

Record of Sincere Advancement in Cultivation

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About This Translation

Record of Sincere Advancement in Cultivation

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Preface

Preface

This book is a record of lectures of the highest order. Because they address sincere advancement in cultivation — and because cultivating the true Dao requires, above all, a genuine heart — everything spoken here forms a step-by-step staircase for our progress forward. For this reason, the book is called *Record of Sincere Advancement in Cultivation*.

The language of this book is plain, rough-hewn, and common. I fear it will hardly satisfy those of deep learning or those skilled in elegant composition. But the present age is different. What ordinary people speak, write, and create is nothing but the vernacular — easy to understand. To cling to classical forms would only make it harder to spread these teachings widely.

Moreover, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, Dao is being transmitted universally, and all the Buddhas and Patriarchs have descended in humble disguise to save the world, adapting their teachings to the times. Everything spoken, recorded, and written strives to be accessible, so that people understand the moment they hear it and comprehend the moment they see it — achieving twice the result with half the effort.

The recorder has therefore followed this same intention. But I ask you, the readers, to bring a discerning eye and study these pages with a humble and open mind. The words are plain, but the meaning reaches far. The truth contained within is truly inexhaustible and cannot be compared to any ordinary book. What is called the supreme and great Dharma — how could it be anything other than this?

Every topic in this book comes from the Dean teaching the assembly through his own experience, elucidating the true meaning of the true Dao. Regrettably, the recorder is of shallow knowledge and limited talent, and much was forgotten during the recording — inevitably catching one detail while missing ten thousand.

I only hope that you, the readers, will use this book to grasp the main outline and thereby recognize your original face. Penetrate the truth through realization, and quickly go forth to cultivate merit and virtue — that would be enough. These trifling, humble words are not worth a glance. I can only hope that the discerning will forgive their inadequacy — that would be a great blessing.

Chapter 1: How to Hold Right Faith in God and Resolve Doubts

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Throughout all times and places, men and women, old and young, all hold reverential titles and worship for "God," "the Heavenly Father," "my Lord," "Old Heaven," and others like them. But what, after all, is the meaning behind these titles and this worship?

Granted, a title is merely a label. Yet upon examination, what it points to is truly formless and imageless, supremely honored and precious, supremely pure and empty, supremely centered and upright — a single point of ultimate truth. It is just that this truth is without sound and without scent, empty and yet not empty.

The *Classic of Odes* says: "When the divine spirit descends, it cannot be fathomed — how much less can it be dismissed!" From this we can know that God's subtlety is unfathomable, beyond thought and beyond words.

And yet, God gave birth to heaven and earth, nurtured every living thing in meticulous detail, governs the universe, and encompasses all phenomena. This reveals all the more that the ultimate Nothing can give rise to the ultimate Something, the ultimate Emptiness can give rise to the ultimate Substance — non-action producing action, wondrous existence within true emptiness.

Explaining it this way seems very abstract. Let us investigate further.

Scientists hold that the evolution of humanity and the formation of the world are the product of natural law. But who governs this law? Human beings certainly cannot. And since humans cannot do it, then it must be a supremely high and supremely luminous divine being.

Look at the sky: the sun, moon, and stars rotating in turn, proceeding in timely sequence — spring, summer, autumn, winter, cold arriving and heat departing. Then look at the earth's mountains and rivers, its lakes, seas, and springs — all interconnected through a shared lineage. Creatures that fly, creatures that swim, creatures that walk, plants that grow — the power to give life and take it, to grant and to seize. If not for a divine being supremely high, supremely great, supremely firm, and supremely gentle, who else could bear this charge?

Consider further the origin of human beings. We were born from our parents, our parents from our grandparents. Extend this line back through great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents, all the way to the very first ancestor of our lineage — who gave them birth? The theory of evolution says humans evolved from great apes in ancient times. But if ancient apes could transform into humans, why can the apes of today not do the same? And if it were truly so that ancient apes became humans, then after evolving thousands of years more, who knows what humans might become next?

Every person's inherited nature carries its own Heaven-endowed quality. The common saying goes: when a person reaches a moment of danger, fear, or desperation, they cry out "Heaven!" or "Mother!" From this we can see that human beings are born from Heaven. The claims of science are groundless talk.

Although modern science appears all-powerful, it merely borrows metallic materials and chemical elements, combining them into various machines. But with any material whatsoever, if one wished to create a human being endowed with spirit — such a thing is absolutely impossible.

We are born from Heaven. God is our first ancestor. Therefore the common saying goes: "We are all children of God."

The Bible says: "A person is not born of blood and flesh, not born of desire, not born of human will — but born of God."

The Patriarch of Dao said: "The Boundless gives rise to the Supreme Ultimate, the Supreme Ultimate gives rise to the Two Forces, the Two Forces give rise to the Four Emblems, the Four Emblems give rise to the Eight Trigrams."

And again: "One gives rise to two, two gives rise to three, three gives rise to all things."

The Confucian tradition says: "The workings of High Heaven are without sound and without scent." And also: "Humanity can participate in and assist the transformative nurturing of Heaven and Earth."

Jesus said: "God is our Heavenly Father."

All of the above proves that the origin of our physical body and spirit-nature, and the creation of all things, were brought forth by God — without the slightest doubt.

Now that we know God has shown us such boundless grace, we must bring forth our genuine hearts, hold fast to unwavering resolve, silence heterodox teachings, and reject deviant conduct. We must cleanse our body and mind and purify our thoughts. To appreciate Heaven's compassion with tender understanding and to repay Heaven's grace — this is what it truly means to hold right faith in God and to have all doubts resolved.

Chapter 2: Have You Truly Entrusted Yourself?

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This topic asks each of us personally: have you understood your own origin and your mission? Have you believed it?

Our body, of course, was conceived from our father's essence and our mother's blood. But parents can only give birth to the physical body. Only when God bestows the spirit-nature upon it can it be counted as a complete person.

A person's entire life is exactly like staying at an inn — one night's lodging and then departure. Of the furnishings inside the inn, not a single thing can be taken along. If you try to steal even the smallest thing belonging to others, you will surely earn the name of a thief.

Since we know the spirit-nature is born of God and comes from the primordial realm, we can understand that when we parted from God, we surely carried a mission and came as ones sent forth under commission. But what is this mission? It is to proclaim transformation on behalf of Heaven and to bring order to the world.

Yet once the spirit falls into the conditioned world, it is buried by wine, lust, wealth, and temper — turning from awakening and merging with dust, drifting ever further into delusion, creating immeasurable sins and transgressions, wandering through the cycle of birth and death. Karmic enmities repay one another without end, ultimately brewing an unprecedented catastrophe.

Because Heaven's compassion is boundless, and fearing above all that we would plunge into catastrophic doom, Heaven did not withhold its most closely guarded treasure. The true Dao descended into the world, enabling us to receive Dao, cultivate Dao, fulfill Dao, and achieve Dao. In the present life, we can escape the suffering of the Final Catastrophe. After death, we can enjoy forever the bliss of the Boundless.

But since we were born from the Eternal Mother, and Dao was also bestowed by the Eternal Mother, how — having received this immeasurable, magnificent grace — shall we fulfill our filial duty before Her?

Only by appreciating the Eternal Mother's heart with tender understanding, exhausting our own strength, going everywhere to pioneer and plant seeds — establishing ourselves and helping others

stand, advancing ourselves and helping others advance — enabling the ninety-six billion fellow beings to leave the sea of suffering together, ascend the path of awakening together, and face the Eternal Mother's countenance together. Only then can we be said to have fulfilled the mission.

In sum, whoever stands at their own post, does nothing that violates propriety or breaks the law, constantly maintains upright conduct and proper character, and is without shame before Heaven — such a person can be said to have truly entrusted themselves.

