

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.

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