

Life Liberation in Chinese Buddhism

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Introduction

Life liberation, namely “Fang-sheng” in Chinese, in a broad sense, means setting the animals caught by human beings back to the nature. But what we will talk in this article is only the behaviors of Buddhist, who set free the animals caught by other people in pursuit of making merit. Life liberation is very popular in Mahayana Buddhist countries, such as Chinese, Japan, Korea, as well as Vietnam. It is indispensable to release some lives in Buddhist holidays or some important ceremonies in Chinese Buddhism, and is quite common to see Buddhist buying some animals in the markets and set them free in a remote forest. Chinese Buddhist regard Life liberation as a significant way to cultivate merit, as referred in the sutra “Life liberation leads to happiness cultivation, helps to get rid of suffering and protects from many disasters.”¹ Ven. Yinshun also said, “Life liberation is a way to practice Metta, and it is merit and virtues.”²

The practice of Life liberation

Life liberation is a traditional action in China, which can date back to the period of Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu period). In the book *Liezi*, there is story talking about Life liberation. Zhao Jianzi, who is the minister of Jin in the end of the period of Spring and Autumn, was interested in Life liberation in every Chinese New Year, when birds were caught for Zhao. So we are easy to find that Chinese people were fond of it since a long time ago. Buddhism, as we know, when it was firstly brought into China, as a foreign religion, was criticized a lot by local religions, so Chinese Buddhist kept looking for effective ways to enter the Chinese society, among which Life liberation was an effectual one.

In the Buddha’s time, some instruments were made to protect animals, like: Life liberation containers (Fang sheng qi). As there were so many lives in the water, monks would filter the water before drinking and put the animals they got into a container which they would set free in the river later. It is said, “it is a significant ritual for monks to observe the animals and filter the water. Protect the animals in danger and save them with compassion... Making Life liberation Container according to precepts is carried out by the western countries (western Asia) a long time ago.”³

Coming to Chinese Buddhism, it is easy to find some special instruments and ceremonies. In Sui dynasty, Tiantai Zhiyi, the founder of Tiantai School, begged the Emperor Xuandi to take the whole Jiaojiang River System as Free Life Ponds, as a result, the king agreed that fishing was forbidden in this area which would be Free Life Pond

¹ “放生修福，令度苦厄，不遭眾難”. *Sutra Of The Medicine Buddha* (藥師琉璃光如來本願功德經), T14, 0408a.

² Ven. Yinshun’s speech on *Life liberation*. *The Voice of Dhamma*, 2005.04, p39.

³ *The Rituals For Protecting and Liberating Lives* (護命放生軌儀法), T45, 0902a.

forever.⁴ In order to memory the event, Master Zhiyi constructed a temple called Guangta Temple (which is called Chongfan Temple now) on the inlet of Jiaojiang River System and set up a Free Life Pond in the temple to symbolize the Free Life Pond of whole Jiaojiang River System, which firstly made the Free Life Pond as one part of Chinese temple. In Tang dynasty, Suzong dictated to build 81 Free Life Ponds.⁵ In Song, Zhenzong ordered all the provinces and cities to rebuild Free Life Pond.....and Master Ciyun asked to set the West Lake, a world-famous scenic spot, as a Free Life Pond.⁶ Nowadays, Free Life Pond has already been a common part of most temples.

In Chinese Buddhism, there is a ceremony called Fang-sheng-fa-hui (ceremony for releasing the animals), which was also firstly conducted by Master Zhiyi, who was referred to, above.

“In the Buddha’s time, Life liberation Container was created for filter the water so that animals in it were able to be set free in the rivers. However there was no Fang-sheng-fa-hui at that time. Later Tiantai Zhizhe (another name for Zhiyi) built Haiqu as a Free Life Pond in Tiantai Mountain, where fishermen set the fish free. What is more, when freeing the fish, Three Refuges Precepts would be given and dhamma would be preached... this is the origination of Fang-sheng-fa-hui.”⁷

In addition, there is a special sutra talking about Life Liberation called The Rituals For Protecting and Liberating Lives (护命放生仪轨法), wrote by Yijing in Tang dynasty. And still, there are some other special things in China, like Life Liberation Bridge, Life Liberation Day, Life Liberation Poem, Life Liberation Monument and so on.