Chapter 3: The Relationship Between Dao and Human Life

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Dao is principle; principle is the path. All things in creation are born from Dao, and therefore all things possess their own inherent principle. Heaven has its celestial principles, earth has its terrestrial principles, and human beings have the principle of their nature. When heaven loses its principle, the stars stray from their courses. When earth loses its principle, mountains collapse and rivers overflow. When human beings lose their principle, the moral bonds become disordered and perverted. Thus the common proverb says: "With principle, one can travel the whole world; without it, one cannot move a single step." Viewed from this, the relationship between Dao and human life is of the utmost closeness.

Confucius said: "Who can go out without using the door? Why then does no one follow this Dao?" Mencius said: "When the world is drowning, rescue it with Dao." Zisi said: "Dao is that which cannot be separated from for even an instant! That which can be separated from is not Dao!"

From these proofs we see that for a person living in this world, Dao is something one dares not separate from for even a moment. If one goes against Dao and loses principle, seeking temporary ease, in this life one will suffer the punishment of the nation's laws, and after death one will suffer the torments of the underworld judges. Even if one escapes by luck in this life, Heaven's principle is manifest and clear, never erring by the slightest measure — how could one escape the judgment of the netherworld court, and not have it repaid in the next life? I earnestly hope all of you will take heed.

Chapter 4: What Makes the Heavenly Dao Precious

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The preciousness of the Heavenly Dao lies in this: first, Dao is not lightly transmitted. Second, when receiving Dao, one must have two sponsors who serve as the Introducer and Guarantor Masters. Furthermore, before the altar one makes grand oaths and great vows, certifying that this is not a heterodox path or side door, not a heretical sect or the White Lotus, and moreover that no one is swindling you of your wealth. The final two lines of the guarantor's vow declare: "Should I introduce anyone whose family background is not clean or whose conduct is not upright, I am willing to receive Heaven's punishment and be struck by the five thunders."

Moreover, when you receive Dao, you first make the Ten Great Vows; otherwise, even holding ten thousand taels of gold in your hands, you still cannot obtain it. Among the Ten Vows, the phrase "repenting with a sincere heart" further proves that before receiving Dao, all people are sinners. After receiving Dao, if one sincerely guards what one has received and repents with a true heart, correcting one's faults, one can become a good and upright person in society. If one can embrace Dao and put it into practice, striving without ceasing, one can further become a Buddha or a patriarch. Since we have already obtained the true Dao, we must press forward. If one can advance day by day and month by month, accumulating merit and virtue, in this life one will surely escape calamity and avoid disaster, and upon leaving this world one can transcend birth and death. One's own nine generations above and seven below will all return together to the Realm of Truth — is this not the preciousness of the Heavenly Dao?

Chapter 5: Why People Do Not Advance After Receiving Dao

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The ancient sages said: "Receiving Dao is easy, cultivating Dao is hard; cultivating Dao is easy, fulfilling Dao is hard." This saying, too, confirms the meaning of our topic. Upon careful investigation, the causes of not advancing are of two kinds.

The first is that after receiving Dao, one has not undertaken adequate study, does not understand the true meaning of Dao, and gives rise to all manner of doubts. Such as: doubting that the Heavenly Dao is not authentic, that a single transmission alone cannot accomplish what is promised. Doubting that the heavenly timing has not arrived, that the Great Gathering has no set date. Doubting that one's karmic affinity is shallow and karmic debts heavy, that the trials and tests are too severe and harsh. Doubting where the merit-contribution funds are spent. Doubting that heaven's plan may shift, that everything is vague and without proof. Doubts and misgivings arise in profusion, layer upon layer.

The second is that because one is obscured by temperamental disposition, there are obstructions to advancing along the path of Dao. Thus the Buddhist tradition says: "People of the world cannot cultivate because of six kinds of obstacles." First, regarding the six sense faculties and the illusory compound of the four elements, one does not awaken to this truth. Thus arises the obstacle of physical form. Second, regarding food, drink, and the desires between men and women, one recklessly gives rise to greedy attachment. Thus arises the obstacle of craving. Third, heroes and outstanding persons exhaust their wisdom and strength to manage worldly affairs. Thus arises the obstacle of ambition. Fourth, scholars and talented persons parade their learning and elaborate upon ornamentation. Thus arises the obstacle of intellectualism. Fifth, bound by convention and following custom, one is tied and cannot free oneself. Thus arises the obstacle of worldly affairs. Sixth, exhaustively probing the mysterious and contemplating the subtle, one reaches understanding yet turns back to doubt. Thus arises the obstacle of doctrine.

With all these forms of obscuration, the mind becomes confused and disordered — how could one cultivate Dao? Tracing this to its root, it is entirely due to the error of not understanding the true principle. Yet the source of this ailment is one for which those who serve in leadership and those who bear the role of Introducer and Guarantor all carry a considerable responsibility.

Consider the immortals, Buddhas, sages, and divine beings of the past — which one of them did not rely on a teacher's guidance and support to awaken? Although it is said, "There are those who

come to learn, but a teacher does not go out to teach," those who succeed without being taught number not one in a thousand. Therefore the Holy Teacher says: "In the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, the great undertaking of the Great Gathering is being carried out. The success or failure of each congregation rests entirely upon whether the one in charge gives full effort." All who have entered Dao hold a heavenly duty at their own congregation, and each of you has junior students of your own. I hope that all of you will recognize the true principle, rouse your spirit, and become forerunners who establish themselves and help others stand, who advance themselves and help others advance. You must never shrink from difficulty and settle for comfort, misleading yourself and misleading others, and thereby become sinners for all ages.

Chapter 6: Is There a Distinction Between the Heavenly Dao and the Human Way?

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The Heavenly Dao and the Human Way are originally without any distinction whatsoever. It is only because people's vision differs — in how far it reaches and how much it encompasses — that the two appear separate.

In terms of the Human Way: being filial to parents, friendly toward siblings, trustworthy with friends, and respectful toward teachers and elders — only then can one be considered to have fulfilled it. But people's circumstances vary greatly. If one has an upright father, a loving brother, a principled friend, and a teacher of noble character, then all share the same aspiration and walk in accord with Dao, each fulfilling their role, joyfully treading the great way of human relationships.

But what if the father is like Gu Sou, the brother like Guan and Cai, the friend like Sun Bin and Pang Juan, the teacher like Shen Bao? Must one not weigh the important against the trivial, distinguish right from wrong? Can one attend only to the lesser part for the moment and leave behind a foul reputation for ten thousand generations?

Especially now, when we personally encounter the extraordinary turning-point that comes once in sixty thousand years. If one has no far-reaching aspiration and seeks only to keep worldly relationships smooth, then once the Heavenly timing arrives and one's fruition is determined according to merit — those who nourished only the lesser part, whose name falls at the bottom of the list, will they not find their regret beyond all remedy?

Let me cite anecdotes of the ancient sages to verify this. Emperor Shun married without informing his hostile father. The Duke of Zhou executed one brother and punished another. When Patriarch Qiu Chuji's attachment lingered, Ma Danyang separated their meditation cushions, and each went their own way. None of these clung to the lesser convention; all nurtured the greater principle.

Each of you cultivates Dao in different circumstances. At this moment a thousand-catty weight hangs by a single hair — the turning point between ascent and descent. You must recognize your

true aim clearly. Do not attend to the lesser conventions of worldly sentiment and thereby ruin the work of ten thousand generations.

Consider Shakyamuni Buddha, who left home at nineteen, abandoning his parents without looking back. On the surface this may seem unfilial, but in the end he became the founder of Buddhism, bringing glory to his name and honor to his parents, and together they returned to the heavenly realm. The Ancient Buddha of the South Sea defied her parents to pursue cultivation. She attained the fruition of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Buddha. Her parents benefited from her radiance, and her ancestors ascended together.

Seen from this perspective, not one among the ancient sages and worthies ever kept wife, friends, children, and companions close, the whole family gathered together, never departing from the yoke of attachment and the shackles of affection, entangled in love and sentiment — and yet attained fruition and transcended birth and death.

