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English

I. Wood Roots, Water Source: The Three Treasures Heart Method

Congratulations to everyone—today you have already heard the Heavenly Dao. This comes from affinity. As the saying goes: “When affinity exists, people can meet though a thousand miles apart; without affinity, they may face each other and never meet.” What do “having affinity” and “lacking affinity” mean? Those with affinity possess good roots and moral character; even from a thousand miles away, they can come and seek the Great Dao. Those without affinity may live right next door, close to us, and still cannot be ferried across, for their conduct is not upright. Even if you were to bring them in, they would refuse to bow and seek. For this reason we speak of those with affinity and those without.

What are we seeking today? The Primordial Dao bestowed from Heaven—the true transmission concerning (human) nature and Principle. This Heavenly Dao is not newly appearing now; it has existed from ancient times. In antiquity, however, the Great Dao was transmitted singly, one person to one person, not spread broadly. Now, at the end of the Third Epoch’s calamities, people’s consciences are not what they were in antiquity. Because sins and evils have become too many, Heaven is angered, and the eighty-one calamities descend together upon the world. The immortals and Buddhas could not bear this in their hearts and petitioned the Supreme Lord (Shangdi) to rescue good men and faithful women. Therefore Heaven showed mercy: the True Dao descended into the world and the great universal ferrying opened. The Holy Teacher (Ji Gong) and Bodhisattva Moon-Wisdom (Yuehui) took on mortal form, received the Mandate of Heaven, and universally ferried the Three Realms (heavenly, human, and netherworld). Those good men and faithful women who have affinity may all come to hear the Heavenly Dao. That we are able to seek the Great Dao today is truly fortune gained over three lives and the fruit of cultivation over many lives.

Since antiquity, those who cultivated the Dao left their households and set aside their affairs, traveling a thousand li to visit an enlightened master and ten thousand li to obtain the oral key, accumulating merits and establishing virtues until three thousand merits were complete and eight hundred fruits were full. Only then would Heaven secretly dispatch an immortal or Buddha to point the way; out of a hundred people, it was hard to select even one who could realize the Dao. Seeking the Dao today is far too easy. Long ago, the Patriarch Lü Zu said: “To be born human within China is most difficult; to meet a bright master who reveals the True Dao is harder still. Having obtained a human body and heard the Great Dao, you must hasten to cultivate and swiftly transcend.” These were originally the “four difficulties,” but now they have become “four eases.”

Today we spent a little money and knocked our heads a few times in prostration and thus obtained the Dao. Yet everyone must understand: “The Primordial Dao cannot be bought with money.” It is because you have Buddha-affinity that your introducer and guarantor exhaust themselves with a thousand words to exhort and guide you. Today, leading you to seek the Dao, they knelt before the Buddhas and made a great vow, guaranteeing that you are a good person of upright conduct and clean family life. You yourself just now also made a vow before the Buddhas so you could receive the enlightened master’s one-point transmission. Without the introducer and guarantor making a vow on your behalf, even if you brought ten thousand taels of gold and wanted to seek the Dao, you still could not. Thus the Dao is not sought with money; it is to save people—to transcend birth and death, to escape calamity and avoid disaster. This is the Great Dao that from antiquity was not lightly transmitted. Until the end of the Third Epoch it would not descend; unless one were a “royal embryo, primordial seed,” one could not receive the pointing transmission. Now, as the Third Epoch unfolds, good and evil must be judged; the Dao and the calamities descend at the same time. Maitreya, the Ancient Buddha, governs the heavenly register; the Holy Teacher and Bodhisattva Moon-Wisdom jointly bear the Mandate to universally ferry the Three Realms and to carry out the great work of the final gathering in this opportune time of the Primordial Dao.

What have we obtained today in obtaining the Dao? We have received three treasures: the Gate (or Pass), the Formula, and the Seal.

The first treasure is the place indicated by the pointing: it is called the “Mysterious Pass Aperture.” This is the portal through which our true spirit comes at birth and returns at death. It is also called the Spirit Mountain, the Spirit Terrace, and the Seamless Lock; the Daoists call it “the Gate of the Mysterious Female”; Jesus called it “the Cross.” In the past, Zigong sighed: “The Master’s writings, we can hear; but the Master’s words on human nature and the Heavenly Dao—these we cannot hear.” Thus it is said among the people: “Even if you read through a thousand scriptures and ten thousand classics, it does not equal one pointing from an enlightened master.” Today you have come to know where this “true nature” resides; the sages of all three teachings began their cultivation from this point and thereby succeeded. Confucius said: “If in the morning I hear the Dao, I may die in the evening.” What does this mean? It means one can be freed from the suffering of rebirth.

If people do not encounter an enlightened master’s pointing, their true spirit cannot exit by this aperture. Hence the saying: “The Mysterious Pass, the Isles of Penglai—once opened, it is a treasure beyond price.” The True Dao has true verifications: when one reaches a hundred years and, at life’s end, returns to the Origin, the face looks as in life; the body and limbs are supple like cotton; in winter there is no rigid corpse; in summer there is no corruption. That everyone receives this Aperture today truly is an inestimable treasure—one step straight to the Realm of Non-Ultimate Principle.

The second treasure is the oral formula—the True Word (mantra). The Dao is the wondrous Dao of the Three Epochs, universally ferrying the Three Realms; only because the Ancient Buddha Maitreya comes in this cycle do we receive this Buddha-word True Formula.

Should you encounter great calamity or danger, silently recite the True Word in your heart; Heavenly Mother (Lao Mu) will naturally command the immortals and Buddhas to protect and

shelter you, turning misfortune to auspiciousness and danger to safety. (Heavenly Mother—Lao Mu—is the true sovereign of all spirits, who gave birth to heaven and earth and the ten thousand beings.) Having received this formula today, do not take it lightly; to treat it lightly is to treat your own life lightly. Guard it with utmost care; never let it pass your lips casually.

The third treasure is the combined hand seal: “Zi and Hai interlock, embraced at the chest,” by which one can pass through the eighty-one great calamities. This is the ancient combined seal granted by Heavenly Mother and borne by Maitreya; it can release one from the tally of the ninety-nine times nine calamities. Why is there a fixed number? Because from the opening of heaven it was ordained that ten Buddhas would respond to the cycles: seven Buddhas govern the world; three Buddhas complete the gathering. Of these three, the first was Dipamkara (Lamp-Lighting) Buddha, who descended to universally ferry beings in the era of Fu Xi—this was the Green (Qing) Era. He governed the heavenly register for 1,500 years and ferried two hundred million Buddha-children back to Heaven. In those times people’s hearts were upright, so nine calamities descended. The second universal ferrying was when Śākyamuni descended near the end of the Zhou, when human hearts had greatly changed; eighteen calamities descended—this was the Red Era. He governed the heavenly register for 3,000 years and again ferried two hundred million Buddha-children to the West. Now, at the end of the Third Epoch, the Ancient Buddha Maitreya governs the heavenly register; the Holy Teacher and Bodhisattva Moon-Wisdom govern the Dao register and universally ferry the Three Realms. Because the sins of the world are too heavy, there descend eighty-one calamities; adding the movements of the Green and Red cycles, the total is one hundred and eight calamities. The 108 beads on a Buddha-rosary tally precisely these calamities.

