

Daoist Belief and Practice in the Sixth Century: An Examination through the Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality

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Keywords: *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality*, Ancient Lingbao Scriptures, Ten Precepts, Precept Comparison, Buddhism

Abstract: This paper examines the “Ten Precepts” in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality*, comparing them with those in three ancient Lingbao scriptures. The study shows that while core prohibitions against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and false speech remain consistent, this scripture omits certain earlier injunctions like “do not drink alcohol.” Instead, it emphasizes Buddhist-inspired passages on equality, such as “regard all sentient beings as oneself,” and provides more guidance on restraining mental defilements. These changes reflect both continuity with the Lingbao precept tradition and the integration of Buddhist concepts in sixth-century Daoist texts.

1. Introduction

The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality, as an important Daoist scripture from the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, exhibits profound influence from Buddhist thought. This text incorporates numerous concepts of Buddhist karma and samsāra, clearly reflecting the prevalent phenomenon of Daoist literature drawing upon Buddhist ideas during that era. However, despite its close connections with certain Buddhist doctrines, the fundamental content and spiritual core of *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* remain deeply rooted in the Daoist tradition itself. Given the extensive and complex nature of the scripture’s content, this paper selects the “Ten Precepts” presented in its fourth volume, the “Chapter on Observing the Precepts”, for a comparative study with the “Ten Precepts” found in the ancient Lingbao scriptures. The specific texts used for reference include: *The Supreme Cavern-Perfection Scripture of the Superior Precepts of Wisdom*, *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom on the Zuigen Superior Precepts*, and *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom, Determination, and Penetration of the Subtle*. Through this specific lens, the study aims to explore the inheritance relationship between *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* and the ancient Lingbao scriptures, thereby offering a glimpse into the trajectory of Daoist development in the sixth century from a particular perspective.

2. Academic Background and Research Context

In contemporary academia, two main perspectives exist on this matter. Some scholars argue that

Daoist precepts were formed at the very beginning of the establishment of Daoism. However, the generally prevailing view remains that early Daoism did not formally develop a systematic set of precepts; instead, Daoist precepts were developed and refined by absorbing and drawing upon Confucian traditional ethics and Buddhist precepts [1]. The Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties period was a critical era of cultural convergence between North and South China, as well as a time of intense interaction and collision between Buddhist and Daoist thought. The ancient Lingbao scriptures, which emerged from this background, contain precepts that incorporate elements from early Daoism, the Shangqing tradition, and Buddhism, demonstrating a characteristic synthesis of these influences. Daoist masters of the Southern Dynasties, such as Lu Xiuqing and Song Wenming, classified "precepts and regulations" as one of the "Twelve Sections" of the "Yuanshi Old Scriptures", highlighting the important status of "precepts" within the Daoist textual system of the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties [2].

The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality is included in the Zhengtong Daozang (The Orthodox Daoist Canon of the Ming Dynasty), specifically within the Cavernous Mystery Section, Textual Division, volumes 174-175. More than twenty fragmentary copies of this scripture are preserved among the Dunhuang manuscripts, where it is titled *The Supreme Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* [3].

Regarding its date of compilation, a definitive scholarly consensus has not been reached. A Concise Dictionary of Daoism suggests it was composed during the Southern Dynasties. Japanese scholar Ōfuchi Ninji also concurred that it was finalized in the late Northern and Southern Dynasties period. In his review of Research on the History of Six Dynasties Daoism, Liu Yi noted that "at least scholars such as Nakajima Ryūzō, Kobayashi Masayoshi, and Yamada Shun believe it was compiled during the Liang Dynasty." Synthesizing these various viewpoints, it can be determined that the Scripture on Karma and Causality was most likely compiled during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period [3].

The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality is divided into ten volumes and twenty-seven chapters. The fourth volume, titled the *Chapter on Observing the Precepts*, explicitly introduces the concept of the "Ten Precepts" and elucidates the meaning of upholding them: "Precepts serve to guard against transgressions and halt evil, to discipline the body and mind, to subdue demons and malevolent forces, and to move the divine and sacred beings." The scripture proclaims that these peerless Ten Precepts can "plant the seeds of blessed karma for humans and celestials, create wholesome conditions throughout life and death, be transmitted and shown to future generations, universally enabling all to protect and uphold them, to invoke blessings and eliminate calamities—their power is inconceivable." The contents of the recorded "Ten Precepts" are as follows:

The first precept: (The disciple shall) Do not kill, nor entertain thoughts of killing. (The disciple shall) Constantly cultivate compassion to aid and deliver all beings. (The disciple shall) Regard all living beings as you would regard yourself.

