

perhaps even societal changes, particularly if liberationists are understood to be motivated by compassion rather than anger.

I have noted the importance of intention in Buddhist teachings and why animal liberationists might benefit from analyzing their actions through the reflective lens of intention. The compassionate roots of animal liberation must be apparent not only in one's motivation, but throughout any liberation action. If we wish to create a society that acts compassionately toward all living beings, we must reflect compassion first and foremost in our own actions.

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Daoism

*From Meat Avoidance to
Compassion-Based Vegetarianism*

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“Animal advocacy” and “animal liberation” have never existed in the Daoist tradition.¹ These are largely modern concerns and commitments that have emerged from industrialized contexts of alienation, dehumanization, depersonalization, objectification, and so forth. They derive from cruelty and violence inflicted on sentient beings, most noticeably on the part of certain humans and institutions in the name of “human benefit” and “progress.” For some, this situation evokes a feeling of compassion for nonhuman sentient beings. A traditional Daoist response involves investigating the ways in which humans have created these patterns of disruption—whether by placing constructs onto reality, including concrete pavement and “virtual realities,” or by distorting our own nature through nationalism, legalism, and/or “morality.”

Contemporary social problems are ecological in every sense of the word. In modern, industrialized nations, suffering and violence—not simply physical violence—are pervasive. While many people have

become deaf or anesthetized to violence, the veils of "ignore-ance" (ignoring what is happening) cannot remain forever: "One day there will be a great awakening when we realize that all of this is a great dream" (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 2; DZ 670, 2.12b–13a). The various dimensions of this dream deserve inquiry and reflection.

With respect to "*reflections on animal advocacy and world religions*," the current "great dream" is that animals are "less than human" and that nonhuman animal suffering is acceptable for human "benefit." The subtitle of this paper thus should not be taken to imply that the subject of "animals" can be reduced to "meat." I have included "meat avoidance" in the subtitle for two principal reasons. First, throughout Chinese history animals have been understood principally in anthropocentric and sociocentric ways, especially as substances for human use. Second, "animal advocacy" in this historic context was most often expressed as compassion for sentient beings (especially in light of a Buddhist commitment to the alleviation of suffering), through a commitment to a vegetarian diet. However, the historic reasons for vegetarianism among Daoists, only some of which involve ethical commitments to other species, are complex. Thus, early Daoist forms of "meat avoidance" stand in contrast to later, fully developed Daoist vegetarian commitments. Vegetarianism may, in turn, be understood as one of the clearest ways to express a commitment to "animal advocacy."

In the pages that follow, I trace the historical development of Daoist vegetarianism and then provide a normative Daoist perspective on the necessity of embracing a conservationist ethic. Such an ethical practice involves inclusive compassion, energetic attentiveness, and the recovery of our innate goodness.

ANIMALS, BLOOD, AND MEAT IN EARLY DAOISM

Throughout Chinese history, animal slaughter, blood sacrifice, and meat consumption have been the norm. In this context, animals were viewed, first and foremost, as materials for human exploitation: meat

for human sustenance, medicine for curing disease, and sacrificial offerings for efficacious communication with gods.²

One of the primary rituals, both on a state and local level, involved killing animals in order to supply sustenance for gods and ancestors. Celestial entities, like terrestrial beings, were believed to need blood to survive. This normative, ritual use of blood sacrifice extends from the ancient state religious rituals of the Shang and Zhou dynasties (Lewis 1990), through contemporary popular practices (Kleeman 1994).³ Animal sacrifice is a central, defining feature of Chinese religions (Kleeman 1994).

Similarly, the dominant diet included slaughtered animals in traditional Chinese society, at least when meat was available. One ate meat if and when possible. While members of the cultural elite frequently had the opportunity to consume large amounts of meat,⁴ such foods supplemented a diet of vegetables and grains for the ordinary person. Historically, the Chinese diet thus tended to center on vegetables and grains, with only a little meat on occasion (see Xu 1999).

Animal flesh was viewed not only as necessary for personal survival, health, and vitality, but also as offering medicinal qualities.⁵ In the context of classical Chinese medicine, which incorporated a system of correlative cosmology (yin-yang and the Five Phases [*wuxing*]), animals and their flesh were categorized as follows: wood/mutton, fire/chicken, earth/beef, metal/dog, and water/pork (see, e.g., *Huangdi neijing suwen*, chap. 22; DZ 1018; Veith 1949, 205–6).⁶ In this cosmological system, a diet without meat was and is seen as leading to potential deficiencies; simultaneously, the consumption of specific kinds of meat was believed to have curative properties (see also Kieschnick 2005, 189).