Our Patriarch and Matriarch have received the Mandate and universally ferry the Three Realms—above, ferrying stars of the Milky Way; below, ferrying the spirits of the netherworld; in between, ferrying the good men and faithful women of the human world. Were it not for meeting this end-time of the Third Epoch, how could ordinary people like us obtain so supremely noble a Dao?

From the opening of heaven and earth and the birth of humankind—over sixty thousand years—there has been birth then death, death then birth, revolving through rebirth; the sins and debts we owe from life to life have piled up too many. Now Heaven causes people to reckon their grievances and karmic debts. After receiving the Dao we must diligently study and understand the meaning of the Great Dao, and we must abundantly perform merit and establish virtue to repay our debts from former lives so that in the future we may elevate nine generations and redeem seven ancestors, returning together to Heaven. The three treasures—the Gate, the Formula, and the Seal—must be remembered without fail. Do not transmit them upward to parents or downward to spouse and children; do not casually divulge Heaven’s secrets.

“Now that the time has arrived for the White Era of the Third Epoch, The universal ferrying of the Three Realms is a fine affinity indeed. The enlightened master, responding to the cycle, hastens East and West, Establishing altars everywhere to point out the wondrous Mystery.

I earnestly urge all with affinity: quickly awaken!
Swiftly seek the Great Dao and clarify the Root and Source.
Receive the Three Secret Treasures from Heaven above;
With sincere heart, cultivate and become a sage or worthy.”

II. The Meaning of Seeking the Dao

What is the meaning of “seeking the Dao”? To seek is to pursue—to come and pursue what this Dao is, whence it arises, what its original body and true aspect are, whether it has form or shape, where it resides within us, what its stake is in relation to humankind and the ten thousand beings, in what way it is precious, in what way it is profound. One must earnestly and concretely pursue until one understands clearly; only then can one sincerely seek it, firmly believe in the Dao, have a method to cultivate it, persevere in walking it, and thereby reasonably expect to realize it.

Mencius said: “Ren (humaneness) is the human heart; righteousness is the human path. To abandon the path and not follow it, to let one’s heart go and not know to seek it—alas!” (Gaozi) Seeking the Dao is precisely to search out our lost Heavenly Principle and conscience. The Great Learning says: “When things are investigated, knowledge is brought to its utmost. When knowledge is at its utmost, intentions become sincere. When intentions are sincere, the heart becomes upright. When the heart is upright, the person is cultivated.” This means that one must first investigate things and extend knowledge; in the end, sincerity of intention and rectification of the heart will arise. With sincere intention and an upright heart, one can then cultivate oneself and the Dao. This is the proof left by the sages. From this we see that to cultivate the Dao, one must first seek the Dao (seek to know where to stop—*zhi zhi*).

“Verse:

Firm in faith and cultivation, the Dao becomes clear;
Once clear, you know where to stop, and your heart is upright and sincere.
With constancy, the Buddha-light shines upon your thoughts;
With sincere devotion and reverence, you accomplish sagehood and worthiness.

III. Why Seek the Dao?

The Dao is a person’s original nature—the root source of one’s nature and life. It is within the human body and thus innate to every person. Why, then, must we still “seek the Dao”? Because all beings—humans and the myriad living things—receive life through this wondrous Dao of nature

and Principle; it is the very beginning of life. This nature-Dao is already endowed within us. Why, then, in the first (Green) Era, the second (Red) Era, and now the third (White) Era at the end of the Three Epochs, is it necessary that the Sovereign Lord on High (Wei Huang) descend the Dao?

It is because this nature-Dao is so subtle that words fail. Though it resides within us, its coming and going leaves no visible trace; its movements make no audible sound. Thus, whether in heaven and earth, among human and spirit, or throughout the myriad kinds, all have it yet do not know that they have it. Without the Heavenly Mandate of the Sovereign on High specially sending down the True Dao and entrusting it to an enlightened master—to transmit the “true tradition of nature and Principle,” to open the subtle Aperture, and to disclose the age-old marvelous secret of the “Great Dharma of the Heart-Seal”—then no matter how virtuous, wiser than Yan and Min, or shrewder than Fan Zeng, one still could not know the origin and locus of this wondrous nature-Dao—the site of the Mysterious Pass. How could one know its profundity? Its preciousness? How could one know that it bears a life-and-death bond with heaven, earth, and all beings, and that its transformations are inexhaustibly mysterious? Therefore, even the ancient sage-king the Yellow Emperor had to bow to seventy-two teachers; Śākyamuni relinquished the honors of the Blue Palace to enter the Snowy Mountains to cultivate; Confucius sought out a teacher and asked about ritual beneath the pillar; Shen-guang stood in the snow at Shaolin and cut off his arm to show sincerity—all of these were in order to seek this “true transmission of nature and Principle,” the True Dao.

Mencius said: “When a man’s chickens or dogs are lost, he knows to search for them; but when his heart is lost, he does not know to seek it. Alas!” From this we see that people have long misplaced their original nature and conscience and do not know to seek it. But if this nature-Dao and conscience are in us, how could they be lost? Because from the time the Celestial Realm endowed us with this nature-Principle and we entered the Taiji Maze of Soul-Delusion, passing through the transformations whereby the former-heaven (innate) becomes latter-heaven (acquired), our pure original nature has been constrained by the endowment of yin and yang energies; our purely good conscience has been veiled by worldly feelings and material desires. The innate true wisdom (prajñā) became acquired intellection and cleverness; the Original Spirit became the conscious mind; the true numinous nature came under the control of the five phases; rational nature turned into temperamental nature, and temperamental nature into coarse disposition. Through such changes, the true master of our Dao-walking heart was pushed into a corner; the True Lord abdicated, the blood-heart seized power, and the conscious mind took charge. This is what the Lord Jesus meant by “God relinquishing authority.”

From then on, people treated the Dao-walking heart like a lost sheep at a crossroads, not knowing where to turn and not even thinking to seek it. In the end they “recognized a thief as their father,” taking the blood-heart as the true heart, indulging it without restraint to act recklessly without self-examination, worsening ever more. The Demon-King then ruled within; the Six Thieves ran rampant without. The mind-horse slipped its reins and trampled the precious field of the square inch (the heart); the heart-monkey broke its lock and wreaked havoc in the Celestial Palace—no longer controllable. Thus we sinned and drew in transgressions, formed grievances and made karmic debts; cause and effect entangled, rebirths unending. People’s hearts declined by the day; morality perished by the day; an unprecedented great catastrophe thereby began. From then on, people at large sought life within a sea of suffering and looked for the road of death within hell. The proper road we came by at first—no one inquired after it. As for the true classic of the Eight Virtues,

who cares to look back to it? Thus this true scripture and proper road became blocked by thorns; before the gate of Heaven's joyous land, sparrows could be netted. This is what Mencius meant: "A path becomes a road when it is used; if it is not used, it becomes overgrown."

