AN EMPEROR’S DISCOURSE
ON KARMA AND VEGETARIANISM
Preface by Emperor Wu 梁武帝 (r. 502–549)
of the Liang

Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty recounts his life as a prince,
his political maneuvers and successes, and his Buddhist faith.

Buddhism entered China in the late Han as a religion of merchants from Central Asia. Its spread was slow at first, but by the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–489) was gaining more and more followers at all social levels. This was a time of multiple regimes, with non-Han rulers in the north and a series of short dynasties in the south with capitals at Jiankang (modern Nanjing) whose ruling families were Chinese.

One of the greatest patrons of Buddhism was Xiao Yan 蕭衍, the founding emperor of the Liang dynasty, known as Emperor Wu of the Liang. Beginning as a military officer of the previous Qi dynasty, he rose quickly to the rank of general, widely praised for his valor and battlefield successes. At first he had strong interests in Daoist ideas of immortals and transcendence, but after joining a literary salon led by a Qi prince, he became fascinated by the prince’s Buddhist practices and the lectures he arranged by renowned
monks. By the time he took the throne himself in 502, he was fully committed to Buddhism. He chose the Buddha’s birthday, the eighth day of the fourth month, as the first day of his dynasty and instituted vegetarian offerings to imperial ancestors instead of the traditional animal sacrifices, as Buddhism rejects killing animals or other sentient beings.

In his later years, Emperor Wu penned *Rhapsody of Good Karma* (Jingye fu) to express his Buddhist aspirations and his journey to enlightenment. In the preface, translated here, he recounts his decision to give up eating meat and to abstain from sexual activity. He seems to have exaggerated his sexual abstinence, however. His wife died before he ascended the throne, but he took at least seven concubines, who bore him eight sons and three daughters, the last born when the emperor was fifty. In the translation below, a few lines have been omitted because scholars believe that they were added after Xiao Yan’s death.

**Preface to *Rhapsody on Good Karma***

When I was young, I loved nature and aspired to be a recluse, but due to worldly ties I could not fulfill my wish. Still, I rectified my wayward conduct and veered away from self-indulgence. I was then selected to serve at court. That was a period of frequent crises, as the court fought wars all the time, not a year passing without a disturbance. The ruler [Xiao Baojuan, 483–501] was a brutal maniac, his underlings scheming and disorderly. The way of the gentleman declined while that of the scoundrel flourished…. Those in power held fast to their positions, barking demands day in and day out, running roughshod over the people, and handing out execution orders at will. The loyal and the worthy were beheaded, and officials with outstanding service were put to death for no reason. Donning clothes like those of officials, men of prowess set out to different regions, all claiming to represent the emperor and possess full authority. They used treacherous schemes to confuse and agitate the public. From morning to evening they made merry; day and night they sought to destroy the capital. The sick died by the roadside, their children unable to mourn them. Pregnant women gave birth by the side of the road, unable even to hold their newborns. The populace was in constant fear of imminent death.

Prince Xuanwu of Changsha [posthumous title of Xiao Yi, the author’s
elder brother] made great contributions to the Qi dynasty, yet he was not given the customary rewards. Instead he was persecuted, as were his brother [Xiao Chang] and nephews. Xiao Baojuan then sent Huan Shenyu, Du Bofu, and several other commissioners to Yongzhou [Hubei] to discuss collaborating with local military commanders to do me harm. However, their plan failed to gain any support and came to nothing. Afterward, Xiao Baojuan sent Liu Shanyang to capture me. With no personal guards, I expected to meet my death when fierce men with sharp weapons clad in armor appeared. Had that happened, I would have died at the hands of the lowest of the low and become the laughingstock of the world. However, on arriving in Jingzhou [Hubei], Liu Shanyang was captured by Xiao Yingzhou [462–501], who immediately sent a messenger to inform me of the news.

As a consequence of all this, I called for overthrowing Xiao Baojuan and formed my own army. People all over, sharing my hopes, responded to my declaration. In the first month of the second year of the Yongyuan reign of the Qi dynasty [500], my army set out from Xiangyang [Hubei]. The soldiers were like a huge cloud, and the boats were lined up tightly, stretching as far as one could see. Jingling [Hubei] governor Cao Jingzong, commander of the cavalry Yin Chang, and others led the infantry and cavalry under their command to wait on the banks to welcome me. The fleet going upstream against the current of the Han River extended forty li to my boat. Just then, a pair of white fish jumped into my ship, as if to declare that our expedition equaled the Menjin Declaration [in which King Wu mobilized Zhou forces and alliances to defeat the Shang dynasty]. This surely was a confirmation of Heaven’s will. Our army marched with the force of thunder and the speed of wind. Soon we captured Yingcheng [Hubei] and forced Jiangzhou [Jiangxi] to surrender. The Gushu [Anhui] forces retreated as soon as they learned of our advance. Li Jushi of Xinting [fortress of the capital Jiankang] bowed his head and joined our forces.

