

# 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)*

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Revision #2

Created 2026-03-08 17:43:22 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-08 17:55:07 UTC by Phil