Because people have lost their true heart and do not know where it went—and because even the proper road to retrieve it is blocked by brambles—there is no way to find back this nature-Dao. For this reason we must seek the Dao, and we must cultivate the Dao. What is seeking the Dao? It is to retrieve the lost true heart. What is cultivating the Dao? It is to repair the proper road by which to seek that heart. If you do not seek the Dao, you cannot know the origin and resting-place of the true heart, nor the reasons for its loss and where it has been confined. If you do not cultivate the Dao, you cannot clear away the obstacles along the way; without advancing, how can you command back the goblins and demons encircling the heart? Therefore you must seek the Dao and cultivate the Dao in order to rescue the true heart, return home to the native land of Ultimate Bliss, let our true master once more see the light of Heaven, pay respects to Heavenly Mother (Lao Mu), and gather at the Dragon-Flower Assembly—how perfect that is!

“Verse:

The root of nature and life—unknown till now;
Alas, we search for lost chickens and dogs—but not the heart!
Pity that the heart is let go without a key to guard it—
In the destined cycle, know to seek and lay the foundation of the Way.

“To awaken is like finding a lamp at night:

In a windowless dark room, light suddenly dawns.
If this very body is not ferried in this life,
Then when shall this body ever be ferried?”

IV. What Good Comes from Seeking the Dao?

“Dao” means road—the proper road back to the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. It is not the road of the dusty mundane world, nor the confounded road that falls into the bitter sea, nor the dead-end road that plunges into rebirth. Where is this road? For the awakened it is near at hand—one step and you can directly transcend; for the deluded it lies one hundred and eight thousand li away—after ten thousand cycles of rebirth, it is still not found. Though countless years pass, it remains the most mysterious path, unreachable. In truth, this road is within our own nature, coming from the Realm of Principle. There it is called the Non-Ultimate True Principle; when endowed within us it is called “nature”—hence “nature-Principle.” Since we came from there, we

should return there. This is the true scripture and proper road by which all must come and go through life and death; hence it is called “the Dao.” Confucius said: “Who can go out without passing through the door? Why does no one follow this Dao?”—this is the idea.

Put simply, to seek the Dao is to seek back the Heavenly Principle and conscience of one’s true nature. Mencius said: “The way of learning is nothing else but to seek the lost heart.”

If one obtains this “true Dao of nature-Principle,” what good comes of it?

(1) One can transcend birth and death. To transcend birth and death means to transcend yin and yang, leap beyond the five phases, escape the wheel of rebirth, ascend to Ultimate Bliss, and be spared the cycle of life and death—never again drowning in the sea of suffering through aeons without end. Why must we transcend birth and death? Because both life and death, as ordinarily experienced, are not good things. The world of yang and the underworld of yin are not good destinations. Zhuangzi said: “I did not originally desire life—suddenly I was born into the world. I did not originally desire death—suddenly the time of death arrived.” Śākyamuni left the royal palace because of the great matter of birth and death. From this we know the human world is not a paradise; life and death are not good in themselves. Life in the world of yang can be a living hell; death in the realm of yin is a dead hell. Both are seas of suffering. Therefore we must seek the Dao, receive from the enlightened master the “true transmission of nature-Principle,” ascend to Heaven’s Ultimate Bliss, and be spared further descent into the dusty world and the suffering of transmigration among the four forms of birth and the six paths. This is why we must transcend birth and death.

(2) One can turn from evil to good and return from deviation to uprightness. Only by seeking the Dao can one retrieve the true nature and conscience and learn that the mind has true and false. The true is the conscience of original nature—namely the Original Spirit; the false is the blood-heart, the human heart—that is, the conscious mind. People’s every thought tends toward greed and self-interest, partiality and deviation; their every act inclines to craftiness and cruelty. This is because the conscience of original nature is sealed up by desire and emotion, unable to appear, and the blood-heart’s conscious mind runs the show. Therefore we must seek the Dao to recover the true heart, bring forth marvelous wisdom, discern right and wrong, good and evil, upright and crooked, transform consciousness into wisdom, uphold the upright and dispel the deviant, and make our deeds follow the Mean, taking our original nature as our teacher. Hence Confucius said: “When three walk together, there is always a teacher among them: choose the good and follow it; see the not-good and change it.” This “teacher” is the conscience of our original nature. If we act by this heart, we will not err; the “not-good” refers to what is enticed by the senses. Thus seeking the Dao truly enables us to turn from evil to good and from deviation to uprightness.

(3) One can dissolve calamities and untie karmic enmities. Calamities and karmic knots are self-made. Having lost the true heart and abandoned the Eight Virtues, we let the blood-heart rule. Our deeds violate conscience and contravene Heavenly Principle; thus we form enmities, create causes with effects to come, and weave disasters into a net. Over time this brewed into an unprecedented great catastrophe—all because humanity lost the Dao. Since calamity and enmity arise from losing the heart and the Dao, we must seek the Dao and retrieve the heart in order to

dissolve calamity and untie enmity. If we truly regain the upright heart and the proper Dao, we naturally know whence calamity and enmity arise; we can repent past faults, blame ourselves and reform, sincerely confess and change, and exert ourselves to perform merit and establish virtue to repay old debts. Then enmities naturally untie and karmic stains naturally dissolve, without any more entanglement. Henceforth every thought and intention takes the true heart as its master, every word and deed follows the Eight Virtues—how could new debts be made or new calamities be sown? When no new hatred is formed and old grievances vanish, body and mind become clear and still; calamities and enmities, without being “dissolved,” dissolve of themselves.

(4) One can change one’s destiny. Whence comes destiny? From Heaven’s decree? From the gods? From what people themselves create? People create the causes; the gods and Heaven assist the conditions; the end naturally yields the results. In short, past-life affinities across three lifetimes and the fruits eaten across several lives—though Heaven and the spirits assist, destiny is truly shaped by the human heart. Look at people: some are born princes and ministers, with fields of ten thousand acres and mansions towering into the clouds, wealthy beyond compare. Such a person in a former life kept the true heart present and did not depart from the Dao, and ancestors had accumulated deep virtue; sowing good seed in the field of blessings, they naturally reap good fruit in this life—this is the natural Way. Others, from birth onward, are hounded by illness, spend a life in destitution without even a place to plant a stake, with no grain for tomorrow, or are lonely and bereft, or beset by disasters without end. These are cases of not cultivating across three lives, letting the true heart wander, letting the conscious mind rule, and sowing weeds in the field of blessings—how could they reap good fruit? “Heaven’s net is vast; retribution misses not”—this is no lie. Disaster and fortune have no fixed gate; people themselves summon them. If you would change destiny, you must first seek back the true heart, pull out the weeds from the field of blessings, and plant good grain anew, so that later you yourself will reap good fruit. The philosopher Hong Zi said: “Merits that cover the world cannot withstand one word—‘pride’; sins that fill the skies cannot withstand one word—‘repent.’” Consider Patriarch Qiu: at first his fate pattern was the most ominous—“golden snake locking the mouth.” After seeking the Dao he exerted himself in true cultivation, piling up merits and fruits; in the end enmities untied and karmic stains dissolved. Unbeknownst to him, in the unseen his inauspicious lines were altered into the grand auspicious pattern of “double dragons vying for the pearl.” From this you can see the good that comes from seeking the Dao.