These details are necessary for understanding the overall cultural context in which Daoism developed—a world in which animal slaughter, blood sacrifice, and meat consumption were the norm. To follow a religious lifeway that omitted these religious/societal norms, was considered a rejection of fundamental Chinese cultural values

and standard social activities. Such a choice had the potential to create social disharmony, one of the greatest fears in Chinese society.

In the earliest moments of organized Daoism, namely, the emergence of the Tianshi (Celestial Masters) movement in the Later Han dynasty (25–220 C.E.), Daoism began a theological and ritual shift that would forever change the Chinese religious landscape. The Celestial Masters superimposed a higher and purer pantheon of deities onto the hierarchy of gods and spirits that then dominated the Chinese theological landscape of state rituals and popular deity worship. Daoist priests and religious communities in the early medieval periods (Later Han and Period of Disunity) that followed the Han Dynasty defined their pantheon in contrast to those of imperial households, administrative elites, and the populace at large. Consequently, Daoist deities were defined as pure emanations of the Dao, who did not require meat or blood for sustenance; early Daoist communities rejected blood sacrifice and meat offerings in ritual activities (Kleeman 1994; see also Kleeman 2005; Kohn 2004, 44–45).

Daoist cosmology includes Three Heavens (*santian*) populated by specifically Daoist gods, gods defined as pure emanations of the Dao (Kleeman 1994, 201). These celestial beings, it was believed, did not eat meat, consume blood, or drink alcohol; they only responded to written petitions (*zhang*) issued by legitimate authorities—specifically ordained Daoist priests (*daoshi*) (Kleeman 1994). Daoist deities were nourished by cosmic ethers and astral palaces, and “orthodox” Daoist rituals centered on bloodless and meatless offerings. Animals were freed from sacrificial servitude. In addition to asserting superiority through theological claims regarding their nearness to the primordial undifferentiation of the Dao, the rejection of standard Chinese ritual activity also served a political function: because Daoist deities were higher, and thus more powerful than non-Daoist gods, and because only ordained Daoist priests could issue petitions to these powerful beings, rulers, officials, and people in general were dependent on Daoist ritual experts for assistance.

While such was the “orthodox” view of Daoist deities and sacred realms, concessions and accommodations were (and are) common (see, e.g., Lagerwey 1987; Saso 1972, 1978; Schipper 1993). Although meat and blood were not included in Daoist rituals, meat consumption continued. That is, Daoist deities did not need meat to survive, but human beings did. Thus, Celestial Masters did not extend their ideas of “purity” (see Douglas 2002 [1966]) to a vegetarian diet; life was compartmentalized into “celestial realms,” “ritual occasions,” and “daily life.” Historical sources indicate that animal slaughter, blood sacrifice, and meat consumption were excluded from early Daoist ritual contexts, but that daily communal life still involved eating slaughtered animals.

One gains insight into early Daoist views of animals and meat consumption by reading the fourth century C.E. *Laojun shuo yibai bashi jie* (180 Precepts of Lord Lao; DH 78; DZ 786, 2a–20b).⁷ With respect to animals and meat consumption, the relevant precepts are as follows:

4. Do not kill or harm any being.
24. Do not drink alcohol or eat meat.
39. Do not engage in killing.
40. Do not encourage others to kill.
49. Do not step on or kick the six domestic animals.
79. Do not fish or hunt and thereby harm and kill the host of living beings.
98. Do not catch birds or animals in cages or nets.
132. Do not startle birds or animals.
176. To be able to cut out all meat and living beings and the six domestic animals is best; without doing this, you will violate the precepts.
177. To be able to eat only vegetables is best; should it be impossible, match [your food to] the ruling constellation.⁸ (Adapted from Kohn 2004, 136–44)

These Daoist precepts suggest a “bioregional ethic” among Celestial Masters communities. They were concerned for place and community, including the potentially harmful effects of human activities on nonhuman inhabitants.

Two points must be emphasized. First, it seems that the *180 Precepts of Lord Lao* was intended for libationers (*jijiu*), high-ranking members and leaders of the Celestial Masters community (see Schipper 2001, 89–90). Second, a distinction must be made between killing animals and eating meat. While libationers probably avoided killing animals with their own hands, it’s unlikely that they were strict vegetarians. Rather, references to meat avoidance probably relate to ritual purification and ritual performance at certain prescribed times.⁹ In this way, vegetarianism is best seen as an extension of personal conduct requirements with respect to traditional Chinese mourning rites. The *180 Precepts of Lord Lao* is a disparate text and probably served more as a set of conduct guidelines than authoritarian rules.

