

# *To atone for killing karma Liberate the Living Instead*

-reported by VBS staff



*MEMBERS OF THE FOURFOLD ASSEMBLY INTONE MANTRAS OVER SOME BURROS AND GIVE THEM THE THREE REFUGES. LARGE-SCALE "LIBERATING THE LIVING" CEREMONIES ARE HELD EVERY MONTH AT THE CITY OF TEN THOUSAND BUDDHAS, IN AN ATTEMPT TO MITIGATE MANKIND'S COLLECTIVE KILLING KARMA AND TO AVERT WARFARE AND DISASTERS THAT THREATEN OUR PLANET.*

*A single grain of rice from a donor  
Is as heavy as Mount Sumeru.  
Having eaten it, if one does not cultivate,  
Then one will have to repay the debt by weaning a coat of fur and horns.*

The workings of cause and effect are an immutable law of the universe. As people do deeds, so do they reap corresponding results. Good causes reap good results, bad causes reap bad results, and there is no trick or mystery involved in the process. As is said in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*,

*According to the deeds they do,  
So they reap a corresponding retribution.  
-Chapter Ten  
"The Bodhisattvas Ask for Clarification"*

But because we living beings are so laden with carnal desires, we've succeeded in blinding ourselves to the lofty vision of our fundamental intrinsic oneness with all things. This degeneration has reached the point now where in trying to gratify our desires for "mouth blessings" --delicious flavors--most of us people do not bat an eye at sacrificing the lives of other creatures so as to indulge ourselves and revel in gastronomical forages. Wanton and incessant killing has contributed to a dark, toxic energy that shrouds our entire global system like a black blanket and the repercussions are an abhorance. One such is the "explosion" of terminal illnesses and weird diseases that currently glut the death market. In the face of these exotic and incurable sicknesses, the exponents of science and modern medicine are baffled and stymied. Little do they realize that the culprit behind the many disasters and diseases that now plague the human race is none other than unbridled killing and merciless disregard for the holiness of life itself.

Witnessing the self-destruction of the human race, the fourfold assembly at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas has brought forth a mind of genuine sympathy and compassion and are resolved to do all they can to help save the world and their fellow-beings. The members of the Sino-American Buddhist Association understand deeply that only by an act of true repentance and reform on behalf of all human beings to atone for our collective killing karma can turn this ominous tide. Thus, beginning in 1982, the Association has begun to hold ceremonies to "liberate the living" on an extensive scale each month. Our hope is that the merit generated from these acts of virtue and repentance, dedicated to the well-being of all sentient creatures throughout the Dharma Realm, will be sufficient to quell all natural disasters and to eradicate manmade calamities so that all warfare and the manufacturing of armaments will come to a stop.



*BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY, May, 1982: over 600 friends from near and far gathered together for a liberating the living ceremony during which hundreds of wild and domestic fowl were set free.*

There is no antidote as powerful as liberating the living to counter the heartless killing that now prevails.

For over ten years the members of the Sino-American Buddhist Association have regularly liberated a wide variety of living creatures destined for slaughter for purposes of consumption, experimentation, as prey in training hunting dogs, reducing population of "unwanted" species, and so forth. These creatures that inhabit land, sea, and air--both domestic and wild--which, having been captured, were about to enter the door of death, have been ransomed and set free. For instance, recently the lives of wild burros are being taken in a government-sanctioned "mass slaughter" conducted by shooting the creatures from helicopters. This is because this "inedible" species is threatening the grazing land of "edible" species through overpopulation. As is so often the case, greed for delicious flavors is behind this reckless act of killing. On hearing this news, members of the Sino-American Buddhist Association contacted authorities to make arrangements to ransom some of the burros for the purpose of liberating them, so that they can be set free to roam unharmed in their natural habitat.

One spring weekend late in May, some of the burros were transported to the Hall of Ten Thousand Buddhas at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. The assembly regarded these destitute animals with kind eyes and brought forth deep compassion. Wishing to deliver them from their plight, everyone participated in a solemn ceremony of "liberating the living." First the boundaries were purified as the assembly filed out of the Buddhahall and circumambulated the burros while reciting the Great Compassion Mantra many times.

The burros, having been exposed to abuse before, were at first wary and nervous. This state of agitation also occurs because when beings fall into the animal realm, their original human efficacy and divine nature get "butchered" so that they become dull-witted and stubborn. Torn by the arrows of depression, they suffer oppression inside and out. Moreover, they must continually undergo beatings, whippings, and being kicked and scolded. All these factors contributed to their fearful and uneasy state as they stood surrounded by the Great Assembly. At the slightest unexpected movement, albeit gentle, the burros would start and prepare to gallop off. At the beginning of the ceremony they had to be reined in bridles and lead ropes, but a strange change took place once the sounds of the Great Compassion Mantra reached their ears. As the soothing syllables of that ancient and magical mantra filled the late spring afternoon, the Venerable Abbot himself came out to give aid. Patting the donkeys on their foreheads, he comforted them with gentle and kind speech, intoned mantras over them, and exhorted them to turn away from confusion and return to enlightenment. The visibly relaxed burros became compliant and subdued.