“*Verse:*

To escape Yama and verify the Realm of Principle—
Keep it close and never lose it, as if standing by a deep abyss.
As you came by the door, so you must go out by it;
Only by direct transcendence can you dwell with Buddhas and immortals.

“Foolish men covet worldly profit; common folk prize empty fame.
In a blink, all becomes void, and only karma follows the body.”

V. The Four Difficulties in Obtaining the Dao

(1) The human body is hard to obtain. Humans are the most spiritual among beings. Nature relies on this body to abide; the body relies on this nature to live. The true does not leave the false; the false does not leave the true—the two are woven together. “Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form.” We rely on this body to transcend with this nature; if we lacked this body, how could this nature transcend? As the saying goes: “Miss the human body once, and for ten thousand kalpas it is hard to regain.” Hence, the human body is hard to obtain.

(2) The Third Epoch is hard to encounter. Without the Supreme Dao, we cannot distinguish true from false, profit from harm, and will muddle through a lifetime. The “end of the Third Epoch” does not mean simply “three yangs in flourishing peace”; rather, Dao and calamity proceed side by side as the Green, Red, and White Eras turn. The Dao does not descend except in its time; it is not transmitted except to its people. Just as a gravely ill person must be treated with medicine suited to the illness, so the Dao descends suited to the calamity. Now, at the end of the Third Epoch, the three disasters and eight difficulties appear together—an unprecedented peril. Only the True Dao is sufficient to save. Thus, the Supreme Dao has descended to the world, universally rescuing all beings—truly a once-in-a-thousand-years blessed season hard to meet. Therefore, the Third Epoch is hard to encounter.

(3) Being born in China is hard. China stands in Asia; the character “Ya” (亞) resembles a white cross. It is the pivot of heaven and earth—called the Central States, Central Florescence, Central Plain. “Centrality” is the great root of heaven and earth. Sages have arisen in succession here and enlightenment began early; in antiquity it was called the Celestial Court—the very place where the True Dao first descended. If not born in China, it is not easy to hear the Heavenly Dao. Hence, being born in China is hard.

(4) Meeting the True Dao is hard. In the Third Epoch, the myriad teachings all arise. The true is the non-dual gate; the false is a bustle of pretenses. The Buddha said: “Those who grasp the root become Buddhas and patriarchs; those who cannot, grope in blind cultivation.” Without deep Buddha-affinity and ancestral virtue providing shade, it is truly hard to meet the True Dao. Therefore, meeting the True Dao is hard.

“ Verse:

To be born human in China is hardest of all;
Harder still to meet the True Dao in the Third Epoch.
Now that you have the human body and have heard the Great Dao,
You must hasten to cultivate and swiftly transcend.

VI. Are Karma, Rebirth, Heaven, and Hell Really Real?

The world is not as in antiquity; people's hearts worsen by the day. Many fashionable folks, thinking themselves clever, do not believe in karma, rebirth, heaven, or hell. Not only do they not believe, they call believers "superstitious." They do not know that those who label others superstitious are themselves deluded and unawakened—cutting off the road to Heaven and planting the deep causes of hell. Pitiful and lamentable!

Know that karma and rebirth, heaven and hell, are the very principles of the cosmos—not just the doctrine of Buddhism alone. As the Confucian tradition says: "A household that accumulates goodness will have surplus blessings; a household that accumulates non-good will have surplus calamity" (*Book of Changes*). The Daoist tradition says: "The recompense for good and evil follows like a shadow" (*Taishang Ganying Pian*). Are these not karma? As for the teaching on heaven and hell, both Christianity and Islam strongly affirm it. Regarding rebirth, countless accounts appear in the writings of the ancients. If one dismisses unofficial histories as untrustworthy, still the official histories record not a few: Bo Gun becoming a bear (*Shiji* commentary); Yi becoming a dog (*Hanshu*); Yang You's former life as the son of the Li family (*Jinshu*); the Liang Yuan-di's former life as a one-eyed monk (*Nan Shi, Liang ji*); Madam Liu Ge's prior life as Li Shu (*Bei Shi, Qi ji*); Liu Yuan's former life as Niu Sengru, Fan Zuyu's former life as Deng Yu, Guo Xiangzheng's former life as Li Taibai (all in the *Song Shi*); Xia Yuanji's former life as Qu Yuan (*Huangming Tongji*). These are written in bamboo and silk—plain to examine. If one claims karma, rebirth, heaven, and hell do not exist, does that mean the sages of all traditions and the historians of all dynasties have been deceiving people? Of course they exist—how can one say they don't?

The principle of karma is like planting: sowing is the cause; ripening is the result. Plant melons and you get melons; plant beans and you get beans. Sow good causes and you obtain good results; sow evil causes and you obtain evil results. This is a fixed principle—the only uncertainty is how soon the fruit ripens. The principle of rebirth is expressed in common speech: when a person dies, the heart does not die. Though the body decays, human nature endures. Unless one transcends, one is naturally carried along by one's karma, circling through former and later lives—like yesterday and tomorrow. This principle is easy to grasp; why argue? As for heaven and hell, there are two ways to explain them. In terms of principle, heaven and hell both arise from the mind itself. In terms of concrete phenomena, the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* describes the forms of the heavens, and the *Sūtra of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha* describes the various hells—very detailed and certainly not illusory.

It is laughable that some modern dabblers who have skimmed only the surface say that since science is flourishing, "superstitions" about spirits collapse of themselves. Yet in Western science there is a field called psychical research that studies just such matters of spirits and souls. How then can one say that because science flourishes, there are no spirits?

“A thousand principles understood—then a thousand marvels appear;
Miss one place, and that one place remains dark.”

VII. The Ten Great Vows

Running east and west to uplift the Dao; with earnest words and a motherly heart we pour out what is within.

Younger brethren, search your hearts and think carefully: for whom do we toil, for whom do we busy ourselves?

I am the **Chief Examiner of the Three Heavens**. By **sacred decree**, I have come to the **temple** and pay respects to the Imperial Presence. Let us rest, **then** explain in detail. I will extemporaneously sing-chant the **Ten Great Vows**—ha-ha!

First sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without sincerity.*

Confused and muddled, you let the days slip by.

You proclaim grand vows with an offhand mouth—

Who has actually followed vows with deeds?

Vows made with empty words and never fulfilled—

You deceive men, you deceive Heaven, you deceive spirits and gods.

I hope you, younger brethren, will question your own hearts—

Do you not fear that sin will be borne upon your body?

Do not say that retribution has not yet come;

When the karmic cycle matures, judgment is apportioned to each.

If you do not believe it, examine histories through the ages—

Heaven’s net is vast indeed; whom has it ever spared?

Second sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without repentance.*

You decorate and cover up to fool yourself and others;

You have faults of your own and refuse to change,

Yet open your mouth and speak only of others’ rights and wrongs.

As the saying goes: those who love to talk about right and wrong

Are surely themselves fond of right and wrong.

I hope you, younger brethren, will blame yourselves—

“Do not fear to change your faults”—then you approach the sages.

Lay down the butcher’s knife, and the Buddha-body appears.

Even a commoner who sets his will can join Heaven and Earth.

Good and evil both receive their due report in the end;

Heaven’s Principle is manifest—whom does it let off?

