

# Liberating Life in Vancouver Harbor

## --- Respecting Life, Benefiting Living Beings

Gold Buddha Monastery

Verse of Merit and Virtue by Great Master Han Shan :

*Just as people love to live long,  
All beings love their life.  
Liberating life is heaven's wish;  
Liberating life fulfills Buddha's teaching.  
Liberating life averts the three disasters;  
Liberating life frees us from the nine accidents.  
By liberating life, we gain longevity;  
By liberating life, we enjoy prosperity.  
By liberating life, we gain offspring.  
By liberating life, we ensure happiness in the family,  
By liberating life, we are free of worries;  
By liberating life, we seldom fall ill.  
By liberating life, we dissolve enmity.  
By liberating life, we purify our karma.  
Liberating life is Guan Yin's kindness;  
Liberating life is Universal Worthy's practice.  
Whether we liberate life or take life,  
Our retribution is as clear as a mirror.*

The three disasters are war, disease and hunger. The nine accidents are incurable disease, the death penalty, being drained of vitality by a nonhuman entity, being burned by fire, being drowned, being devoured by an animal, falling off a mountain, being put under a spell, hunger and dehydration. People who practice liberating life consequently enjoy long life. If you wish for longevity, then you need to liberate life.

As Mahayana Buddhists, we know that Bodhisattvas practice the Bodhisattva Path which consists of the Six Paramitas and Myriad Practices. Within the Six Paramitas and Myriad Practices, they mostly focus on the Six Paramitas (giving, upholding precepts, patience, vigor, Samadhi and prajna wisdom); within these Six Paramitas,

giving comes first. There are three kinds of giving: the giving of wealth, the giving of Dharma, and the giving of fearlessness.

There are some requirements to liberating life. First, we need to know the kind of animals we want to liberate. Do they fly in the sky, run on the ground, or swim in the sea? Are they insects? Where is the appropriate place to liberate them? It's very important to select a proper environment; this is a form of giving fearlessness, to assist these animals to evade death. If people don't care about the environment, the animals will prey upon each other and suffer injury and death. Then one is hurting life and damaging the environment.

Gold Buddha Monastery is located in Vancouver, Canada. Known as the gateway to the Pacific Ocean Vancouver is surrounded by water and is the largest natural harbor of the Pacific Ocean in North America. In the early days, Gold Buddha Monastery was located in Chinatown, next to a fish market, so naturally liberating sea creatures became our frequent activity. In the year of 2000, we moved from Chinatown to the current location, but for more than 20 years, on the last Sunday of the month, the liberating life ceremony has been held without fail. We still liberate sea creatures, so we can send the sea creatures just caught by the fishermen back to the ocean immediately.

Liberating life is liberating ourselves, because living being and we are as one. A living being is just myself; I myself am a living being. People can get along if they are able to understand and forgive, but otherwise they suffer together. In China, farmers leave some grains for the birds to eat during the harvest season; this shows their kindness and compassion and their respect for life. When I see a snail crossing the street, I will move him to the lawn; this is the continuation of life between the snail and myself. From this action, the snail's life is saved and I feel like I have avoided death from dehydration in the desert of life.

Often, we want to liberate life, but we do not understand the animals adequately. Then we end up not respecting and not caring about life and possibly taking life instead. Because of our ignorance, we fail to benefit living beings. The most precious thing in the world is life. Any type of life should be respected. Why liberate life? The Ten Grounds Chapter in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, "Towards all beings endowed with life, generate kind and beneficial thoughts." This can increase one's kind and compassionate intentions to free them. To refrain from killing is also to practice kindness and compassion.

The “Appearance of the Thus Come One” chapter in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, “All Buddhas, World Honored Ones, rescue and protect all living beings in their great kindness, and liberate all living beings out of great compassion; they benefit all beings through their great kindness and great compassion.” There is not a single mote of dust where the Bodhisattva has not given up his life! All Buddhas, World Honored One, out of tremendous kindness and compassion, help, rescue, and cross over all living beings. Their great kindness and compassion pervasively benefits all living beings.