In ancient times, Gun labored at flood control without success, and Shun executed him at Mount Yu. Gun's son Yu did not avenge his father but instead carried on his father's mission and completed the work of taming the waters. Though away for eight years, passing his own door three times without entering, he ultimately became one of the Three Sovereign Officials.

Furthermore, when Jesus was preaching to the crowd, his mother brought his siblings to find him, wanting to speak with him. When someone told Jesus, he answered: "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?" And pointing to the listeners he said: "Look! Whoever does the will of my Heavenly Father — they are my brothers and sisters; they are my mother!" Jesus ultimately became the founder of Christianity.

Since all these departed sages cultivated and attained the true fruition, could their parents and ancestors possibly fail to transcend birth and death?

Therefore the old saying goes: "Attending carefully to the end of life and honoring distant ancestors — this is true filial piety. Serving one's parents in life with propriety — this is obedience. If you consider merely supporting your parents to be the fullness of filial duty, when they have passed and face the sorrows of the underworld, what share of that burden can the child bear?"

The Classic of Filial Piety says: "The body — every hair and patch of skin — is received from one's parents; one dares not damage or injure it: this is the beginning of filial piety. Establishing oneself, practicing Dao, and making one's name known to later generations, thereby bringing glory to one's parents: this is the fulfillment of filial piety."

From this we can see that the Heavenly Dao and the Human Way are deeply interconnected. Some fulfill the Human Way and thereby accord with the Heavenly Dao; others cultivate the Heavenly Dao and in doing so implicitly fulfill the Human Way. In the end, whether Heavenly Dao or Human Way, what accords with principle is right, and what violates principle is wrong.

Chapter 7: What Does It Mean to Cultivate Merit and Virtue?

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"Cultivate" means to put into practice. "Merit" means effective work. "Establish" means to set up. "Virtue" means moral excellence. Only by putting effective work into practice can one establish true virtue.

In sum: sparing no effort or hardship to seek survival and welfare for society and humankind — this is called cultivating merit, and its result is the establishment of virtue.

There are two dimensions of merit: inner and outer.

Inner merit is rectifying one's own heart and cultivating one's person, restraining the self and returning to propriety. In every word and deed, one dares not harbor even a trace of selfish desire.

Outer merit is pioneering and planting seeds, establishing vessels of salvation, sparing neither energy nor material resources, sacrificing everything, humbling oneself and deferring to others, and planning on behalf of Dao.

If inner merit is lacking, the root source remains impure. If outer merit is deficient, one's virtue and conduct cannot be complete.

Therefore the Shrimala Sutra says: "When evil is exhausted, that is called merit; when goodness is fulfilled, that is called virtue."

The Sixth Patriarch said: "Inward humility of heart is merit; outward conduct according to propriety is virtue." And: "When one's original nature establishes the myriad dharmas, that is merit; when the mind-substance is free from discriminating thought, that is virtue." And: "Not departing from one's original nature is merit; responding to circumstances without defilement is virtue." And: "Seeing one's true nature is merit; equanimity is virtue."

Equanimity means that all sentient beings in the universe return to one body, without any distinction.

The Buddhist precepts say: "Every word must be uttered with care, for speech carries merit." From this we can see that whether our words, deeds, and thoughts are deviant or upright is a matter of

the utmost consequence.

The Buddhist precepts also say: "Be clear and lucid — do not let yourself fall into confusion. Guard your thoughts as you would guard a city under siege. Be wakeful and alert — do not let yourself become scattered. Guarding the heart-mind must be stricter than guarding the body." And the proverb says: "Guard your thoughts as you would guard against a plague."

From this we can see that cultivating merit and virtue depends on the advancement of outer merit, but even more on the inner merit of vigilance in solitude.

Chapter 8: What Does It Mean to Honor the Teacher and Treasure Dao?

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In the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, the true Dao has descended into the world. Whoever receives the Enlightened Teacher's transmission can personally escape catastrophe and avoid calamity, transcending birth and death. Even nine generations above and seven below can together ascend the heavenly ladder and jointly reach ultimate bliss. From this one can know how vast the teacher's grace is! How great!

But having received the teacher's virtue, how does one repay it? By honoring and respecting the teacher.

Yet the true meaning of honoring the teacher is not merely offering material support and showing surface respect. Even more, one must embody the teacher's heart, revere the teacher's instructions, emulate the teacher's conduct, carry on the teacher's aspiration, walk the teacher's Dao, fulfill the teacher's vow, and cherish the teacher's intention — achieving a mind-to-mind seal, deeds that coincide without prior arrangement. Only this constitutes truly honoring the teacher.

The Analects say: "When there is work to be done, the disciples take on the labor; when there is wine and food, the elders are served first." This too expresses the meaning of honoring the teacher. Consider how the seventy-two disciples honored Confucius, and how Wan Zhang and others honored Mencius. Although each case differed, they converged on the same destination by different paths. Without exception, they honored their teachers through the seal of heart upon heart, putting into practice the true honoring of the teacher.

What does it mean to treasure Dao? It means making Dao the foremost consideration in all things. One would rather humble oneself and defer to others, witnessing Dao and bringing it to completion, than act out of selfishness for personal gain, or let poverty and hardship cause one to betray one's integrity.

Therefore those who treasure Dao will surely hold fast to death in defense of the good Dao, never compromising the greater principle — in haste or in hardship, never depart from this.

The ancient sages said: "The noble person plans for Dao, not for food; worries about Dao, not about poverty." It is also said: "To take benevolence as one's own burden — is that not weighty? To cease only at death — is that not far-reaching?" All of these testify to how precious Dao is. Do not regard it lightly.

However, honoring the teacher and treasuring Dao cannot be separated. Dao is transmitted through the teacher, so one cannot but honor the teacher. The teacher's fundamental purpose is to transmit Dao, so Dao cannot but be treasured. If one leans too far toward honoring the teacher, one falls into clinging to appearances, and it becomes mere personal sentiment. If one leans too far toward treasuring Dao, one falls into barren emptiness, and it becomes hollow abstraction.

Therefore honoring the teacher and treasuring Dao are interconnected — truly one yet two, two yet one, nothing more than two faces of a single body. I urge you all to contemplate this and awaken to it!

Chapter 9: Karma and Retribution

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The reason people of the world cannot refrain from all evil and practice all good is entirely because they do not understand the principle of karmic cause and effect.

Confucius said: "If good is not accumulated, it is not sufficient to make one's name known; if evil is not accumulated, it is not sufficient to destroy one's person."

Sage Emperor Guan said: "The two paths of good and evil — fortune and misfortune are thereby distinguished."

Lord Lao said: "Plant melons, harvest melons; plant beans, harvest beans. If planting does not miss its season, in ten years roots grow and stems bear fruit. Whether it is melons or beans, one still receives the harvest in return."

The Treatise on Response and Retribution says: "Misfortune and fortune have no gate through which they enter of their own accord; it is only people themselves who summon them. The retribution of good and evil follows one like a shadow follows the body."

The Sutra on Karma says: "If you wish to know the causes of your past life, look at the body you receive in this life. If you wish to know the fruits of your next life, look at the heart with which you act in this life."

The Earth Treasury Sutra says: "Whether one does good or does evil, never has there been the slightest discrepancy. Whether misfortune descends or fortune descends, reward and punishment have from ancient times never erred."

Dipankara Buddha said: "Even the slightest good — offer it as a convenience to others. Even the slightest evil — exhort people not to do it." And: "Let clothing and food follow whatever conditions arise, and naturally you will be content. Being generous to others is fortune; deceiving others is calamity."

Mencius said: "When Heaven sends down calamities, one may still escape them; when one brings calamity upon oneself, one cannot survive."

The Book of Changes says: "A household that accumulates goodness will surely have blessings to spare; a household that accumulates what is not good will surely have calamities to spare."

The Book of Documents says: "To those who do good, a hundred blessings descend; to those who do not good, a hundred calamities descend."

From the words of the ancient sages and worthies cited above, it is proven that whatever one plants, one harvests — karmic retribution is absolutely without error.

