

# Buddhist Scriptures

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## FREEING BIRDS AND FISH FROM BONDAGE

Much Buddhist practice is the practice of restraint, especially the restraint of body, speech and mind in order to avoid the performance of negative deeds that will result in suffering in the future. Refraining from non-virtue, whether it be physical, verbal or mental, is said to produce merit, especially when it is motivated by a vow to refrain from non-virtue. However, merit may also be produced by more active deeds of virtue, especially those inspired by the bodhisattva's vow, and one of the most interesting of such deeds is the practice of 'releasing life' (fangsheng yi), one of the mainstays of lay Chinese Buddhism.

In Buddhist literature, the plight of animals is a common theme. Beings from the other realms of rebirth (such as gods, ghosts and hell beings) are only rarely seen by humans, but animals, and their plight, are ubiquitous. Their sufferings are many, compelled as they are to seek food constantly, while at the same time seeking to avoid becoming food. They suffer also from ignorance, with their inability to speak and to understand language preventing them from taking refuge in the three jewels and deriving benefit from Buddhist teachings, despite living in the presence of the dharma (a famous story tells of a frog who was accidentally stepped on while the Buddha was preaching the dharma and was reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three). Animals are therefore special objects of Buddhist compassion. 'Releasing life' involves gathering animals held in captivity (often by purchasing them from butchers and fishmongers) and setting them free. In China, the release of animals was performed at both the local and the imperial levels. A decree of 759 established eighty-one ponds for the release and protection of fish.

Public ceremonies for the release of creatures were held to commemorate the Buddha's birth. Local lay societies for releasing living beings were founded, often inspired by the preaching of famous monks. Birds, turtles and fish were more popular for release than domesticated animals because they required no further assistance upon release into the water or air.

The physical release of animals was not considered fully efficacious unless some attempt was made to ensure their spiritual release as well. In the Sūtra of Golden Light (see Chapter 5), it is explained that the previous buddha Ratnabhava had made a vow that any being dwelling in the ten directions who chanced to hear his name would ascend to rebirth in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. A young man named Jalauāhana (Śākyaṃni Buddha in a previous life) came upon ten thousand dying fish. After filling their dry pond with water, he recited ten epithets of Ratnabhava, causing the fish to be reborn in heaven.

Ceremonies to accompany the liberation of the animals were devised by eminent Buddhist monks; the one translated below is among the most famous. The officiating priest begins by asking the three jewels to purify the assembled creatures of the mental defilements that prevent them from comprehending what is about to be said. The priest then bestows refuge in the three jewels and recites the epithets of Ratnabhava so that the animals will be reborn in their next life in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three and, eventually, achieve enlightenment. This is followed by a lecture on the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, one of the more difficult of Buddhist doctrines even for humans, then a confession of the animals' sins, and finally a prayer for rebirth in the pure land.

The text translated below is entitled Rite for Releasing Living Creatures (Fangsheng yi) and it was composed by the Chinese monk Yunqi Zhuhong (1535–1615), based on a tract by the Tiantai master Siming Zhili (960–1028). Zhuhong's liturgy for releasing life has been the authoritative manual for such ceremonies since the early Qing Dynasty.

### Rite for Releasing Living Creatures

I have consulted the existing tract by the *dharmma*-master [Zhiji] of Siming, to which I have made slight adjustments for the purpose of making it more simple and easy to perform. Its ending I have altered by substituting the prayer for rebirth [in the Pure Land], to which I have also added a passage from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*'s chapter on transference of merits to bring it to a conclusion. The idea here is that one first achieves rebirth in the Realm of Highest Bliss of Amitābha Buddha, and after that one enters the arcane gate of the Lotus Treasury Realm of Vairocana Buddha. Moreover, when the weather is hot, you should do the requisite recitations and [promptly] release those creatures that have arrived [or been brought] first. If more continue to arrive after [the main rite has been performed], continue to release them accordingly. Simply intone the spell of great compassion once; recite the spell of rebirth three times; recite the name of Amitābha, and let them go. It is not necessary to be absolutely uniform in all of this. For by drawing things out too long you will end up doing harm to the creatures. If creatures still continue to arrive after that, just handle it as before.

