

On the Three Virtues of Food



FISH look on water as their parent; birds look on trees as their home. For people, food is a prize. . . . It is written that the ruler of a large state looks on the people as his parent, and the people look on food as their Heaven.

Food has three virtues. First, it sustains life. Second, it enlivens the complexion. Third, it nourishes strength.

If one gives food to others, one will improve one's own lot, just as, for example, if one lights a fire for others, one will brighten one's own way.

But if one provides food for those who do evil, then by prolonging their lives, one will increase their vitality; by enlivening their complexions, one will

add light to their eyes; by nourishing their strength, one will make their legs faster and their hands more skillful. And because this is so, the person who provided food will find, on the contrary, that as a result his own complexion grows pale, his vitality wanes, and he is deprived of strength.

All the various sutras preached by the Buddha are recorded in words written on paper. They are like the stars and the moon ranged in the sky, or the plants and trees that grow on the earth. These words embody the vitality of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. The word "vitality" means the vital spirit, and this vital spirit is of two kinds. First is that of the nine worlds.



Background

This is a fragment of a letter, the recipient and date of which are unknown, but one view holds that it was written in 1278. It appears to be a reply to a believer who sent Nichiren Daishonin offerings of food. The Daishonin describes the three virtues of food and the benefit of giving food to others. If, however, food is given to persons who

commit evil, then the giver will lose these three virtues.

Next, the idea that the words of the Buddha's teachings embody the Buddha's vitality, or vital spirit, is introduced, and it is stated that there are two kinds of vital spirit, one being that of the nine worlds. The extant manuscript ends here.