Furthermore, taking the present world as evidence: if you treat people with kindness, they will surely be grateful to you; if you treat people with cruelty, they will surely resent you. Just consider those corrupt officials who strutted across the stage, boasting of their abilities and flaunting their power, relying on their influence to bully the orphaned and the widowed. Once their evil reached its full measure, everything crumbled — were they not, in the end, dead or imprisoned? And those local tyrants and wicked gentry who borrowed the tiger's prestige like foxes, dominating for a season — are they not now running in every direction with no home to return to? From this we can see that karmic retribution is the upright principle by which Heaven unfolds. The only difference is whether it comes early or comes late.

Therefore the proverb says:

Good causes bring good returns;
evil causes bring evil returns.
If retribution has not yet come,
the appointed time has not arrived.

From this one can know that prior causes and later effects are not off by even a hair's breadth.

Chapter 10: The Origins and Resolution of Karmic Debts

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Whenever one takes profit without the other party's consent — through scheming and covert calculation, harming others to benefit oneself, causing people to suffer injustice they cannot clear — this is called wrongful harm. Even when the other party has consented, if one has long borrowed and accrued obligations, and in the end has defaulted on grace and fallen short in righteousness, with debts still unreturned — this is called unpaid debt. Together, these compose one's karmic debts, and every person carries them. Tracing back to their root causes, most arise from acting without understanding karmic retribution, so that they accumulate day by day, generation piling upon generation, growing worse all the time.

People are born receiving the upright vital energy of Heaven and Earth — sheltered by Heaven above and supported by Earth below, illuminated by the sun and moon, nourished by rain and dew, sustained through the transformative nurture of the five grains, water, and fire. Only then can they sojourn in this world. But since we have received such generous grace from Heaven and Earth, should we not practice benevolence and righteousness, follow the upright way of Heaven and Earth, in order to repay that grace? It is lamentable that people are hazy about this truth. Not only do they fail to repay Heaven's grace, but those who are utterly reckless commit acts of blaming Heaven and deceiving others. Can one still say they do not owe a debt to Heaven?

Furthermore, the grace of parents in bearing, raising, and toiling on our behalf — even if one spent an entire lifetime, it would be difficult to repay. If one falls short in filial duty, is this not yet another debt owed to one's parents? Beyond this — between spouses where reciprocal grace is lacking, toward children where compassion is insufficient, among friends where trust is deficient, between teacher and disciple where righteousness has been severed — all of these are origins of debt.

As for wrongful harm: it arises from our craving for the pleasures of the palate, from wantonly slaughtering living beings, and even from unintentionally stepping on ants or injuring insects. Furthermore, there are the ignorant who are deluded and blind to their true nature, committing every kind of treachery, theft, sexual transgression, murder, arson, covert scheming, and acts that wound Heaven and violate principle. How little they realize that each person has a spirit-nature and each creature has a soul. For all those who have suffered wrongful harm, how could there be any reason they would not come to demand repayment?

Moreover, now in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, it is precisely the day appointed for settling all accounts. We who cultivate Dao — if we do not clear and repay, one by one, the karmic debts accumulated over sixty thousand years, how can we return to the Realm of Truth?

Consider: in the human world, there are surely no officials who serve while carrying criminal charges. In the Realm of Truth, much less are there Immortals and Buddhas who carry unforgiven debts. We cultivate Dao in order to transcend birth and death. To resolve the cycle of birth and death, one must clear all karmic debts.

But how does one repay them? By earnestly imploring Heaven's compassion — on the one hand, to shelter and protect us, temporarily shouldering our karmic debts; on the other hand, we swiftly cultivate merit and virtue, and afterward deliver our karmic creditors, offsetting debts with merit. Would our karmic debts not then naturally dissolve?

Chapter 11: Why Observe the Vegetarian Vow and Its Benefits

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Since we cultivate the Heavenly Dao, we must embody Heaven's heart. Heaven possesses the virtue of cherishing life, taking benevolence and compassion as its foundation. Then we who cultivate Dao should likewise take benevolence and compassion as our foundation, and swiftly adopt the vegetarian vow.

Therefore Patriarch Lü said:

My flesh is the flesh of all beings;
our forms differ, but the principle does not.
Do not wait for the underworld judges to render their verdict —
ask yourself: what should you do?

From this one can know that the Immortals, Buddhas, Worthies, and Perfected Ones of the past — the sages of all Three Teachings — all observed the vegetarian vow and gradually attained their fruition. In Dao, the Three Purities and Five Phases; in Buddhism, the Three Refuges and Five Precepts — stated directly and spoken plainly, resounding clearly in one's ears. These prove beyond doubt that the Buddhist and Daoist traditions of fasting and abstinence are well established.

But did not Confucius of the Confucian school also observe the vegetarian vow? However, Confucius in his day was a man without power or position, and to avoid the ridicule of others he was upright in conduct but restrained in speech, always containing rather than revealing.

Examine what is recorded in the Xiangtang chapter of the Analects: "Wine bought from the market he would not drink; dried meat from the market he would not eat. Food with an unpleasant color he would not eat; food with a foul smell he would not eat. Food improperly cooked he would not eat; food out of season he would not eat. Food not properly cut he would not eat; food without the right sauce he would not eat. Ginger he never went without." And further: when Ji Kangzi hosted Confucius at a banquet, Confucius ate without touching the meat. Confucius observed three fasts per month — three days of strict fasting and seven days of relaxed fasting. Furthermore, the things the Master treated with utmost gravity were "fasting, warfare, and illness." All of these prove that Confucius practiced fasting and abstinence — this truly admits of no doubt.

According to Mencius: "Having seen a creature alive, one cannot bear to see it die; having heard its cries, one cannot bear to eat its flesh. For this reason, the noble person stays far from the kitchen." He also said: "If chickens, pigs, dogs, and swine do not miss their proper seasons of breeding, then those who are seventy may eat meat." But when a person reaches seventy, their vitality has already declined, their digestion is poor, and their teeth have loosened and fallen out, unable to chew. How could they eat meat? Even if one's body were strong, eating meat is in any case never fitting. Furthermore, the common saying goes: "Since ancient times, few have lived to seventy." This makes it even more apparent that by the time one reaches seventy, one is soon to die — will one still have time for eating meat? From this one can know that not only did Mencius himself fast and abstain, but he was moreover exhorting everyone to do the same.

Now, the Five Pungent Herbs, the Three Forbidden Meats, and things such as tobacco and alcohol are all substances that cloud one's nature. The Five Pungent Herbs are scallion, chives, shallots, garlic, and asafoetida — produced from the improper vital energy of Heaven and Earth, they readily damage the original vitality of the five organs. The Three Forbidden Meats: Heaven abhors flying birds; Earth abhors running beasts; Water abhors aquatic creatures. These are creatures that move laterally, each drawing vital energy from only one direction to sustain its life. Eating them readily damages the original spirit of the Three Treasures, and moreover secretly diminishes one's hidden moral merit. Tobacco and alcohol likewise deplete one's original vitality and original spirit; we should all abstain from them. Our cultivation of Dao is a process of removing the turbid and retaining the pure, refining the yin and replenishing the yang. If one indulges in desires and cravings, craving the pleasures of the palate, how could one ever succeed in cultivation?

Take the very creation of the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras — was it not brought about by humans and animals devouring one another in turn, accumulating over countless lifetimes? Consider the ancient verse:

For a thousand years, the broth in the bowl —
wrongful harm runs deep as the ocean,
resentment impossible to level.
If you wish to know the origin of the world's wars and slaughter,
listen to the sounds from the slaughterhouse at midnight.

How plainly this is spoken! Moreover, all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature. It is because in their previous lives they were deluded and committed sins that in this life they have been reborn as animals to receive retribution, made to suffer and expiate their transgressions — that is all. Now we slaughter them — splitting open their bellies, cutting, chopping, scraping, slicing, boiling, frying, searing, braising — to please our mouths and fill our stomachs, to beautify our skin and fatten our bodies. I ask you: where is Heavenly principle? Where is conscience?