Why liberate the animals? Life Liberation and Chinese culture:

Besides the story we referred about Zhao Jianzi’s Life Liberation above, there are still many examples telling about the long history of Life Liberation in China. Even earlier, Chinese declared the value of life, “Cherishing the lives is the greatest moral in the world.”⁸ They held the idea that the world was beautiful because of the various of lives. And as we know, Confucian is a leading culture in China, which influences Chinese people broadly. Kongzi, who is the principal exponent, said, “Angling but not netting the fish; shot the birds which are flying, but not the ones which are in the nests”⁹, asking that we should give the animals the opportunity to live and cherish the limited resources. And Zhuangzi, a famous leader of Taoist school, indicated that there is neither lowliness nor nobleness in the world in the view of Tao¹⁰, believing that everything was just the same as human being, and we should respect the life of any other things, without looking down upon them.

In addition, referring to Chinese folk religion, it is indispensable to talk about an influential belief, namely, Animism, a currently accepted concept which was only

⁴ *Guoqing Bailu* (國清百錄), T46, 0822b.

⁵ *Buddhist Lineage* (佛祖統紀, T49, 0455c.

⁶ *Buddhist Lineage* (佛祖統紀, T49, 0455c.

⁷ Ding Fubao, *Great Dictionary of Buddhism*, the word of “fang sheng hui”.

⁸ Han Kangbo, *Zhou Yi*, Shanghai: Shanghai Book Shop, 1997, P48.

⁹ Nan Huanjin, *A Selection of The Analects*, Shanghai: Fudan University Press, p346.

¹⁰ Cao Chuji, *A Simple Commentary on Zhuangzi*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p239.

developed in the 19th century by Sir Edward Tylor¹¹ and means that non-human entities are spiritual beings, or at least embody some kind of life-principle¹². In their mind, not only human being, but other beings also had soul and spirit, such as animals, trees, even stone and water, so it is easy to find so many kinds of gods in Chinese folk religion, such as Village God, Mountain God, Tree God, Fox Spirit, Snake Spirit and so on. We can not kill all of the above mentioned animals and plants, or else, we will be punished. For example, it is commonly illustrated in Chinese Folk Story that some men offended Fox Spirit then got a serious disease.

Life Liberation and Refrain from Killing

Refrain from Killing is the first one of the five precepts, requiring not only no killing human beings, but also sentient beings; not only abstain from the behavior of killing, but also the thought of killing. In the sutra *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, it is said “Manslaughter is the severest one in all the crimes; refraining from killing is the greatest one in all the virtues. Cherishing the lives is the most important thing in the world.”¹³ Later, the thought of Refrain from Killing was developed into the idea of vegetarianism. The *Lankavatara Sutra* said, “what are killed are always eaten by human beings, so if we stop eating them, there will be no killing any more. Thus, eating meat is as serious as killing.”¹⁴ Actually, vegetarianism is quite significant, as some wild animals are in danger of extinction partly because our human beings take them to our dining table. And in another thing, stopping eat wild animal is good for us, as we may not forget the truth that some diseases killing us come from the harmful bacteria of wild animals, such like SARS. From Liang Wudi, who regulated the vegetarianism for Chinese Buddhism, Vegetarianism is the characteristic of Chinese Buddhism.

Refrain from Killing, however, is negative to protect the lives. As Master Zhizhe said, “Refraining From Killing is a virtue to stop doing, but Life Liberation is a virtue to doing good. (不殺是止善，放生是行善)”¹⁵ So Life Liberation is a positive action, not only stopping killing other beings themselves but also acting to protect them from killing, thus it is even better than no killing. Take an example, if you see a bird which is not able to fly because of a severe injury in its arm, it is not enough to stop thinking of eating it, as it will die or be caught by other people. But if you take it, cure it, and then set it free into the nature, the little bird will survive at last.

