

LIBERATING ANIMALS AS A COLLECTIVE AWAKENING RESPONSE TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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The main cause behind the ecological crisis and climate change we face in modern times is greenhouse gases emitted by industrial development. The greenhouse gas emissions have made it difficult for life to survive on Earth. That's why scientists warn that life on Earth will face extinction unless we drastically reduce greenhouse gases within eight years. According to the fifth evaluation report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of scientists under the UN, the most worrisome situation is the imbalance in precipitation. It is causing more rain in wet areas, while dry areas of Africa, Australia, and South Asia are getting worse as precipitation decreases. As a result, the yield of wheat, rice, corn, and nutrients in crops such as zinc and protein decreases as carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increases. About 800 million people suffer from nutritional deficiencies from eating these crops. As such, Eco-Crisis and climate change adversely affect not only various living beings' conditions but also human life as a whole, such as food and security.

Western Buddhist scholars have analyzed that our distorted worldviews and values toward nature are the chief cause of Eco-Crisis. Our prejudices against nature are institutionalized and spread throughout society. If we want to respond to ecological issues, we will deal with institutionalized problems in society. Accordingly, Dharma teachers worldwide suggest that we should go beyond individual practice and carry out collective and institutional practices.

David Roy, who further embodies the suggestions of these Dharma teachers, proposes that we should become Ecosattvas and practice Eco-dharma as a collective awakening. At the time of Buddha, there were no ecological problems. However, what has not changed 2,500 years ago and now is that living beings entirely depend on the ecosystem to survive. In this respect, Ecosattvas must try to find Eco-dharmas in Buddha's teachings and social applications through a perspective that humans and the rest of the biosphere are connected, and they should establish an ultimate goal to emancipate their own sufferings and cope with ecological and social pains through collective awakenings. David Roy asked, "Is human suffering identified with ecological suffering?" In asking the question, he suggests that Ecosattvas should

understand the deepest similarity between the suffering of an individual and the current ecosystem.

However, David Roy points out that some traditional Buddhist practices focus on relieving personal suffering. As a result, Buddhists are passive in social and ecological participation, and are not interested in collective awakening, so they lack empathy for social pain. The case corresponding to Roy's analysis is consistent with the criticism of the practice of releasing living beings (*fangsheng* in Chinese) in the modern world. In fact, it has been regarded as an Eco-Dharma based on Ahimsā (Non-Killing) due to respect for life. But Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes criticized that releasing living beings is not ethical and causes ecological problems because people who participate in the ritual emphasize only personal benefits such as living a long, healthy, and royal life obtained through the ritual, rather than considering the interests of the living creatures. In addition, it would happen that the foreign species released during the ritual create disturbing the local ecosystem. Thus, Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes ask a reproachful question of whether people can be proud of themselves of practicing compassion while continuing to be conducted in the same way as they are now, even though they have recognized that the ritual is inevitably harmful to animals and the environment.

In this paper, I would like to consider what it is to be the releasing living beings as a collective realization that considers the pain of the ecosystem Eco-dharma presents. Let us start this article with the following questions. For Buddhism, in particular Chinese Buddhism: Does the release of living beings refer to the release of captured fishes or birds into nature? What is the basis for claiming that the release of living beings is simply a practice to obtain individual worldly interests? This approach will reveal the purpose of releasing living beings in Buddhist teachings, and through this, the direction of practice for coping with Eco-Crisis will be revealed.

Since the *Sutra of Golden Light* and the *Sutra of Brahma Net* were introduced to China around the 5th century, the releasing living beings and vegetarianism are examples of how Chinese people have adapted to the cultural soil by embracing the notion of Ahimsā in Indian Buddhism. According to Joanna F. Handlin Smith and other Japanese scholars, there are two types of releasing living beings in the history of Chinese Buddhism. First, Tiantai Master Chiyi (538–597) was the first to create ponds for the release of living beings based on the *Sutra of Golden Light* in the 6th century. The monks of the Tiantai

Order inherited it until Tang, Song, Yuan, and the early Ming Dynasty. Joanna F. Handlin Smith describes that it was carried out on a large scale on special days such as Buddha's birthday or the emperor's birthday by installing a release site. Emperors and bureaucrats led this ritual.

