

Formation and Practice of Freeing Animals and the Vegetarian Tradition in Chinese Buddhism

Sheng Kai
Nanjing University

Environment issues concern aspects of modernization. Buddhism is always regarded as an environmental friendly religion, which is one key intellectual resource of ecological cultural-ideological trends. Chinese Buddhism has actively practiced ecological conservation and formed Chinese characteristics of ecological wisdom; particularly, freeing animals and having a vegetarian dietary, which can best reflect the characteristic of Chinese Buddhism. However, since the formation of Chinese Buddhist's freeing animals and vegetarian tradition – this not only inherits Mahayana compassionate thought, but also incorporates the “cherishing life” idea of Chinese culture, so that it could acquire support from Chinese governments and people in different periods.

Formation and Practice of freeing life tradition in Chinese Buddhism

In the pre-Qin period, Confucius followed the example of Shun's cherishing life and emphasized environmental protection; Mencius emphasized benevolence, and edified King Hui of Liang with the idea of virtue. Writings such as *Lv's Spring and Autumn- Difference Use* and *Liezi- Saying on Signs* started the ethos of stop-killing and freeing animals. After Buddhism was introduced into the land of Chinese Han, Dharmaksema translated *Sovereign Kings of Golden Light Sutra- Senior Son Water Vagga*, to provide the theoretical basis for life-release – a Buddhist influence. *Sovereign Kings of Golden Light Sutra- Senior Son Water Vagga*, translated by Dharmaksema, provides the Buddhist source of life release, a brief description as follows:

Senior Son Water could not endure the fish's exposure in the sun, so he begged the king to allow him drive 20 elephants to fetch water to rescue the fish. The king approved. Senior son asked two men to take 20 elephants from the elephant stable and borrowed many leather bags from wine shops. They went to the river, fetched water by bag, and returned on elephants – pouring water into the pool. The pool was filled as once before. Senior Son Water saved dying fishes, offered them water and food and taught them Mahayana scriptures. After listening, all of the fish were reborn in the Trayastrimsa Heaven.¹

Senior Son Water Vagga cast important influence on Buddhist freeing-animal custom. Such as Twelve links of dependent origination, holy epithets of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, freeing-animals merit gatha, freeing-animals process, freeing-animals ritual procedure, etc. The story of Senior Son Water to rescue fish promoted Chinese people's understanding of Buddhist idea of freeing-animals, making it more acceptable and transmissible.

Chinese Buddhist custom of freeing-animals has the following features: the freeing-animals custom got support from the governments. Emperor Wenxuan of

¹ *Sutra of Golden Light*, Vol. 4, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol.16, pp.352b- pp 353c.

Northern Qi Dynasty practiced Buddhist compassion teaching and actively refused meat dietarily. In May Tianbao 7th year (556), Emperor Wenxuan thought eating meat was in breach of compassion, so he decided to stop eating meat. On Gengwu Day in April Tianbao 8th year (557), he issued an edict to prohibit catching shrimp, crab, clam, corbicula etc., except for fishing. On Yiyou Day that month, he ordered to prohibit hunting eagle and accipiter etc. In February Tianbao 9th Year, he issued an edict to limit setting field fire to November and January, and prohibited firing in other months.²

Emperor Liangwu wrote *On Abstention from Wine and Meat*, awarded the edict to make vegetable and fruits the temple sacrifice. Moreover, Emperor Liang Wu built 13 infinite treasuries to practice two divisions of freeing animals and alms giving.³ Emperor Liangwu ordered Zhang Wenxiu to go to slaughterhouse to buy animals and free them. Aristocrats and common people were impressed and actively involved and promote life release.

In Taijian 13th Year (581) of Emperor Chen Xuan, Zhiyi advised Emperor Chen Xuan to issue an edict to prohibit hunting and fishing. Seeing people set fishnets continuously of more than 400 li, he purchased typical sectors at river and sea bays to use as life release ponds, and preached *Sutra of Golden Light* to fishermen. Edified by Dharma, fishermen diverted to other professions and followed good deeds. They offered 63 places adjacent to sea, river, lake, brook and bridge, amounting to 300-400 li, as life release ponds. Xuling erected Tablet to explain Karma.⁴

Emperor Tang Suzong issued an edict in Qianyuan 2nd Year (759), to set 81 life release ponds at the roads of Shannan, Jiannan, Qianzhong, Jingnan, Lingnan, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, till Jiangning in Shengzhou, at Taiping Bridge of Qinhuai River, of five li areas along upper and down reaches of rivers. Yan Zhenqing wrote the freeing animals tablet inscription.⁵ The alleged five li areas along upper and down reaches of rivers in the edict was similar to Zhiyi's natural bay freeing animals' pond.