The second precept: (The disciple shall) Do not steal, nor entertain thoughts of stealing. (The disciple shall) Always practice humility and do not take what is not rightly given. (The disciple shall) Regard all material possessions as you would regard your own.

The third precept: (The disciple shall) Do not engage in sexual misconduct, nor entertain thoughts of lust. (The disciple shall) Constantly abide in purity and dwell in solitude. (The disciple shall) Regard all men and women as you would your own flesh and blood.

The fourth precept: (The disciple shall) Do not be miserly or covetous, nor entertain thoughts of greed. (The disciple shall) Constantly practice giving, widely relieving the poor and destitute. (The disciple shall) Maintain a mind of equality, free from distinctions between self and other.

The fifth precept: (The disciple shall) Do not give rise to anger, nor entertain thoughts of hatred.

(The disciple shall) Constantly cultivate joy and harmonize with both adversaries and loved ones. (The disciple shall) Regard all living beings as your own children.

The sixth precept: (The disciple shall) Do not cling to ignorance, nor entertain foolish thoughts. (The disciple shall) Constantly cultivate wisdom to guide the deluded. (The disciple shall) Regard all living beings as you would your own limbs.

The seventh precept: (The disciple shall) Do not engage in frivolous speech, nor entertain vain thoughts. (The disciple shall) Always abide in loyalty and integrity, maintaining purity within and without. (The disciple shall) Regard all scriptures and teachings with a mind inclined to recite and uphold them.

The eighth precept: (The disciple shall) Do not engage in false speech, nor entertain deceptive thoughts. (The disciple shall) Constantly practice honesty and sincerity, without deceit in public or private. (The disciple shall) Regard all people without thoughts of falsehood or treachery.

The ninth precept: (The disciple shall) Do not use harsh speech, nor entertain malicious thoughts. (The disciple shall) Always maintain right mindfulness and refrain from nurturing poisonous intentions. (The disciple shall) Reflect on venomous snakes and consider how they bring harm upon themselves.

The tenth precept: (The disciple shall) Do not engage in slander or divisive speech, nor entertain thoughts of discord. (The disciple shall) Constantly practice uprightness without attachment or aversion. (The disciple shall) Contemplate self and others without thoughts of opposition or alienation.[4]

3. Comparative Analysis of the Ten Precepts

The concept of the “Ten Precepts” was not first introduced in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality*; it had already appeared frequently in the ancient Lingbao scriptures. A detailed comparison reveals striking similarities between the “Ten Precepts” cited above and those recorded in certain ancient Lingbao texts [5]. For example, the “Ten Precepts” contained in *The Supreme Cavern-Perfection Scripture of the Superior Precepts of Wisdom* are as follows:

The first precept: (The disciple shall ensure that) the mind should be free from malice and jealousy; (the disciple shall) do not give rise to hidden harmful intentions; (the disciple shall) guard one’s speech and carefully avoid transgressions; (the disciple shall) let one’s thoughts constantly dwell on the Dharma.

The second precept: (The disciple shall) preserve humaneness and refrain from killing; (the disciple shall) pity and aid all living beings; (the disciple shall) embrace all with kindness and compassion; (the disciple shall) extend nourishment to everyone.

The third precept: (The disciple shall) maintain purity and humility; (the disciple shall) abstain from sexual misconduct and theft; (the disciple shall) always cultivate good thoughts; (the disciple shall) deny oneself to benefit others.

The fourth precept: (The disciple shall) refrain from lust and desire; (the disciple shall) do not let the mind wander recklessly; (the disciple shall) remain pure and cautious; (the disciple shall) act without moral blemish.

The fifth precept: (The disciple shall) utter no malicious words; (the disciple shall) avoid frivolous or ornate speech; (the disciple shall) be upright in heart and speech; (the disciple shall) do not commit verbal faults.

The sixth precept: (The disciple shall) abstain from alcohol and moderate one’s conduct; (the disciple shall) harmonize one’s qi and nature; (the disciple shall) do not damage the spirit; (the disciple shall) avoid all evils.

The seventh precept: (The disciple shall) do not envy those who surpass you; (the disciple shall) do not contend for fame and profit; (the disciple shall) in all matters be humble and yield; (the disciple shall) withdraw the self to liberate others.

The eighth precept: (The disciple shall) do not criticize the teachings or slander the sacred texts; (the disciple shall) receive the Dharma with sincere reverence, as if always in the presence of the divine.

The ninth precept: (The disciple shall) do not engage in divisive speech or quarrel; (the disciple shall) do not judge the four classes of beings; (the disciple shall remember that) such acts incur blame from heaven and humanity, and harm one's spirit and qi.