Therefore the Buddhist precepts say: "To rely on our strength to bully those who are weak — this, I fear, is against principle. To eat their flesh to nourish our bodies — how can one's conscience be at ease?"

Since this is so, how can we rescue ourselves from the sins and transgressions accumulated through life after life, generation after generation? The foremost remedy is adopting the vegetarian

vow. Because now, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, Heaven has opened wide its compassion. For any person who resolves to adopt the vegetarian vow, Heaven will hold their prior debts and accumulated karma in abeyance, waiting for them to cultivate merit and virtue so as to dissolve and repay them. Otherwise, if one dissolves debts on one side while creating new ones on the other, nothing is accomplished. In the end, one will never succeed.

Now the Three Calamities and Eight Hardships come frequently and without cease. Those who have long maintained a vegetarian practice have purified bodies; Immortals and Buddhas can easily protect them, and they will not fall into catastrophic harm. Furthermore, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, the great work of the Great Gathering is being carried out, and all the Immortals and Buddhas of every heaven are lending their aid to Dao. If your spirit-body is purified, Immortals and Buddhas can easily work through you, and they will surely use you to build merit and virtue. Afterward, there will moreover come a time of merging spirits.

I hope you will swiftly see this truth clearly, practice it with your whole person, and exert every effort to guide your junior students and your families to completion — causing those who have not yet adopted the vegetarian vow to adopt it, and those who have not yet made their vows to make them. Truly, in the cultivation of the Third Era, everyone has a share: the grandfather who cultivates, the grandfather receives; the grandmother who cultivates, the grandmother receives; those who do not cultivate receive nothing.

My hope for each of you is that all may escape the Final Catastrophe, that your spirit-nature may return to its root, and that at the Grand Assembly of the Three Realms, divine and human may rejoice together, the whole family reunited — that would be wonderful indeed!

Chapter 12: Thoroughly Recognizing True and False

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Among all things in the world, where there is the true there must be the false, and where there is the false there must be the true — this is the principle of duality. Without the true, the false cannot be revealed; without the false, the true likewise cannot be revealed.

In your responses to this topic, you all said: "Dao is true, Principle is true, the Heavenly Mandate is true, the spirit-nature is true." Correct! All that is formless and without appearance — that Principle — is true! You also mentioned the thirty-six heterodox paths and the seventy-two side-gate schools. And you said that one's own physical body, and all that has form and appearance, breath and color — all of it is false. What you have said is entirely correct, and quite good!

But before long, ten thousand teachings will arise together. The thirty-six and seventy-two will all claim to carry Heaven's mandate and to be conducting universal salvation and the Great Gathering. Moreover, their magical arts will be astonishing, manifesting all manner of wonders. At that time, with the true and false intermingled, it will be genuinely difficult to tell them apart. But when we encounter this critical juncture, we must bring forth extraordinary wisdom to examine whether their transmission lineage is correct, whether their principles are true, whether their Heavenly Mandate is genuine. Wherever they emphasize deliberate action and outward display, we should see through it completely. Only when you have certainty should you proceed; otherwise it is extremely dangerous.

You all say that the spirit-nature is true and the physical body is false. In these years of the Final Catastrophe, having encountered the true Dao, you do not seek comfort for the physical body but only seek to deliver the spirit-nature from suffering — this is certainly correct. But how does your spirit-nature escape suffering? It comes down to whether a single thought is true or false. If the thought is true, then all becomes true — even what is false can become true. If the thought is false, then all becomes false — even what is true becomes false. The division between true and false lies at the very moment a single thought arises. Therefore, the truth or falsehood within one's own heart must be recognized thoroughly above all.

Chapter 13: Recognizing the True Meaning of Trials and Tests

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"Trials and tests" — this is a path that we who cultivate Dao must inevitably traverse. Therefore it is said: "Those who cultivate Dao yet do not understand ordeals are not worth speaking with." It is also said: "Where there is Dao, there are inevitably ordeals; Dao and ordeals follow each other like a shadow follows a form." If one wishes to attain Dao, one must be forged and refined through trials and tests. Therefore Daoism says: "Without tempering, one cannot become a true immortal." Confucianism says: "Without testing, one cannot become a sage." Buddhism says: "Without grinding and refining, one cannot become a Buddha." And the proverb says: "Jade uncarved does not become a vessel; gold unrefined is not worth its price."

All of us who cultivate Dao, when we pass through trials and tests, should understand that this is precisely Heaven shaping us. Now I will set out the true meaning of trials and tests in several points; I hope you will all reflect upon them.

(1) Separating the True from the False

The Heavenly time has arrived; the Great Gathering draws near. Yet among those who cultivate Dao, the good and the bad remain intermixed, the true and false hard to distinguish. Moreover, there are those who follow human sentiment yet defy Heavenly Principle — who fabricate right and wrong, who make trouble out of nothing, who exploit public trust for private gain, whose hearts are treacherous, who commit all manner of deeds that injure Heaven and violate Principle. This causes genuine practitioners to suffer unjust wrongs that cannot be cleared. Therefore Heaven sends down trials to select the finest and sift out the unworthy, and only then are the true and the false distinguished. Once the sincere practitioners are free of blemish, the work of the Great Gathering can proceed.

(2) Dissolving Karmic Debts

Through our past lives of birth and death, sixty thousand years of karmic debts have accumulated like mountains and seas. Now that in this life you have received the Heavenly Dao, how could the karmic debts of accumulated lifetimes simply let you be? Therefore Imperial Heaven, in its infinite compassion, sends down trials — cutting, polishing, carving, grinding — to reveal one's true resolve and settle past transgressions. Each time one passes through an ordeal, one settles a portion of karmic debt; gradually heavy karma becomes light, and what was dead transforms into life. All the sages, worthies, immortals, and Buddhas of old were forged and refined through trials and tests.

(3) Transforming One's Temperamental Nature

Because human beings have fallen into the conditioned, material realm, their temperaments have changed in different ways, producing countless uneven dispositions, none of which accord with the Middle Way. Even among those who cultivate Dao, certain faults are hard to avoid: affirming oneself while faulting others, being arrogant and aiming too high, being superficial and restless, being careless and inattentive, acting without awareness, practicing without examination. If one can endure several rounds of trials and tests, and meet with rebuff a few times, one will naturally have a change of heart, repent and correct one's faults, and transform the temperamental nature back to the original heavenly nature.

(4) Determining One's Rank

The nine ranks of the lotus platform are determined according to one's merit. As the saying goes, the true Dao and true ordeals reveal the true heart — and this is found entirely within hardship and difficulty. Heaven tests and humanity verifies; your aspiration, insight, learning, and attainment determine whether you rise or fall.

Thus when Confucius was cut off from provisions between Chen and Cai for seven days, his followers all fell ill, yet Confucius grew only more spirited in his lecturing and recitation, and his singing to the zither never ceased. He summoned Zi Lu and asked: "The Odes say: 'Neither rhinoceros nor tiger, yet dragged across the wilderness.' Is my Dao wrong? Why have we come to this?"

Zi Lu, his face flushed with indignation, replied: "A noble person should never be reduced to such straits. Could it be, Master, that you have not been benevolent enough? — for people do not trust us. Could it be that you have not been wise enough? — for people do not follow our way. Moreover, I once heard you say, Master: 'Do good, and Heaven repays it with blessing; do evil, and Heaven repays it with calamity.' Now the Master has accumulated virtue and embraced righteousness, and has practiced this for a long time — why then do you dwell in such poverty?"

Confucius said: "You do not yet understand, Zi Lu! Let me explain it to you. If you think the benevolent must always be trusted, then Bo Yi and Shu Qi would not have starved to death on Mount Shouyang. If you think the wise must always be employed, then Prince Bi Gan would not have had his heart cut out. If you think the loyal must always be rewarded, then Guan Longfeng would not have been executed. If you think those who remonstrate must always be heeded, then

Wu Zixu would not have been killed.

