. The mind-monkey broke free of its chains and wreaked havoc in the heavenly palace, beyond all control. Sins were committed and transgressions invited, grievances were formed and karmic offenses created, cause and effect became entangled, and the cycle of rebirth could not be ended. Human hearts declined by the day, morality perished by the day, and an unprecedented great catastrophe had its beginning.

From that time forward, all people of the world, without exception, were seeking life amid the sea of suffering and seeking the path of death toward hell. The straight road by which they originally came — no one traveled it anymore. The true scripture of the Eight Virtues — filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, integrity, and a sense of shame — who would still turn to look upon it? And so this straight road of the true scripture became utterly overgrown and impassable, and before the gates of the Heavenly Paradise one could set nets to catch sparrows — so deserted had it become. As Mencius said: "A mountain path through the valley, if continuously used, becomes a road; if for a time it is not used, it becomes overgrown." This is precisely what he meant.

The Necessity of Seeking and Cultivating Dao

Because people have let their true heart go astray and do not know where it went — and because this straight road of the true scripture has been blocked by thorns and brambles — there is simply no way to recover this nature-Dao, this true heart. For this very reason, it is necessary to seek Dao, and necessary to cultivate Dao.

What is seeking Dao? It is to find and recover the true heart that has been let loose. What is cultivating Dao? It is to restore the straight road by which one goes to find the true heart. Without

seeking Dao, one cannot understand the source and resting place of the true heart, nor can one know the reason why it was lost, nor the place where it is imprisoned. Without cultivating Dao, one cannot clear away the obstacles along the road — and without clearing the road, how can one advance? Without advancing, how can one drive back the demons and monsters that besiege the true heart? Therefore one must seek Dao and cultivate Dao in order to rescue the true heart, return to one's original homeland — the Land of Ultimate Bliss — so that our master of the house may once again see the light of day, pay reverence to Lao Mu, and rejoice at the Dragon-Flower Assembly. How perfect and complete that would be!

A verse:

“ The root-source of our nature and life-destiny, we once did not know;
how sorrowful — when chickens and dogs are lost, we know to search,
yet the lost heart we treat as nothing important.
Responding to the calling of this age, know to seek it and build the foundation of
Dao.

“ Awakening is like receiving a lamp in the night —
a windowless dark room, suddenly filled with light.
If this body is not delivered in this lifetime,
in what other lifetime will this body be delivered?

4. What Benefits Does Seeking Dao Bring?

Dao means "the road." It is the straight road for returning to Heaven, to the Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss. It is not the worldly road of the mundane realm, nor the confused path that plunges one into the sea of suffering, still less the dead-end road that sends one tumbling into the cycle of rebirth. Where is this road? For the awakened, it is right before one's eyes — a single step and one ascends directly. For the deluded, it lies 108,000 li distant; through tens of millions of cycles of rebirth one still cannot find it — even after tens of thousands of years, one still cannot reach it. It is the most wondrously secret road of all.

As it turns out, this road lies within our original nature and comes from the Realm of Principle. In the Realm of Principle it is called the True Principle of Non-Ultimacy; when bestowed within the human body, it is called "nature" — hence the term "Nature and Principle." Since it came from such a place, when departing it should also return to such a place. This is the true-scripture straight road that every person, in birth and death, coming and going, must travel. And so it is also called "the Dao" — this is the reason. Confucius said: "Who can go out except by the door? Why does no one follow this Dao?" This is precisely the meaning.

In brief, seeking Dao is nothing other than seeking to recover the Heavenly Principle and innate conscience of one's original nature. Mencius said: "The way of learning is nothing other than seeking the heart that has been let loose."

If one does obtain this True Dao of Nature and Principle, what benefits are there?

First: Transcending Birth and Death

First: One can transcend birth and death. What does this mean? It means transcending yin and yang, leaping beyond the Five Phases, escaping the cycle of rebirth, and ascending to Ultimate Bliss — freeing oneself from birth after birth and death after death, from being forever mired in the sea of suffering, from ten thousand kalpas without the power to turn one's fate around. Why is this necessary? Because both birth and death are not good things; the world of the living and the netherworld are both not good destinations. Zhuangzi said: "I did not wish to be born, yet suddenly I was born into the world; I did not wish to die, yet suddenly the time of death arrives."

Shakyamuni, in his time, renounced the nobility of the royal palace for the sake of the one great matter of birth and death. From this we know that the world is not a land of joy, and both birth and death are far from good. To live in this world is a living hell; to die and enter the netherworld is a dead hell. Birth and death always lie within the hell of the sea of suffering — neither realm is a blessed land, neither is paradise. Therefore we must seek Dao, receive the enlightened master's

pointing instruction of the True Transmission of Nature and Principle, and ascend to the Heavenly Paradise of Ultimate Bliss, so as never again to be born into the dusty world, never again to suffer the cycle of rebirth through the four modes of birth and six paths. This is why seeking Dao aims to transcend birth and death.

Second: Turning from Evil toward Good

Second: One can turn from evil toward good and leave the crooked for the straight. Only by seeking Dao can one recover one's original nature and innate conscience, and only then can one discern that the human heart has both a true and a false aspect. The true is the original nature and innate conscience — the Original Spirit. The false is the blood-heart, the human heart — the conscious mind. Every thought that arises in worldly people touches upon greed, selfishness, partiality, and crookedness. Every action partakes of treachery, cruelty, and cunning deception. This is so because the original nature and innate conscience have been entirely veiled by desire and sealed by emotion, unable to emerge, while the conscious mind of the blood-heart is left to conduct all affairs unchecked. Therefore one must seek Dao in order to recover the true heart and give rise to wondrous wisdom — only then can one see clearly right and wrong, good and evil, the straight and the crooked, transforming consciousness into wisdom, guarding the upright and expelling the crooked. All of one's actions then follow the Middle Way and original nature as their teacher. Confucius said: "When three walk together, there must be one among them who can be my teacher; choose what is good in them and follow it, and what is not good — correct it in yourself." This is to say that the original nature and innate conscience are precisely our truest teacher. In all one's deeds, if one acts according to this innate conscience, one will never go astray. "What is not good" refers to the enticements of the eyes and ears. By seeking Dao, one can truly turn from evil to good and leave the crooked for the straight — this is indeed so.