#### Preparations

At the location where the release of creatures is going to take place, set out an incense tray with willow sprig and purified water. The congregation should look upon the [bound] creatures with the eye of loving kindness, pondering their [plight] and arousing a profound empathy for their being mired deeply [in the cycle of *samsāra*]. They should furthermore reflect on the fact that the three jewels possess an immense and awesome power that is capable of delivering them from [their condition]. Having performed this meditation, [the lead *dharmma*-master] should take the basin [of holy] water in hand and silently reflect as follows: 'With all my being I reverently request that the vastly efficacious *bodhisattva* Guanshiyin, loving father of the ten directions, descend [to join us] in this ritual sanctuary and empower this water, so that, infused with great meritorious

powers, I might sprinkle it over the different species of creatures, enabling their bodies and minds to be purified and made fit to hear the marvellous *dharmma*.' He thereupon intones the spell of great compassion once, while sprinkling them two or three times with the purified water. After that, he takes up the hand-held incense censer and announces [as follows]:

#### Invitation of the Deities

I reverently announce [our intention] to the three jewels throughout the ten directions, to our original teacher Śākyamuni [Buddha], to our loving father Amitābha, to the *tathāgata* Ratnabhava, and to the *bodhisattva* Guanyin, to the elder's son Jāvāhana, to all the illustrious [former] progenitors [of this rite], such as Tiantai [Zhiji] and Yongming [Yanshou], with the sole wish that, out of their kindness and compassion, they bear witness to [our rite] and guard over us.

Today there are various creatures of the air, water and land who have been captured by others and are about to enter death's door. We, *bhikṣu* so-and-so and lay disciple so-and-so, intent on carrying out our *bodhisattva* practice, arouse a heart of loving-kindness and compassion and [prepare] to be the cause that will grant them long life. Through this act of releasing life we redeem for them their bodies and lives, releasing them to wander in ease and freedom. Moreover, in compliance with the [teaching of] the *vaiṣṭulya* scriptures [of the Mahāyāna] we will bestow on them the three refuges, proclaim for them the ten epithets [of the buddha Ratnabhava], and preach for them [the doctrine of] the twelvefold chain of dependent origination. However, because the obstacles of their evil *karma* are so heavy, their cognitive faculties [thereby] being benighted and deluded, we reverently beseech the three jewels to mysteriously empower them with their awesome sustaining power, have mercy on them and receive them.

### Administering of The Three Refuges

These sentient creatures that stand before us now, of species different from our own, [hereby] profess refuge in the Buddha, profess refuge in the *dharma*, profess refuge in the *saṅgha*. [Repeat three times.]

These sentient creatures that stand before us now, of species different from our own, [hereby] profess that they have taken refuge in the Buddha, have taken refuge in the *dharma*, have taken refuge in the *saṅgha*. [Repeat three times.]

From this day forward, they will proclaim the Buddha as their master, and will never again look to [or trust in] depraved demons or [teachers] of heterodox paths. [Repeat three times.]

### Reciting the Ten Epithets of Buddha Ratnabhava

Now that you disciples of the Buddha have taken refuge in the three jewels we will forthwith proclaim for you the merits of the ten epithets of the *tathāgata* Ratnabhava, so that upon hearing them you will obtain rebirth in the heavenly realms in a manner no different from the [rebirth of the] one hundred thousand fishes [released by Jalavāhana]:

Homage to the *tathāgata* Ratnabhava, he to whom offerings should be made, he who possesses perfect and universal wisdom, he who has completed [the accumulations of] illumination and [meritorious] practice; he who has perfected the good; he who has achieved liberation from the world; he who is the peerless master; the virile hero who subdues all others; teacher of gods and humans; buddha; world-honoured one.