Third sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without practice.*

With empty mind and false intent you try to cheat Heaven.

Outwardly you comply; inwardly you defy—wearing a false face.

Your mouth says “yes,” your heart says “no,” weaving clever speech.
You angle for name and fish for praise to save appearances;
As for true merit and real goodness—you do not speak of them.
I hope you, younger brethren—why not reflect?
A gentleman is cautious when alone—why is this so?
Whispered words among men resound like thunder—
How much more are they seen by gods, the Dao, Buddhas, and immortals!
Do you not fear incurring Heaven’s reproof?

Fourth sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without constancy of will.*

Diligent at first, lazy at last—no success can come.
You retreat when you meet adversity and advance only when all is smooth;
On and off, stop and start—how could that be the work of a worthy or hero?
Learning is like rowing upstream—
If you do not advance you will surely retreat; this principle cannot be changed.
I hope you, younger brethren, will set your will on constancy—
To bend in a hundred trials is no hero at all.
The great road to the Western Heaven may be far,
But with each stage you walk, you are a stage nearer.
Be the same from start to finish—fix your resolve;
To abandon halfway cripples the spirit.

Fifth sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without learning humility.*

Daring to insult teachers and extinguish patriarchs—your gall reaches heaven.
Since ancient times, how could a bright master be easy to meet?
People have trod iron shoes through mountain depths to find one.
They wore out their shoes and found no place;
They suffered bitterly and achieved nothing—truly pitiable!
I hope you, younger brethren—let your Heavenly conscience appear:
Honor the teacher and revere the Dao—this accords with Heaven.
For the one-pointing master you must face north all your life;
The teacher-student bond endures through myriad years.
However high your merits tower without bound,
Forget the teacher—and even your very life is hard to preserve.

Sixth sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without depth of understanding.*

To look down on the Elders is no light offense.
To know grace and not repay it is not the conduct of a gentleman.
“When you drink water, remember the source”—this is true feeling.
How can grass or trees grow without roots?
Without someone to introduce you, how could a person walk this road?
I hope you, younger brethren, will recognize this clearly—
Unite heart and courage to carry out the final phase.
Think how the Elders introduced you,
Making grand vows and setting up the altar on your behalf.
Even ants in their holes repay loyalty—

How much more should humans, foremost among beings!

Seventh sigh: *Cultivating the Dao while losing proper regulation.*

You do not keep the temple rules and do whatever you please.

If you cultivate without keeping the rules,

On what will you rely to climb the ladder to Heaven?

The temple rules are Heaven's commandments.

If you do not follow them, how will you return to your native home?

I hope you, younger brethren, ponder carefully:

Keep the rules reverently and press on ahead.

A cart without rails will meet with danger;

A boat without oars sails in peril.

If you cultivate without keeping the precepts,

How can you escape birth and death and the wheel of rebirth?

Eighth sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without caution in speech.*

You casually talk about Heaven's secrets and the precious mysteries.

From of old, enlightened masters were hard to meet—

Who would dare speak the "scripture without words"?

The sages of the Three Teachings guarded it most strictly—

How much more should ordinary folk among the common crowd!

I hope you, younger brethren—do not deceive Heaven.

To leak Heaven's secrets is a crime hard to bear.

If it were not for this felicitous season and day,

How could this treasure lightly descend among mortals?

Be guarded in word and careful in deed; press straight ahead—

When your vows are fulfilled, you will naturally return to the Realm of Principle.

Ninth sigh: *Cultivating the Dao without a compassionate heart.*

You hide the Dao and do not reveal it, harming the original beings.

Heaven itself is wordless and relies on people's exhortation;

If people do not exhort, how will others hear the Dao?

Think back to the day you yourself sought the Dao—

Was it not an Elder who ferried you across the ford of delusion?

I hope you, younger brethren, will examine yourselves thrice a day.

"Share goodness with others," said the ancient sages.

Those who become Buddhas ever did so by ferrying the world:

Having established yourself, establish others; let the Dao be heard together.

How much more now that universal ferrying is open—

The ninety-two original beings return to the Root together.

Tenth sigh: *Cultivating the Dao with many failings of heart.*

Who is willing to advance according to their capacity?

The fetters of sentiment and locks of attachment—you cannot see through them;

You treat wealth as life and hoard rare goods.

A fine season and lovely scene flow away like water;

Complacent and slack, you miss the timing.
I hope you, younger brethren, do not deceive yourselves—
A missed good season is hard to meet again.
While this great season is not yet spent,
Practice the Three Givings: giving of wealth, of Dharma, and of fearlessness.
Advance according to these Ten Great Vows;
Fulfill your vows and return to the Root, going back to the Jasper West.

Further Admonition (I)

The Primordial Dao has not been lightly transmitted since time immemorial. Now we meet the Third Epoch, the universal ferrying, the great final gathering. With one point from the enlightened master, you escape the suffering of rebirth. By performing merit and establishing virtue, you will assuredly verify the Nine-Ranked Lotus. Transcending birth and death has confirmations everywhere; this is not a side-gate's spectacle to bedazzle the eyes.

The Dao is within one's own body—outside the body there is no true Dao. Whatever has form and appearance still lies within the round of rebirth. By receiving the one pointing, you transcend from qi into the realm of Principle. If one receives it yet does not cultivate, then at the crucial time—how pitiable!

The True Dao of the enlightened master is not mere talk; “elevating the mysterious and redeeming the ancestors” is not an empty boast. Those with Buddha-affinity who have received the Dao should arouse the vow-heart, establish the Dharma-boat, and widely save those with affinity among men. Those with shallow affinity who, having received the Dao, give rise to doubt—fixating on forms and appearances, letting the two eyes gaze outward—fail to investigate nature-Principle and turn the light around to reflect back. Greedy for externals, they cannot awaken to true principle.

Since ancient times, those who cultivated the Dao climbed mountains and forded waters. When their merits were full and fruits complete, the immortals and Buddhas secretly transmitted the pointing. Having endured all hardships, they cultivated to become guests of the Realm of Qi; yet when heaven and earth decay, they still fall into the abyss of the bitter sea.

In this end-cycle today, Heaven has opened great compassion. The Living Buddha descends into the world, searching everywhere for the original beings. At home or having left home—wives, friends, and children as companions—you can cultivate together as a household and be forever reunited in the Realm of Principle. In this sixty-thousand-year span, we have met this excellent opportunity. Miss it now, and cultivation will be difficult indeed. The deluded sons do not believe only because their karmic grievances are heavy; when the hour arrives, regret comes and crying to Heaven is in vain.

Those with affinity and good faith—having received the Dao—must quickly advance in the work. At the Dragon-Flower Assembly the majesty will be displayed; fruits will be apportioned exactly according to merits. Heaven does not obscure even a hair's breadth. It all depends on this very time—exert yourselves in works of merit!

