

Chapter 11: Why Observe the Vegetarian Vow and Its Benefits

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Since we cultivate the Heavenly Dao, we must embody Heaven's heart. Heaven possesses the virtue of cherishing life, taking benevolence and compassion as its foundation. Then we who cultivate Dao should likewise take benevolence and compassion as our foundation, and swiftly adopt the vegetarian vow.

Therefore Patriarch Lü said:

My flesh is the flesh of all beings;
our forms differ, but the principle does not.
Do not wait for the underworld judges to render their verdict —
ask yourself: what should you do?

From this one can know that the Immortals, Buddhas, Worthies, and Perfected Ones of the past — the sages of all Three Teachings — all observed the vegetarian vow and gradually attained their fruition. In Dao, the Three Purities and Five Phases; in Buddhism, the Three Refuges and Five Precepts — stated directly and spoken plainly, resounding clearly in one's ears. These prove beyond doubt that the Buddhist and Daoist traditions of fasting and abstinence are well established.

But did not Confucius of the Confucian school also observe the vegetarian vow? However, Confucius in his day was a man without power or position, and to avoid the ridicule of others he was upright in conduct but restrained in speech, always containing rather than revealing.

Examine what is recorded in the Xiangtang chapter of the Analects: "Wine bought from the market he would not drink; dried meat from the market he would not eat. Food with an unpleasant color he would not eat; food with a foul smell he would not eat. Food improperly cooked he would not eat; food out of season he would not eat. Food not properly cut he would not eat; food without the right sauce he would not eat. Ginger he never went without." And further: when Ji Kangzi hosted Confucius at a banquet, Confucius ate without touching the meat. Confucius observed three fasts per month — three days of strict fasting and seven days of relaxed fasting. Furthermore, the things the Master treated with utmost gravity were "fasting, warfare, and illness." All of these prove that Confucius practiced fasting and abstinence — this truly admits of no doubt.

According to Mencius: "Having seen a creature alive, one cannot bear to see it die; having heard its cries, one cannot bear to eat its flesh. For this reason, the noble person stays far from the kitchen." He also said: "If chickens, pigs, dogs, and swine do not miss their proper seasons of breeding, then those who are seventy may eat meat." But when a person reaches seventy, their vitality has already declined, their digestion is poor, and their teeth have loosened and fallen out, unable to chew. How could they eat meat? Even if one's body were strong, eating meat is in any case never fitting. Furthermore, the common saying goes: "Since ancient times, few have lived to seventy." This makes it even more apparent that by the time one reaches seventy, one is soon to die — will one still have time for eating meat? From this one can know that not only did Mencius himself fast and abstain, but he was moreover exhorting everyone to do the same.

Now, the Five Pungent Herbs, the Three Forbidden Meats, and things such as tobacco and alcohol are all substances that cloud one's nature. The Five Pungent Herbs are scallion, chives, shallots, garlic, and asafoetida — produced from the improper vital energy of Heaven and Earth, they readily damage the original vitality of the five organs. The Three Forbidden Meats: Heaven abhors flying birds; Earth abhors running beasts; Water abhors aquatic creatures. These are creatures that move laterally, each drawing vital energy from only one direction to sustain its life. Eating them readily damages the original spirit of the Three Treasures, and moreover secretly diminishes one's hidden moral merit. Tobacco and alcohol likewise deplete one's original vitality and original spirit; we should all abstain from them. Our cultivation of Dao is a process of removing the turbid and retaining the pure, refining the yin and replenishing the yang. If one indulges in desires and cravings, craving the pleasures of the palate, how could one ever succeed in cultivation?

Take the very creation of the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras — was it not brought about by humans and animals devouring one another in turn, accumulating over countless lifetimes? Consider the ancient verse:

For a thousand years, the broth in the bowl —
wrongful harm runs deep as the ocean,
resentment impossible to level.
If you wish to know the origin of the world's wars and slaughter,
listen to the sounds from the slaughterhouse at midnight.

How plainly this is spoken! Moreover, all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature. It is because in their previous lives they were deluded and committed sins that in this life they have been reborn as animals to receive retribution, made to suffer and expiate their transgressions — that is all. Now we slaughter them — splitting open their bellies, cutting, chopping, scraping, slicing, boiling, frying, searing, braising — to please our mouths and fill our stomachs, to beautify our skin and fatten our bodies. I ask you: where is Heavenly principle? Where is conscience?

Therefore the Buddhist precepts say: "To rely on our strength to bully those who are weak — this, I fear, is against principle. To eat their flesh to nourish our bodies — how can one's conscience be at ease?"

Since this is so, how can we rescue ourselves from the sins and transgressions accumulated through life after life, generation after generation? The foremost remedy is adopting the vegetarian

vow. Because now, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, Heaven has opened wide its compassion. For any person who resolves to adopt the vegetarian vow, Heaven will hold their prior debts and accumulated karma in abeyance, waiting for them to cultivate merit and virtue so as to dissolve and repay them. Otherwise, if one dissolves debts on one side while creating new ones on the other, nothing is accomplished. In the end, one will never succeed.

Now the Three Calamities and Eight Hardships come frequently and without cease. Those who have long maintained a vegetarian practice have purified bodies; Immortals and Buddhas can easily protect them, and they will not fall into catastrophic harm. Furthermore, in the Final Catastrophe of the Three Eras, the great work of the Great Gathering is being carried out, and all the Immortals and Buddhas of every heaven are lending their aid to Dao. If your spirit-body is purified, Immortals and Buddhas can easily work through you, and they will surely use you to build merit and virtue. Afterward, there will moreover come a time of merging spirits.

I hope you will swiftly see this truth clearly, practice it with your whole person, and exert every effort to guide your junior students and your families to completion — causing those who have not yet adopted the vegetarian vow to adopt it, and those who have not yet made their vows to make them. Truly, in the cultivation of the Third Era, everyone has a share: the grandfather who cultivates, the grandfather receives; the grandmother who cultivates, the grandmother receives; those who do not cultivate receive nothing.

My hope for each of you is that all may escape the Final Catastrophe, that your spirit-nature may return to its root, and that at the Grand Assembly of the Three Realms, divine and human may rejoice together, the whole family reunited — that would be wonderful indeed!

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