"Whether one meets with opportunity or not is a matter of timing. Whether one is worthy or unworthy is a matter of ability. Many a noble person of broad learning and deep deliberation has gone unrecognized — why should I, Qiu, be the only exception? Moreover, the iris and orchid grow in secluded forests, yet do not cease to be fragrant because no one is there to appreciate them. The noble person cultivates Dao and establishes virtue, yet does not alter his integrity because of poverty or hardship. What one does is within one's own power; life and death are a matter of destiny. Thus Duke Chonger of Jin harbored the ambition to rule, born out of his exile in Cao and Wei; King Goujian of Yue harbored the ambition to rule, born out of his humiliation at Kuaiji. Therefore, those who occupy a low position yet feel no concern — their thinking does not reach far. Those who live in constant comfort — their ambitions do not expand. How can one know how things will begin and end?"

Zi Lu departed, and Confucius summoned Zi Gong and put the same question to him. Zi Gong said: "The Master's Dao is supremely great — that is why the world cannot accommodate it. Master, why not lower it somewhat?"

Confucius said: "Ci! A good farmer can sow, but may not always reap a good harvest. A skilled craftsman can create fine work, but cannot guarantee it will please everyone. A noble person can cultivate his Dao, ordering and systematizing it, but cannot guarantee that the world will accept it. Now, to neglect cultivating one's Dao and instead seek acceptance — Ci! Your ambition is not broad enough! Your thinking is not far-reaching enough!"

Zi Gong departed. Yan Hui entered. The question was put to him in the same manner. Yan Hui said: "The Master's Dao is supremely great; the world cannot accommodate it. Yet the Master extends and practices it nonetheless. That the world does not employ us — this is the disgrace of those who rule the states! What cause has the Master for distress? It is precisely in not being accepted that the noble person is revealed."

Confucius sighed with delight and said: "How wise! — the son of the Yan family! If you had great wealth, I would serve as your steward."

Based on the differences in what these disciples said, we can see that their attainment and accomplishment must certainly have differed. Afterward, Confucius became the Supreme Sage; Yan Hui became the Restoring Sage; Zi Gong became one of the Ten Philosophers; and Zi Lu became a Great Worthy. This may also serve as a reference for how trials and tests determine one's rank.

In sum, since we cultivate the true Dao, we must endure trials and tests. This is an inescapable principle. Now I will analyze the categories of trials and tests in the next chapter, for you all to ponder and explore.

Chapter 14: How to Face Trials and Tests

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(1) Inner Ordeals

As for developing sores and falling ill, prolonged afflictions that will not heal, insect stings and dog bites, falls and blows and sudden pains, disasters of flood and fire, the menace of thieves and robbers, and so forth — all of these, great and small, have their causes and consequences. If you wish to dissolve them, the way is: "Move them with sincerity." For virtue can move Heaven, and sincerity can stir the spirits. You need only hold fast to a true heart and place your trust in God. As the saying goes, "August Heaven shows no favoritism; it aids only the virtuous" — and invisibly, the mechanism will naturally be turned to dissolve the ordeal.

(2) Outer Ordeals

These are: slander from relatives and friends, ridicule from neighbors, intimidation by local authorities, hostility from government officials, and interference by armed force. The way to face them is: "Trust in Principle." Once you understand the true Principle, you let go of worldly desires, accept that life and death are determined by destiny, and find no cause for fear.

Thus when Master Cheng cultivated Dao, in his time he was labeled a purveyor of false teachings, called a partisan, denounced before the court, and his condemnation inscribed in stone — across the vast earth, he could scarcely find a place to set his feet. When Master Zhu pursued Dao, in his time he was branded delusional, called a sorcerer; to follow his teachings was to break the law; to shun him was considered blameless; to attack him was considered meritorious; to denounce him merited reward. He himself was stripped of office and had his stipend docked, and his students were banished to frontier service. Master Yangming pacified turmoil and disorder, yet his achievements went unrewarded. He dwelt in a desolate temple discussing Chan, as though unaware of worldly affairs. Cai Yuanding and his sons, because they followed Master Zhu's teachings, were banished to military service. They did not shrink from hardship and danger, but taught Dao from their places of exile. All of them had recognized the true Principle and looked lightly upon worldly things — that is why they feared no ordeal.

(3) Ordeals of Anger

These are when kindness goes unreturned and is instead repaid with enmity, causing you to suffer unjust wrongs, your chest filling with rage, your fiery temper erupting. When you encounter this ordeal, you must face it with a magnanimous and tolerant spirit. When they try to make you angry, you simply refuse to be angry.

The Patriarch once said: "If someone strikes this old fool, this old fool falls down first. If someone curses this old fool, this old fool just laughs and grins. If they spit on my face, I let it dry on its own. I save my energy, and they are spared their vexation."

Jesus said: "If someone strikes your right cheek, turn your left cheek to them as well. If someone wants to take your inner garment, let them have your outer garment too. If they compel you to go one mile, go with them two."

Therefore we should emulate the words of the Patriarch and of Jesus and put them into practice.

(4) Extraordinary Ordeals

Whenever one's household is ruined and one's fortune destroyed, when husband and wife are separated, when children die — all of these belong to extraordinary ordeals. Those of us who cultivate Dao, if we do not recognize this ordeal, easily fall. But how does one face it? The answer is: "Uphold Principle and accept one's fate." You must understand that houses, property, and land all belong to the realm of the false; husband and wife, sons and daughters, will eventually be separated.

An ancient poem says:

“Heaven is empty, earth is empty;
human life drifts, small and lost, between the two.
The sun is empty, the moon is empty;
rising in the east and falling in the west — for whose sake is this work?
Gold is empty, silver is empty;
after death, when were they ever in your hands?
Fields are empty, land is empty;
how many owners have they already changed?
Wife is empty, children are empty;
on the road to the Yellow Springs, you will not meet again.

Therefore in a person's life, all gain and loss, prosperity and decline, are determined by destiny. One must not grasp for them, nor can one refuse them. Knowing this, there is no such thing as an ordeal!

(5) Ordeals of Ease

This may be discussed from two sides: the sacred and the worldly.

On the worldly side: the tender bonds of wife and the love of children cannot be pushed away or broken through. Sensory pleasures, material goods, and profit — following desire wherever it leads — cause you to become lost and unable to return. On the sacred side: when Elders praise you and junior students defer to you, it makes you arrogant and presumptuous, strutting about with your nose in the air. Without realizing it, you abandon the heart of Dao.

If you encounter this ordeal, you must quickly awaken with a start: "When ease comes, receive it as adversity." On the worldly side: stop at the edge of the abyss, rein in your horse at the cliff's edge, recognize that the road ahead is perilous, and embrace Dao with renewed urgency. On the sacred side: examine yourself and ask whether the praise and compliments you receive are truly deserved. Then naturally the ordeal of ease can be dissolved.

(6) Ordeals of Adversity

This too may be discussed from the sacred and worldly sides.

On the worldly side: resentment from parents, spouse, and children; harsh circumstances; hardship in clothing and food; loss of purpose and ill fortune; depression of body and mind. On the sacred side: when Elders are cold and junior students look down on you, causing you to become disheartened and at a loss.

When you encounter this field of trial, you should: "When adversity comes, receive it with grace." On the worldly side: accept your lot and hold fast to the heart of Dao. Know that jade, though shattered, does not lose its whiteness; bamboo, though burned, does not lose its integrity. On the sacred side: cultivate the Dao of non-action, perform the work of non-action, taking the fulfillment of vows and the repayment of grace as your guiding principle. In all things, seek the cause within yourself; in serving those above and guiding those below, always feel there is room for improvement.

(7) Ordeals of Reversal

In the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, cultivating the true Dao is originally for the purpose of escaping birth and death and severing the chain of cause and effect. But because practitioners differ in their spiritual foundations, affinities, and karmic debts, their trials and tests also differ. Some go from poverty to wealth, become self-satisfied and smug, and abandon all thought of Dao. Others go from wealth to poverty, grow depressed and resentful, and retreat from their aspirations.