Members of early Daoist communities, specifically the Celestial Masters and their spiritual heirs, the Shangqing (Highest Clarity) and Lingbao (Numinous Treasure) movements, abstained from consuming meat and alcohol to purify themselves. In preparation for ritual activity, and in order to ensure efficacious relations with gods who were “vegetarian” in some sense of the word, priests and community members avoided meat—making their personal diet correspond to the “diet” of celestial beings. These Daoists did not refrain from slaughtering animals and consuming their flesh out of compassion; they avoided meat consumption (for limited durations) because ritual and theology required them to do so. Their informing worldview was theological, rather than ecological. One finds a similar pattern in contemporary Zhengyi (Orthodox Unity) Daoism, a householder and village-based ritual tradition with at least some connections to Tang-dynasty Celestial Master Daoism (see Kohn and Kirkland 2000, 349). Modern priests and ritual assistants in the Orthodox Unity tradition abstain from meat and alcohol as part of a purification process in prep-

aration for formal ritual activity, while at the same time consuming large quantities of meat and alcohol in daily life (see, e.g., Saso 1978).

In the earliest historical moments of Daoism, however, certain adepts completely abandoned ordinary Chinese diets and consumption patterns. These individuals were immortality seekers, people who sought to complete a process of self-divinization (see Puett 2002). There’s a discernable logic here. If the highest gods reject meat and blood offerings, and if one wanted to ascend to their sacred realms and/or to godhood, one must abstain from conventional terrestrial consumption. To become a god, one must “eat” like a god, or at least consume substances that might confer immortality.

In the early medieval period, some Daoists turned their attention from communal ritual activity to search for personal postmortem survival. In terms of meat consumption, this included “alchemical diets” or “cuisines of immortality.” Here there was a hierarchy of ingestible substances, with ordinary foodstuffs on the bottom, and cosmic ethers on top. Some external alchemy (*waidan*) practitioners endeavored to “ingest the marvelous,” that is, vegetal and mineral substances that would confer longevity and immortality (Campany 2001; 2002, especially 18–97; 2005).¹⁰ In concert, many medieval Daoists practiced “abstention from grains” or “cereal avoidance” (*bigu*) (Lévi 1983), which aimed at extinguishing the Three Death-Bringers (*sanshi*)—biospiritual parasites seeking to bring about a premature death for human beings. Although conventionally interpreted as the abandonment of grains in particular, recent research suggests that *bigu* often referred to complete fasting (Campany 2002, 22–24; Eskildsen 1998, 43–44, 153–54).

Another dimension of these early medieval culinary disciplines included ingesting astral effulgence and cosmic ethers, sometimes referred to as “qi ingestion” (*fuqi*). This form of Daoist practice was especially prominent in the Highest Clarity movement (Robinet 1989, 1993). Daoist dietetics are thus far more complex than mere “food consumption.” In addition to the ingestion of food, Daoist dietetics

includes herbology and mineralogy, fasting regimens, ingestion of seasonal and locality influences, and absorption of astral effulgence.

There were three distinct religious dietary practices in early medieval Daoism: divine vegetarianism for deities, ritual vegetarianism (occasional vegetarianism) for priests and community leaders, and complete vegetarianism for immortality seekers.

TOWARD A VEGETARIAN COMMITMENT IN LATER DAOISM

As we have seen, meat avoidance played some role in early and early medieval Daoism, though for what are likely to seem unfamiliar spiritual reasons. It was not until the steadily increasing influence of Buddhism, after the fourth century C.E., that an “ethical” or “soteriological” view of sentient life began influencing Daoist communities. In Chinese culture and society, the association of vegetarianism with Buddhism is so strong that “eating purely” (*chisu*; *sushi*) is most often interpreted as “believing in Buddhism” (*xin fojiao*). Nonetheless, one also finds a tendency toward vegetarianism in Daoist monastic communities.

Daoist dietary matters are complicated by a dearth of texts providing explicit arguments or explanations for vegetarianism. When or if vegetarianism ever was completely institutionalized and thoroughly embraced by Daoists is unclear. There are hints of early adherents and proponents of vegetarianism, but it is unclear if vegetarianism was ever fully required for Daoist monastic participation.¹¹ It is clear, however, that in contemporary China “Daoist vegetarianism” is principally practiced by monastics of the Quanzhen (Complete Perfection) order.