Third: Dissolving Calamities and Resolving Karmic Debts

Third: One can dissolve calamities and resolve karmic debts. Calamities and karmic debts are all created by people themselves, because everyone has let their true heart go astray and abandoned the Eight Virtues, with the blood-heart conducting affairs. Everything they do violates innate conscience and runs counter to the Heavenly Principle and the upright Dao. Grievance-debts are formed, karmic causes and effects accumulate, disasters link together, and over time there brews an unprecedented great catastrophe — all because people have lost Dao. Since calamities and karmic debts arise from losing the true heart and losing Dao, one must seek Dao and recover the true heart in order to dissolve them — this much is clear. If one can truly recover innate conscience and the upright Dao, one will naturally understand the origin of calamities and how karmic debts were formed. One will repent of past faults, hold oneself to blame and resolve to cut away the error, sincerely confess and repent, and exert oneself to cultivate merit and establish

virtue in order to repay the karmic offenses of past lives. Naturally, grievances will be resolved and karmic offenses dissolved, with no further entanglement. From that point forward, every thought follows the true heart as master, every action follows the Eight Virtues as guide. How could one form new karmic debts or create new causes of calamity? When no new enmity is formed and old grudges cease to exist, body and heart become pure and tranquil, and calamities and karmic debts dissolve of themselves — without needing to be resolved.

Fourth: Changing One's Destiny

Fourth: One can change one's destiny. Where does destiny come from? Is it decreed by Heaven? Determined by spirits? Created by people themselves? People create their own causes, spirits and Heaven assist the conditions, and in the end the effects come naturally to fruition. In sum, the predestined conditions of three lifetimes and the fruits consumed over many lifetimes, though spirits and Heaven assist, are all in truth created by the human heart. Observe: some are born as princes, lords, generals, and ministers, with vast estates, towering mansions reaching the clouds, and wealth rivaling an entire region — because in their previous lives their true heart was constantly preserved, their heart never departed from Dao, and their ancestors accumulated virtue deeply. Having sown good grain in their field of blessings, they naturally reap good fruit in this life — this is the natural Dao. Others, from the day they were born, are beset by illness, spend their lives in destitution, with not a patch of ground to stand upon, not a day's grain stored in the house, lonely and wretched, beset by one disaster after another — because over three lifetimes they did not cultivate, the true heart went into exile, and the blood-heart and conscious mind conducted affairs. Bad weeds were sown in the field of blessings; naturally, they cannot enjoy good fruit. As the saying goes: "Heaven's net is vast and loose, yet nothing slips through" — retribution is never in error.

Calamity and fortune have no gate of their own; it is people alone who summon them. Those who wish to change their destiny must recover the true heart, clear away every bad weed from the field of blessings, and replant good grain — in time, they will harvest good fruit. Master Hong said: "World-covering achievements cannot withstand a single word: arrogance. Heaven-filling sins cannot withstand a single word: repentance." Consider Patriarch Qiu, who originally bore the face-lines of "a golden serpent locking the mouth" — the most dire and malevolent destiny. After seeking Dao, he practiced with diligence and genuine effort, accumulating merit upon merit, until at last his grievances were resolved and karmic offenses dissolved. Without his knowing, in the unseen workings of fate, his shadow-lines were transformed into "twin dragons seizing a pearl" — the most exalted and noble configuration. The benefits of seeking Dao, from this example too, can be understood clearly.

Of all the roads traveled under heaven, cultivation alone never leads one astray.

A verse:



To escape King Yama and attain the Realm of Principle,
embrace the teaching and never lose it — as if standing at the edge of a deep
abyss.

Coming, one entered by this door; departing, one exits by this same door;
only by ascending directly can one accompany buddhas and immortals.

“ The fool craves worldly profit;
the common man prizes empty fame.
In the blink of an eye, all turns to emptiness;
in vain, karma follows the body.

5. The Four Difficulties of Attaining Dao

(1) A Human Body Is Difficult to Obtain

(1) A human body is difficult to obtain.

Human beings are the most numinous of the myriad things. Our nature depends upon this body to exist, and this body depends upon our nature to live. The true does not depart from the false, nor the false from the true — true and false are forged into a single whole. As the Heart Sutra (Xīnjīng 心經) says: "Shariputra, form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form." It is by means of this body that one transcends one's nature. Without this body, how could one's nature ever be transcended? As the saying goes: "Once the human body is lost, through ten thousand kalpas it is hard to regain." Therefore, a human body is difficult to obtain.

(2) The Three Eras Are Difficult to Encounter

(2) The Three Eras are difficult to encounter.

Without the supreme Dao, one cannot distinguish true from false or benefit from harm, and will simply muddle through, finishing out one's life carelessly — and that would be all. The Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras is also spoken of as the Opening of the Three Yang — catastrophe and blessing running in parallel. It refers to the turning of the Blue-Green, Red, and White Eras. Dao does not descend unless the time is right; it is not transmitted except through the right person. Just as a critically ill person must call upon a physician, and medicine is taken in response to illness, so Dao descends in response to catastrophe. When the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras arrives, the three disasters and eight tribulations appear all at once — an unprecedentedly perilous moment. Only the True Dao can rescue and deliver. The blessing lies in the True Dao descending into the world, universally saving the myriad spirits — truly a fine opportunity that comes once in a thousand years. Therefore it is said: the Three Eras are difficult to encounter.

(3) Birth in the Central Land Is Difficult

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China is situated in Asia. The character for Asia (亞, yà) contains a white cross — it is the pivot of heaven and earth. It is called the Central Kingdom (中央, Zhōngguó), the Central Florescence (中央, Zhōnghuá), the Central Plains (中央, Zhōngyuán). "The Central" is the great root of heaven and earth. Sages emerged in unbroken succession, civilization opened earliest there, and in antiquity it was called the Heavenly Dynasty — the place where the True Dao first descended. If one is not born in the Central Land, it is not easy to hear the Heavenly Dao. Therefore it is said: birth in the Central Land is difficult.

(4) The True Dao Is Difficult to Encounter

(4) The True Dao is difficult to encounter.

In the era of the Three Periods, the myriad teachings all arise together. The true one is the non-dual dharma gate; the false ones recklessly abound. The Buddha said: "Those who grasp the root become buddhas and patriarchs; those who cannot grasp the root cultivate blindly." Without deep buddha-affinity and the sheltering grace of ancestral virtue, the True Dao is truly difficult to encounter. Therefore it is said: the True Dao is difficult to encounter.

A verse:

“ A human body and birth in the Central Land — hardest to obtain;
the True Dao in the Three Eras — harder still to encounter.
Now, having obtained a human body and heard the Great Dao,
one must cultivate early and ascend early.

