

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.

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