

5. The Four Difficulties of Attaining Dao

(1) A Human Body Is Difficult to Obtain

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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

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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

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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.

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