Freeing animals' custom is popular in Chinese society, people took part actively. According to *Continuation of the Biographies of Eminent Monks- Biography of Daozhou*, Daozhou built more than 100 freeing animals' ponds in many states, spirit traces often appeared.⁶ In Ming Dynasty, Yunqi Zhuhong built freeing-animal ponds and propagated his idea of stop-killing and free animals by preaching sutras and Dharma to advice local officials to accept his idea. According to *Biographies of Lay Buddhists- Biography of Yu Changru*, "just when Mr. Hong was sitting down ready to teach *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, to collect money to establish pond of 10000 workers, and freeing animals society, of tens of thousands of monks and lay members, Gatha voice shook the volley. Many gentlemen collected, led by Changru".⁷ Zhuhong preached *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, which obtained assistance from local officials, especially, which was advocated, initiated and led by Official Leader Changru. According to records of freeing-animal pond at North Gate Changshou Convent, some lay Buddhists, monks and

² *Beiqishu*, Vol.4, pp. 61, 63, 64.

³ *Collect Works of Guanghongming*, Vol 19, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol. 52, pp 237c.

⁴ *Sui Tiantai Master Zhizhe Anecdotal Biography*, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50 ,pp 193c.

⁵ Yan Zhenqing (Au), *Life Release Pond Tablet*, Lan Jifu (Ed), Dazheng Tripitaka Supplement, Vol 16, pp 822-823.

⁶ *Continuation of the Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 22, Biography of Daozhou, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 623a.

⁷ *Biographies of Lay Buddhist s*, Vol 42, New Versions of Tripitaka, Vol 88 , pp. 259a.

officials offered money, food or served by themselves.

The maintenance of freeing-animal pond also needs money. One source is donations from lay-disciples and followers. The other source is from Sangha's own supplies from the temple. According to *Stories of Yunqi*, "Yunqi set up a freeing-animals park in mountains, to liberate birds and animals; Sangha saved uncooked food to raise them; except for fruits and shoots, it spent about 200 shi millets. Two freeing-animal ponds in and outside the city cost more than 100 gold yearly. It never lacked.⁸ It is clear that the building and maintenance of freeing-animals ponds is a result of incorporating the idea, discipline and practice to stop killing and to free animals.

Influenced by society-formation trends in the Ming Dynasty, Zhuhong established the Life Release Society. According to *Super Benevolent Society Convention*, there were Super Benevolent Society and West Lake Freeing-Animals Society. *Super Benevolent Society Convention* defined the purpose, schedule, readings, offering, discussion and meeting and other proceeding of Super Benevolent Society.⁹

3. Freeing animals has become a religious-practice mode. Freeing animals is a practice of Buddhist-compassion ideals, moreover, by formulating of freeing-animals ritual procedures, Chinese dignitary monks integrated freeing-animal customs into Buddhist cultivation practice. Zhili in the Song Dynasty formulated the freeing-animals ritual procedure in order to make freeing-animals ritual-assembly go on wheels. He also wrote *To Free Animals* to depict the ritual procedure. Based on Siming Zhili's *To Free Animals*, Zhuhong in Ming Dynasty reformed the freeing-animal procedures, making it simpler and easier to practice. The steps include meditation, water purifying, preaching, confession, and vows. The biggest change made by Zhuhong was addition of *Pure-Land Rebirth Dharani* and *Ten-direction Flower Adornment Sutra- Ten Transfers Vagga* chanting, hoping to embody the significance of freeing-animals as a transfer merit to sentient beings and rebirth in the pure land.

4. Chinese Buddhism creative-explanations of the idea of freeing animals. In the late Ming and early Qing, Yunqi Zhuhong proposed ideas such as: "animals have Buddha nature", "animals have consciousness", "animals can be reborn", "animals can also feel sadness and pain" - trying to change people's opinion on animals and realize the aim of stopping the killing and protection of all life. Starting from the Buddha-nature theory: "anyone having mentality is sure to become Buddha" - he indicated animals could be reborn if they could chant the Buddha's name. In *Amitabha Sutra Commentary Notes*, he said:

For "good men and women", "good" has two meaning: one is good cause from last life, one is this life good. "Men and women", refer to monks and lay people, wise or foolish, and all predestined sentient beings from 6 paths... ghost, animal, hell, male and female, are all called men and women. Any one who chant Buddha's name, will be reborn. So it means all sentient beings.¹⁰

Zhuhong explained "good men and women" as "all predestined sentient beings from 6 paths", animals of mentality can "become still mindfully", animals are also possible to

⁸ Master Lianchi Complete Works-Stories of Yunqi, pp 5077.

⁹ Master Lianchi Complete Works-Disciplines, pp 4941-4944.