In other words, no matter Refrain from Killing or Life Liberation, are the behaviors of compassion. Chinese Buddhism, as we know, pays a lot of attention to compassion, or we can say compassion is the spirit of Chinese Buddhism. *Jiu Jing Ci Bei Lun* said, “the dhamma of Buddha means compassion essentially”.¹⁶ Compassion requires us not only give happiness to all the sentient beings, but also remove all the

¹¹ Bird-David, Nurit. 1999. "Animism Revisited: Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology", *Current Anthropology* 40, p67.

¹² Iannone, A. Pablo, "animism". *Dictionary of world philosophy*. Taylor & Francis. 2001, p54.

¹³ *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* (大智度論), T25, 0155c.

¹⁴ *A Mahayana Text of The Lankavatara Sutra* (大乘入楞伽經), T16, 0624a.

¹⁵ *Text of Golden Light Sutra* (金光明經文句), T39, 0053b.

¹⁶ *Jiu Jing Ci Bei Lun* (究竟慈悲論), T52, 0292c.

suffering from them. Therefore, Life Liberation is an important way to practice it.

Life Liberation and Equality

Dependent origination is the theory with which Buddhism explains how everything come up. All beings are originated because of the five aggregates, that is to say, everything is not able to exist without the help of other factors. Thus, it is easy to say that all the beings are equal in the world. *The Lotus Sutra* said, arhant was a huge tree while I was an unknown little grass, however, no matter a little grass, or a huge tree, are both fertilized by the Dhamma rain. In another point, in the base of Dependent Origination, we notice that our human being is not the ruler of the world but only a part of it, thus we can not live without the existence of all the other beings.

Chinese Buddhism also talks a lot about Buddha Nature. Though in the beginning there are quite a lot of quarrels in this topic, later most of Chinese Buddhist agree that all the sentient beings possess Buddha Nature and all of them can be Buddha in the future. Master Zhanran of Tiantai Sect even thought that not only all the sentient beings had Buddha Nature, but the grasses and trees could also have it, accepting the value of them. And Chan Sect also agreed that a single grass or tree was the reflection of Buddha Nature and there must be some reasons for their existence. It is preached in *The Brahmajala Sutra*:

Practice Life Liberation for the reason of compassion. All the men are my fathers; all the women are my mothers. I am born from them in all my births. So the sentient beings in The six destinies are all my parents. If I kill and eat them, it is just the same as kill my parents or my own body. All the earth and water are my former body, while all the fire and wind are my essence. So we should often liberate the lives..... Teach others to liberate lives too. If we find other are killing animals, we should save them and protect them from suffering.”¹⁷

It is also said:

At first, we should liberate the lived; second, save the animals which will be killed; third, pray to save those which have been killed, in which compassion-invoked Life Liberation is the essential one... how to save the lives? There are two meanings, firstly, the view the all the beings are our relation, secondly, the view of equality... all the men and women are my parents. Killing and eating them means eating my parents.¹⁸

So in this sense, we also can find our human being is not the ruler of the universe. In contrast, they are compared to our parents, illustrating that they are very significant to us.

Life Liberation and its influence

¹⁷ *The Brahmajala Sutra* (梵網經), T24, 1006b.

¹⁸ *Commentary to the Chapter on the Bodhisattva Precepts in the Sutra of Brahma's Net* (梵網經菩薩戒本疏), T40, 0643b.

Life Liberation, as mentioned above, leads to happiness, helps to get rid of suffering and protects from many disasters.

There is a story in the Golden Light Sutra about an Indian man, who Specialized in medical skill and always travelled in the villages to cure the patients, named Liushui (running water). One day, he saw a large pond, where the fish was dying because of the burning sun and drying water. Being compassionate, he ran around to look for water source, but found that the river had been dammed up by some men in order to catch fish. Liushui returned to the king to borrow 20 elephants to carry water for the above mentioned dying fish, with which he filled the pond and save the fish eventually. Later the fish died and became ten thousand gods in the heaven. One day, when Liushui was sleeping because of drinking too much, the ten thousand gods came to send him many gems and flowers in order to repay his kindness.¹⁹