6. Do Cause and Effect, the Cycle of Rebirth, Heaven, and Hell Truly Exist?

The ways of the world are no longer as they were in antiquity. The human heart grows worse by the day. A certain sort of fashionable person, fancying themselves clever, refuses to believe in cause and effect, the cycle of rebirth, heaven, or hell. They themselves do not believe, and what is more, they call other people superstitious. They do not realize that the ones calling others superstitious are precisely those who are themselves deluded and unawakened — cutting off the road to heaven, planting the deep causes of hell. Foolish and confused — how pitiable, how lamentable!

One must understand that cause and effect, the cycle of rebirth, heaven and hell are the ultimate principle of the universe. They are not merely the doctrine of Buddhism alone. The Confucian tradition says: "A family that accumulates goodness will surely have abundant blessings; a family that accumulates evil will surely have lingering misfortune" (*Book of Changes*). The Daoist tradition says: "The retribution of good and evil follows like a shadow follows form" (*Treatise on Response and Retribution*). Are these not expressions of cause and effect? As for the doctrine of heaven and hell, both Christianity and Islam strongly uphold it. And as for the cycle of rebirth, the records in ancient books are beyond counting. Even if one dismisses the unofficial histories as untrustworthy, the records in the official dynastic histories are far from few.

Let me briefly cite a few examples. Bó Gǔn (伯古) became a bear — recorded in the Commentary on the Records of the Grand Historian (Shǐjì Zhèngyì 史記正義). Rúyì (魯逸) became a dog — recorded in the History of the Han (Hànshū 漢書). Yáng Hù's (楊護) previous incarnation was the son of the Lǐ family — recorded in the History of the Jin (Jìnshū 晉書). Emperor Yuán of Liáng's (梁元帝) previous incarnation was a one-eyed monk — recorded in the History of the Southern Dynasties, Liáng Annals (Nánshǐ 南史). Liú Shìgē's (劉士鞅) previous incarnation was Lǐ Shù (李樹) — recorded in the History of the Northern Dynasties, Qí Annals (Běishǐ 北史). Liú Yuán (劉元) was formerly Niú Sēngrú (牛僧儒); Fàn Zǔyǔ (范祖禹) was formerly Dèng Yǔ (董禹); Guō Xiángzhèng (郭象正) was formerly Lǐ Tàibái (李太白) — all recorded in the History of the Song (Sòngshǐ 宋史). Xià Yuánjí's (夏元吉) previous incarnation was Qū Yuán (瞿元) — recorded in the Comprehensive Annals of the August Ming (Huáng Míng Tōngjì 黃明通記). Recorded in the historical compilations, all clearly evident and verifiable. If one says that cause and effect, the cycle of rebirth, heaven and hell do not exist, then are the sages of every teaching and the historians of every dynasty all liars? Of course they exist. How can one say they do not!

The Principle of Cause and Effect

The principle of cause and effect is like planting: sowing the seed is the cause; ripening to maturity is the effect. Plant melons, harvest melons; plant beans, harvest beans. Sow a good cause, reap a good effect; sow an evil cause, reap an evil effect. This is an invariable principle — it is only a matter of whether the ripening comes sooner or later.

The principle of the cycle of rebirth is just as the common saying puts it: when a person dies, the heart does not die. Though the bodily shell decays, human nature endures forever. So long as one has not transcended the world, one naturally revolves according to one's karma. Previous lives and future lives are like yesterday and tomorrow. This kind of principle is even easier to understand — why must there be so much debate?

As for heaven and hell, there are two kinds of explanation. Discussed in terms of principle, heaven and hell both arise from one's own mind. Discussed in terms of phenomena, the forms of the various heavens described in the Shurangama Sutra and the forms of the various hells described in the Kshitigarbha Sutra are exceedingly detailed and clear — absolutely not fabrications.

How laughable that nowadays a certain kind of new intellectual who has merely skimmed the surface proclaims that science is flourishing and that superstitions about ghosts and spirits collapse on their own. We would like to ask in return: in Western science today, is there not a field called psychical research that specializes in investigating the phenomena of ghosts and spirits? How can one say that because science flourishes, ghosts and spirits do not exist!

“A thousand ways of penetrating principle, a thousand wonders;
one place not reached, one place of confusion.”

7. The Ten Great Vows

Running east and rushing west to spread Dao,
speaking earnestly and tenderly, pouring out the depths of the heart --
all disciples, question your hearts and consider well:
for whose sake this toil, for whose sake this striving?

I am
the Examiner of the Three Heavens, bearing
the sacred decree. I come to the prayer hall
to pay respects at the Imperial Throne.
After resting, I shall speak at length.

Now I sing extemporaneously:
the Ten Great Vows -- Ha ha!

First Lament

Cultivating Dao without a sincere heart,
muddled and confused, squandering your days --
the great solemn vows spoken carelessly from the mouth.
I ask: who among you lives according to their vows?
Making empty promises with no intent to keep them --
you deceive people, you deceive Heaven, you deceive the very spirits.

I urge all disciples: question your own hearts.
Do you truly not fear the weight of sin upon you?
Do not say that retribution has not yet arrived --
when the calamity comes, your portion will be judged.
If you doubt this, look to the records of history:
Heaven's net is vast and loose, yet nothing slips through -- whom has it ever spared?

Second Lament

Cultivating Dao without repentance,
adorning and concealing your faults, deceiving none but yourself --
your own errors you refuse to correct,
yet every word you speak is gossip about others.
The old saying has it: those who talk of others' faults

are themselves most fond of stirring fault.

I urge all disciples: hold yourselves to account.

Do not shrink from correcting your mistakes -- this is the sages' call.

Lay down the butcher's knife and you become a buddha;

even a common man of firm resolve can stand beside Heaven and Earth.

Good and evil in the end will always meet their reckoning --

Heavenly principle shines clear: whom has it ever passed over?

Third Lament

Cultivating Dao without genuine practice,

with hollow heart and false intent, deceiving High Heaven --

outwardly complying, inwardly defying, wearing masks,

mouth saying one thing, heart harboring another, playing with clever speech,

fishing for fame and angling for reputation to save face --

of true merit and real goodness, not a word is spoken.

I urge all disciples: why do you not reflect?

For what reason does the noble one keep watch even in solitude?

Wrong the heart in a dark room, and the spirits' eyes flash like lightning;

whispered words in the human world sound like thunder to the gods.

How much more the discernment of spirits, buddhas, and immortals --

do you truly not fear incurring Heaven's judgment?