Next, the assembly invited the Triple Jewel of the ten directions to bestow protection and mindfulness upon these ransomed creatures. The Presiding Master recited:

*...Only because the offenses of these species are so heavy, are their spirits and consciousnesses obscured so that they are unable to understand the profound Vaipulya Dharma. We beseech the Triple Jewel of the ten directions to use their awesome virtue invisibly to infuse them so they become enlightened and are soon liberated.*

*Disciples of the Buddha! Be mindful that your heavy karma of many lives has made you fall among the animals. Now, on your behalf, before*

*the Triple Jewel, we confess our offenses and mistakes. You should sincerely follow us in repentance and reform.*

The assembly together recited the verse of repentance and reform:

*For all the bad karma created in the past,  
Based upon beginningless greed, hatred and stupidity,  
And born of body, mouth and mind,  
I now repent and reform.*

*Offenses arise from the mind,  
Repentance is done by the mind.  
If the mind is extinguished, offenses are forgotten,  
The mind forgotten, offenses wiped out--both are empty.  
This is called true repentance and reform.*

Then, the Seven Buddha's True Words for Eradicating Disasters and the Liberating the Living Mantra were intoned. Following that the Three Refuges were transmitted to these ransomed animals. All recited with a single mind:

*We take refuge with the Buddha,  
We take refuge with the Dharma,  
We take refuge with the Sangha.*

*We take refuge with the Buddha, the Venerable One who is doubly perfected.  
We take refuge with the Dharma, the revered which allows one to leave desire.  
We take refuge with the Sangha, the Venerable Ones among the multitudes.*

*We take refuge with the Buddha, so that we shall not fall into the hells.  
We take refuge with the Dharma, so that we shall not fall among the hungry ghosts.  
We take refuge with the Sangha, so that we shall not fall among the animals.*

Following the Three Refuges the Twelve Links of Conditioned Causation were explained to the burros, and then everybody recited the four vast vows of a Bodhisattva on their behalf:

*Living beings are boundless, I vow to save them all.  
Afflictions are endless, I vow to cut them off.  
Dharma doors are countless, I vow to study them.  
The Buddha Way is most supreme, I vow to realize it.*

*I vow to take across the living beings of my own nature.  
I vow to cut off the afflictions of my own nature.*

*I vow to study the Dharma doors of my own nature.  
I vow to realize the Buddha Way of my own nature.*

An incredible transformation took place as this ancient ritual was enacted. Whereas the burros had at first bucked and jumped, now they became quiet and serene. When the Three Refuges and Four Bodhisattva Vows were recited, they stood facing the assembly reverently, with heads lowered--as though absorbed in reflection. In their eyes was reflected a flicker of deep remorse and a spark of awakening. It was as if after many lives of sinking into gloom and oblivion they once again became attuned to their original human goodness.

*Strange indeed! Living beings are deluded and devoid of wisdom. Within birth and death they receive countless bodies that are imperiled and frail, and will all too quickly go bad and disintegrate... and yet these beings do not think so use their undurable bodies to seek solid and durable bodies.*

*-Ten Conducts, Chapter 20  
Avatamsaka Sutra*

The Assembly proceeded to recite the names of the Seven Thus Come Ones. These names have an efficacious energy that illumines heaven and earth. At the very sound of these names, the offenses from measureless aeons can be wiped away.

Homage to Many Jewels Tathagata!  
Homage to Jeweled Victory Tathagata!  
Homage to Wonderfully Colored Body Tathagata!  
Homage to Extensive Body Tathagata!  
Homage to Apart from Fear Tathagata!  
Homage to Sweet Dew King Tathagata!  
Homage to Amita Tathagata!

After exhorting the creatures with numerous other expedient means, the Assembly intoned the verse of dedication. And then, with hearts full and at peace, the Assembly filed back to the Great Buddhahall, all the while reciting Amita Buddha's name. The merit was transferred to all living beings of the Dharma Realm, as we disciples once again implored all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to certify this liberation of life.