Second, a change occurred in the late Ming and early Qing. According to Joanna F. Handlin Smith, since 1580, intellectuals have participated in the releasing living beings through small groups, instead of making a large scale. It is because around Ming, folk religions are popular, but these religious movements were conflicted with the state because the state regarded these folk religions as heresy and suppressed them. Since large-scale gatherings are prohibited, this ritual has changed to a small or individual practice. In the case of Buddhist communities, it seems that they have also changed to small or individual practices to avoid suspicion from the state. Yu Chun-fang also pointed out that Zhuhong (1535–1615), who was one of the most influential monks during the late Ming and early Qing periods, was very careful in his activities while writing his essays “*On Refraining from Killing*” and “*On Releasing Beings*” for Buddhists in line with changes in society. It is said that his ideas have influenced the present.

Joanna F. Handlin Smith, who reveals the difference between these two stages, said that at the end of the Ming Dynasty, in the case of Buddhism, the Ahimsa and the release of living beings in the *Sutra of Brahma Net* are valued as the same concept. But the intellectuals only focused on the release of living beings and had nothing to do with the concept of Ahimsā. Based on this fact, he concluded that, unlike Confucianism and Taoism, the releasing of living beings in Buddhism is characterized by Ahimsa. Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes raise very similar arguments that Ahimsā is unnecessary for the Chinese releasing of living beings, which originated from Confucianism and Taoism, not Buddhism. In addition, they deny that the Chinese releasing living beings originated from the story of Jalavahana in the *Sutra of Golden Light*, which emphasizes compassion by rescuing dying fishes from a pond and not releasing captured fish back to nature. To summarize their arguments, the method of capturing fishes and birds and bringing them back to nature and emphasizing the virtues of longevity and health is not the original way of Buddhist practice.

But their research tells us that for Buddhism, the release of living beings is characterized by the notion of Ahimsā. If so, how does the release of living beings relate to the notion of Ahimsā? What scripture was it based on? When,

by whom, and how was it accepted and developed in Chinese Buddhism?

In Chinese Buddhism, Liang Emperor Wu (464–549) should be regarded as the person who accepted the notion of Ahimsa from Indian Buddhism around the 5th century. He values Ahimsā because his political role model was King Ashoka of India. Wu was the first emperor in the history of China to model his role on King Ashoka, who was the person who settled Ahimsā in Indian society. Liang Emperor Wu became a vegetarian in 502, shortly after his ascension for five years. Initially, he privately practiced it, but he gradually promoted it as an official event in 516. In 517, he prohibited using meat at memorial services for previous governors at his court, and then he enacted and promulgated *'The refraining liquor and meat'* to Buddhist Sangha before 523. Because of his efforts to settle the notion of Ahimsā in Chinese society, Chinese Buddhists have become vegetarian, although it was limited to Buddhist Sangha.

It wonders why the emperors of India and China want Ahimsā to settle in the secular world. It can be assumed that they wish to govern their own country with Buddha's teachings, and Ahimsā is the first and most important precept among the ten precepts of good karma for Sangha and lay. According to the National Guard scriptures, such as in the *Sutra of Golden Light* and the *Humane King Sutra*, Sakyamuni Buddha asked the kings to protect the dharma at a secular level. It is called the spirit of the National Guard. Thus, it should be seen that they want to settle Ahimsā in their society to realize the dharma for the protection of the country.

This aspect is revealed in the contents of his *'The refraining liquor and meat,'* where he cites the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutra* and the *Lankavatara Sutra* as prohibiting meat eating. However, he does not mention the Sutra of Brahma Net, one of the significant texts prohibiting meat eating. In contrast, Endo Yusuke notes that the *Humane King Sutra* and the *Sutra of Golden Light* called the National Guard scriptures, were cited. In this regard, we must pay attention to the *Sutra of Golden Light*, which includes the story of Jalavahana's rescuing fishes.