In the fish market, we buy halibut, ling cod, rockfish, crab, shrimp, clam, oyster etc. which are about to be killed and sold. We pick the big ones with eggs. We buy them by the container. To pay money to buy these sea creatures is to practice the giving of wealth. The *Brahma Net Sutra* says: “If we see people killing animals, we need to rescue them, to liberate them from suffering.” To free living beings destined for slaughter, to free them from fear, to return all of them to the ocean, is a greatly meritorious deed. This is a true gift of fearlessness. This is to extensively benefit living beings.

For more than 20 years, Gold Buddha Monastery has been following the regulations of the Fisheries and Oceans Department in Vancouver. In the beginning, we bought 1,000 Canadian dollars’ worth of sea creatures. Starting from year 2000, we can liberate about 3,000 Canadian dollars’ worth of sea creatures. From year of 2007, we increased to 700 pounds, worth about 4,000 to 5,000 Canadian dollars, of sea creatures. At the end of 2007, the Fisheries and Oceans Department in Vancouver has visited Gold Buddha Monastery a few times. Then starting in 2008, they approved us to liberate up to 1,400 pounds of sea creatures. Therefore, Gold Buddha Monastery became the monastery that can liberate the most sea creatures in the Vancouver region.

The Fisheries and Oceans Department indicated that we can liberate the following ocean creatures: halibut, flounder, ling cod, bullhead, rock sole, lemon sole, rockfish, greenling, cabezon, butter, crab, prawn, shrimp, clam, littleneck and Pacific oysters.

Although the causes and conditions of each life are impermanent, every life is equal! Based on the basic teaching of the Buddhadharma, we learn to understand the nature of our mind. First, we learn to respect life, then we learn to contemplate life and care for life. By applying the mind of kindness and compassion to everything, we can help all living beings leave suffering and enjoy happiness. The Buddhadharma is not just a conversation topic, not just a theory, it is an action that we need to uphold and practice in our daily life. Regardless of whether it is a blade of grass, a flower, or a tree, we don’t

want to break it. Whether it is a worm, an ant, a fly, a fish, or a fish egg, we don't want to harm or disturb it. This is the mind of kindness and compassion. This is to widely benefit all living beings.

Many types of living creatures can be liberated, but some sea creatures are unfit to be released into the sea because their lives are too fragile. After we buy fishes and sea creatures from the fish market, we must deliver them to the doorstep at Gold Buddha Monastery on the last Sunday of each month before 9:30 a.m. Within a short time we need to place these sea creatures in some super-sized plastic containers and install oxygen pipes. We do all the preparations to ensure that no sea creature dies before the liberating life ceremony.

When Gold Buddha Monastery was still located in Chinatown, many laymen often placed the containers with the sea creatures directly into the Buddha Hall. Since we moved, the containers are placed at the front door of the monastery because the left side is the Buddha Hall after we enter the door way. First, we sing the Praise for Purifying the Water and recite the Great Compassion Mantra three times, then sprinkle the purified water on these sea creatures. The fishes swing their bodies and splash the water, the crabs and shrimps also make lots of movement. It seems like they know this is the day that they will be liberated.

After the boundaries have been purified, the Liberating Life Ceremony begins. We recite the *Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra* and the Rebirth Mantra. Then we request the Triple Jewel to come and we repent on behalf of these sea creatures, then conduct the Three Refuges Ceremony to allow them to "take refuge with the Buddha, to avoid falling into the hells; take refuge with the Dharma, to avoid falling among the hungry ghosts; take refuge with the Sangha, to avoid falling among the animals." The Dharma Master speaks "The Dharma of the Twelve Links of Conditioned Causation" to them, then speaks the Four Great Vows and praises the Thus Come One. The presiding Dharma Master also recites "We wish that after you are released, you will never again encounter evil demons, be devoured by predators or snared in nets, and that you will live out your natural span of years. We wish that at the end of your lives you will, because you have received the power of the Triple Jewel, be reborn in accord with conditions, maintain the precepts, cultivate, see the Buddha, hear the Dharma, receive the prediction of a Bodhisattva, and transform living beings."

