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## Environmental Communication of Animal Release Practice in Buddhism View

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of environmental degradation is a complex issue that requires the contribution and role of all levels of society to overcome this problem. Nature preservation is each responsibility to protect. The ritual of releasing animals is still viewed by many practitioners as a means of disposing bad luck and having prosperity, so impacts other than loving practices such as health and environmental damage that should have been prioritized are not being considered. This study provides a basic understanding that must be possessed by practitioners who conducted the animal release ritual so as not to create an environmental problem. It is accomplished through understanding the history of animal release ritual origin, and a brief survey of animal release. The research is qualitative which is expected to provide reliable data for more in-depth results for the research needs. The research was approached through case studies related to environmental communication of animal release ritual. The result of the study shows the right strategy of environmental communication can resolve a narrow understanding of animal release practitioners so that they can be more open-minded to a logical understanding of animal release rituals. Also, large-scale animal release practice tends to have an unwanted negative impact on the environment such as excessive animal invasion. This raises the notion that the practice obscures its important aspect of compassion, the basis of Buddhist views in conducting animal release ritual. The understanding must be embedded in the minds of the practitioners of animal release.

### I. Introduction

Animal release ritual is customary practice in Buddhism throughout Asia. In recent decades, this ritual is also practiced by Buddhists in the West. The purpose of the ritual is to free captured animals to their natural habitat.

Therefore, the ritual of animal release can be seen as a means of cultivating compassion, which is an important aspect of Buddhism principles. Perhaps due to the direct nature and purpose of the ritual, the Buddhist scholars tend to be uninterested in researches on animal release (Law, 1994; Severinghausdan Chi, 1999; Williams, 1997).

There are two main issues in animal release practice according to Buddhism. First, is the notion that animal release is a traditional Indian-Buddhist practice. Second, the current practice of animal release creates environmental and ecological problems that contradict Buddhism's important aspect of compassion. This second issue has been recognized in several Buddhist countries. In recent years, on Vesak Day or Buddha's day of enlightenment and parinirvana, many suggestions were made to avoid the animal release practices. For example, in 2006, Cheung Ho Fai, Head of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society, asked the government to ban bird release to minimize the danger of bird flu (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). Likewise, the Singapore National Parks Board has imposed fines on people for releasing animals during the Vesak celebrations (Wong, 2006). Thus, this article aimed to explain the history of environmental communication of animal release practice and evaluate its impact.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Environmental Communication**

Technological developments that are not accompanied by its users' human resources development often cause problems related to the damage that arises from unwise usage of technology. Environmental communication became known as Rachel Carson stated pesticide hazards in human health and its impact on the environment, thus environmental communication is always on par and linked to health communication (Willoughby & Smith, 2016). Burgess & Harrison (1998) stated that environment discourse in the 80s and 90s has evolved from unlikely to be discussed at first to likely be considered on its sustainability measurement. Environmental communication includes a comparative analysis of the social and cultural processes to which the public comprehend and interpreted global environmental issues into changing daily practices at the individual and household level. This sustainability aspect was established following beliefs that individuals and institutions can be persuaded to accept responsibility for the emerging of environmental problems and changing daily practices to mitigate future negative environmental impacts.

Flor (2004) defined environmental communication as an application of communication approaches, principles, strategies, and techniques to environmental management and protection. In short, environmental communication is an exchange of environmental information, knowledge, and even wisdom that leads to mutual understanding between the parties. While Cox (2013) defined environmental communication as a study of how we communicate about the environment, the influence of that communication on our perceptions of the environment, ourselves, and our relationship with the environment. Environmental communication is a pragmatic and constitutional

vehicle or tool to study and understand the environment, including our relationship to the environment.

Environmental communication is a symbolic medium used to construct environmental problems and to negotiate different community responses. Environmental communication does not solely entail environmental governance, but more, including the study of public opinion and perceptions. Furthermore, Lie and Servaes (2015) classified environmental communication as one of the thematic sub-disciplines in the communication development field and social change which addresses all interactions between humans and the environment.

Cox (2013) stated that the study areas of environmental communication include: 1. Environmental rhetoric and discourse; is the broadest area of environmental communications studies covering rhetoric from environmental activists, environmental writing, business public relations campaigns, media, and websites; 2. Media and environmental journalism; is an area of study that focuses on how news coverage, advertisements, commercial programs, and internet sites describe environmental issues. This study area also covered media impact on people's behavior, agenda-setting, and media framing. 3. Public participation in decision making regarding environmental issues; 4. Public education and advocacy campaigns or also known as social marketing; is a study area that includes campaigns that are aimed at changing people's behavior to achieve a desired social or environmental goal. 5. Collaborative environment and conflict resolution; is a study area that examines alternative models for overcoming dissatisfaction with public participation and conflict resolution methods. An important aspect in this area of study is a collaboration by inviting stakeholders to be involved in problem-solving discussions and not in the form of advocacy or debate. 6. Risk communication; a study area that has traditionally evaluated the effectiveness of communication strategies in conveying technical information about health to the modern approach, which by looking at the impact of people's comprehension of risk in risk acceptance of public assessment. 7. Representation of environmental issues in popular culture and green marketing; is a study area that examined the use of images, music, television programs, photography, and commercial advertisements in influencing people's behavior towards the environment.

Cox (2013) concluded that environmental communication is a sub-field of communication in which there are several different or interdisciplinary study areas. However, environmental communication in principle has two main functions, namely: 1. Pragmatic function, which includes functions to educate, alert members, mobilize, and persuasive functions; 2. A constitutional function, in which language and other symbols play a role in shaping our perception of the reality and nature of the environmental problems.