How does Liang Emperor Wu's ban on meat consumption at the social level connect to the spirit of the National Guard in the Sutra of Golden Light? Fujitani Atsuo indicates that the central theme of the *Sutra of Golden Light* is the idea of repentance and karmic extinction taught in the third chapter. He claims that although it is originally a personal practice, the concept of state

karma is based on the spirit of the National Guard in the National Guard scriptures. Since the karma state is closely related to the king's karma, the king himself is the state. So, to protect the nation safely and peacefully, one of his duties must not only convert the state's evil karma into good karma but also encourage people to build good karma, especially keep the Ahimsā precept. This is why Liang Emperor Wu cited the National Guard scriptures, not the Sutra of Brahma Net, when enacting a ban on meat consumption. His intended to let intellectual officials and Shanga leaders realize social pains through the practice of Ahimsa, so he wanted to make his own land the pure land.

In this context, the release of living beings in Chinese Buddhism is similar. Chiyi is considered the first one to practice it. Details are in his special biography. Many fishers around the foot of Tiandai Mountain continued to kill marine organisms and were drowned because of the rough terrain. So, he decides to make a district for the release of living beings by purchasing a certain area of the foot of Tiandai Mountain with his money and the help of others. In addition, the commander of the county, Xuyi, requested Chiyi to give a lecture on the Jalavahana chapter in the Sutra of Golden Light. The businessmen were impressed by his lecture and donated 63 sites for the release of living beings. This way was popular until the end of the Qing Dynasty, and many sites or ponds for releasing living beings were created around temples in China.

Therefore, Ahimsa in Indian Buddhism was accepted into Chinese society through the spirit of the National Guard of the *Sutra of Golden Light*. Then, how does the spirit of the National Guard connect with Ahimsā and the release of living beings? Even in the *Humane King Sutra*, another patriotic scripture, Prince Sudhana asks, "What is the national territory?" Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva answers, "It is the place where all beings live." It means that the national land is the foundation of all living creatures. Mazunaga Ukei explains that when we say the spirit of the National Guard, the meaning of the nation indicates the ecological land as a protected object and all living things that depend on the land. Thus, first, the spirit of the National Guard in the Sutra of Golden Light means that it is the object to protect the so-called the ecosystem, including mineral rights, plant rights, animal rights, and human rights.

These kinds of perspectives of nature and worldview of the *Sutra of Golden Light* are the ideological background of Jalavahana's story. The Chiyi's pond of the release of living beings inherited this ideological background. In this aspect, a remarkable part is the phrase of the chapter on the Earth Goddess

Drdha.

I will listen to the Dharma too and satisfy myself with dharma nectar. I will fully honor him. I will honor him. I will fully worship him. I will become content. I will complete deeds of honor. Being pleased, I will greatly enrich the essential nutrients of the earth, from the mass of earth 68,000 leagues in extent to the Vajra base of the ground. I will do homage and consummate it. On the top too, I will moisten this earth sphere to the limits of oceans with the essential oil of the earth. I will make this great earth glow with radiant luster. Therefore, the grasses, bushes, medicinal shrubs and forests in this Jambudvipas will grow very lustrous. All varieties of parks, forests, stately trees, leaves, flowers, fruits and crops will become extremely lustrous too. They will have sweet fragrance, essential oil and delicious tastes. They will be beautiful to behold and be great in size. These beings will seek rich varieties of drink and food. Using these they will greatly grow in longevity, robust bodies, they will work to accomplish hundreds and thousands of different activities on this earth. They will persevere. They will strive. They will perform actions that lend strength. O Venerable Transcendent Victor, through these means Jambudvipa will be at peace, have good crops, prosper and abide in the state of serene joy. It will be populated by many human beings. All beings in Jambudvipa will be happy and will experience a myriad of joys. These beings will have great complexion, robust bodies, charisma and strength. (Losang Dawa, 52-53)

This phrase shows that the earth, plants, and people are connected circularly. The land and living things are related, and for people to live a rich and happy life, the ecosystem must first be healthy. This maintains the view of people by connecting them with other natural objects. In other words, when the land becomes fertile, mineral rights, plant rights, and biospheres such as wood forests, hills, rivers, ponds, and springs become abundant, and ultimately, people become healthy, and their lifespan increases. Thus, the spirit of the National Guard protects the ecosystem and humans.