If you encounter this ordeal, you should act according to your present station, hold fast to your true resolve, never forgetting it in thought after thought, preserving it at every moment. In haste or in hardship, never depart from this.

(8) Ordeals of the Path

These are of two kinds: inner and outer.

Inner ordeals come from fellow practitioners of this Dao. In minor cases, they are heedless in word and deed, violating benevolence and forsaking righteousness, harboring mutual resentment and friction. In major cases, they become treacherous at heart, split off into separate branches and factions, contend for control of the Dao's resources, and usurp the Heavenly Mandate.

Outer ordeals come from the thirty-six heterodox paths and seventy-two side-gate schools, with all manner of magical arts and every sort of wonder, dazzling your eyes and confusing your spirit, making it hard to distinguish true from false. The slightest greed or delusion, and you may find yourself boarding a boat while searching for a boat, riding a donkey while looking for a donkey.

If you encounter this ordeal, you must be free of greed and free of delusion. Therefore Daoism says: "Be pure, still, and without action." Confucianism says: "Without sound and without scent." Buddhism says: "If you seek to see me through form, or seek me through sound, this person walks a deviant path and cannot see the Tathagata." It also says: "All that has form is illusory. All conditioned phenomena are like a dream, a phantom, a bubble, a shadow — like dew and like lightning. One should contemplate them in this way." Therefore, in cultivating Dao, we must recognize the ordeals of the path.

For all the various ordeals described above, if any of you should encounter them, you must remember the words of the Dean. "Trials" are the open tests; "ordeals" are the hidden tests. Trials are easy to recognize; ordeals are not easy to recognize. In the end, it all comes down to four words: joy, anger, love, and hatred. Whenever these are not expressed in due measure, one enters the realm of the demonic. Therefore in cultivating Dao, one must see through the appearance of the demonic. Otherwise, far from guarding against and resisting it, one ends up aiding the demonic and becoming demonic oneself — how terrifying!

Consider how the Tathagata Buddha, in a past life as the Patient Immortal, suffered the ordeal of being dismembered by King Kali. He regarded the king as his very benefactor, one who helped him attain Dao all the sooner. He said: "When I am reborn in a future life, I will certainly deliver you." Later, when the Tathagata attained Buddhahood, he delivered the disciple Ananda — who was the reincarnation of King Kali.

Likewise, when Yue Wumu met his doom at Fengbo Pavilion, fearing that his sons and followers might later rebel, he summoned them to the execution ground to perish together, yet still gave thanks to Qin Hui for enabling him to become a paragon of loyalty.

From this we can see that throughout history, those who upheld loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness — in most cases their physical bodies bore the catastrophe while their spirits returned to Heaven. How much more so for us who cultivate the Heavenly Dao? Nevertheless, those of limited experience will inevitably spread rumors and slander, ridicule and disparagement.

Therefore Laozi said: "When the highest type hears Dao, they diligently practice it. When the middling type hears Dao, they half keep it and half lose it. When the lowest type hears Dao, they burst out laughing." Zhuangzi said: "The sparrow at the fence does not know the ambition of the swan and the wild goose; the summer insect cannot be told of ice; the frog in the well does not believe the sky is vast." Song Yu said: "The loftier the melody, the fewer those who can harmonize with it." Confucius said: "When virtue is cultivated, slander arises; when Dao is lofty, detraction follows."

Seen in this light, where there is Dao there are ordeals — this is an inescapable principle. We who cultivate Dao must be vigilant and strive onward, embracing a spirit of fearlessness and non-action, harboring the magnanimity of one who is not known yet feels no resentment. Only then will we avoid being encircled by trials and tests.

Chapter 15: Subduing Body and Mind

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The mind is the sovereign ruler of the myriad spirits within the human body. The body is the instrument through which a person acts in life. Every movement of the body is governed by the mind's direction; every expression of the mind depends on the body to give it form. The Buddha said: "The myriad phenomena arise from the mind; the myriad phenomena are extinguished by the mind."

The movement and stillness of the mind are truly wondrous and unfathomable. Yet they do not go beyond two kinds of thought: the deviant and the upright. The upright accords with principle; the deviant drifts into desire. People of the world constantly lose their uprightness and drift into deviance; they are blind to principle and deluded by desire. The harm that deviant desires inflict on people is truly terrifying. In the Buddhist tradition we find: "Tether the monkey of the mind, lock the horse of thought." "Sweep away the three minds, cast off the four marks." In the Confucian tradition we find: "Examine yourself three times daily; restrain your mind with the four do-nots." All of these demonstrate that people must abandon the deviant and return to the upright, restrain desire and return to principle.

Now I shall explain the three minds and four marks, and the three examinations and four restraints, simply and by analogy, to elucidate the fundamental meaning of subduing body and mind.

The three minds are the minds of the past, the future, and the present — none of which should be harbored. The four marks: to be attached to form is called a mark.

First, whenever one schemes for one's own clothing and food, or schemes on behalf of one's children, bustling about all day long, muddled in fame and profit, chasing waves and forgetting to return, bound and unable to free oneself — this is called the mark of self.

Second, seeing others with power and influence, one endlessly seeks to attach oneself to them; seeing others who are weak, one endlessly despises and loathes them. Envy others for what they have, being stingy when others ask for help — this is called the mark of others.

Third, clinging to form, sensation, perception, and volition, hoping and unscrupulously seeking, speaking uprightly but acting deviously, professing goodness with the mouth while harboring evil in the mind — this is called the mark of sentient beings.

Fourth, kneeling in prayer and worship, seeking blessings and rewards in the present life. Burning talismans and refining elixirs, hoping for longevity and immortality — this is called the mark of the long-lived one.

The three examinations:

First, "In counseling others, have I been disloyal?" In terms of cultivating Dao, this means: In propagating Heaven's teachings on its behalf and saving sentient beings, have you fulfilled your responsibility?

Second, "In dealings with friends, have I been untrustworthy?" This means: in connecting those above to those below, in every word and action, has your own mind been free of deception and falsehood? Have you kept your word?

Third, "Have I failed to practice what was transmitted to me?" This means: the teachings of the heart transmitted by your teacher, the words and instructions your teacher gave you in daily life, the revelations conveyed by the immortals and Buddhas of all the heavens, and the teachings that the various Elders spoke to you — have you contemplated and penetrated them? Have you put them into practice?

The four restraints:

First, "Do not look at what is contrary to propriety." This means: since we cultivate the true Dao, we must recognize true principle and see through all appearances of form. Keep the mind always within the Mysterious Pass. Do not let it race outward. Then naturally it will not be harmed.

Second, "Do not speak what is contrary to propriety." This means: do not discuss the rights and wrongs of others, and naturally you will not bear the transgression of the mouth.

Third, "Do not listen to what is contrary to propriety." This means: do not rashly listen to others' words and let the mind give rise to resentment. A single deviation in thought, and dangers spring up in profusion.

Fourth, "Do not act in a way contrary to propriety." This means: in one's conduct, do not act rashly or recklessly. One must examine and inspect oneself within one's own mind, asking whether it accords with propriety, so as to avoid committing errors and bearing the burden personally.

All of the analogies above serve as warnings to us cultivators of Dao that we must constantly subdue body and mind. Once a person has fallen into the acquired realm, one is everywhere surrounded by sensory desires. The moment body and mind stir, it is either upright or deviant. If deviant, one sinks into indulgence and lingers there, and the future becomes perilous. The harm done by the mind is especially terrifying: it constantly gives rise to illusions, and the slightest external stimulus makes it most easily agitated. Therefore the Buddha said: "Demons arise from the mind; trials are self-invited." If one does not subdue body and mind, restraining the source of disorder, how can cultivation of Dao succeed?