After we eliminating the despot, the populace was able to breathe again, so I once more gave some thought to becoming a recluse and enjoying nature to my heart’s content. Yet I felt pressured by the shared desire of the people and was awed by the mandate that Heaven had bestowed on me, giving me no alternative but to assume the throne. I conducted myself with caution, as if I were standing at the edge of an abyss or treading on thin ice. Still I hoped to abdicate and allow someone more capable to take over. However,
if I yielded the throne, the country would fall into chaos once more. That would not only lead to my death and humiliation but also let down both the living and the dead who counted on me. I thus composed these lines: “Day and night I go over things in my mind, again and again, finding no solution. If I stop thinking about it, I might still be able to leave, but then things will not end well.”

Once I was sitting on the throne and holding audiences, I reached out to all the people within the four seas. Day and night, I worked unceasingly, cautioning myself not to be complacent, as if I were driving six horses with a single rotten rein. Commentators of the time compared me to King Tang of the Shang and King Wu of the Zhou, an unfair appraisal. Tang and Wu were sages, and I am an ordinary person, unworthy of comparison to them. On the other hand, King Tang exiled his ruler (King Jie of the Xia dynasty) and King Wu beheaded his king (King Zhou of the Shang dynasty) before their ties to their sovereigns were severed. I eliminated the despot and removed the peril of the world only after our ruler-subject relationship had been broken. For these two reasons, my case is different.

Prior to taking the throne, I focused only on Confucian rites and duty and did not understand Buddhist faith and belief. I slaughtered and cooked sentient beings to entertain guests. I regularly ate meat and hardly knew the taste of vegetables. After I ascended the throne, the wealth of the entire empire was at my disposal. Delicacies from afar were presented to me one after another; exotic food was delivered to me all the time. Sumptuous feasts were a constant occurrence; the kitchen was well stocked with gourmet food. However, whenever I was about to eat, I would put down my chopsticks and sob. I was sorry that I could not fulfil the filial obligation of serving my parents day and night. How could I possibly enjoy a feast by myself? Hence, I started eating only vegetarian fare and would not take a single bite of fish or meat. At first, I did this secretly, without telling anyone. Then when I hosted banquets for court officials, I followed my dietary routine, but since I had not gotten used to a vegetarian diet, my body looked sallow and weak. That was when officials began to realize what I was doing.

Xie Fei, Kong Yanying, and others repeatedly urged me to give up my vegetarian diet. This reflected their loyalty to me but nevertheless was not what I wanted. Besides, I reminded myself that it had never been my ambition to become the ruler. Du Shu [197–252] once said, “If I cut off my heart
and throw it on the ground, all I would lose would be a small piece of flesh.” I am indebted to enlightened gentlemen who expressed their inner feelings in this way. In order for the people to know that I had not intended to take the throne, I would have to do something beyond the capacity of a normal person. Therefore, in addition, I abstained from sexual pleasure. For more than forty years now, I have not shared a bedroom with a consort.

Sometime earlier, when I had some minor physical problem, I asked imperial doctors Liu Chengzhi and Yao Puti for a diagnosis. Liu Chengzhi said, “I know for sure that the cause is overeating.” I replied, “I always had delicacies before I took the throne.” Liu Chengzhi said, “What you had back then cannot compare to what you have now.” Yao Puti shook his head with a smile and said, “I am the only one who knows the cause: you go to excess in sexual activity.” By then I had not eaten fish or meat or engaged in sexual intercourse for a long time. I realized that both of them lacked the wisdom of the legendary doctors He and Huan [Spring and Autumn period] and the skills of the legendary doctors Bian Que [Spring and Autumn period] and Hua Tuo [Han dynasty]. Therefore, I held my tongue and only asked for prescriptions.

Liu Chengzhi prescribed medicinal liquor, and Yao Puti prescribed pills, but my illness continued to worsen. Since they did not know the actual cause of my illness, I stopped the treatment. Afterward, whenever I got sick, I took care of it myself and no longer consulted physicians, a practice I have continued for more than forty years. I may not be a virya [diligent person], but since I don’t eat sentient beings, I am not bothered by the killing hindrance, and since I don’t touch consorts, I am no longer hindered by lust. After eliminating these two hindrances, my mind gradually became clear. I understood all the scriptures after just a quick read. From that time on, I knew exactly what my path would be. The Book of Rites (Liji) says, “At birth, a person is serene: this is his Heavenly nature. Through contact with other things, he is stirred and desire appears.” Being stirred up contaminates the mind, while serenity purifies it. If outside interference is eliminated, the mind will be clear. Once you realize that, worries will have no way to take root. I thus compose this Rhapsody on Good Karma to express myself.

**Source:** Liu Dianjue 劉殿爵, Chen Fangzheng 陳方正, and He Zhihua 何志華, *Liang Wudi Xiao Yan ji zhuzi suoyin* 梁武帝蕭衍集逐字索引 (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), 24–25.
Further Reading


