Chapter 8: The True Self and the False Self

In the previous chapters so far we have come to understand that the soul is the owner and governing essence of the body. When body and soul combine, there is birth. When body and soul go their separate ways, death occurs. The body goes through the processes of birth and death, creation and destruction. This, however, does not happen in the case of the soul, which merely comes and goes.

There is a very close relationship between body and soul. Each affects the other. This relationship is the topic of this chapter. An ancient sage named Kong Ming posed this riddle in the *Passage of the Heavenly Secret*:

> “Two people share the same pair of shoes,
>
> The one who is alive carries the one who is dead,
>
> Yet, the one who is dead buries the live one.

This, like all riddles, makes no sense if we interpret it literally. How can two people share one pair of shoes? That in itself would be strange enough, especially when we read the second line. It seems more like a joke. In addition, how can a dead person bury someone who is alive?

The answer is **a person**. The two people are in fact one person. The one who is alive is the soul, and the dead one is our physical body. The soul gives life to the physical body and, in fact, carries it—the body cannot function by itself unless it is ensouled. The soul animates and activates the body.

However, when we were born into this world we failed to recognize our true nature. We mistake our physical body for our true self and spend our whole lives finding ways to keep it comfortable and entertained. As a result, the soul bears all the karma that accumulates in the course of a lifetime, unable to escape the ceaseless cycle of suffering. If we follow the desires of the physical body, the soul will have to take the consequences.

This is what it meant in the riddle when “the one who is dead buries the one who is alive.” The physical body can cause the downfall of the spiritual self. As it is said:

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> How we feel after death depends on what we do while we are alive.

The Two Corpses: A Story

A story from a Chinese legend illustrates this principle. About three thousand years ago, at the end of the Zhou dynasty, Zheng Zi, a disciple of Lao Zi, was strolling in the wilderness when he saw a heavenly deity holding a bouquet of flowers and paying respects to a corpse. Zheng Zi asked the deity what his relationship to the corpse was and why it deserved such honor.

The deity answered:

> “This body is my previous incarnation. It helped me to do many meritorious deeds, so I was able to ascend to heaven, where I can live in freedom and joy. Without my old body, none of this would have been possible. That is why I am now paying my respect to it.

When asked what good deeds he had done, the deity replied:

> “I paid respect to heaven and earth; I respected the saints and sages and honored my ancestors. I was a pious son to my parents, lived harmoniously with my neighbors, and helped the poor and needy. I was compassionate and generous, giving and sharing.

Zheng Zi thanked the deity and went on his way. Soon, he came upon a hungry ghost whipping a corpse in rage. Curious, Zheng Zi asked the ghost why.

The ghost replied:

> “This body is my previous incarnation. This terrible body made me do terrible deeds.

When Zheng Zi asked what these were, the ghost explained:

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> I insulted heaven and earth, disrespected the saints and sages, dishonored my ancestors, and mistreated my parents. I constantly argued and fought with others, showed no respect to anyone, vandalized and killed many animals, and denied the teachings of the saints and sages. Because of my deeds, I now suffer constant torment in the underworld. That is why I am venting my anger by whipping this traitorous body.

The ghost recited:

> “Because of this stinking covering of flesh
>
> I have spent my whole life pursuing temporary pleasures.
>
> I did not stop to reflect on my actions.
>
> Even though life is transient,
>
> The pain after death seems endless.
>
> Now I whip this body that has led me astray,
>
> So that I can release my anger and frustration.

Zheng Zi, deeply moved, recited:

> “Today I saw two corpses.
>
> The wise one ascended to heaven
>
> While the evil one descended to hell.
>
> The virtuous soul paid respects to its body,
>
> While the body of the tormented soul was whipped in anger and frustration.

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1. Birth and Death Are Continuous

Birth is not the beginning and death is not the end. Birth comes as a result of death, and death has its origin in birth. As the saying goes:

> One extra person born into the world means one less ghost in the ghost realm.

This shows that life is a continuous process. The soul is eternal; it has no birth or death. Birth and death are unavoidable processes for the physical body. Life in the physical world is transient, just a dot on an infinite line of existence.

When we realize that life is a process and that there is no permanence in our physical existence, we can begin to see all things of this life—bodies, reputations, property, wealth—merely as tools, useful but without real substance. Nevertheless, these impermanent things can greatly influence the soul's state after death.

The deity in the story lived in joy because he used those tools wisely to fulfill his spiritual needs. The ghost suffered because he used them for actions that obscured his true nature. To die in peace and live on in brightness, we must consider our actions while alive.

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2. Positive Existence After Death Requires Virtue and Merit

Death is not the end—it begins life in another form. Our present life follows our death in the past, and our past death led to this life. If we want a positive life after death, we must cultivate virtues and merits now. Everything we experience is the result of our past actions; blaming others is pointless.

The constant pain of humankind stems from ignorance of this principle. If we do not plant good seeds in this life, we cannot expect to harvest good fruits in the future. Ignorance of cause and effect only deepens our suffering.

The way to change our circumstances is to change our heart. As we cultivate goodness, unnecessary pain and worry will be resolved.

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3. Better to Transcend the Cycle of Birth and Death

Whether rebirth is into good or bad circumstances, it is still within the cycle of karmic returns. As long as karma exists, birth and death will continue, and reincarnation becomes a vicious cycle.

Acting well to secure a better next life is still limited. Even in fortunate rebirths, old negative seeds from earlier lives can still sprout. The best course is to transcend the cycle entirely.

This is possible only when positive actions are unconditional. When we receive Dao and our Heavenly Gate is opened, we gain inner wisdom, enabling unconditional benevolence. Cultivating Dao and dedicating ourselves to saving all beings allows us to transcend birth—and thus death.

Whether we can transcend the cycle depends entirely on how we live now.

Conclusion

Life is precious when used to cultivate Dao and radiate inner virtues. Death is frightening when one lacks virtue. We must cherish each moment, using life to establish and realize our divine goal.

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