In this section, I briefly discuss the influence of Buddhism, then examine early and later Quanzhen views of animals and meat consumption.

In Chinese Buddhism, among both monastics and laity, vegetarianism became increasingly normative from the seventh century onward. As John Kieschnick (2005) has suggested: “While, in the sixth century, for a monk to renounce meat was considered a sign of eminence,

by the tenth [century] it was considered a minimum requirement for any monk or nun” (201). Kieschnick traces the formation of Buddhist vegetarianism in China, noting that “vegetarianism is perhaps the most important contribution Buddhism has made to Chinese cuisine” (Kieschnick 2005, 186). (One might reverse this to note that vegetarianism is perhaps one of the most important contributions of Chinese Buddhism to Buddhism as a whole, since most Buddhists around the world continue to eat meat.)

Buddhist views on animals and the Buddhist rationale for vegetarianism are important to an understanding of Daoist vegetarianism. Briefly stated, in some Indian sources (and thus in some influential Chinese sources), the Buddhist precept against killing was not interpreted as a prohibition against eating the meat of slaughtered animals; as long as Buddhists did not witness, participate in, or personally influence the killing of animals, it was often considered acceptable to consume flesh (Kieschnick 2005, 188, 192–93, 195). Such Buddhists, like most modern “consumers” in industrialized nations, may have found the actual practice of slaughtering animals abhorrent, but they often did not notice their implicit collaboration and participation in meat consumption. As Chinese Buddhists reflected on the insights and prohibitions mentioned in Mahayana sutras, and began creating distinctively Chinese forms of Buddhism, monastics and laity recognized vegetarianism as a clear requirement.

This Chinese dietary shift involved a more complete adherence to Buddhist views on karma, reincarnation, and the Mahayana ideal of the *bodhisattva*—the being of limitless wisdom and compassion committed to the universal salvation of all sentient beings. From this perspective, meat consumption had negative karmic consequences. By consuming the flesh of slaughtered animals, one was participating in suffering and death.¹² The karmic consequence might be a less soteriologically opportune incarnation, including potential rebirth as an animal (Kieschnick 2005, 201–5). Furthermore, slaughtered animals might be one’s former relatives. In a characteristically Chinese move,

the act of eating animals was therefore tantamount to filial impiety. Just as important, Buddhists applying and embodying Mahayana views of interconnection and universal salvation saw suffering *as suffering*, without distinctions between “human” and “nonhuman.” Vegetarianism, rooted in a pervasive concern for all sentient life, was the natural culmination of Buddhist cosmology, philosophy, and soteriology.¹²

In the initial stages of communal and institutionalized Daoist vegetarianism, it appears that a meatless diet was understood as an extension of earlier “alchemical diets,” mentioned above. Some members of late-medieval Daoist monastic communities thus began to embrace vegetarian diets. For example, according to the seventh century *Fashi jinjie jing* (*Scripture on Prohibitions and Precepts Regarding Ceremonial Food*; DH 80), the “five food groups” are identified as vegetables, grains, vegetal substances, minerals, and *qi* (*ch’i*):

Eating vegetables is not as good as eating grains; eating grains is not as good as eating fungi and excrescences; eating fungi is not as good as eating gold and jade; eating gold and jade is not as good as eating primordial *qi*; and eating primordial *qi* is not as good as not eating at all. By not eating at all, even though the heavens and earth may collapse, the self will remain eternally. (Adapted from Kohn 2004, 51; italics mine)

In this succession we see that the aspiring adept endeavors to move from a yin (terrestrial) condition to a yang (celestial) condition. From a soteriological perspective, one endeavors to attain and/or create self-transcendence through a dietary shift. While meat avoidance became central to Daoist diets aimed at immortality, they were not maintained out of concern for animals. Instead, vegetarian Daoists believed that ordinary consumption patterns, whether animal flesh, grains, or food in general, bound the adept to the mundane.

While vegetarianism seems to have had some place among early Daoist monastics (see Kohn 2003, 112–32; 2004, 44–47, 50–53), it is unclear if this diet became normative. Currently, no evidence exists

that Daoists ever required lay believers to renounce animal slaughter or meat consumption; when vegetarianism was practiced, it was practiced by the Daoist clerical elite.

