

7. The Ten Great Vows

Running east and rushing west to spread Dao,
speaking earnestly and tenderly, pouring out the depths of the heart --
all disciples, question your hearts and consider well:
for whose sake this toil, for whose sake this striving?

I am
the Examiner of the Three Heavens, bearing
the sacred decree. I come to the prayer hall
to pay respects at the Imperial Throne.
After resting, I shall speak at length.

Now I sing extemporaneously:
the Ten Great Vows -- Ha ha!

First Lament

Cultivating Dao without a sincere heart,
muddled and confused, squandering your days --
the great solemn vows spoken carelessly from the mouth.
I ask: who among you lives according to their vows?
Making empty promises with no intent to keep them --
you deceive people, you deceive Heaven, you deceive the very spirits.

I urge all disciples: question your own hearts.
Do you truly not fear the weight of sin upon you?
Do not say that retribution has not yet arrived --
when the calamity comes, your portion will be judged.
If you doubt this, look to the records of history:
Heaven's net is vast and loose, yet nothing slips through -- whom has it ever spared?

Second Lament

Cultivating Dao without repentance,
adorning and concealing your faults, deceiving none but yourself --
your own errors you refuse to correct,
yet every word you speak is gossip about others.
The old saying has it: those who talk of others' faults

are themselves most fond of stirring fault.

I urge all disciples: hold yourselves to account.

Do not shrink from correcting your mistakes -- this is the sages' call.

Lay down the butcher's knife and you become a buddha;

even a common man of firm resolve can stand beside Heaven and Earth.

Good and evil in the end will always meet their reckoning --

Heavenly principle shines clear: whom has it ever passed over?

Third Lament

Cultivating Dao without genuine practice,

with hollow heart and false intent, deceiving High Heaven --

outwardly complying, inwardly defying, wearing masks,

mouth saying one thing, heart harboring another, playing with clever speech,

fishing for fame and angling for reputation to save face --

of true merit and real goodness, not a word is spoken.

I urge all disciples: why do you not reflect?

For what reason does the noble one keep watch even in solitude?

Wrong the heart in a dark room, and the spirits' eyes flash like lightning;

whispered words in the human world sound like thunder to the gods.

How much more the discernment of spirits, buddhas, and immortals --

do you truly not fear incurring Heaven's judgment?

Fourth Lament

Cultivating Dao without steadfast resolve --

diligent at the start, slack at the end -- this will never succeed.

Retreating at adversity, advancing only when things go well,

starting and stopping at whim -- how is this the way of the wise?

Study is like rowing a boat against the current:

if you do not press forward, you fall back -- this truth does not change.

I urge all disciples: set your resolve to constancy.

Unbent through a hundred reversals -- that is the hero.

Though the great road to the Western Heaven is far,

each stretch you walk brings it one stretch nearer.

From beginning to end, remain as one, with purpose firmly set --

to abandon the journey midway is to shatter your own spirit.

Fifth Lament

Cultivating Dao without learning humility,
deceiving the master, dishonoring the patriarchs -- an audacity that swallows the sky.
Since when has an enlightened master been easy to find?
People traveled a thousand miles, searching deep into the mountains,
wearing out iron shoes with nowhere yet to find him --
to toil unto death without attainment, truly pitiable.

I urge all disciples: let your innate conscience shine.
To honor the master and revere Dao is to walk in accord with Heaven.
The master who gave the one pointing -- to that master you bow for life;
one lifetime of master and student endures ten thousand ages.
No matter how high your merit or how vast your measure --
to forget the master, your very destiny cannot be preserved.

Sixth Lament

Cultivating Dao without refining your understanding,
scorning the Elders -- this sin is not light.
To know grace yet fail to repay it is not the way of a noble heart.
When drinking water, think of the source -- this is true devotion.
Without roots, how can grass and trees grow?
Without someone to guide you in, the road is hard to walk.

I urge all disciples: see this clearly.
Unite your hearts and share your courage to carry out the final journey.
Remember that the Elders are the ones who brought you in.
They stood before the altar and pledged their solemn vows.
Even mole crickets in their burrows repay debts of loyalty --
how much more so, when human beings are the most spiritual among all living things?

Seventh Lament

Cultivating Dao yet losing the proper discipline,
not keeping the Buddhahood Precepts, acting recklessly at will --
if you cultivate Dao without upholding the Precepts,
by what means will you ascend the heavenly ladder?
The Buddhahood Precepts are the commandments of Heaven itself;
without obeying them, how can you return to your original home?