VIII. The Work of Cultivation After Seeking the Dao

In former times one left home to cultivate. Now, at the end of the Third Epoch, the True Dao descends to save the original beings and universally ferry the Three Realms. A special mandate sends the enlightened master into the world to transmit the “true tradition of nature-Principle,” and commands the thousand Buddhas and ten thousand patriarchs to descend together to the Eastern Grove to proclaim Heaven’s transformation and greatly expound the heart-method of nature and Principle—beginning straightaway with cultivation by nature, without the need to abandon wife and children or family, to flee the world or shun society. Husbands and wives and sons and daughters may cultivate together at home: fathers do not fail in kindness, children do not fail in filial piety; spouses do not fail in righteousness; brothers do not fail in fraternal love. Whether scholar, farmer, artisan, or merchant—all can cultivate the Dao.

While the Primordial Dao can be advanced and administered, latter-heaven enterprises can also be pursued. Half-sage and half-common, one may both cultivate the Dao and carry on one’s work. Whatever the field, one’s occupation need not be harmed. So easy, so convenient—this is because Heavenly Mother (Lao Mu) loves Her children deeply, issuing great compassion and opening great grace so that whoever we are, we can cultivate the Dao. Even women and the illiterate may transcend birth and death, escape rebirth, and ascend to the Realm of Ultimate Bliss; while scholars and gentlemen can pursue learning, become true Confucians, and accomplish worthiness, sagehood, immortality, and Buddhahood. Such a fine opportunity is seldom met in a thousand years. May those of good faith who have received our Dao quickly cultivate it—**accomplish yourself and accomplish others**. To accomplish yourself is to cultivate the person: repent and change; let all deeds accord with Principle. To accomplish others is to ferry others: having received the Dao, spread its truth so that relatives and friends also understand and ascend the Heavenly Path. When everyone reforms, deeds will accord with Principle.

The *Doctrine of the Mean* says: “To follow one’s nature is called the Dao”—this is self-cultivation; “To cultivate the Dao is called teaching”—this is ferrying others. Proclaiming Heaven’s transformation and ferrying people is **external work**; reforming faults and returning to goodness—cultivating the person—is **internal work**.

We now stand in the end-times of the Third Epoch; Heaven’s timing is urgent. Emphasize **external work** and do not neglect internal work. When external work is full, internal work completes of itself. Yet if one’s person is not cultivated, one cannot set one’s household in order—and a household that cannot be set in order cannot teach others. Only by accomplishing oneself can one accomplish others; only by rectifying oneself can one transform others. In short, the Dao’s work must make no division between inner and outer, and no duality between movement and stillness—no inner and no outer, yet able to be inner and outer; knowledge and action as one; constantly responsive and constantly attained. This is the non-dual Buddha-Dharma—the true work of the Great Dao.

IX. In Cultivation, One Must Perform Merit and Establish Virtue

The ancients spoke of the three that do not perish: **establishing virtue, establishing merit, and establishing words**. “Performing merit and establishing virtue” means this: *performing* is actual practice and building up; *merit* is efficacious work; *establishing* is to set upright; *virtue* is moral excellence. By building up deeds that benefit others without sparing toil and without seeking fame or profit for oneself—for the welfare of society and humankind—this is called **performing merit**; the resultant effect is the **establishing of virtue**.

(1) Merit is of two kinds—internal and external.

1. **Internal merit:** to rectify one’s heart and cultivate one’s person, to subdue the self and return to ritual; in every word and act, dare not harbor even a hair’s breadth of selfish desire.
2. **External merit:** to open new ground and sow seed—to establish Dharma-boats (temples and works of ferrying), not sparing spirit, wealth, or effort; to sacrifice all, yield oneself and follow others; to plan for the Dao. Thus, the fruits of your contributions to living beings as you walk the Dao—these are **external merits**. External merit may be carried out in three ways:
 1. **Giving of wealth:** giving material aid; rescuing in hardship and urgency—for example, printing and giving away virtuous books and scriptures, providing medicine and tea, building bridges and paving roads, helping others open ground and run Dao-work, outfitting Dharma-boats, contributing to the Dao within your capacity, and all manner of acts that make things convenient and beneficial for others.
 2. **Giving of Dharma:** speaking of morality and benevolence, discussing cause and effect and the profound; exhorting people to goodness, resolving disputes; proclaiming Heaven’s transformation; ferrying people to seek the Dao so they cultivate goodness. Helping others understand and cultivate the Dao accrues immeasurable merit.
 3. **Giving of fearlessness:** keeping the heart of the Dao steadfast; bearing insult and enduring humiliation; when insulted, bear no resentment; accept adversity with equanimity; set up a standard for those who come after—this too is a way of establishing merit.

(2) Establishing Virtue. Establishing virtue is one of the most important lessons in cultivation. The Manifest Emperor revealed: “With merit but without virtue, one becomes a demon” (proud and arrogant); “With virtue but without merit, the Dao is hard to accomplish” (karmic debts remain unpaid). Thus **merit and virtue must complement each other**. The old saying goes: “The great sea is able to accept tiny streams; therefore it becomes great.” This is the sea’s **virtue**. If people

emulate it, why worry we cannot become vessels? There are three ways to establish virtue:

1. **Virtue of the heart:** harbor compassion; be fair in dealings; courteous and yielding; contend with no one; sincerely revere Heaven and Earth; be filial to parents; toward others, harbor no arrogance, jealousy, anger, or hatred—this is the virtue of the heart.
2. **Virtue of the body:** keep conduct upright; practice with caution; abstain from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; be a model for others; be plain and industrious; peaceful in all things; toward superiors be respectful; toward subordinates be compassionate; act before speaking; keep words and deeds consistent—this is the virtue of the body.
3. **Virtue of the mouth:** speak in ways that benefit others; often speak of karmic consequences; offer loyal words to exhort the world; explain the classics and virtuous books to transform people; keep words and deeds consistent; do not speak of others' faults; do not flaunt your own strengths—this is the virtue of the mouth.

Beyond these three, in concrete practice we should do the following: (1) revere the Patriarch; (2) live in harmony with those in the Dao family; (3) be upright and unselfish; (4) honor elders with filial devotion; (5) examine yourself at midnight and find nothing to be ashamed of; (6) keep money matters clean, not taking a single improper cent; (7) keep to your place and be steady in work; (8) attend to the root and be a good example.

X. Filial Piety and the Modern Age

Some say: “Filial piety may be promoted, but in modern times it should be reinterpreted.” There is some sense in this, but *how* to interpret it—so far, nothing convincing has appeared.

China possesses a complete theory of filial piety—hence it is a **Dao**. If one does not understand this complete theory—that is, does not understand filial piety—and yet wants to make a “new interpretation,” this is merely chasing fashion: hurrying after the “modern,” and also after a so-called “cultural renaissance.”

Our complete Chinese doctrine of filial piety is the **Classic of Filial Piety** (*Xiaojing*). I have read its eighteen chapters closely and find nothing unreasonable, nothing at odds with modernity. If one says it is out of step, it is only because modern people do not understand filial piety and therefore do not live up to it.

Consider the opening chapter “Clarifying the Teaching”: “The body, hair, and skin are received from one’s parents; do not dare to damage them—this is where filial piety begins.” This *beginning of filial piety* expresses parents’ love for their children, hoping they will cherish themselves and not cause their parents grief. If “modern people” use it as an excuse not to cut their hair, that is merely unfilial sophistry and has nothing to do with understanding the parents’ heart.