As mentioned, the Daoist movement most often associated with vegetarianism is the Complete Perfection monastic order. In the earliest historical phases of the movement, when Complete Perfection was a small renunciant community (see Eskildsen 2004; Komjathy 2007), there is little evidence that vegetarianism was required.¹³ Generally speaking, the writings of the first-generation adepts, most commonly known as the Seven Perfected, provide few explicit discussions of animals or dietetics. For example, the Ten Admonitions of Liu Changsheng (1147–1203) and Ma Danyang (1123–1184) make no mention of vegetarianism (Komjathy 2007, 148–57).

Although early adepts seem to have accepted the five basic Buddhist precepts, we must again keep in mind that avoidance of killing was not necessarily understood to be equivalent to meat avoidance. Nonetheless, we do find some hints that early Complete Perfection adherents, and leaders of this regional and national religious movement such as Ma Danyang, expressed concern for the plight of non-human animals; Ma Danyang was especially committed to an ethic that reached across species (Marsone 2001, 103).

The fact that early adepts lived in seclusion in the mountains of Shandong and Shaanxi not only suggests a commitment to intensive religious training, but also an appreciation of natural and secluded environments. Some of their extant poetry expresses just such sentiments. Qiu Changchun (1148–1227), for example, writes:

The landscape of this place is truly beautiful;
Humans and animals respond to each other.
Water and bamboo surround a few dozen houses;
Each household understands the Mandate of Heaven.
I love the clear and empty scenery of nature;
Holding my walking-stick, I explore the dark paths.

Every day I walk around the village one time;
Wandering aimlessly, I sing and chant at leisure. (*Panxi ji*, DZ 1159,
6.5a)

And from the same source, a reference to karma and reincarnation:

When a dog gets sick, there is no one who will cook porridge for it;
When a donkey falls to the ground out of cold, its limbs become
stiff [from neglect].
This is because people do not know how to cultivate hidden virtue
(*yinde*);
Changing husks, how could they avoid calamity and retribution?
(*ibid.*, 2.6b)

In these and similar poems, Qiu expresses a sense of reverence for secluded places, places that are filled with natural beauty, places that support self-cultivation. He also conveys compassion for domestic animals who are dependent on the kindness of humans to survive and flourish. From Qiu's perspective, people who don't show concern *through their actions* will accrue negative karma in one form or another.¹⁴ Daoist adherents must, therefore, "cultivate hidden virtue." Viewing the world and sentient beings from a more encompassing, transpersonal perspective, Daoists aim to relieve suffering, nourish existential flourishing, and adhere to an ethical code that is likely to go unnoticed and unrecognized by others.

As Quanzhen began to be transformed from a local religious community and regional religious movement to a nationwide monastic order under Qiu Changchun and the second-generation adherents, a corresponding shift occurred from ascetic and eremitic training to institutionalized monasticism. Earlier Quanzhen commitments to celibacy and abstention from intoxicants became requirements for entrance into, and continued association with, the monastic order. Monastic manuals provide guidance and explain the expected daily routine.

In texts such as the fourteenth century *Quanzhen qinggui* (*Pure Rules of Complete Perfection*; DZ 1235; cf. Yifa 2002), there is no mention of meat avoidance or vegetarianism. The only relevant dietary proscription found among monastic rules is as follows: "Those who drink alcohol, indulge in sex, seek wealth, lose their temper, or eat strong-smelling vegetables will be expelled [from the monastic order]" (12a).¹⁵ It is noteworthy that a meatless diet is not required. While one might argue that vegetarianism was already normative in fourteenth century Complete Perfection monasteries, it is unclear to what extent vegetarianism was a central feature of late-medieval and late-imperial Daoist monastic life.¹⁶

Complete Perfection Daoism lost its place of supremacy in the Daoist tradition during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), but again came to prominence during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).¹⁷ In particular, there was a resurgence of Complete Perfection under the leadership of Wang Changyue (Kunyang [Paradisiacal Yang]; 1594?–1680). Today Wang Changyue is identified as the principal architect of the formal Longmen (Dragon Gate) lineage of Complete Perfection, with its headquarters located at Baiyun guan (White Cloud Temple, Beijing). He composed/compiled monastic manuals and precept texts that continue to provide the foundation for ordination and the standard for daily monastic life.