I urge all disciples: reflect upon this with care.
Guard the Precepts diligently and pursue the path ahead.
A cart without rails will surely meet with danger;
a boat without oars will surely sail into peril.
If in cultivating Dao you do not keep the precepts,
you will not escape the turning of death and birth and the cycle of rebirth.

Eighth Lament

Cultivating Dao without guarding your speech,
speaking carelessly of Heaven's secrets and sacred treasures --
since antiquity, an enlightened master has been hard to meet;
the true scripture without words -- who dares speak of it?
The sages of the Three Teachings kept strict guard;
how much more should ordinary folk and common people?

I urge all disciples: do not deceive Heaven.
To leak Heaven's secrets is a sin too heavy to bear.
Were it not for this auspicious day and hour,
how could this treasure have descended lightly to the world?
Guard your speech, be careful in action, and press straight ahead --
when vows are fulfilled, you will naturally return to the Realm of Principle.

Ninth Lament

Cultivating Dao without a compassionate heart,
hiding Dao and refusing to share it, leading the primordial souls astray --
Heaven itself has no voice; it relies on people to deliver the call.
If no one delivers it, how will Dao ever be heard?
Look back to the day you yourself sought Dao --
was it not the Elders who ferried you from the crossing of delusion?

I urge all disciples: examine yourselves thrice.
"Sharing goodness with others" -- so the ancient sages taught.
From the very beginning, attaining buddhahood has required ferrying the world.
Establish yourself, then establish others -- let Dao be heard by all.
Now is the time when universal ferrying stands open --
let all the primordial souls return together to the Root.

Tenth Lament

Cultivating Dao while the heart falls far short --
who is willing to step forward and give what they can?
The shackles of emotion and the chains of attachment remain unbroken;
they cling to wealth as if it were life itself, hoarding precious things.
Fine seasons and fair scenes flow away like water;
clinging to comfort and shrinking from effort, they let the moment pass.

I urge all disciples: cease deceiving yourselves.
A favorable time, once missed, is hard to find again.
While this auspicious season has not yet ended,
give of your wealth, give of your teaching, give without fear.
Let the Ten Great Vows advance upon these words --
fulfill your vows, return to the Root, and journey home to the Jasper West.

Appended Verse Teaching

The primordial Great Dao --
since time immemorial, never lightly transmitted.
Now, meeting the Third Era,
universal ferrying and the Great Gathering begin.

With the enlightened master's one pointing,
one escapes the suffering of the cycle of rebirth.
Cultivate merit and establish virtue;
you will surely reach the nine grades of the lotus throne.

Transcend birth and death --
everywhere there is proof of this.
This is no side gate;
those paths merely dazzle the eyes with spectacle.

Dao resides within the self;
outside the body there is no true Dao.
Whatever has form and appearance
remains within the turning wheel of rebirth.

Having received the one pointing,
you transcend the realm of qi and enter the domain of Principle.
Those who receive it yet do not cultivate --
when the time comes, how pitiable they will be.

The enlightened master's True Dao
is not mere words from the lips.
To transcend the mysteries and deliver your ancestors --

this is no empty talk.

Those with affinity, the children of the Buddha,
who receive Dao and set forth their heart-vows --
they build the vessel of deliverance
to rescue all who share in this affinity.

Those whose affinity with the Buddha is shallow --
upon receiving Dao, doubt fills their minds.
Attached to form and fixed on appearances,
their eyes gaze ever outward.

Not investigating the principle of their own nature,
not turning the light back to illuminate within,
coveting what glitters on the surface --
the true principle they neither awaken to nor fathom.

Since antiquity, those who cultivated Dao
crossed mountains and forded rivers.
Even when their merit was complete and fruit was full,
the immortals and buddhas gave the pointing only in secret.

Having endured every hardship,
they attained no more than sojourn in the realm of qi.
When heaven and earth are destroyed,
they fall once more into the abyss of the bitter sea.

Now, in the final destiny of this age,
High Heaven opens its compassion.
The Living Buddha descends into the world,
searching everywhere for the primordial souls.

Whether at home or renouncing the household,
with spouse and friends and children as companions,
ordering the family while cultivating Dao --
eternal reunion in the Realm of Principle.

Across sixty thousand years,
we meet this rare and precious chance.
To let this moment pass --
the wish to cultivate becomes impossibly hard.

The deluded do not believe,
weighed down by heavy karma.
When the time comes, they will regret --
crying to Heaven will avail them nothing.

Those faithful ones who share in this affinity --
having received Dao, press forward without delay.
At the Dragon-Flower Assembly,
majesty will be revealed at last.

Merit determines the fruit;
not a fraction does Heaven overlook.
It all rests on this present hour --
strive forward now in the work of cultivation.

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