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At this point, one may wonder: what are the reasons that brought these burros to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and what were they *before* they became burros? Well, it might just be the case that once in a former lifetime they were servants in a temple. Their daily chores consisted of cooking, sweeping, and cleaning the grounds; chopping the wood, tending the fires, and watering the vegetables. Now, to begin with, in serving the Sangha community, one should be willing to endure toil and hardship and never complain of weariness. But these servants harbored a grudge. They felt that temple work was all work and no pay-offs, and instead of rejoicing at the good fortune of getting an opportunity to serve the Sangha, they grumbled to each other. On top of that, they had stingy and greedy natures, and so on numerous occasions they stole the property of the Eternally-Dwelling Triple

Jewel and secretly enjoyed it themselves. Now it is stated very clearly in the Sutras and Vinaya that all food and drink, medicine and so forth that is presented by donors should first be offered up to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with utmost veneration. The Sangha does not eat until the offering is completed, and laypeople should in turn wait until the Sangha has been served. Everything has to be handled properly and reverently to ensure that the presentation is "pure" and in accord with the Dharma.

However, because these servants worked in the kitchen and had easy access to the altars in the different Buddhahalls where the offerings were placed, they would lift those gifts and pocket them, without allowing those gifts to be presented to the Sangha for whom they were intended. Those servants also harbored many doubts concerning the Sutras and denied cause and effect.

They used to kid between themselves, "Hah! All this cause and effect stuff--it's just stories that the old monks conjure up to scare housewives and children." Because of stealing from the Triple Jewel, their transgressions also included deceiving donors, for it was the donor's original intent to plant blessings with the Sangha, the pure field of blessings. By usurping the offerings which rightfully belonged to the Sangha, these servants corrupted the "pure" causes planted by the laity, thereby wreaking irreparable damage to their own self-natures. The offenses they created in the temple far outnumbered the merit they acquired. And although these wrongdoings weren't colossal, the problem was, "An offense that is as light as a feather committed within the Triple Jewel carries the same weight as an ordinary worldly crime that is as heavy as Mount T'ai." Eventually the Dharma-protecting spirits became displeased with these repeated violations.

And so, upon the deaths of these temple servants, when their individual accounts were reckoned before the court of King Yama, it was discovered that they had seriously "overdrawn" their bank of merit and virtue. As a result, they lost their human bodies and wound up in the path of animals. They received vile bodies and coats of hide and fur which were dirty, mangy, and stinky. Numerous tiny organisms and bugs infest every hairpore of their skin, gnawing and biting away, causing them to feel continual discomfort and agitation. Who knows the suffering and misery that these animals undergo? How many people understand from a burro's brays its cries of torment?

Why is one an ox or horse this life? Because in the past one did not repay one's debts in full.

*-The Sutra of Cause and Effect of the Three Periods of Time*

Living beings who steal the wealth and property of the Permanently Dwelling, their grains, food and drink, clothing, or anything that should not be taken, will fall into the uninterrupted hells, where they will seek escape for thousands of tens of thousands of millions of years in vain.

*-Earth Store Sutra*

*"Contemplating the Karmic conditions of Living Beings" Chapter 3*

Their offenses as mentioned above caused those servants to be reborn as burros--servile animals--to pay back the debts they incurred. To this day they are still burros, having been reborn as such for several lifetimes already. Therefore it is said that a single grain of rice or a piece of thread from a donor cannot be abused or used recklessly. Every portion of offering, even down to a needle or a blade of grass, has assigned to it--albeit invisibly --a specific amount of merit and virtue. Cultivators who

accept an offering must make sure they work hard enough to be worthy of receiving it, no matter how small it may be. They must be able to "fulfill the quota," so to speak, so that, they do not enjoy undeserved benefits. For this reason, frugality and thrift have always been stressed in Proper Places of the Way from of old. All sages practice the path of "cherishing few desires and knowing contentment." They cherish the earth and its resources, never daring to exploit or waste anything carelessly. And because they cherish the myriad things, the myriad things cherish them in turn, and eventually those sages gain the path of liberation. With cause and effect so severe, how do we dare to make mistakes?

After the liberating the living ceremony, the burros were guided to the back fields of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas where they are allowed to roam in a vast expanse of meadows with abundant food. It is hoped that they can spend the rest of their lives in peace and live out their natural span of years. From what remains of their good roots which has led them back to the grounds of the Triple Jewel, may they be daily infused with the holy atmosphere and auspicious energy of the Proper Dharma that permeates the City, so that they may open wisdom, bring forth the Bodhi intent, quickly cast off their animal bodies, be reborn as human beings, and pursue the Unsurpassed Bodhi Way.

A verse in exhortation says,

Stealing the property of the Triple Jewel, they fell and became burros.  
Whipped, struck, and abused--to whom could they appeal?  
May all who hear this story, cherish their blessings and be careful about  
cause and effect,  
For just a single wrong move, may cause one to be sorry for a thousand  
years!