

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 (Rúyì) 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 (鄧禹); 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 黃明通紀). 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.”

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