Chapter 16: Careful Speech and Cautious Conduct

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Careful speech means not being careless with one's words. Cautious conduct means exercising care and inspection over one's actions. A person's speech and actions should always be expressed in due measure. If they are not expressed in due measure, then troublesome incidents will arise. In minor cases, one's own reputation is ruined, and one suffers slander, contempt, and exclusion. In major cases, one drags in the wider community and invites all manner of trials and tests, suffering humiliation and defamation.

Therefore Confucius warned people to be careful in speech, saying: "The noble person desires to be slow in speech." He also said: "To speak before it is one's turn is rashness; to remain silent when it is one's turn to speak is concealment; to speak without reading the other's expression is blindness." He also said: "If one can speak with someone but does not, one loses that person. If one cannot speak with someone but does, one wastes one's words." Zi Gong also said: "A single word can mark one as wise; a single word can mark one as unwise. One cannot be anything but careful with words." Cautious conduct means guarding against error and correcting faults; do not be careless and inattentive, lest unexpected incidents occur.

In sum, "careful speech and cautious conduct" tells people that in their words and actions they should be cautious and watchful, apprehensive and fearful; vigilant in small matters, vigilant in solitude; never departing from this in a single thought. Therefore in our cultivation of Dao, any word or deed that benefits Dao or supplements it, we carry out. Otherwise, we refrain.

Chapter 17: Establishing Vows and Fulfilling Vows

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A vow is the original heart. Whenever conscience manifests, the earnest and aspiring heart that naturally arises from one's innate heavenly nature — that is a vow.

In our cultivation of Dao, regarding the matter of establishing vows, we are all quite clear. Once a great vow is established, it is immediately registered in the primordial realm, causing our ancestors in the spiritual realm to ascend on high and our karmic debts to retreat far away. The congratulations I just offered you carry precisely this meaning.

Since Heaven is so compassionate toward us, we should establish our vows and fulfill them, proceeding with solid action. Otherwise, when the appointed time of Heaven arrives, Heaven tests the genuine and verifies the real, and not only will we be unable to reach the realm of ultimate bliss — we will certainly drag our ancestors in the spiritual realm down into the sea of suffering along with us. Why is this? Only because, though Heaven is compassionate, it absolutely will not shelter and protect those who outwardly comply but inwardly defy, or who seem right but are not. Therefore, in the vow text established at the time of receiving Dao, it already tells us plainly: "If vows are established but not fulfilled, it is hard to return Home." Viewed from this, in our cultivation of Dao, on the topic of establishing vows and fulfilling them, we must regard it with the utmost seriousness and must not take it lightly.

Chapter 18: Repentance and Correcting Faults

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Repentance means confessing and laying bare. Remorse means regretting and reforming. Repentance and correcting faults means confessing and declaring one's past transgressions and renewing one's future conduct. Therefore repentance is the foremost essential for us cultivators of Dao. In our daily dealings with people and encounters with situations, we are invariably biased or skewed, creating all manner of transgressions. If we do not sincerely repent and correct our faults, how can we accomplish Dao? As the saying goes: "In Heaven there are no immortals or Buddhas who carry transgressions; in the human world there are no officials who bear guilt." This is precisely the meaning.

Therefore, repentance in this present life is undertaken for the sake of the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras — repenting so that one's own spirit may escape suffering; repenting so as to nurture and become a pure and complete person; repenting so that one's ancestors in the spiritual realm may be delivered and ascend. The true meaning of repentance — I hope each of you will by no means neglect it. In the Repentance Text that we recite every day:

“ Maitreya, the Ancestral Patriarch, whose wondrous Dharma is boundless, shelters and protects all sentient beings. Repent before the Buddha, correct faults and renew oneself, and together be recorded in the Heavenly Register.

This too is saying that in our cultivation of Dao, if we do not repent and renew ourselves daily, it will always be difficult to reach the hope of complete fulfillment.

Chapter 19: One Thought of Wrath Arises, and a Million Gates of Obstruction Swing Open

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Wrath is one of the three poisons. Every flicker of resentment, every impulse to compare and keep score — all of these are the wrath-mind at work.

We who cultivate Dao possess an original nature that is lively, natural, and effortless. Dao moves in accord with heaven's timing, adapting and transforming with circumstance. Human nature — luminous, complete, and free-flowing — should likewise adapt and transform. One must never, at the slightest discomfort to the heart, allow oneself to be swept away by external conditions, for a single thought of wrath opens the door to dark demons.

In the past, when Patriarch Qiu was cultivating Dao, he first encountered a physiognomist who declared his facial features most inauspicious and predicted he was certainly destined to starve to death. Yet Patriarch Qiu's merit and practice reached completion; he did not starve but became an immortal.

On one occasion, however, his wrath-mind stirred. He rode high upon the cloud-tops and sought out the physiognomist to demand why the prediction had failed. The physiognomist explained that his hidden accumulated merit had grown immense and his features had already turned from ill fortune to good. Only then did Patriarch Qiu realize it was his own wrath-mind that had been stirred. Immediately he stilled his heart, quieted his thoughts, withdrew into the mountains, and sat deep in meditation.

But since the wrath-mind had already arisen — though he awakened to it quickly — heaven's trials would not be remitted. In the end the matter could not simply be settled. Various dark demons descended upon him, throwing his body and mind into turmoil. Fortunately, Patriarch Qiu recognized the danger early, held firm, and was never shaken. Otherwise, through the error of a

single thought, all his prior merit would have been wasted, and he would have sunk forever into perdition.

The harm caused by wrath is truly terrifying. Let all take warning and guard against it!

Chapter 20: True Dao, True Trials — There the True Heart Is Seen

Chapter 20: True Dao, True Trials — There the True Heart Is Seen

This is the final topic. Over these two days, the Dean has spoken with you on many subjects, recounting the ancient and deliberating on the present. All of it has been to illuminate the preciousness and sincerity of Dao, so that each of you may carry out your own practice and fulfill your own vows.

But on the path of advanced cultivation, karmic debts and trials and tests absolutely cannot be avoided. Whoever cultivates the true Dao must undergo heaven's true trials, for only through true trials can the true heart be seen. Moreover, those whom you have wronged over accumulated lifetimes, those to whom you owe debts — how could these not be repaid?

From this it is clear: within the true trials, heaven is secretly dissolving your sins and karmic debts. Therefore, when you encounter trials and tests, it is precisely heaven having compassion on you and bringing you to completion through hardship. You must understand this clearly. This topic may be called my parting word from the heart — so that you may hold a settled understanding, and never again be bound or constrained by trials and tests.

The Dean once more earnestly admonished the assembly, sincerely and ardently encouraging them, and bestowed the "Song of Remembering Mother and Striving Forward" (set to the tune *Falling Flowers and Flowing Water*) as a keepsake:

“ Good times flow ceaselessly, like water —
the Great Gathering is not far off,
and when dissolution comes, no one can remain.

The final catastrophe is upon us;
how pitiable that the ninety-six billion lost children
drift in the sea of karmic suffering.

Think of the Compassionate Mother who grieves for the world,
her boat upon the bitter sea,
rescuing all living beings —
evening after evening, morning after morning,
morning after morning, evening after evening,
always her heart grieves.

Her brows are furrowed,
her tears flow —
if the ninety-six billion cannot be saved,
how can the Gathering be called complete?

Brothers and sisters — awaken!
Follow our Mother and press forward!
Go everywhere, pioneering and planting seeds;
hurry and help our compassionate Mother —
Sisters! Brothers!
Remember my words!

The Holy Teacher said:

"When you understand principle, cultivating Dao comes easily." "When your understanding is correct, nothing can topple you."

On the road of cultivation and service, always preserve the luminous original heart of the newborn. Only then can wisdom arise unceasingly, ignorance be broken through, and no trial — however fierce — bring you down. When your understanding of the meaning of Dao is sufficiently clear and transparent, your foundation stands firm and your practice runs deep. Neither wind nor trials can shake the original heart, and only then can the temple's work endure for the long term.