The sutra clearly indicates that these liberated beings derive great benefit from hearing

the Buddha's name and the mantras. The Universal Worthy Conduct and Vows Chapter in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says: "There are many lands in a mote of dust; in every land there are unimaginable Buddhas; every Buddha dwells in an assembly. I see them constantly cultivating Bodhi deeds." Therefore, during the Liberating Life Ceremony, we need to bring forth the Bodhi mind and the Four Limitless Mental Qualities of kindness, compassion, joy, and giving. Through this contemplation, we put the Buddha's name and the mantras into our own body, contemplate within ourselves, then return the contemplation to the living beings being liberated. May they gain happiness through the contemplation.

Also, we can contemplate the emptiness of the three aspects: that is, the living beings being liberated, the self, and the place where the liberation is performed are all empty. The *Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra* says, "One should practice giving without any attachment to the Dharma." The merit and virtue of an offering made with no attachment to form is truly limitless. The emptiness of the three aspects means there is no attachment. One performs deeds as if not performing them, breaking through all attachment.

During the liberation ceremony, we recite the Buddha's name for the creatures, recite mantras, speak the Dharma, perform Three Refuges, make vows and transfer merit. This is just like making a Dharma offering. A Dharma offering is especially important. Why? It can increase their wholesome foundation, so they can attain liberation. If we don't recite the Buddha's name for them, then although we have physically freed them, we have not truly helped them to realize their Dharma body and their wholesome foundation. They didn't receive the true benefit.

After the Liberating Life Ceremony ended, we continue to recite Amitabha Buddha's name, then we move the containers with the sea creatures onto the trucks and take them to the harbor. Many laypeople also drive to the Burrard Inlet Harbor in Vancouver.

In the early days, this was a private estate, but then a Vancouver police officer understood our need and gave us the front gate key to enter the Royal Police Boat Launching Ramp. Later on, the harbor regulated by the royal government moved to another dock, and there is a gate on the boat launching ramp. There is a sloped ramp at the front gate entrance. Often, there will be six foot long boat or an upscale cruise boat docked in the harbor.

At the Liberating Life Dharma Assembly on the last Sunday of each month, the great Buddha Hall is packed with lay people from different places and different traditions. There are Westerners, Asians, Chinese Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, Theravada Buddhists, and people who come just to enjoy the ceremony. Some come to pray for blessings for their family member or pray for themselves. Other come to pray because their prayer has been answered. Some come because they respect life and respect the Liberating Life Dharma Assembly. Regardless, everyone's face shows his hope and joy in the Dharma.

The "Appearance of the Thus Come One" chapter in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says "Living beings in the water receive benefit from the water; living beings on land receive benefit from the land; living beings in the palace receive benefit from the palace; living beings in the air receive benefit from the air." Aquatic creatures such as fish, turtles, shrimp, crabs, are beings of the water who receive benefit from the water. All land animals, including farm animals, receive benefit from the land. Beings who live in the palace refers to humans, who receive benefit from their homes. Living beings in the air refer to flying species, including insects, who receive benefit from the air.

We notify the Royal Police Force once we reach the harbor; then many laymen work together to move the containers holding the sea creatures. Two-person teams move them to the slope and put them down on the docking station. In a short time, the entire docking station is packed with people.

The Dharma Master leads us with the sound of the bell, and every one of us sincerely recites "Homage to Amitabha Buddha." At the same time, we pour the sea creatures out of the containers. If they are fish or shrimp, then they will be slowly poured into the ocean. If they are big fish, then we will pick them up by hand and slide them into the ocean. If they are clams or oysters, then we will pick them up by hand and slowly put them into the ocean. If they are big crabs, then we will untie the rope and use our hands to put them back to the ocean one by one.

As we recite the Buddha's name, these sea creatures return to the ocean. Often, we see the fish swim for awhile and return over and over; they swim freely in the ocean and seem to be saying thank you to us by nodding their heads. Finally, as the Dharma Master leads us to sing the Verse for Transferring the Merit, the assembly completes the

meaningful and profound Liberating Life Dharma Assembly in accord with the Dharma.

Venerable Master Hua mentioned, “Liberating Life has a very important place in Buddhism. People do not understand the meaning so we think that is very common. If you want to liberate yourself, first you need to practice liberating life. If you don’t practice liberating life, then you cannot be liberated. This is the theory of limitless birth and limitless transformation. Don’t take this lightly. If you work more on this, then you will grow more in this area. Cultivating the Way means to cultivate yourself. Take care not to slander this dharma door just because you do not understand the meaning of it!