### Preaching the Twelvefold Chain of Dependent Origination

Disciples of the Buddha! We will now preach for you the details concerning arising and cessation of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, so that you may thereby know the doctrine of the arising and cessation [of suffering]. When you become enlightened to [the truth that things] neither arise nor

cease, you will be identical with the buddhas and you will realize the great *nirvāṇa*.

Ignorance conditions volitional impulses; impulses condition consciousness; consciousness conditions name and form; name and form condition the six sense accesses; the six sense accesses condition sensory contact; sensory contact conditions perception; perception conditions attachment; attachment conditions grasping; grasping conditions being or becoming; becoming conditions birth; birth conditions old age, death and the afflictions of pain and grief.

When ignorance ceases, then impulses cease; when impulses cease, consciousness ceases; when consciousness ceases, name and form cease; when name and form cease, the six sense accesses cease; when the six sense accesses cease, sensory contact ceases; when sensory contact ceases, perception ceases; when perception ceases, attachment ceases; when attachment ceases, grasping ceases; when grasping ceases, being or becoming ceases; when being or becoming ceases, birth ceases; when birth ceases, old age, death and the afflictions of grief and suffering cease.

### Confession of Sins

You disciples of the Buddha! We have now finished bestowing on you the three refuges, the ten epithets [of the *tathāgata* Ratnabhava], and the [meaning of] the twelvefold chain of causation, all in accord with [the exceedingly profound and wonderful meaning of] the *Mahāyāna sūtras*. Standing in the presence of the three jewels, we will now confess sins and seek mercy and repentance on your behalf, praying that your sinful *karma* might be instantly eliminated and that you will thereupon achieve rebirth in good locations, come near to the buddhas, and receive their prophecy. You should repent along with us in utmost sincerity:

All the evil deeds that I have committed in the past,  
Influenced by beginningless craving, hatred and delusion,  
And born, respectively, from body, speech, or mind,  
All of them I now repent, without exception. [Repeat three times.]

[Glory to the] *bodhisattva mahāstūvas* of the Land of Clear and Cool!

*Dedication of Merits and Final Vow*

We pray that, after this ceremony releasing life forward, you will never again meet with evil demons, to suffer the fate of being seized in nets or gulped down by evil demons. May you live out your natural span, wandering in freedom. And when that life comes to an end, may you be reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three or be reborn in the human realm, through recourse to the power of the three jewels and the loving power of the original vow of Ratnabhava Buddha. [May you] keep the moral precepts, engage in practice, and never again commit evil deeds. May you faithfully think of [and recite] the Buddha [Amitābha's name], and make the vow to be reborn [in the western pure land].

Moreover, the disciples of the Buddha, so-and-so, who have released these living creatures, from this day forward may their practice and vow to achieve perfect enlightenment increase in brightness with each successive moment, that they constantly think of delivering other beings from suffering as they would themselves. Through these causes and conditions may they be reborn in the Land of Succour and Ease [i.e., the western pure land], see Amitābha and the saintly hosts, attain early enlightenment to the [truth of] non-origination, [develop the power to] multiply their bodies through realms as numerous as motes of dust, widely save sentient creatures, and together with them attain to the perfect enlightenment [of buddhahood].

The congregation with voices united recites the marvellous passage from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* on the dedication or transfer [of merits] and the divine spell for rebirth in the pure land. [Passage from the *sūtra* follows; then the spell for rebirth is recited three times.]

We dedicate the merits from the release of living creatures that we have just performed towards universal repayment of the four debts of gratitude and towards nurture of the three kinds of being. May sentient beings throughout the universe together perfect the same omniscient wisdom [that knows all modalities

of existence]. [Hail to] the buddhas throughout the three times and ten directions! [Hail to] all the *bodhisattva mahāstūvas!* *Mahāprajñāpāramitā!*

Translated by Daniel Stevenson from Zhuhong, *Fangsheng yi*, in *Lianchi dashi quanji* (Taipei: Dongchu chuban she, 1992), pp. 333–42.