Fourth Lament

Cultivating Dao without steadfast resolve --

diligent at the start, slack at the end -- this will never succeed.

Retreating at adversity, advancing only when things go well,

starting and stopping at whim -- how is this the way of the wise?

Study is like rowing a boat against the current:

if you do not press forward, you fall back -- this truth does not change.

I urge all disciples: set your resolve to constancy.

Unbent through a hundred reversals -- that is the hero.

Though the great road to the Western Heaven is far,

each stretch you walk brings it one stretch nearer.

From beginning to end, remain as one, with purpose firmly set --

to abandon the journey midway is to shatter your own spirit.

Fifth Lament

Cultivating Dao without learning humility,
deceiving the master, dishonoring the patriarchs -- an audacity that swallows the sky.
Since when has an enlightened master been easy to find?
People traveled a thousand miles, searching deep into the mountains,
wearing out iron shoes with nowhere yet to find him --
to toil unto death without attainment, truly pitiable.

I urge all disciples: let your innate conscience shine.
To honor the master and revere Dao is to walk in accord with Heaven.
The master who gave the one pointing -- to that master you bow for life;
one lifetime of master and student endures ten thousand ages.
No matter how high your merit or how vast your measure --
to forget the master, your very destiny cannot be preserved.

Sixth Lament

Cultivating Dao without refining your understanding,
scorning the Elders -- this sin is not light.
To know grace yet fail to repay it is not the way of a noble heart.
When drinking water, think of the source -- this is true devotion.
Without roots, how can grass and trees grow?
Without someone to guide you in, the road is hard to walk.

I urge all disciples: see this clearly.
Unite your hearts and share your courage to carry out the final journey.
Remember that the Elders are the ones who brought you in.
They stood before the altar and pledged their solemn vows.
Even mole crickets in their burrows repay debts of loyalty --
how much more so, when human beings are the most spiritual among all living things?

Seventh Lament

Cultivating Dao yet losing the proper discipline,
not keeping the Buddhahood Precepts, acting recklessly at will --
if you cultivate Dao without upholding the Precepts,
by what means will you ascend the heavenly ladder?
The Buddhahood Precepts are the commandments of Heaven itself;
without obeying them, how can you return to your original home?

I urge all disciples: reflect upon this with care.
Guard the Precepts diligently and pursue the path ahead.
A cart without rails will surely meet with danger;
a boat without oars will surely sail into peril.
If in cultivating Dao you do not keep the precepts,
you will not escape the turning of death and birth and the cycle of rebirth.

Eighth Lament

Cultivating Dao without guarding your speech,
speaking carelessly of Heaven's secrets and sacred treasures --
since antiquity, an enlightened master has been hard to meet;
the true scripture without words -- who dares speak of it?
The sages of the Three Teachings kept strict guard;
how much more should ordinary folk and common people?

I urge all disciples: do not deceive Heaven.
To leak Heaven's secrets is a sin too heavy to bear.
Were it not for this auspicious day and hour,
how could this treasure have descended lightly to the world?
Guard your speech, be careful in action, and press straight ahead --
when vows are fulfilled, you will naturally return to the Realm of Principle.

Ninth Lament

Cultivating Dao without a compassionate heart,
hiding Dao and refusing to share it, leading the primordial souls astray --
Heaven itself has no voice; it relies on people to deliver the call.
If no one delivers it, how will Dao ever be heard?
Look back to the day you yourself sought Dao --
was it not the Elders who ferried you from the crossing of delusion?

I urge all disciples: examine yourselves thrice.
"Sharing goodness with others" -- so the ancient sages taught.
From the very beginning, attaining buddhahood has required ferrying the world.
Establish yourself, then establish others -- let Dao be heard by all.
Now is the time when universal ferrying stands open --
let all the primordial souls return together to the Root.

Tenth Lament

Cultivating Dao while the heart falls far short --
who is willing to step forward and give what they can?
The shackles of emotion and the chains of attachment remain unbroken;
they cling to wealth as if it were life itself, hoarding precious things.
Fine seasons and fair scenes flow away like water;
clinging to comfort and shrinking from effort, they let the moment pass.

I urge all disciples: cease deceiving yourselves.
A favorable time, once missed, is hard to find again.
While this auspicious season has not yet ended,
give of your wealth, give of your teaching, give without fear.
Let the Ten Great Vows advance upon these words --
fulfill your vows, return to the Root, and journey home to the Jasper West.

Appended Verse Teaching

The primordial Great Dao --
since time immemorial, never lightly transmitted.
Now, meeting the Third Era,
universal ferrying and the Great Gathering begin.

With the enlightened master's one pointing,
one escapes the suffering of the cycle of rebirth.
Cultivate merit and establish virtue;
you will surely reach the nine grades of the lotus throne.

Transcend birth and death --
everywhere there is proof of this.
This is no side gate;
those paths merely dazzle the eyes with spectacle.

Dao resides within the self;
outside the body there is no true Dao.
Whatever has form and appearance
remains within the turning wheel of rebirth.

Having received the one pointing,
you transcend the realm of qi and enter the domain of Principle.
Those who receive it yet do not cultivate --
when the time comes, how pitiable they will be.

The enlightened master's True Dao
is not mere words from the lips.
To transcend the mysteries and deliver your ancestors --

this is no empty talk.

Those with affinity, the children of the Buddha,
who receive Dao and set forth their heart-vows --
they build the vessel of deliverance
to rescue all who share in this affinity.

Those whose affinity with the Buddha is shallow --
upon receiving Dao, doubt fills their minds.
Attached to form and fixed on appearances,
their eyes gaze ever outward.

Not investigating the principle of their own nature,
not turning the light back to illuminate within,
coveting what glitters on the surface --
the true principle they neither awaken to nor fathom.

Since antiquity, those who cultivated Dao
crossed mountains and forded rivers.
Even when their merit was complete and fruit was full,
the immortals and buddhas gave the pointing only in secret.

Having endured every hardship,
they attained no more than sojourn in the realm of qi.
When heaven and earth are destroyed,
they fall once more into the abyss of the bitter sea.

Now, in the final destiny of this age,
High Heaven opens its compassion.
The Living Buddha descends into the world,
searching everywhere for the primordial souls.

Whether at home or renouncing the household,
with spouse and friends and children as companions,
ordering the family while cultivating Dao --
eternal reunion in the Realm of Principle.

Across sixty thousand years,
we meet this rare and precious chance.
To let this moment pass --
the wish to cultivate becomes impossibly hard.

The deluded do not believe,
weighed down by heavy karma.
When the time comes, they will regret --
crying to Heaven will avail them nothing.