In two of these texts, the seventeenth century *Chuzhen jie* (*Precepts of Initial Perfection*; JY 292; ZW 404) and *Zhongji jie* (*Precepts of Medium Ultimate*; JY 293; ZW 405), there is strong evidence that vegetarianism was part of daily Complete Perfection monastic life. As expressed in the seventh of the "Ten Precepts of Initial Perfection": "Do not drink alcohol or eat meat in violation of the prohibitions. Always harmonize *qi* and innate nature, remaining attentive to clarity and emptiness" (ZW 404, 9b; also 32a). Similarly, according to precept two of the "Three Hundred Precepts of Medium Ultimate": "Do not eat the blood and flesh of living beings" (ZW 405, 2a). The latter precept, in particular, suggests strict vegetarianism.

It is important to note, however, that a later section of the *Precepts*

of *Initial Perfection*, specifically precept four of the “Nine Precepts for Female Perfected,” reads as follows: “During rituals and recitations, be diligent and circumspect, give up all eating of meat and drinking of alcohol” (32a). Thus, it would seem that certain members of the monastic community were only practicing occasional vegetarianism, or semi-vegetarianism, in ways that paralleled earlier Daoist views of temporary ritual purification. The Qing-dynasty Complete Perfection ordination system offers one interpretation of these discrepancies: there were three levels of practice corresponding to three texts. The *Precepts of Initial Perfection* corresponded to the first level, and was thus intended for initiates or novices, while the *Precepts of Medium Ultimate* corresponded to the middle level, and was thus intended for confirmed members of the monastic community. Perhaps only fully committed monastics were required to maintain a strict vegetarian diet. However, it is unclear to what extent this was realized, rather than a mere ideal, and the texts also lack explicit rationales for meat avoidance.

Perhaps for those who followed such monastic guidelines, there were at least three underlying principles: (1) earlier Daoist views of ritual purity (now extended to all-encompassing existential commitments); (2) earlier Daoist alchemical diets, in which meat consumption bound one to the mundane world and inhibited the complete alchemical transformation required for immortality; and (3) Buddhist influence concerning karma and the suffering. Only the third suggests concern for animal welfare. Interestingly, the highest of the three precept texts, the *Tianxian jie* (*Precepts of Celestial Immortality*; JY 291; ZW 403), suggests that “celestial immortals” are also Buddhist *bodhisattvas* (see Kohn 2004, 111–13). A similar trend is found in much Daoist alchemical literature of the Qing dynasty.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

As a final point regarding daily Complete Perfection monastic life, I will mention some relevant information from my fieldwork in

mainland China, which included living as a visiting Daoist monk (*yang daoshi*) at contemporary Daoist monasteries in Shandong and Shaanxi.¹⁸ (The contemporary situation for Daoist monastics in mainland China may also be instructive regarding earlier moments in Daoist history.)

In accordance with modern Complete Perfection religious rules, monastics are prohibited from eating meat or taking intoxicants. This means that all meals within the monasteries are vegetarian. Generally speaking, monastic dishes tend to be simple combinations of vegetables with minimal amounts of seasoning, supplemented with rice, millet, or *mantou* (steamed buns). At times, one also finds *doufu* (tofu). Generally speaking, monastic meals go beyond modern conceptions of “vegetarianism”; they are vegan (no eggs or dairy products). Until quite recently, dairy products were not consumed in China, so the avoidance of eggs is most noteworthy.¹⁹

My experiences behind monastic walls in China reveal two discrepancies. First, within the refectory of Mount Lao near Qingdao, monks are currently offered milk, yogurt, and eggs. Second, the majority of contemporary Daoist monastics are only vegetarian while “inside the gates.” When outside temple compounds with fellow monastics, family, officials, visitors, and so forth, they eat meat and consume alcohol. When I refused such products, even when “given permission,” most monks inquired as to how long I had been vegetarian, abstaining also from intoxicants. When I replied sixteen and fourteen years respectively, most expressed surprise. Quanzhen monastics offer a variety of reasons for consuming meat: nutrition, personal health problems, lack of dedication, and so forth. When asked about the importance of vegetarianism from a Daoist perspective, most simply recalled monastic rules and did not seem to understand (or had not considered) deeper motivations. These details expose the contextual meaning of vegetarianism in contemporary Daoist monasteries, as well as contemporary Chinese dietary habits and health views. Moreover, most Chinese Daoists are living in local communities where “livestock” is

raised in a bioregional manner, which is very different from factory farming in industrialized countries.

While most contemporary Complete Perfection monastics may not be considered strict or lifelong vegetarians, some show clear concern for nonhumans. For example, I personally witnessed Complete Perfection monks on various occasions express and embody compassion and affinity with nonhuman beings: daily appreciation for the grace and carefree movements of fish and birds, awareness of the patterns of wind and water through local forests and valleys, and “activism” on the part of birds and dogs. With respect to the latter, some monks requested and secured the release of captured songbirds, owls, and monkeys, while others reprimanded young boys for abusing dogs.