“It is by establishing oneself and walking the Dao, making one’s name known to later generations and thereby glorifying one’s parents—that filial piety comes to completion.” This *completion of filial piety* again expresses parents’ love, hoping their children become upright and independent, doing good work and living well, so that parents feel honored that the sons and daughters they raised have contributed to human society. What about this is “unmodern”? Must we cater to a shallow, individualistic notion to be “timely”?

“Filial piety begins with serving one’s parents, proceeds to serving one’s ruler, and ends with establishing oneself.” This is the full course of filial piety—hoping that a person will be a good child in the family, a good citizen in the nation, and a contributor with achievements to human society. What is wrong with this? If someone objects to the phrase “serving one’s ruler” as “undemocratic,” then if you understand democracy you should understand that “serving the ruler” can be taken as “serving the people.” What about that is unmodern?

Confucius sums up: “Filial piety is the norm of Heaven, the righteousness of Earth, and the conduct of the people.” Here “norm” means what is proper; “righteousness” means what is fitting; “conduct” means the rule of life. If a person is unfilial, is that normal? If not normal, is it fitting? Then what sort of life is he living?

That filial piety is not flourishing today is abnormal; and abnormality harms everyone. We need normalcy—therefore we must begin by reviving filial piety.

XI. *Liao-Fan’s Four Teachings* as a Guide to Establishing Virtue and Cultivating the Person

I recently reread the vernacular *Liao-Fan’s Four Teachings* and was deeply moved. It is admirable that Mr. Yuan Liao-Fan set down his life lessons in writing to instruct later generations.

At first Mr. Yuan rested content in fatalism, seeking nothing else. Later, the Chan master Yun-gu awakened him with teachings such as: “Destiny is made by me; blessings are sought by oneself,” “All fields of blessing are not apart from a square inch—seek them in the heart and all responses will be unhindered,” “Calamity made by Heaven can yet be avoided; calamity made by oneself cannot be lived through,” and “A household that accumulates goodness will have surplus blessings.” These shattered Mr. Yuan’s fatalistic views. The master then further exhorted him to **cultivate the person and establish destiny**, eliminate evil and accumulate goodness. Mr. Yuan upheld these teachings with reverence, moved cautiously toward goodness, and personally verified that “Though Heaven be truthful, destiny is not fixed,” and that “Whatever is called fortune or misfortune is all sought by oneself.”

Knowing clearly that fortune and misfortune are self-sought and that destiny is self-made, we must cultivate the person, accumulate virtue, and turn away from evil toward good. In methods of correcting faults, we must first arouse a **sense of shame** and a **sense of awe**, and have the **courage** to change quickly. There are three ways to eliminate evil: (1) **Change from the level of action**—when a fault is committed, afterward sit quietly and reflect. (2) **Change from the level of principle**—think things through carefully in advance; once the principle is clear, you will not commit the fault. (3) **Best of all, change from the level of the heart**—when the heart stirs not, with no selfish desire, whence can faults arise? Thus, if we cultivate the heart, clarify principle, restrain faults, rely on good friends to remind us, keep spirits and deities as witnesses, and sincerely repent and head toward goodness, then the mind becomes tranquil and open, and wisdom swiftly unfolds—we will surely be able to calm the mind and settle the nature.

After correcting faults we must still **accumulate good deeds** to dissolve past karmic enmities and change destiny. Hence the book explains the logic and principles of doing good with examples such as “A family that accumulates goodness will have surplus blessings,” “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” “Protecting life brings a good reward,” “Those who accumulate virtue are revered by spirits and deities,” “Easing grudges and reducing punishment accords with Heaven’s heart,” “Revering the gods and protecting the Dharma brings flourishing descendants,” “True goodness and false goodness,” “Upright goodness and crooked goodness,” “Open goodness and hidden virtue,” “Partial goodness and proper goodness,” and “Great or small, hard or easy—look to the motive.” As for methods of accumulating goodness, they are countless. Among them: (1) cooperating with others in goodness; (2) harboring respect and love; (3) helping others to perfect their good; (4) exhorting others to goodness; (5) rescuing those in peril; (6) initiating great benefits; (7) giving wealth to create blessings; (8) protecting the True Dharma; (9) revering and honoring elders; (10) cherishing living beings. By practicing and promoting such methods, myriad virtues can be perfectly fulfilled.

Finally, in “The Efficacy of Humility,” the *Book of Changes* is cited: “Heaven’s Way diminishes the full and augments the humble; Earth’s Way shifts away from the full and flows to the humble; the spirits harm the full and bless the humble; the human Way dislikes the full and favors the humble.” The *Book of Documents* says: “Fullness invites harm; humility receives benefit.” This shows that one must be as open as a valley, always maintaining humility and giving others leeway—thus one can move Heaven and Earth. Therefore, to cultivate the person and establish destiny, one must be constant, set firm resolve, and broadly accumulate hidden virtue to bless the ten directions—then destiny can no longer bind us.

“All fields of blessing are not apart from a square inch—seek them in the heart and all responses will be unhindered.” “Fortune and misfortune are self-caused.” These should awaken those who think fortune and calamity are fixed by a previous life. “Whatever harvest you want, sow accordingly.” Your future rests in your own hands. Rather than resigning yourself to fate, rise up to cultivate the person and establish destiny. After careful reading, we should receive Mr. Yuan’s fine admonitions—establish the person and destiny, do no evil, practice all good. As Master Shanxuan said, those who cultivate the Dao should take this to ferry themselves and others—awaken yourself and awaken others. Those who have not yet heard the sages’ heart-method, by reading this book can learn the way of self-cultivation, discern the truth of life, and then use it as a **stairway to seeking the Dao**—to seek the method of transcending birth and death. Thus *Liao-Fan’s Four*

Teachings is our guide to establishing virtue and cultivating the person. If all hold to it, society will surely move toward the utmost good—thus repaying the author’s painstaking heart.

XII. Where Does Life Go?

Where does life go? One may answer: life inevitably goes toward death. If there is birth, there must be death. But after a person dies, where then do they go? This shifts the question from life to death—no less important than the question of life.

Three representative answers:

First, the Buddhist answer. Buddhism teaches that after death one returns to **nirvāṇa**—the state of no-birth and no-death; to transcend life and death requires deep cultivation to reach the other shore. The human body is a union of the four great elements—earth, water, fire, and wind. At death the four great elements disperse. But the **karma** made in life does not disperse with them; hence Buddhism teaches **rebirth**. According to the karma created before death, after death one returns again to the human world. Thus death and life revolve without end—like a vast sea of suffering. Therefore in life one should lessen karma so as to gradually cross this sea; one should also harbor great compassion to rescue those in suffering—helping others out by expedient means. Suicide, being a negative escape, is not the right path and does not escape the suffering of rebirth.

Second, the Christian answer. God created the world. Adam and Eve sinned and were punished—descending into the human world. If people recognize their sins and practice rightly, they can return to Heaven.