Those faithful ones who share in this affinity --
having received Dao, press forward without delay.
At the Dragon-Flower Assembly,
majesty will be revealed at last.

Merit determines the fruit;
not a fraction does Heaven overlook.
It all rests on this present hour --
strive forward now in the work of cultivation.

8. The Effort of Cultivating Dao After Receiving It

In earlier times, cultivation required leaving home for the monastic life. But now, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, the true Dao has descended into the world to save and deliver primordial souls, to universally ferry the Three Realms. An enlightened master has been specially mandated to descend and transmit the True Transmission of Nature and Principle. Thousands of Buddhas and myriad Patriarchs have been commanded to descend together to this great spiritual gathering, proclaiming on behalf of Heaven and broadly expounding the heart-dharma of Nature and Principle.

This path proceeds directly from the merit of cultivating one's nature. There is no need to abandon wife and children, give up one's family, or withdraw from the world. At home, husband and wife, sons and daughters can cultivate together. Fathers need not sacrifice kindness, sons need not abandon filial devotion, husbands and wives need not forsake righteousness, and brothers need not lose fraternal love. Whether one is a scholar, a farmer, an artisan, or a merchant — all can cultivate Dao.

The primordial Great Dao can be advanced and practiced while worldly enterprises are also pursued. Half-sage, half-worldly: on one hand cultivating Dao, on the other hand carrying out one's own work. No matter what field one is in, this path does not hinder one's occupation.

So easy. So simple. This is because Heavenly Mother, with Her urgent love for Her children, has broadly extended vast compassion and widely opened the gates of grace. She enables us, no matter who we are, to cultivate Dao. Even women and the illiterate can transcend birth and death, escape the cycle of rebirth, and ascend to Ultimate Bliss. She enables scholars and literati, through pursuing learning, to be counted among true Confucian sages, to become worthies, to become sages, to become immortals and Buddhas. Such a fine opportunity is rarely encountered in a thousand years.

Completing Oneself and Completing Others

We only wish that all faithful devotees who have received our Dao will quickly — quickly — cultivate it, completing themselves and completing others.

Completing oneself means cultivating one's own person: personally reforming faults and repenting, ensuring that all conduct accords with principle. Completing others means delivering them: having received Dao oneself, one must proclaim its truths, so that all relatives and friends also come to

understand the meaning of Dao, together ascending to the Heavenly Dao — everyone reforming faults, all conduct according with principle.

The *Doctrine of the Mean* says: "Following one's nature is called the Dao" — this is cultivating one's person. "Cultivating the Dao is called teaching" — this is delivering others.

Proclaiming on behalf of Heaven and delivering others is outer merit. Reforming faults and moving toward goodness — cultivating one's person — is inner merit.

At this present time, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, the Heavenly timing is urgent. Outer merit is valued over inner merit: when outer merit is complete, inner merit accomplishes itself. Therefore, in cultivating Dao, outer merit comes first.

Yet if one does not cultivate one's own person, one cannot bring order to one's household. There has never been anyone whose household was not well-ordered yet who could teach others. Only by completing oneself can one complete others; only by rectifying oneself can one transform others. Then it seems, again, that inner merit comes first.

In summary: the effort of the Great Dao lies in not dividing inner and outer. Movement and stillness are not two. There is no inner, no outer — yet it can be inner, it can be outer. The unity of knowing and acting: always responding, always attaining. Precisely this is the non-dual dharma gate — the true effort of the Great Dao.

9. Cultivating Dao Requires Cultivating Merit and Establishing Virtue

The ancients spoke of three immortalities: "establishing virtue, establishing merit, and establishing teachings." What is called cultivating merit and establishing virtue? "Cultivating" means to put into practice and build. "Merit" means meritorious works. The enterprise of Dao requires cultivating merit and establishing virtue. "Establishing" means to erect and set up. "Virtue" means noble character. Only by building meritorious works can one erect noble virtue.

In summary: to spare no effort and toil, to give no thought to fame or profit, and to work for the welfare of society and all humanity — this is called cultivating merit. Its natural effect is the establishment of virtue.

(1) Merit — Inner and Outer

(1) Cultivating Merit

Inner merit is personally rectifying one's heart and cultivating one's person, restraining the self and returning to ritual propriety, such that in every word and deed one does not dare harbor even a hair's breadth of selfish desire.

Outer merit is pioneering and planting seeds, establishing vessels of deliverance, sparing no spirit or material resources, sacrificing everything, bending oneself to follow others, and devising plans for Dao's sake. It is the result of your contributions to all living beings in the process of practicing Dao.

The methods of practicing outer merit are three:

1. **Giving of wealth:** Giving generously with one's resources — rescuing from hardship, relieving urgent need. This includes printing and distributing virtuous books and scriptures, donating medicine, offering tea, repairing bridges and paving roads, helping others pioneer and propagate Dao, establishing vessels of deliverance, contributing to Dao according to one's means — all manner of deeds that benefit others and provide convenience.
2. **Giving of teachings:** Expounding morality and virtue, speaking of humaneness and righteousness, discussing the subtle mysteries of cause and effect, exhorting people to do

good, resolving difficulties and untangling disputes, proclaiming on behalf of Heaven, delivering others to seek Dao, causing people to cultivate goodness, and helping others understand principle and cultivate Dao. This carries immeasurable merit and virtue.

3. **Giving fearlessly:** Holding fast to the Dao-heart, enduring humiliation and bearing injustice, receiving insult without resentment, accepting adversity with equanimity, and setting a standard so that later students may follow the example. This, too, is a form of establishing merit.

(2) Establishing Virtue

Establishing virtue is one of the most important themes in cultivating Dao. Virtue means to erect and set up one's moral character.

The divine Guan Yu, the Emperor of Manifest Transformation, says: "Having merit without virtue, one becomes a demon" — that is, self-exalting and arrogant. "Having virtue without merit, Dao is difficult to accomplish" — that is, karmic debts and obstructions remain undissolved. Therefore, merit and virtue must complement and complete each other.

The ancients say: "The great sea can receive small streams, and therefore achieves its vastness." This is the sea's virtue. If we can emulate this, why worry about being unable to become vessels of great capacity?

