What Is Life?

(Original in Japanese)

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What is life? The first thing that came to my mind when I thought about this question was the feeling that I am a living being. Because I have life, I can feel that I am alive. Every day, I sleep and I eat, no matter what. If I couldn't do those things for a day, I would surely feel unwell and I might get sick.

At my house, we have a dog and a cat. The dog is older than I am, and he competes with me for my snacks and for space on the sofa. When the cat was a kitten, we found it dying on our porch. We took it to the animal hospital and it recovered, so it became our cat. The pets and I sleep together and play together—they are important members of our family. However, human life expectancy is about 80 years, while 20 years is a long life for dogs and cats. Whenever I think about that, I get choked up. I know they will die before me, and the time will come when I have to say goodbye to them. It breaks my heart to think about it. At 17, our dog is already quite old. He can't see, and this past winter he caught a cold and had to go to the animal hospital. The vet thought he would pass away soon, but our family nursed him and he managed to recover. When I hold my dog or cat tightly, I can hear the rapid heartbeat coming from a body smaller than mine. At those times, I wish that all lives were equally long, and I pray that they will live as long as possible.

My favorite food is meat. I love *yakiniku*, *sukiyaki*, *yakitori*, hamburger, and steak. But I also love animals. I realized this contradiction when I was in my first year of elementary school and we visited a farm with livestock. They were raising cattle and pigs, and we used the meat to make sausages and have a barbecue. It was my favorite kind of food, so I couldn't turn it down. Without realizing it, I had been eating many other lives.

What did the lives that I had eaten think about being eaten? If I were the one who was

eaten, I would want the life that ate me to live to the fullest, to make good use of my life, and to accomplish something for the benefit of living things. When I eat my meals every day, I now feel that we need to think about what our role is as we live by receiving another's life.

My meals became an opportunity to think about being alive, which I didn't usually give any thought to. I want to try and think about what I can do with the life I have, to feel the happiness of being alive, to value life and not be careless with it, and to cherish not only my own life, but the lives around me, too. Although both people and animals have a life span, we don't know when we're going to die. Every day on the news they announce the number of people who died from COVID-19, and people also die in fires and accidents, and in wars and conflicts happening in faraway countries. I'm sure all of them wanted to go on living. I felt that I want to take care and enjoy the life I have, so that I have no regrets.

In the future, I want to be a person who can solve problems, helping animals and people who are suffering, and finding ways to improve the global environment. How can we reduce the number of unwanted dogs and cats that are put down? How can we lend a hand to people who are poor and don't have enough to eat? I still need to learn more before I can answer these questions, but I want to become someone who makes discoveries that are useful for society and that make everyone happy. When I think that I'm studying a lot of things for that purpose, I can give it a little extra energy, even when my work is hard. I want to continue living in such a way that I do not feel guilty toward the lives I've eaten. Those lives have become my blood and my cells, and they are watching me.