Third, the Confucian answer, native to China prior to the arrival of these two religions. When Zilu asked about death, Confucius said: “Not yet understanding life, how can we understand death?” Confucius’ meaning: to understand what comes after death, one must first understand life. The one who lives is this person; the one who dies is also this person. If you do not understand the person in life, how could you understand the person after death? What, then, is a person? Mencius said: “Ren (humaneness) makes one a person.” Most people think this six-foot body—this “I”—is what makes a person. In truth, this physical “I” alone does not truly make a person. One becomes a person within the community of humans: the Dao of kindness and filial piety, of care between old and young; the way of husband and wife; the righteousness of brothers; the trust of friends—these are the human Way, the Way of **ren**. Thus Confucians first value the great human relations.

Today, with science flourishing and astronomy and biology revealing much, in the West there is a crisis of a “lost God.” In China, however, if we use Confucius’ learning of the mind-and-nature to understand the spirit of the cross, do we not reach it more directly and clearly? And in modern society, if everyone were to follow Buddhism one-sidedly—leaving home en masse to become monks and nuns—would this not block the way of life? Only by following Confucius’ teaching of the great Dao of self-cultivation, ordering the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world can we first secure our livelihood, without being contrary to Śākyamuni’s great compassion to rescue those in suffering. Buddhism says: “Be a monk that strikes the bell as long as you are a

monk.” And: “If I do not enter hell, who will?” Today, to live by Confucius’ teaching is likewise to strike the bell; it is also to **step first into hell**, to better rescue others out of hell.

The refined meanings of the Three Teachings cannot be fully expounded here. I offer instead the Song-dynasty Neo-Confucian motto “Be earnest in being a person” as mutual encouragement for all—whether one believes in any religion or none.

(Excerpted from the United Daily News supplement.)

XIII. After Reading “Where Does Life Go?”

The value of a book lies not in its price but in how the knowledge within awakens our rational mind and conscience—only then is it a treasure. The ancients said: “To open a scroll is to gain benefit”—not a vain saying.

In *Where Does Life Go?*, such pieces as “The King of Hell’s Warning Letter,” “Three Doctors Discuss Spirits,” “Curios of Folkways and the Bond of Life and Death,” “Borrowing a Corpse to Return the Soul,” and “On Cause and Effect” are written in plain language yet rich in meaning. The book proceeds from shallow to deep and shows that the universe is one and yet manifold.

We are not all sages; we are common people. Death, in human eyes, is a vague, drifting realm. Death ends life; human vision is short and values only what is before the eyes—thinking life is joyful and worth clinging to—so death seems always to happen to someone else. People cling to life and fear death; only the wise can “give up life to realize ren,” “sacrifice life to uphold righteousness.”

This book tells us the highest state of life. Though life must go toward death, and though people cling to life and fear death, none can escape dying. Since antiquity, who has not died? After a person dies, in what form do they continue to exist? Someone once said: “When I die, my body returns to its elements, but my ****personhood—the true me—continues on...**” By “body” he meant what Buddhism calls the physical self, not the true self—the temporary aggregation of the four great elements (earth, water, fire, wind), which will dissipate, age, and die. By “personhood” he meant what Buddhism calls the **true spirit**—our soul, the true self that never perishes. **Life** is the union of spirit and body; **death** is their separation. After death, where does the spirit go?

A person’s end is not like a lamp being snuffed. The book also speaks of **rebirth**: after death the body returns to nature, but the soul must undergo judgment. If, while alive, one did every evil—betraying Heaven and harming reason—one falls into hell and suffers the fruits, then is reborn again; birth after death, death after birth—rebirth without cease. But if one can obtain true liberation of one’s nature, visit an enlightened master, receive direct pointing to the root of life and nature, cultivate the learning of sages and worthies, perform merit and establish virtue, awaken oneself and awaken others so that the awakened nature becomes complete—then one can

transcend birth and death, forever leave the suffering of rebirth, realize Buddhahood by seeing one's nature, and reach nirvāṇa.

We need not take the death of the body as the final destination, nor be bound by limited time and space. Time and eternity are a seamless whole; life and death should be viewed together. “Know Heaven's decree and recognize Heaven's times”: we must know the dignity and value of life, seek to see the true self, recognize Principle and return to the True. Perform merit and establish virtue—then where one goes at death needs no words.

The meanings within *Where Does Life Go?* are worth our careful thought again and again.

XIV. Recognize Principle and Cultivate the True — After Reading the “Spiritual Research Anthology”

The study of psychical phenomena began in mid-nineteenth-century Britain at Cambridge, Oxford, and London, and in a century spread worldwide, becoming a new field of learning that attracted many scholars and experts, and **confirmed the religious doctrine of the soul**.

The great modern educator Cai Yuanpei (longtime president of Peking University) once said: “The aim of Buddhism lies in ‘escaping the suffering of rebirth and gaining the joy of nirvāṇa.’ If rebirth can be shown credible, then the need to escape rebirth will naturally be believed.” The seed of rebirth is this **soul** (Buddhists call it Buddha-nature). The great man of letters and Confucian physician Ding Fubao said: to understand the karmic fruits of rebirth in this and the next life, first one should understand that after death there **truly exists** a soul. (*See Primer to Faith in Buddhism* .) Psychical research uses objective scientific methods to show that beyond the body there exists the soul. Its essence is to study the soul for the sake of the soul—acknowledging this objective fact. It is **not** set up for religion; yet we deem it useful to confirm the truth of religious doctrine and help us grasp life's truth, so as to restrain the flood of desire, turn back the great tide, purify hearts, and nurture a wholesome social ethos.

This anthology gathers views of contemporary scholars and experts, selecting materials by an objective standard and striving for truth—not simply repeating hearsay. For example, Dr. Wu Yan-fang was among the first students sent abroad, absorbed Western thought, and later served as minister of foreign affairs and ambassador to the United States—an eminent figure of the early Republic. If what he saw were not true, he would never have risked his reputation to speak boldly of “ghost photography.” Hence Mr. Ding Fubao said: “Ghost photographs I have personally seen, and I have no doubt of the matter. Dr. Wu was a gentleman of accomplished virtue—he would

certainly not deceive. The photographing of a ghostly image is precisely the departed person's **soul**." For this reason, the British physicist Sir Oliver Lodge (former president of the University of Birmingham) advocated **spirit-attachment** theory. (See Prof. Li Mai-xian's translation of *Modern Western History*, vol. 2, p. 275.)

Prof. Song Xi-shang, a contemporary hydraulic engineer, promoted the printing of *Evening Talks by the Stove* and gave it to students; in his *Scattered Notes of a Floating Life* he often speaks of karmic retribution—also a man of heart. Prof. Mao Peng-ji's *Qi Xie* anthology gathers ancient and modern stories of spirits and karmic recompense to warn and transform people. The late-Qing man of letters Xue Fu-cheng's *Notes from the Thatched Study* likewise records karmic affairs. Prof. Xiao Yu spread Chinese culture overseas; his *Records of the Inexplicable* speaks extensively of spirits. If these were not real events involving real people, given their social standing, would they have spoken so lightly?

The American philosopher William James once said: "If there really is a God, and I neither know nor acknowledge Him, then will I not suffer a great loss after death?" If you would avoid that loss, quickly study this truth: recognize your own Buddha-nature; seek an enlightened master's pointing; only then can you escape rebirth and realize nirvāṇa.