

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.

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