

Interpreting the Tang Dynasty Poem "Self Understanding"

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Self Understanding

By Bai Juyi

Fang Guan was said to be a Zen Buddhist in his last life,
Wang Wei claims himself to be a painter in his previous
life.

I too observe my fates in past lives,
Finding my predestined relationship with poetry more than
once.

That explains why I create poems like crazy,
And wrote even more in sickness than when I was well.

About Bai Juyi

Bai Juyi (772 - 846 A.D.), also known Bai Letian, is a renowned poet of the Tang Dynasty and the advocate of new ballads and folk songs written in the style of the Han Dynasty. His poems are characterized by simple language with explicit themes. The poems flow smoothly and his poetic style was so unique that it became a literary form generally called the "Fundamentally Plain Form". Bai Juyi was good at different styles of poetry, especially long narrative poems. Among them, "Song of Eternal Sorrow," a long poem describing the rise and downfall of the famed beauty, Royal Concubine Yang Yuhuan, and "Song of the Pipa Player," about a pear-shaped Chinese lute, are two representative works

of his that had a tremendous influence on later generations.

About the Poem

At the age of 68, the author suffered a stroke that left him with one leg paralyzed. He was once in bed and wrote "15 Poems During Sickness." This is one of the 15 poems. Fang refers to Fang Guan, who was the Prime Minister during the times of Emperor Xuan Zong and Emperor Su Zong of the Tang Dynasty, and who was given the title Tai Wei (Head of the Defense Ministry) after death. Wang refers to Wang Wei, a great poet of the Tang Dynasty. Painting master: painter, whose profession is to paint. Ding (Samadhi) refers to a state in meditation. Predestined fate: fate in past lives. Debt refers to the karmic debt one has to repay during one's transmigration cycle, and here it means the karmic relationship caused by karma. Chant originally means chant and recite poems. Here it is used to mean poetry writing.

The Author's Interpretation

In his early stage of sickness, the author took medicinal wine and other methods to improve blood circulation when he felt a chill in his knees. He also received moxibustion, a type of acupuncture treatment. But after all, the author was a genuine cultivator of the Buddha school and thus knew that all the sicknesses have their karmic causes. He regarded his one leg being paralyzed as mostly the result of his "overindulgence in taking sightseeing trips in his younger days." Since he believed that the sickness came from karma, he didn't think there was any use to treat his illness with medicine. The author therefore decided to stop medical treatments and no longer visited doctors. "Taking the body as doctor and mind as medicine", he tried to cure his body by curing his mind. Having fully understood the principles, he worried no more in the heart; "Le Tian can leave with no worry knowing his fate". Having trouble walking, he would meditate and observe his inner self more often, and remove the disease karma through cultivation. Moreover, during the time he was sick, Bai Juyi sold his horses that he used in the past for traveling and was determined not to travel any more. He also allowed

two of his concubines who had taken care of him for many years to go home to their families. It was undoubtedly painful for him to give all those things up, but he certainly accumulated a great amount of virtue in return. At such an old age and without taking medicine, Bai Juyi eventually was able to walk again.

It was very possible that when he was ill, by giving up attachments and performing meditation, Bai Juyi was able to develop the ability of seeing into the past. Considering Fang Guan and Wang Wei's previous lives, Bai Juyi also tried to observe his own past lives, and he may have seen saw his hidden predestined relationship with poems that was behind his talent in poetry.

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