The methods of establishing virtue are three:

1. **Virtue of the heart:** Keeping compassion in one's heart. Conducting oneself in the world with fairness, with propriety and deference, without contention. Sincerely revering Heaven and Earth. Honoring one's parents with filial devotion. Treating others without arrogance, without jealousy, without anger, without resentment. This is virtue of the heart.
2. **Virtue of the body:** Being upright in conduct, careful and cautious in practice. Abstaining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Being a model for others — simple, diligent, and frugal. Peaceful in all matters. Treating superiors with respect and those below with kindness. Acting first and speaking after; words and deeds reflecting each other. This is virtue of the body.
3. **Virtue of speech:** Speaking words that benefit others. Often discussing karmic retribution. Offering loyal counsel to admonish the world. Expounding on sacred scriptures and virtuous books to exhort and transform others. Keeping words and deeds in harmony. Not speaking of others' shortcomings, not flaunting one's own strengths. This is virtue of speech.

The above three virtues are theoretical principles of cultivation. But in practice, we must accomplish the following:

1. Revere the Patriarch.
2. Live in harmony with Dao kin.
3. Be upright and selfless.

4. Honor and respect one's elders.
5. Reflect at midnight and find no cause for shame.
6. Be clean and clear with money — not taking even a cent.
7. Keep to one's place and act with maturity.
8. Attend to fundamentals and set a good example.

10. Filial Piety and Modernity

Some people say that while filial piety may be promoted, in the modern age it should receive a new interpretation. The view sounds reasonable enough — yet no one has actually produced one.

In China, filial piety possesses a complete and systematic body of theory, which is precisely why it became a "Way" — a principled path, not merely a custom. If someone does not even understand this body of theory, does not understand the Way of filial piety, yet insists on producing "a new interpretation," then what is really at work is nothing more than a trend-chasing mentality: running after "modernity" with one hand and "cultural revival" with the other — and nothing more.

This complete body of filial-piety theory is the Xiaojing, the Classic of Filial Piety. I have read closely through its eighteen chapters and have found nothing in them that is unreasonable, nor anything that fails to suit the modern age. If one claims they do not suit the modern age, it is because modern people do not know the Way of filial piety and do not live in accord with it — that is the true reason.

The Opening Chapter of the Classic of Filial Piety

Let me cite just the opening chapter, "Establishing the Theme and Clarifying the Meaning":

"Our body, hair, and skin are received from our parents; we dare not damage or injure them — this is the beginning of filial piety." This "beginning of filial piety" is entirely a parent's loving and protective heart toward their children, hoping that the children will treasure themselves and not cause their parents heartbreak. If "modern people" use this as a pretext for refusing to cut their long hair, that is merely an unworthy person making excuses and has nothing to do with truly appreciating a parent's heart.

"Establish oneself and practice the Way, make one's name known to later generations, and thereby bring honor to one's parents — this is the completion of filial piety." This "completion of filial piety" is still entirely a parent's loving and protective heart toward their children, hoping that the children will grow into mature, self-reliant persons who conduct themselves well and do their work well, so that the parents — having raised and educated good sons and daughters who contribute to human society — may feel proud. What is there about this that does not suit the modern age? Must one necessarily yield to today's unworthy notion of individualism for it to count as fitting the times?

"Filial piety begins with serving one's parents, extends in the middle to serving one's ruler, and culminates in establishing oneself." This is the full course of filial piety, expressing the hope that a person can be a good son or daughter in the family, a good citizen in the nation, and a person of

contribution and achievement in human society. What is wrong with this? If someone says it is wrong, it is probably aimed at the two characters "serving the ruler" as being undemocratic. But since you already understand democracy, you should also understand that "serving the ruler" can be read as "serving the people." What, then, does not suit the modern age?

Confucius's Summation

Confucius summed it up: "Filial piety — it is the constant principle of Heaven, the proper fitness of Earth, and the practiced norm of the people." Here, "constant principle" means what is normal; "proper fitness" means what is appropriate; and "practiced norm" means a life principle. I ask you: if a person is not filial, is that normal? If it is not normal, is it appropriate? Then what kind of life is such a person living?

Today the Way of filial piety is not upheld — and that is precisely what is abnormal. Abnormality serves no one. We need normalcy, and therefore we must begin with reviving the Way of filial piety.

11. Liao Fan's Four Teachings — A Guide to Establishing Virtue and Cultivating the Person

Recently I read a vernacular translation of Liao Fan's Four Teachings and was deeply moved. That Mr. Yuan Liaofan set down in writing what he gained from lived experience, bequeathing his teachings to later generations, is truly admirable.

At first, Mr. Liaofan resigned himself to the calculations of fate and destiny, seeking nothing further. Later he encountered Master Yungu, who used the words "Destiny is made by me; blessings are sought by oneself," "Every field of blessings lies within the heart; seek from the heart, and there is no resonance that fails to connect," "Calamities sent by Heaven may still be evaded; calamities wrought by oneself leave no escape," and "A family that accumulates goodness will surely have abundant blessings" to shatter Liaofan's fatalistic outlook of leaving everything to Heaven's will. The Master then further encouraged him with the path of cultivating the person and establishing destiny and of eliminating evil while accumulating goodness. Mr. Liaofan upheld these teachings, conducting himself with vigilant caution, humbly inclining toward goodness, and in time he verified that the words "Though Heaven is trustworthy, destiny is not constant" and "Whatever is called fortune or calamity is all self-sought" were no empty claim.

Correcting Faults

Having clearly understood that fortune and calamity are self-sought, and that destiny is established by oneself, one must then cultivate the person and accumulate virtue, correct one's faults and turn toward goodness. In the methods of correcting faults, one must first develop a sense of shame and a sense of reverent awe, and moreover one must have the courage to swiftly root out evil and correct faults. There are three methods of eliminating evil. The first is to correct at the level of deeds: after committing a fault, quietly reflect. The second is to correct at the level of reasoning: think carefully through everything beforehand so that once the principle is clear, one does not commit faults. But the best approach remains to correct at the level of the heart, because if the heart harbors no stirring of thought, no selfishness, no desire, then from where could faults possibly arise? Therefore, if one cultivates the heart, illuminates principle, and restrains faults — relying on good friends for reminders and the spirits as witnesses — repenting single-mindedly and turning toward goodness, the heart and spirit will surely grow serene and expansive; wisdom will open suddenly, and one will be able to still the heart and settle one's nature.