¹⁰ Amitabha Sutra Commentary Notes, Vol 3, 卍 New Versions of Tripitaka, Vol 22, pp 659a-b.

become Buddha, which elevate animal's position from the angle of cultivation and liberation. Since animals are equal to human in Buddha nature, one who kills animals is a "bully" – committing an unjust action.

Formation and Practice of Chinese Buddhist Vegetarian Tradition

According to precepts in primitive Buddhism era, there are such sayings as three kinds of clean meats, three kinds of unclean meats, ten kinds of unclean meats. However, it is clearly provided that Sangha of primitive Buddhism and sections were not banned from consuming meat. According to *Dharmaguptaka*, "for getting fish, Buddha said: listen to eat fishes; for getting meat, Buddha said: listen to eat meats".¹¹ However, in view of respect life, Buddha advocated three pure meats, not see killing, not hear killing and not killed for myself.

In addition, in view of respect certain life, according to *Mahasangha-vinaya*, vol.32, fasting meats include: human meat, dragon meat, elephant meat, horse meat, dog meat, fowl, vulture meat, pork, macaque meat, lion meat.¹² It is clear as to Indian Buddhist provisions on dietary are varied in different regions and sectors.

However, along with the development of Mahayana, under the background of Bodhisattva compassion idea, sutras on fasting from meat were gradually formed. According to the *Brahmajala Sutra*: "Therefore, Buddhists, for eating meat, all kinds of meats are inedible, which sterilize the seed of great compassion nature, all beings shall give up at sight. Therefore, all Bodhisattvas shall not eat any meat of all sentient beings, and eating meat gets immeasurable sin."¹³ Bodhiruci, in the translation of Lankavatara Sutra, said: practitioners shall not eat meat in order to complete cultivation path.¹⁴ Dharmaksema in Northern Liang Dynasty translated Mahaparinibbana Sutta, which specified: "Good men, from today, disciples shall not eat meat. When offered by Danapati, who shall meditate such meat as whose son's flesh". It further explained the three clean meats in precepts: "Three kinds of clean meats gradually formed system"¹⁵, which emphasized the course of gradually giving up meat.

It is generally acknowledged that the vegetarian tradition in Chinese Buddhism was established during the period of Emperor Liang Wu. However, before Emperor Liang Wu, *Biographies of Eminent Monks* recorded many "vegetarian" monks, providing historic basis for the establishment of vegetarian tradition.

As to monk's vegetarian dietary in *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, e.g., Zhiyan (智严, after becoming a monk, "wore ragged clothes, sat for meditation and ate vegetarian dietary all life"¹⁶, Gunabhadra (394-466), "was vegetarian through all his life since childhood"¹⁷, though the backgrounds, reasons and situations were varied.

Live secluded in mountain forest could only eat vegetable, as forced by real life; on the other hand, the image of Taoist celestial practitioners cast influence to Chinese

¹¹ *Dharmaguptaka*, Vol 42, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 22, pp 866c .

¹² *Mahasangha-vinaya*, Vol 32, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 22, pp 487a.

¹³ *Brahmajala Sutra*. Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 24, pp 1005b.

¹⁴ Lankavatara Sutra, Vol 8, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 16, pp. 561a.

¹⁵ *Mahaparinibbana Sutra*, Vol 4, Dazheng Tripitaka, pp. 386a.

¹⁶ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 3, Biography of Zhiyan, Dazheng Tripitaka t, Vol 50, pp 339b.

¹⁷ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 3, Biography of Gunabhadra, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 345a.

eminent monks. Most celestial practitioners have requirement of vegetarian dietary, even not eating five grains. Daoan (道安) (314-385), after receiving full ordination, “lived in mountain and eat tree food”¹⁸. Taoist emphasizes on such techniques as taking qi (Fuqi, 服气), Bigu (辟谷), taking bait (Fuer , 服饵), Taoist thinks primordial qi is the source of vitality, qi exists, spirit was born, people who have primordial qi will survive, otherwise, will die. Fuqi, also called Tuna (breathing), Shiqi (eating qi), which means absorbing vitality between sky and earth. “Bigu”, also called Duangu (give up grains), Juegu (no grain), Xiuliang (stop eating), Queli (remove grain), which also means not to eat five grains; however, do not eat five grains while still sustain body, therefore, they eat such herbs as poria, sesamum indicum, solomonsel and date. “Fuer” means take Dan medicine.

Such Taoist techniques were introduced into Chinese Buddhism in early days and monk practice. Facheng (法成) “didn’t take five grains but pine resin, secluded in rock cave, only practiced Chan meditation”¹⁹; Shengcong (僧从) “not taking five grains but bait, date and chestnut”, however, “they were strong and practiced ritual chanting without stop”²⁰.

