

Chapter 50



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Translation

Emerging into life, entering into death.
Three in ten are companions of life;
three in ten are companions of death.
Three in ten, though alive, move toward the ground of death —
drawn there by their own hand.
Why is this so?
Because they feed life too richly.

I have heard that one who is skilled at tending life
walks the open land without meeting rhinoceros or tiger,
passes through armies without need of shield or blade.
The rhinoceros finds no place to drive its horn,
the tiger finds no place to set its claws,
the blade finds no place to lodge its edge.
Why is this so?
Because in him there is no ground where death can reach.

Word Notes

- □ — "**companions; category**": A class or type of people.
- □ — "**to preserve; to maintain**": To hold together, to safeguard.
- □ — "**overland; level ground**": Flat, open terrain.
- □ — "**rhinoceros**": A fierce beast, paired with the tiger as an exemplar of mortal danger.
- □ — "**to avoid; to dodge**": To evade, to shy away from.
- □ — "**blade; cutting edge**": The edge of a weapon.

Chapter Explanation

Everything under Heaven that emerges into life must inevitably enter into death. Children who are in the midst of growth constitute three out of ten. The elderly who are approaching death constitute three out of ten. Those in their middle years whose vital energy still flourishes but who gradually shift toward the ground of death — they too constitute three out of ten. Why do these middle-aged people shift toward the ground of death? Because they have developed cravings and

desires: savoring fine food, delighting in beautiful appearances, indulging themselves too lavishly. Moreover, in scheming for clothing, food, and shelter to nourish their lives, they exhaust and injure themselves, and so they end up in the ground of death.

I have always heard that one skilled at tending life, when walking the open land, does not encounter rhinoceros or tiger; when passing through armies, has no need of shield or blade. The rhinoceros finds no place to drive its horn; the tiger has no place to set its claws; weapons have no place to lodge their blades. Why is this so? Because such a person regards the body as nothing, does not cherish the flesh-self, and his true nature encompasses all that lies beyond the vastness of space — there is no ground where death can reach him.

Discourse

The reason people cling so deeply to the mark of self and fall into contention and turmoil is nothing other than this: they have this body, they have this life, and so they must eat, must dress, must have shelter. What is more, they insist on eating fine food, wearing fine clothes, and living in fine houses. They chase after the pleasures of wind, flowers, snow, and moonlight to amuse this body. They study hygiene and health in meticulous detail to make this body last forever. Little do they realize that feeding life in this way will inevitably feed them straight into the ground of death.

How so? Consider: a small child, when hungry, simply eats; when cold, simply puts on clothes. If there is nothing, he does not scheme to get it. If there is something, he uses it without thinking to save any. As for feeding life and guarding health, he understands none of this. By rights he ought to die. Yet on the contrary, he is able to grow. Once he has grown up and learned to scheme for clothing and food, to feed life and guard health, to chase the pleasures of longevity, on the contrary he feeds himself into old age and arrives at the ground of death. This is sufficient proof that feeding life in this way does not work.

Not only does this approach fail — even those who devote themselves to seated meditation and study alchemical scriptures, if they can transcend the confines of the single body, that may be acceptable; but if they only labor on the flesh-self, it still will not work. (This is discussed in detail elsewhere.) For the human body progresses from youth to prime, from prime to old age. Whatever has life must inevitably have death. Regardless of whether one lives many years or few, none can escape this. Therefore the Sage sees through this principle: he does not seek life on the level of the flesh-self but seeks life on the level of the spirit-self. He does not fear the death of the flesh-self; he fears only the death of the spirit-self.

As Laozi said: "If I had no body, what trouble would I have?" Confucius said: "Sacrifice one's life to accomplish humaneness." Mencius said: "Give up life to take hold of righteousness." He also said: "Whether one dies young or lives long, one does not waver" — meaning that one cultivates the self without regard to the span of one's years. These are all marvelous methods for tending life.

Guan Longfeng and Bi Gan died as martyrs for their states. Bo Yi and Shu Qi died treading the path of humaneness. The Buddha endured King Kalinga's dismemberment, limb by limb. Jesus gave up his body to save the world. These are all models of true life-preservation.

Their flesh-selves died, yet their true natures endure forever. The flesh-self has form and substance; it has a ground where death can reach it. Therefore, where there is life, there is inevitably death. The spirit-self has no body and no location; there is no ground where death can reach it. Therefore it is neither born nor destroyed. Why should anyone, for the sake of feeding a flesh-self that lasts a few decades, let the true nature that endures through all the ages die?

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