A NORMATIVE DAOIST PERSPECTIVE

The preceding sections attempt to provide a fair, accurate, and realistic discussion of the place of vegetarianism and “animal advocacy” in Daoism, suggesting that the reasons for meat avoidance in the earlier religious tradition often don’t conform to modern Western animal liberation philosophy. Daoist commitments to a vegetarian diet, more often than not, derive from anthropocentric, cosmocentric, or theocentric views, and are most frequently understood through a prism of personal benefit and communal requirements, whether ritual purity, immortality, soteriological import, or monastic conformity. While various dimensions of the Daoist tradition have the potential to inform a commitment to animal advocacy and animal liberation, including a distinctive religious ideal of concern for sentient beings and adherence to a vegetarian diet, few Daoists have expressed any such commitment.

In conclusion, I will attempt to provide a normative Daoist perspective on compassion across species and on vegetarianism as a spiritual commitment. Here I speak as a Daoist scholar-practitioner—as an adherent.

After some twelve years of commitment and practice, in 2006 I received ordination in the Huashan (Mount Hua) lineage of Complete Perfection Daoism. I am thus writing this section from the perspective of someone with formal lineage affiliation in the Daoist religious tradition. I hope that my words will inspire Daoists and non-Daoists to more fully embrace a commitment to the alleviation of suffering in the world, especially among sentient beings who are voiceless and helpless beneath the machinery of “technological progress” and “human consumption.”

To begin, one does not need Daoist sources to plead for ecological commitments as expressions of compassion that reaches across species. Speaking frankly, to be human is to be humane. A lack of concern for suffering and dying reveals a loss of humanity. Many contemporary humans have been systematically conditioned to be ignorant about, insulated from, and anesthetized against caring for life. The point I wish to make is that perhaps people need to relearn what it means to be human before worrying about being Buddhists, Christians, Daoists, and so forth. Religious traditions can help us understand our shared humanity, but they also have potential for great division, deception, and delusion.

To this, I would add that for *anyone* who claims to have ecological commitments or environmental concerns, vegetarianism is a *minimal requirement*. At the very least, consumption of slaughtered animals should form a supplemental part of one’s diet, and “meat” should only come from animals raised and slaughtered in humane ways. That is, “animal industries” ought be systematically undermined and eventually extinguished through a shift in consumption. The only justifiable exceptions to this largely vegetarian diet are people in situations of extreme need, people living in bioregional communities, or people whose medical condition requires animal products—if such a condition exists and can be verified. To bring about a larger ecological shift, people may have to remain strict vegetarians, even if this leads to premature death. I have taken such a vow. Beyond Daoism, in a modern

industrialized context, I suggest that “animal advocacy” is the fulfillment of our humanity.²⁰

“Daoist ideas” have too often been represented as mere intellectual entertainment and distraction—exercises in futility aimed at *talking about* change without actually *changing*: “One who speaks does not know; one who knows does not speak” (*Daode jing*, chap. 56). The latter sentence, which is followed by a set of *practice principles*, may be amended to note that Daoists ought to be committed to application and embodiment: “My words are easy to understand, easy to practice, but no one understands or practices them” (*Daode jing*, chap. 70). An emphasis on ideas extracted and disembodied from lived practice, communities, and places, is a distortion of fundamental Daoist values.

The Complete Perfection order provides a clear Daoist response, although a response that few wish to consider, let alone embrace. Complete Perfection monastics live in Daoist sacred sites, usually in wild places, and follow a renunciant way of life. They are celibate, have very few material possessions, and maintain a vegetarian diet. In some sense, this lifestyle is a “conservationist ethic,” a commitment to conserving external and internal landscapes: “Appear plain and embrace simplicity; decrease selfishness and lessen desires” (*Daode jing*, chap. 19). This way of life leads to specific benefits. Local wildlife is protected and respected, human reproduction is inhibited, and “livestock” isn’t sacrificed for human consumption. If one embraces the principles and values expressed in these dimensions of Daoist communal life, one will work to preserve, establish, and maintain wildlife sanctuaries; one will find a way to live gently within the vast landscape of existence. From a Daoist perspective, that landscape is the Dao made manifest. A Daoist religious path involves “nourishing life” (*yangsheng*).