Accumulating Goodness

After correcting faults, one must still accumulate goodness and merit, dissolve the karmic debts of past lives, and transform one's destiny. Therefore, in the methods of accumulating goodness, the text draws on such principles and examples as: "A family that accumulates goodness will surely have abundant blessings," "It is more blessed to give than to receive," "Protecting life brings good reward," "A person who accumulates virtue is revered by spirits," "Redressing injustice and reducing punishment accords with Heaven's heart," "Revering the divine and protecting the Dharma brings prosperity to one's descendants," as well as the distinctions between true and false goodness, upright and crooked goodness, manifest goodness and hidden virtue, partial and correct goodness, and how to gauge motive regardless of scale or difficulty — all to illustrate the principles and guidelines of doing good. As for the specific methods of accumulating goodness, they are too numerous to list in full, but include: (1) Be good to others, (2) Maintain a heart of respect and love, (3) Help others achieve their good ends, (4) Encourage others toward goodness, (5) Rescue people in urgent danger, (6) Undertake great works of public benefit, (7) Give away wealth to create blessings, (8) Uphold and protect the true Dharma, (9) Respect and honor elders, (10) Cherish and spare living creatures. If one extends and practices these methods broadly, then every kind of merit can be perfectly fulfilled.

The Benefits of Humility

Finally, in "The Benefits of Humility," the Yijing is cited: "The way of Heaven diminishes the full and augments the humble; the way of Earth transforms the full and flows to the humble; spirits harm the full and bless the humble; the way of humanity despises the full and favors the humble." And the Book of Documents says: "Fullness invites loss; humility receives gain." These passages explain that a person should be as open and receptive as a valley, always maintaining humility, offering convenience to others, and in doing so one will surely move Heaven and Earth. Therefore, whoever cultivates the person and establishes destiny must persevere with firm resolve, broadly accumulate hidden virtue, and extend blessings in all directions — and then destiny will no longer be able to constrain that person.

"Every field of blessings lies within the heart; seek from the heart, and there is no resonance that fails to connect." "Fortune and calamity come from oneself." These words truly serve as a wake-up call for those who regard good and bad fortune as predetermined from a past life. "To reap a certain harvest, you must first plant accordingly." Each person's entire future life lies in one's own hands. Rather than leaving everything to fate, it is better to rise up and cultivate the person and establish destiny. Therefore, after studying the work carefully, we should embody Liaofan's fine words and noble teachings: settle body and establish destiny, refrain from all evil, practice all good. As Master Shanxuan has said, those who cultivate Dao should use these teachings to deliver themselves and deliver others, awaken themselves and awaken others. Those who have not yet heard the sages' heart-method may read this book and come to know the method of cultivating the person, gain clear insight into the truth of human life, and further use it as a stepping stone toward seeking Dao — seeking the way to transcend birth and death. Liao Fan's Four Teachings, therefore,

is our guidepost for establishing virtue and cultivating the person. If everyone upholds and practices it, society will surely reach the highest good, and we shall not have failed the painstaking effort of Mr. Liaofan.

12. Where Does Human Life Go?

Where does human life go? One might answer that human life necessarily travels the road toward death. Where there is birth, there must be death. But after a person dies, where does one go? This question shifts from the problem of human life to the problem of human death, and its importance is by no means less than that of human life itself.

To answer this question, we may raise three theories as representative.

The Buddhist Account

First, the Buddhist account. Buddhism teaches that after death one should return to nirvana — neither arising nor ceasing, transcending birth and death altogether. One must possess profound and lofty cultivation before one can ascend to the other shore: nirvana. The human body is composed of the four elements — earth, water, fire, and wind. When a person dies, the four elements all become empty. Yet during life one creates karma, and this karma does not depart together with the four elements. Thus the Buddhists have the theory of the cycle of rebirth: karma created during life causes one to return again to the human world after death. In this way, death and birth cycle endlessly, without termination — likened to a great sea of suffering. Therefore, during one's lifetime, one should seek only to reduce the creation of karma, so as to gradually cross over this sea of suffering. Furthermore, one must cultivate great compassion and great mercy, rescue those in suffering and difficulty, and help others to emerge together from this sea of suffering — only thus can one gradually return to nirvana. As for the negative course of suicide, that too is not the proper path, and still does not escape the suffering of the cycle of rebirth.

The Christian Account

Second is Christianity. God created the world; Adam and Eve committed sin and were banished, descending into the world as humans. If they can truly recognize their sin and cultivate their conduct, they may also return to heaven.

The Confucian Account

The Chinese, before these two religions were transmitted to China, had their own separate set of beliefs, represented chiefly by the Confucian teaching. Zǐlù asked about

death. Confucius said: "If you do not yet understand life, how can you understand death?" Confucius meant that to understand what comes after death, one must first understand what comes before death. In life it is this person; in death it is also this person. If you do not understand the person who lived before death, how can you understand the person who exists after death?

Then what, after all, is a person? Mencius said: "Humaneness is what makes a person." Everyone takes this six-foot body — this single "I" — to be the person. But in truth, with only this six-foot body and this single "I," one does not yet truly constitute a person. A person must become a person within the community of persons. The way of compassion and filial devotion, the mutual care between old and young, the way of husband and wife, the righteousness between elder and younger siblings, the trustworthiness among friends — all these are the way of being human, which is also the way of humaneness. Therefore Confucians place foremost importance on the great way of human relations.

At this moment, science flourishes. Various discoveries in astronomy and biology have created in the West the difficulty of a "lost God." But in China, if one takes the learning of mind and nature transmitted by Confucius and the Confucians to comprehend the spirit of Jesus's cross, would this not prove more direct and more clear? Moreover, in modern society, if one single-mindedly devotes oneself to Buddhism and everyone enters monastic life as monks and nuns, would this not be blocking one's own path of life? Only by following the Confucian way — cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and pacifying the world — can one first secure one's own survival, while also not betraying Śākyamuni's spirit of great compassion and rescue from suffering, which is itself a world-transcending spirit.

The Buddhists say: "Be a monk for a day, ring the bell for a day." They also say: "If I do not enter hell, who will enter hell?" In the present day, believing in the teachings of China's Confucius is likewise ringing the bell as a monk — it is likewise entering hell first, so as to rescue people out of hell.

The essential meaning of the three teachings — I cannot probe deeply at this moment. I will instead put forward the Song-dynasty Neo-Confucian phrase "the urgent work of becoming human," these four characters, to offer to all who believe in a religion — any religion — and even to those who do not believe, for mutual encouragement.

(Excerpted from the United Daily News literary supplement)

13. After Reading "Where Does Human Life Go?"

The value of a book is not measured by the amount of money it costs, but rather by how much the knowledge within it can awaken our rational conscience — only then can it be called a treasure. The ancients said: "Opening a book, there is always benefit" — this is truly no empty saying.