Confucianism emphasizes that they must abstain from meat food in mourning period; meanwhile, Confucianism also regards no killing as one embodiment of virtue, according to *Mencious-King Hui of Liang Part I*: “seeing it alive, not bear seeing it die! Hearing its sound, not bear eating its flesh”. Vegetarian as a necessity in mourning became a representation of filial piety, which was practiced and supported by Chinese Buddhists.

Vegetarian contributes to observe precepts, and set up ascetic image for cultivation, as well as symbol of virtue. Tanshun (昙顺), disciple of Huiyuan(慧远), “was vegetarian and virtuous”²¹; Faye (法业), according to *Additional Biography to Biography of Huanguan(慧观)*, he has dharma virtue, so Princess Jinling built Nanlin Temple for him.²² Vegetarians control their desire, abstain from worldly lifestyle, no doubt which is representation of noble moral behavior.

Vegetarian contributes to sitting Chan meditation, chanting sutra, reciting mantra, which is assistant condition to cultivation life. Daoheng (道恒) (346-417), was

¹⁸ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 5, Biography of Daoan, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 352a.

¹⁹ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 11, Biography of Facheng, Dazheng Tripitaka Vol 50, pp 399a.

²⁰ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 11, Biography of Sengcong, Dazheng Tripitaka , Vol 50, pp 398c.

²¹ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 6, Biography of Tanshun, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 363a.

²² *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 7, Attached Biography to Biography of Huiguan, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 368b.

“vegetarian and tasted Chan meditation, secluded from the world”²³; Huian (慧安) was “vegetarian, diligent and ascetic, who grasped the meaning of scriptures, good at preaching, and renown as strict observer of precepts.”²⁴

Vegetarian has a close link with confession. Sengyuan (僧远), before becoming a monk, “was vegetarian and confessor”, after becoming a monk, who kept vegetarian for more than 50 years²⁵; Senghou (僧侯) (396-485), at age 18, was “vegetarian and practitioner of ritual confession”, after becoming a monk till his end, “never ate any fish or meat or pungent”²⁶.

The number and proportion of vegetarians in various *Chapters of Biographies of Eminent Monks*, are shown in the Table below²⁷:

Chapter	Number of vegetarian monks	Total number of monks	Proportion
Translation of Scriptures	2	63	3.2%
Paraphrase	16	271	5.9%
Miracle	3	30	10.3%
Chan Cultivation	9	32	28.1%
Precept Clarification	5	21	23.8%
Body Death	6	14	42.9%
Chanting Scriptures	16	33	48.5%
Blessing	5	16	31.3%
Scriptures Teaching	2	11	18.2%
Chanting Instruction	3	10	30.0%
Total	67	497	13.4%

From the above Table, vegetarian monks in “Chapter of Chanting Scriptures”, “Chapter of Body Death”, “Chapter of Blessing” “Chapter of Chanting Instruction” are of the highest proportions, because these monks kept in touch with populace frequently, who must obtain their trust and respect. No doubt, vegetarian behavior became one reason.

In addition, according to *Biographies of Nuns*, there were always vegetarian nuns, shown in Table below²⁸:

Dynasty	Number of Nuns in Biographies	Number of Nuns in Attached Biographies	Total Number of Nuns	Number of Vegetarian Nuns	Proportion
Jin	13	1	14	4	28
Song	23	11	34	11	39

²³ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 6, Biography of Daoheng, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 365a.

²⁴ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 7, Biography of Huian, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 370a.

²⁵ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 8, Biography of Sengyuan, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 377b-pp 378a.

²⁶ *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Vol 12, Biography of Senghou, Dazheng Tripitaka, Vol 50, pp 408c.

²⁷ Gijun Suwa (Au), *Studies in Medieval Chinese Buddhism History*, Tokyo, Daito Publishing Co., 1985, pp 53.

²⁸ Gijun Suwa (Au), *Studies in Medieval Chinese Buddhism History*, pp 57.

Qi	15	10	25	5	20
Liang	14	8	22	10	45
Total	65	30	95	30	32

We can see in the earth days of Chinese Buddhism, whoever monks and nuns, there are many vegetarians. According to *Biographies of Eminent Monks* and *Biographies of Nuns*, in Southern Dynasty, many monks and nuns ate meat. Chinese Confucianism idea of filial piety, mourning provision and Taoist pursuit in celestial life, as well as provisions of scriptures and precepts, existence of numerous real vegetarians, provided basis for Emperor Liang Wu's advocating of vegetarian dietary.

In April 8th Tianjian 18th Year (519), Emperor Liang Wu took the Bodhisattva vow. In view of confusing situation of Sangha, he decided to promote Buddhist Sangha reform centered at abstaining from meat and wine, which played a decisive role in the formation of vegetarian tradition in Chinese Buddhism.