The tenth precept: (The disciple shall) in every action and deed, maintain a mind of equality and single-hearted focus; then harmony between humanity and the divine will be naturally and constantly achieved. [6]

A direct comparison between the two immediately reveals extensive similarities in content. For instance, core injunctions such as “(the disciple shall) do not kill” and “(the disciple shall) preserve humaneness and refrain from killing”; “(the disciple shall) do not steal [and] (the disciple shall) do not engage in sexual misconduct” and “(the disciple shall) abstain from sexual misconduct and theft”; “(the disciple shall) do not use harsh speech” and “(the disciple shall) utter no malicious words”; “(the disciple shall) do not engage in divisive speech” and “(the disciple shall) do not engage in divisive speech or quarrel”; “(the disciple shall maintain) a mind of equality” in both texts; and “(the disciple shall) do not give rise to poisonous intentions” and “(the disciple shall ensure that the mind should be free from malice” show significant overlap. However, the “Ten Precepts” in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* do not incorporate certain more specific precepts found in the ancient Lingbao scriptures, such as “abstain from alcohol” (from the sixth precept) and “do not criticize the teachings” (from the eighth precept). Instead, they reflect a more pronounced Buddhist influence. A noteworthy observation is that *The Supreme Cavern-Perfection Scripture of the Superior Precepts of Wisdom* opens by stating that these precepts were transmitted by the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning to the Lord of the Dao. Similarly, in the “Chapter on Narrating the Teaching” of *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality*, the Lord of the Dao is cited as saying: “The reason I have received the teachings of the Primordial Beginning is to enlighten humans and celestials, aiming to save all living beings from suffering.” Furthermore, at the end of the scripture, it is transmitted to the Real Person of Universal Salvation. This shared framework of divine transmission powerfully indicates that *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* not only absorbed Buddhist ideas of karma but also directly inherited and was influenced by the conceptual framework of the ancient Lingbao scriptures. Given that *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* is widely acknowledged as a work from the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, this comparison corroborates the continuity and development of Daoism in the sixth century, building upon the foundation of the ancient Lingbao tradition [7].

Certainly, evidence of the transmission of the “Ten Precepts” is not limited to *The Supreme Cavern-Perfection Scripture of the Superior Precepts of Wisdom*. *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom on the Zuigen Superior Precepts* also contains an analogous formulation of the “Ten Precepts”:

First, (the disciple shall) do not envy those who surpass you, or suppress the wise and talented.

Second, (the disciple shall) do not indulge in alcohol or debauchery, defiling the Three Palaces (i.e., the three elixir fields).

Third, (the disciple shall) do not commit adultery with another's spouse or crave sensual gratification.

Fourth, (the disciple shall) do not despise or neglect the elderly, the sick, or the poor and lowly.

Fifth, (the disciple shall) do not slander good people or vilify fellow practitioners.

Sixth, (the disciple shall) do not hoard treasures and refuse to practice charity.

Seventh, (the disciple shall) do not kill living beings as sacrificial offerings to the deities and spirits of the Six Heavens.

Eighth, (the disciple shall) do not dismiss the classics as false or fictitious.

Ninth, (the disciple shall) do not betray the kindness of your teacher or deceive novice learners.

Tenth, (the disciple shall) cultivate a heart of equality, benevolence, and filial devotion toward all beings.[8]

Here, it similarly emphasizes precepts such as: refraining from debauchery, refraining from licentiousness, refraining from coveting wealth, refraining from killing living beings (especially for sacrificial purposes), and cultivating a mind of equality. Although the specific items of these “Ten Precepts” differ from those in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* (e.g., by including more specific injunctions such as refraining from drinking alcohol and refraining from dismissing the classics as fiction), their overlap with the “Ten Precepts” from *The Supreme Cavern-Perfection Scripture of the Superior Precepts of Wisdom* is remarkably high (e.g., refraining from alcohol, refraining from envy, refraining from criticizing/dismissing the classics, and refraining from killing for sacrificial offerings / preserving humaneness and refraining from killing). This further confirms that the concept of the “Ten Precepts” and their core content were widely present and relatively stable within the ancient Lingbao corpus.

Furthermore, after presenting these “Ten Precepts,” *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom on the Zuigen Superior Precepts* proclaims: “These Ten Precepts are universally taught throughout the boundless worlds of the ten directions to deliver all people.” It is no coincidence that *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* also states after its “Ten Precepts”: “From the Three Clarities down to the holy immortals and perfected beings of the ten directions, none have not attained their status by upholding these precepts.”

