Chapter 9: The Story of the Kew Chow Master and Bai

We now live in a time when Dao can be part of our family life. It is no longer necessary for us to seclude ourselves in order to cultivate. After receiving Dao we can cultivate at home, together with all the other members of the family.

As part of a family, we show love and respect towards our parents. As part of society and a nation—whether we work as farmers, laborers, business people, or professionals—we each have responsibilities to fulfill. Within society we also develop networks of affinity with friends and relatives, and we share the knowledge of Dao with them when we meet. This is a very agreeable and convenient way to spread the Dao message and elevate ourselves as well as others.

In the past, the situation for cultivators was much more difficult. They had to leave their homes and families behind and travel deep into the mountains. As you can imagine, very few people cultivated in this way. This chapter is about earlier methods of cultivation.

Two Immortals in the World

Seeing how souls in the world created bad seeds and had no intention of returning to their heavenly home, the Buddha in the West told two immortals to reincarnate into the world to awaken the lost. These two immortals came separately:

- **Bai Lee Tian**, born into the Bai family, became a royal officer.
- **Ma Tian Zhang**, born into the Ma family, was a great scholar in the National Academy. Through reading scriptures, he came to understand the law of cause and effect, resigned his position, and became a monk in the Ta Shuan Ling monastery.

When Ma Tian Zhang completed his cultivation, he returned to heaven. Buddha asked:

> “While you were in the world, how many people were you able to deliver from the cycle of reincarnation?

Ma Tian Zhang replied that delivering lost souls was difficult. The Buddha then asked where his fellow cultivator was. Ma explained that Bai Lee Tian was content in his royal position and had been captivated by the mundane world. The Buddha admonished him for not saving Bai and instructed

him to return immediately to do so.

The Bird’s Nest Zen Master

Knowing Bai was already nearly eighty years old, Ma Tian Zhang worried that reincarnating again would take too long. Then he saw a bird’s nest at the top of an old pine tree and chose to reincarnate as a bird with a human face. Thus was born the **Bird’s Nest Zen Master**, who preached truth from his perch.

One day, Officer Bai rode past and heard the Zen Master. Curious, he asked:

> “What is cultivating?

The Zen Master replied:

> “Stop all negative doings, do all positive actions and good deeds. That is cultivating.

Bai scoffed, saying even a child could say that. The Zen Master replied:

> “Yes, a three-year-old can say it, but an eighty-year-old still cannot do it.

When Bai asked if living fifty feet up a tree was dangerous, the Zen Master answered:

> “Your position is much more dangerous than mine.
>
> Being an officer, you ride beside the emperor.
>
> Attending the emperor is like riding with a tiger.
>
> The flowers that bloom in the dawn are enchanting,
>
> But in the dust they fade, leaving nothing behind.

Bai was moved and promised to return, but worldly routines made him forget.

Awakening Officer Bai

The Zen Master later visited Bai's home and wrote this on his wall:

> In forty years of being an officer, whether general or scholar,
>
> There are thousands of rights and wrongs.
>
> In the comfort of one family lie the complaints of a thousand families.
>
> In the achievements and fame of half a lifetime,
>
> The grievances of a hundred lifetimes arise.

Reading this, Bai was awakened. He told his wife he wished to retreat into the mountains to lighten his karmic burden. She objected, saying the whole family could share his burden. Bai then tested them by blowing out a lamp and asking who would take the blame. No one did. He concluded:

> If you cannot take responsibility for a small act, how can you bear my karma?
>
> When we have sickness and pain, we must endure the suffering alone.
>
> No one can suffer on our behalf.

The next day, Bai went to the Green Water Bridge, paid respects to the Zen Master, and began cultivating.

The Family Follows

Bai's wife tried to change his mind, but he wrote to her:

> Husband and wife begin as birds from the same forest,
>
> But when danger comes, each flies in a different direction.

> What is the use of achievement and high status,
>
> When they can vanish in an instant, leaving a heavy karmic burden?

His family, inspired, later joined him in cultivation.

Lessons from the Story

1. With Willingness to Learn, a Common Person Can Become a Buddha

Even worldly people who sincerely cultivate can transcend confusion and attain awakening, especially if they perform deeds to save others. Without pursuit of truth, even Buddhas and bodhisattvas can become lost in the illusions of the world, as happened to Officer Bai.

By receiving Dao, we rediscover our true nature. Learning, cultivating, and spreading Dao allows our virtues to shine and helps us fulfill our life mission.

---

2. Focus on Cultivation and Help Others Do the Same

Many of us have strong spiritual foundations and affinities, possibly from past lives as disciples or even Buddhas and bodhisattvas. But the world’s temptations can bind us. Bai was trapped by attachments to status, wealth, and family, but freed himself through wisdom. His choice led his whole family to cultivate.

We must not sacrifice our spiritual purpose for career, reputation, or material gain. Instead, we should focus on cultivation and help our families cultivate together for a truly happy, meaningful life.

---

3. Each Person Must Bear Their Own Results

Our circumstances are the results of our own actions. No one can bear our karma for us. As the saying goes:

> A person has to deal with the circumstances of his own death just as the one who eats will have the full stomach.

Now that we have received Dao, it is time to learn more, understand the truth, and cultivate ourselves.

Revision #1
Created 2025-08-10 01:24:59 UTC by Phil
Updated 2025-08-10 01:26:59 UTC by Phil