Returning to some of the details mentioned above, I will advance a more systematic argument for respect and compassion for sentient beings. Daoist ideas of ritual purity can be extended to become all-pervasive, existential commitments—commitments that derive from

personal observation, practice, and experience. Why should one only be “pure” in preparation for “ritual”? Is not all of life a “ritual process,” a form of *communitas*, and as an expression of reverence for the sacred? It seems preferable to avoid the compartmentalization of life into “before,” “during,” and “after.”

Daoist ritual purity requires the avoidance of animal slaughter and blood sacrifice. The Daoist stands before the universe as a sacred vessel filled with the numinous presence of the Dao; ritually informed Daoist vegetarianism extends Daoist views of cosmic harmony and “salvation” to include all sentient beings. In such a place of reverence and realization, one discovers that the altar is simultaneously temple platform, celestial locale, mountain peak, and internal center (see Schipper 1993). The altar is simultaneously in the world and in the self. We release animals from their former sacrificial role because no “sacrifice of other” is required.

Simultaneously, higher levels of Daoist training involve sublimation and rarification, self-cultivation and alchemical transformation, a shift from agitation to stillness, from turbidity to clarity. One also activates the Daoist subtle body, the energetic “body” within the body. This includes attentiveness to what one ingests and circulates. This Daoist view has clear implications for sentient beings through dietary intake: what one ingests is what one is. To consume the meat of slaughtered animals is to make suffering, injury, and violent death part of oneself. Meat eating is not the practice of priest or immortal; such is not the practice of “adepts of the Dao” or of realized beings.

Liberating oneself from a context of violence liberates those who inflict violence,²¹ and those upon whom the violence is inflicted. Through a dietary shift away from animal products, one becomes less material and more rarified. Through a process of cosmicization, a state of transpersonal interconnection develops; one abides in the primordial undifferentiation of the Dao in which personal selfhood and selfish desires disappear, and beings are able to abide in their own natural places.

For Daoists with Buddhist-influenced, karma-based reincarnation models, models that are normative in many contemporary Chinese Daoist communities, there are yet more reasons to relieve suffering and support the nourishment of sentient beings. Vegetarianism/vegetarianism is one of the simplest and easiest ways to reduce suffering and nurture all beings. Anyone who understands the realities of modern slaughterhouses (“meatpacking plants”) and still has access to the core goodness of innate nature—the Dao made manifest in/as/through us—will accept the responsibility of vegetarianism. The consumption of meat enmeshes an individual in an interconnected system of suffering, exploitation, and murder—such are the perils of domination and domestication. A lack of direct killing does not lessen karmic involvement in slaughter for one who eats animal products. The personal consequences of such involvement may differ with each person, but the consequences for animals (human and nonhuman), for society, and for the world are quite clear.

One important consequence is suffering. This suffering is clearly audible, as is the inner call to relieve suffering. The choice of compassion for sentient beings, especially those who are unheard and unseen, has other important spiritual effects. One begins to free oneself from karma; one becomes part of a different community, lineage, and reality, a community in which reverence, sacred presence, and energetic aliveness are nourished and expressed. One’s decision to rectify harmful patterns and cultivate beneficial patterns may also exert a transformative effect on one’s family, community, and society. From a Daoist perspective, much of our life is determined by our ancestors. With the vision of reincarnation at hand, we would do well to expand our conception of who our ancestors are.

Daoists have reverence for Three Treasures, the sources of the Daoist religious tradition: the Dao, scriptures, and teachers. Each of these can help inform a Daoist way of life, including the challenges of living during a time of degeneration. As a Daoist, I am responsible for relieving suffering among sentient beings, especially those suffer-

ing and helpless under human hands: those in distant forests, rivers, and mountains; those experimented on for “human benefit”; those abused and neglected as domesticated animals; and those raised for consumption.

I endeavor to follow a Daoist way of life, a life based in attentiveness, reverence, and connection. Energetic sensitivity, observation, and deep listening reveal vast suffering. And yet, beneath this is the numinous presence of the Dao. We must cultivate the ability to recognize both suffering and the Dao in all beings. We may begin with a commitment to inquiry: What are we cultivating? What are we listening to? From a Daoist perspective, we may ask a perennial question: What does it mean to be fully human?

As inhabitants of community, place, and world, let us cultivate ways of nourishing life. Let us contemplate and embody fundamental Daoist values: attentiveness, clarity, stillness, conservation, noncontention, responsiveness, reverence, and simplicity.