Regarding the karmic rewards for observing the precepts, the descriptions in the two scriptures are notably similar. *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom on the Zuigen Superior Precepts* declares: “Those who can uphold them... in past lives received rebirth in celestial palaces and pure lands, upon jeweled thrones in halls of splendor, clad in fine robes, free from striving, shaded by celestial canopies and drawn by dragon-carriages, roaming in boundless ease. They constantly hear the sacred teachings and serve the Celestial Worthy. Through successive rebirths, they will ultimately encounter the genuine True Dao.” *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* similarly states: “Those who can uphold them will have their merits recorded in the Ten Heavens, and blessings will extend to their seven generations of ancestors. They will be extracted from the prolonged darkness within the Nine Shades and ascend to the Southern Palace. Their bodies will enter radiance, their karmic conditions will remain unbroken, and they will attain the status of divine immortals.” Both texts ultimately present attaining immortality and achieving Daoist perfection as the supreme goal of precept observance. [9]

Furthermore, the “Ten Precepts” found in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom, Determination, and Penetration of the Subtle* also hold significant reference value. Their text is as follows:

First, (the disciple shall) do not kill; (the disciple shall) constantly be mindful of all sentient beings.

Second, (the disciple shall) do not engage in sexual misconduct; (the disciple shall) do not violate women.

Third, (the disciple shall) do not steal; (the disciple shall) do not take possessions wrongfully obtained.

Fourth, (the disciple shall) do not deceive; (the disciple shall) do not pervert right and wrong.

Fifth, (the disciple shall) do not become intoxicated; (the disciple shall) always contemplate pure conduct.

Sixth, (the disciple shall) harmonize with your clan and kin; (the disciple shall) do not estrange even those not related by blood.

Seventh, upon seeing others perform good deeds, (the disciple shall) inwardly rejoice and support them.

Eighth, upon seeing others in sorrow or distress, (the disciple shall) help them accumulate merit and blessings.

Ninth, when others inflict harm upon you, (the disciple shall) resolve not to retaliate.

Tenth, toward all who have not yet attained the Way, (the disciple shall) hold no expectations or judgments. [10]

Of particular note, core precepts such as “(the disciple shall) do not kill,” “(the disciple shall) do not engage in sexual misconduct,” “(the disciple shall) do not steal,” and “(the disciple shall) do not deceive” (corresponding to the prohibition against false speech/deception) have all repeatedly appeared in the previously cited “Ten Precepts” from various scriptures;

Therefore, they will not be elaborated upon further here. This scripture similarly emphasizes the karmic rewards of observing the precepts and cultivating practice: “Those who can receive these Ten Precepts and cultivate in accordance with the Dharma will unfailingly receive the protection of the divine officers of the ten directions and will certainly attain the Way.” [10] This vision of attaining the Way and achieving immortality through precept observance is almost entirely consistent with that described in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality*.

4. Inheritance and Transformation: Buddhist Influences on the Precept System

Through a comparative study of the “Ten Precepts” from the Chapter on Observing the Precepts in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* and those found in the ancient Lingbao scriptures—*The Supreme Cavern-Perfection Scripture of the Superior Precepts of Wisdom*, *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom on the Zuigen Superior Precepts*, and *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture of Wisdom, Determination, and Penetration of the Subtle*—we can draw the following brief conclusions regarding this specific category of precepts: In terms of core ethical content, the “Ten Precepts” of *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* clearly draw upon and inherit the tradition of the ancient Lingbao scriptures. Foundational moral prohibitions such as those against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, covetousness, anger, false speech, and divisive speech were already universally present in the “Ten Precepts” of the ancient Lingbao corpus and are likewise given prominent placement (at the forefront) in *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality*. Simultaneously, the precepts of *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality* bear distinct marks of their time: they simplified or omitted certain more specific, life-oriented precepts found in the ancient Lingbao texts (such as prohibitions against drinking alcohol and criticizing the classics). On the other hand, they incorporated more pronounced Buddhist philosophical elements. This is most evident in the emphasis on concepts such as “regard all sentient beings always with the same attitude as regarding oneself”, “maintain a mind of equality without thought of self or other”, and “contemplate self and others without thoughts of opposition or alienation”, which reflect notions of the equality of all beings, compassion, and selflessness. They also provided more detailed regulations for mental states and speech, such as “do not give rise to anger” and “do not engage in false speech”. This synthesis likely resulted from integrating the then-prevalent Buddhist thought with the inherited Lingbao preceptual tradition. Of course, as a scripture with a complete system,

intricate structure, and vast content, precepts represent only one aspect of *The Supreme Lingbao Scripture on Karma, Retribution, and Causality*; it contains far more information reflective of the beliefs and practices of its time, worthy of further in-depth exploration.

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