The second means people who practice of Ahimsa and save all of these creatures through Bodhisattva practices. The story of Jalavahana is one of three Jataka stories in the Sutra of Golden Light, including the chapters on Susambhava, the chapter on Jalavahana, and the chapter on the Tigress. Jataka literature presents the stories of the previous lives of Sakyamuni when he practiced as a Bodhisattva. King Susambhava let the Buddhist monk Puming teach the *Sutra of Golden Light*, the Jalavahana saves fishes, and Prince

Mahasalta gives his own body to the tiger, are all the previous lives of Sakyamuni. These Jataka stories are linked to the chapter on the span of the tathagata's life, which explains why Sakyamuni's life span is limitless. It is because he practiced two things in his previous lives—the first is to practice Ahimsa and the second is to give food—even his own body, such as bone marrow, flesh, and blood act. Accordingly, the Jalavahana is the practice of Ahimsā, and the Tigress is the practice of giving.

Likewise, Ahimsā and Giving are essential practices of the Jataka literature. In his paper "Buddhist Environmentalism: Narratives from the Jatakas," Anand Singh states that there are two concepts in describing sacrifice in Jataka literature. One is to oppose the killing of thousands of animals in sacrificial rites in Vedic literature, and the other is to provide flesh or bone marrow to save other lives with mercy by a Bodhisattva embodied in humans or deer. Anand Singh says that Ahimsā is related to ecological values and describes the perspective of nature and worldview in Jataka, showing how ethics is related to humans and animals, especially values that coexist with Earth's resources, forests, and water. It also rejects anthropocentricity; animals and forests are connected to humans, and natural objects are not treated as tools of sacrifice but recognize their intrinsic value.

So far, we have examined why the Ahimsa in Indian Buddhism has been embraced by Chinese society through the spirit of the National Guard in the *Sutra of Golden Light*. The spirit of the National Guard is based on the nature and worldview of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, characterized by ecosystems as equal relief objects as living beings. Because of it, the story of Jalavahana, with this ideological background, filling a dry pond with water, represents a typical example of the Buddhist release of living beings.

However, around late Ming, the practice form of Buddhist release of living beings was transformed because the spirit of the National Guard was separated from the release of living beings. The fundamental cause of this transformation seems to be the emergence of civilian religions related to the White Lotus community from Sung dynasty, which is led by intellectuals and the people. Civil religions were banned from the Ming state, and the confrontation between the state and civilian religions intensified. Zuhong's writings imply that the Buddhist sect's position at that time was located between the state and the civilian religion, which is why Zuhong emphasized the Ahimsā of the *Sutra of Brahma Net*, but he interpreted the release of living beings as

accumulated virtues. Accordingly, from this period, the concept of Ahimsā in the releasing living beings is based on the *Sutra of Brahma Net* rather than the *Sutra of Golden Light*. In other words, it can be claimed that for the release of living beings, the *Sutra of Brahma Net* has replaced the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

Therefore, the release of living beings as a collective awakening to cope with Eco-Crisis and restore the spirit of the National Guard of the *Sutra of Golden Light* is recommended. Rather than practicing the release of captured fish back to nature, Ecosattvas should practice the restoration of ecosystems in contaminated areas and the restoration of habitats in each country. With the increase in population and meat consumption, pollution from livestock and household wastewater in ranches is becoming more serious. Like environmental pollution, habitat restoration is a difficult problem. These problems can't be handled by individuals, temples, and small environmental groups. Instead, it is a government-level policy or project. Because of that, it seems obvious that Ecosattvas need cooperation with environmental experts, environmentally friendly companies, and government policies to cope with Eco-Crisis.

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