However, the wealth is not only what Life Liberation repay, some other benefit we also can get from it. As what is said in the sutta, “liberating lives and stopping killing lead to strong life in the future”²⁰. There is another story in the sutta. An arhant, who found a novice was going to die in seven days, gave him a holiday to visit his parents and asked him to come back in the seventh day. On his way back home, the novice saw some ants dying in the flowing water. So he took off his robe, with which he brought some earth to bank up a stream, and took out of the ants from the water to save them. In the seventh day, he came back to his temple, which really shocked his master. The master began to meditate and looked for an answer with celestial eyes immediately, finding that there was no karma left working for his survival. So it was his behavior of saving the ants which protect him from death.²¹

The problems exist in Life liberation

1. To the animals:

I told a story about Zhao Jianzi above, actually, the story didn't finish yet. A retainer of Zhao pointed out to him that people struggled to catch birds to please him, when a lot of birds were injured and died. The retainer advised that it was better to forbid catching birds than to liberate birds, otherwise, it would cause a severer loss. In fact, situation like this not only happened in the former time, however, it is even more serious now. There are some people specializing in catching and selling animals for Life Liberation. Moreover, after selling, they will go to the place where Buddhist liberate animals to catch them again. Some interesting situations happen, like some people set fish free in the upper reaches of the river, while some others net them in the lower reaches.

On the other hand, in or after the ceremonies to liberate animals, many animals will die. Because most of them have been caught and kept in the cages for a long time, during which they have lost their natural skills such as hunting and killing. If they are set free, they are not able to look after themselves in the wild.

And even if the animals can survive the life liberation, it is really a disaster to

¹⁹ See *Golden Light Sutra* (金光明經), T16, 0352b-0353b.

²⁰ *Abridged Subcommentary to The Vimalakirti Nirveda Sutra* (維摩經略疏), T38, 0644c.

²¹ See *Miscellaneous Jewels Sutra* (雜寶藏經), T04, 0468c.

them during the time being caught and set free.

2. To the environment:

Unsuitable life liberation not only means a disaster to animals which we talked above, but also causes environmental problems. As people are fond of Life Liberation now, so sometimes, there are always a lot of people joining it. Thus, it is easy to find that the grass and forest are trodden and garbage are left during the ceremonies.

What is worse, unscientific Life Liberation is harmful to species diversity. I have read a report about Brazilian turtles, which are kept as pets by many families due to their good looking. Though Brazilian turtles act very slowly, actually, they are fierce predators. What is more, they begin to propagate when they are only two years old, while other kind of turtles begin at eight. So if they are raised together with other turtles, they will propagate very soon, and take over the place in several years. In addition, they threatens the lives of local fish, shellfish, as well as any other animals. It is once happened in Fujian Yongquan temple, which owns a quite large Free Life Pond, in which lived hundreds of big carps. In 1995, many batches of Brazilian turtles were put into the pond. After about 5 years later, almost all the carps in the pond died, only leaving the “good-looking” Brazilian turtles. It is reported by ecologists that there are at least 283 kinds of alien species threatening our environment in China like Brazilian turtle, and lose two hundred billions each year.²² Therefore, if we continue to put them into the environment, there is no doubt that our human being will lose our room to live one day.

Conclusion:

In a word, Life Liberation has been practiced in China for a long time, and now it is an indispensable part of Chinese Buddhism, which attracts a number of people, largely due to the long history and the benefit we can get from it. But still, many problems exist, such as death of the animals and destroy of the environment. It seems that some solutions should be used to settle them.

First of all, we should not book the animals in advance, thus the merchant will not catch animals especially for us. What is more, we should choose the kinds of animals which can survive in the nature, like fish, but not the ones which have already lost their ability to live in the wild, like some animals kept as pets, or the ones which would threaten the other ones, like the aforementioned Brazilian turtles. Then, after liberating them, we should take care of the surrounding to make sure that no one is catching them.

Secondly, considering to the environment, we should not choose a place in advance or choose the same place every time, as well as not fix some special days, in order to protect some ill men from knowing the details and coming to catch them. During liberating, we must take care of the surroundings, including not leaving any garbage or injuring the local animals or destroying the plants.

²² <http://www.chinavalue.net/Media/Article.aspx?ArticleId=43862&PageId=2>