In the book *Where Does Human Life Go?*, such chapters as "The Warning Letter from the King of Hell," "Three Doctors Discuss Ghosts and Spirits," "Folk Curiosities: The Fates of Life and Death," "Borrowing a Corpse to Return the Soul," and "Speaking of Karmic Retribution" — these may be said to use plain and simple language while carrying deep and far-reaching meaning. This book goes from the accessible to the profound, and furthermore demonstrates that the universe is unitary yet multi-layered.

We humans are not all sages; we are merely ordinary people. Regarding death, in people's minds it is a realm of vague and drifting uncertainty. Death is the end of life. Human vision is shortsighted — it values only what is presently visible, considering life to be joyful and worth lingering over. Therefore death seems as though it is forever something that happens to other people. We cling to life and fear death; only the wise can sacrifice life to achieve humaneness and give up life to preserve righteousness.

The Highest Realm of Human Life

In *Where Does Human Life Go?* we are told of the highest realm of human life. Although human life necessarily travels the road toward death, and where there is birth there must be death, and despite our clinging to life and fearing death, one cannot escape death. Consider: since antiquity, who has ever been immortal? After a person dies, in what form does one exist? I recall someone once said: "When I die, my body will decompose, but my personality — that which is truly I — will continue to live on..." What he referred to as "the body" is precisely what the Buddhists call the fleshly self, which is not the true self, but rather the false appearance of the four elements — earth, water, fire, and wind — temporarily assembled, which will in time decay, grow old, and die. What he referred to as "personality" is precisely what the Buddhists call the one numinous true nature: it is our soul, which is the true self, and it is never extinguished. Life is the union of spirit and flesh; death is the separation of the soul and the body. Then, after a person dies, where does the soul go?

Rebirth and Transcendence

Human death is not like a lamp going out, after which matters are concluded. In this book, the theory of the cycle of rebirth is also raised. After death, the flesh ultimately returns to nature, but the soul must face judgment. If during one's time in the world one has committed every evil, defied heaven and harmed principle, acted against heaven and gone contrary, then one will enter hell and fully endure its bitter fruit. One will be reborn by transmigration — living and dying, dying and living — the cycle of rebirth turning without cease. If one can attain the liberation of one's true nature, seek out an enlightened master who points directly to the root-source of nature and life-destiny, and if one can cultivate the learning of sages and worthies, cultivate merit and establish virtue, awaken oneself and awaken others, and bring awakened nature to perfect fullness, then one will surely transcend birth and death, forever escape the suffering of the cycle of rebirth, see one's nature and become a buddha, and reach the realm of nirvana.

People need not any longer take the death of the flesh as their final destination. They need not any longer be confined by limited time and space. Time and eternity are complete and indivisible; life and death should be regarded equally. "Know the mandate of heaven and recognize the time of heaven" — we should know the solemnity and preciousness of life, seek to perceive the true self, recognize principle and return to truth, and cultivate merit and establish virtue. Then where death goes can be known without being spoken. The meaning contained in each chapter of *Where Does Human Life Go?* truly merits our thinking again and again.

14. Recognizing Principle and Cultivating Truth — After Reading "The Psychological Research Special Collection"

The study of psychical research was founded in the mid-nineteenth century at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, and London in England. Over the past century it has spread to all parts of the world, becoming a newly emergent field of learning that has attracted a considerable number of scholars and specialists to engage in this research, and has given substantiation to the religious theory of the soul.

The great contemporary educator Cài Yuánpéi, who served as president of Peking University for many years, once said: "The aim of the Buddha-dharma lies in 'escaping the suffering of the cycle of rebirth and attaining the bliss of nirvana.' If the cycle of rebirth can be proven credible, then faith in the need to liberate oneself from the cycle of rebirth will naturally arise." The seed of the cycle of rebirth is this soul, which the Buddhists call buddha-nature.

The great literary figure and Confucian physician Dīng Fúbǎo said: "To understand the karmic retribution of this life and the next, one should first ascertain that after a person dies, the soul assuredly exists."

Psychical research uses objective scientific methods to seek proof that, apart from the physical body, a person also possesses a soul. Its essential nature is concerned with the soul for the sake of the soul — acknowledging this objective fact, nothing more; it is not established for the sake of religion. However, we believe that borrowing it to substantiate the correctness of religious principles, to help us understand the truth of human life, and thereby to check the unchecked flood of human desire, to turn back the raging tide when it has already toppled, so as to achieve the effect of purifying the human heart and cultivating a wholesome social atmosphere — this is its true value.

Evidence from Scholars and Specialists

This special collection gathers the statements of contemporary scholars and specialists. Its selection of materials is purely guided by objective research, and it strives for truthfulness; it is by no means repeating what others say without verification.

For example, Dr. Wǔ Tíngfāng was an early overseas student who absorbed the new Western intellectual currents and, upon returning to China, successively served as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to the United States, and so forth. He was a worthy and eminent figure of early Republican society, a person of renown. If what he saw were not real, he would certainly not have dared to greatly defy convention and speak at length about ghosts. Therefore Dīng Fúbǎo said: "Ghost photographs — I have personally seen them. This matter I also believe without doubt, for this gentleman is a man of established virtue who would certainly not engage in the conduct of deceiving others. His photographs of ghosts are precisely the souls of the deceased."

For this reason, the British physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, who served as president of the University of Birmingham, advocated the theory of spirit possession.

Professor Sòng Xīshàng, a contemporary expert in hydraulic engineering, throughout his life promoted the printing and distribution of *Night Talk Around the Hearth*, giving it to students. His *Scattered Notes from a Floating Life* speaks much of matters of karmic retribution — he too was a person of purposeful intention.

Professor Máo Péngjī compiled and authored *Selected Tales of the Uncanny*, collecting ancient and modern stories concerning ghosts, souls, and retribution, in order to warn and transform worldly people.

The late Qing literary figure Xuē Fúchéng's *Brush-Notes from the Yong'an Studio* also speaks of matters of retribution.

Professor Xiāo Yú, who propagated Chinese culture abroad, wrote a *Record of the Inexplicable* entirely devoted to accounts of ghosts — if these were not accounts of real persons and real events, given their social standing, they would certainly not have dared to speak rashly of such matters.

The American philosopher William James once said: "If there truly is a God, and I did not know it and did not acknowledge it, would I not suffer a great loss after death?"

Do you wish not to suffer such a loss? Then quickly investigate this truth, recognize your own buddha-nature, and seek an enlightened master for guidance — only then can one escape the cycle of rebirth and attain nirvana.