The relationship between discourse, communication, and stakeholders as explained by Cox (2013), showed that: 1. Communication carried out by humans is a symbolic action. Our beliefs, attitudes, and behavior towards environmental issues are completely mediated by communication. Thus the public space emerges as a discursive space to communicate about the

environment. 2. Collaboration is a form of constructive and open communication in which the parties involved (participants) work together in solving environmental problems and conflict resolution. The collaboration is manifested in a dialogue that focuses on long-term goals, learning processes, and power-sharing. In some cases, participants will try to reach a consensus understanding so that discussion and debate will not be completed until each party expresses different attitudes and finds common ground. 3. Stakeholder is a key term that is closely related to collaboration; in this case, each party involved in a dispute has a clear interest (a stake) in achieving a result (outcome). A successful collaboration begins with all stakeholders involved are willing to participate in a collective effort to solve a problem.

Lie and Servaes added that the sub-discipline of environmental communication is generally dominated by the climate change issue, which has become the main agenda in recent years. In contrast to agricultural counseling, environmental communication, especially climate change communication, focuses more on public engagement and opinion as well as the risks of climate change, while agricultural communication generally focuses more on communication with certain target groups. In regards to the development aspect, it was stated that people who are categorized as poor are the most vulnerable to environmental impacts such as climate change, scarcity of energy sources, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, excessive exploitation of natural resources, and extreme weather. In this context, environmental communication is closely related to sustainability issues.

### **Animal Release History**

According to one of the Buddhist scriptures, Fanwang Jing, the practice of animal release is an act of releasing animals based on compassion. Furthermore, all human beings must enact animal release practice based on loving thoughts. Everyone must acknowledge that all men should be viewed as our own fathers and all women should be viewed as our own mothers because we always derive life from all every time we incarnate. Therefore, every being in all the realms of existence is our own parent, so killing and eating the flesh of beings is the same as killing our own parents and killing our old incarnate bodies. We must always enact the practice of animal release and lead or teach others of the practice. If someone sees another slaughtering an animal, then he should save and protect the animal and the actor from the suffering of death and slaughter (Shiu and Stokes, 2008).

Apart from Fanwang Jing, Renwang Jing also supports the practice of animal release. According to Renwang Jing, one should protect the body of all living things (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). However, modern scholars usually see these two scriptural sources as dubious Chinese works (Buswell, 1990).

The JinGuangming Jing scriptures also describe the practice of releasing animals from suffering. According to the book, a young man named Jalavahana used 20 elephants to fill water into an almost dry pond containing 10,000 fish suffering from the lack of water (Emmerick, 1970). Although he did not release those fish into their natural habitat, this practice demonstrates an act of

releasing fish' suffering due to lack of water. This practice is an act of compassion towards animals.

Another compassionate act is shown by the monks of not harming small insects while fetching water in the river. They use soft cloth to filter the small insects from the water into the container and release it back into the river. Yijing monk during his visit to India said that he witnessed monks practicing caution against small insects while drinking water (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). Although Indian Buddhism does not show animal release practice, it shows protection for living beings and the principle of ahimsa or non-violence. It is important to see the difference between the enactment of refraining from killing or harming living things and the practice of releasing animals in rituals which tend to not be built upon the principle of ahimsa.

After knowing the difference between animal release practice and compassion for animals, it is clear that the ritual of animal release cannot be found in Buddhism. This practice is found in the Taoist teachings known as Liezi or animal release ritual in New Year celebrations as a sign of kindness. However, Liezi was criticized for causing several dead animals after being caught in the New Year as the impact caused by the ritual is a large-scale animals' captivity often causing problems related to the environment. Thus, to maintain the survival of animals, a ban on capturing animals should be enforced. When an animal has released again after being captured, this act of kindness is unable to make up for the arrest that has been implemented (Graham, 1960). Smith (1999) also argues the animal release rituals and eluding animals killing have obscured an important aspect of Buddhism, namely compassion.

The Taoist teachings of Liezi emerged around the early 3rd century AD along with the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Meanwhile, the teachings of Buddhism Fanwang Jing and Renwang Jing were translated by Kumarajiva who lived in 344 - 413 AD. Therefore, Liezi appeared earlier than the other two Buddhist books (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). Shiu and Stokes (2008) continued that since the arrival of Buddhism in China, Liezi's culture of animal release practices has been interpreted as Buddhist practice. Buddhists in China created their own scriptures confirming that a cultural practice of animal release is an important teaching of Buddhism, namely compassion and non-violence. It is not surprising, then, that Buddhists in China have considered the practice of animal release as one of their important rituals for centuries. The influence of the practice of freeing these animals has spread to several countries. For example, apart from Buddhists, Catholics, and Christians in Taiwan also conducted animal release practice (Severinghaus and Chi, 1999).

### **The History of Animal Release in China**

The animal release practice in China has become popular over the centuries due to the influence of Tiantai Buddhism and Jingtu Buddhism (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). The BhikkhuChiyi of the Tiantai sect after observing the fishermen around the Tiantai region accumulate bad karma, prompting on buying a piece of land for building a to encourage the fishermen on releasing their catch into the pond. He has built more than 60 fish ponds and turned them into ponds for releasing living things. During the ritual of animal release,

BhikkhuChiyi will teach the *Dharma* (nature of reality) of JinGuangming Jing and MiaofaLianhua Jing for the fish that will soon be released into the pond. Therefore, the practice of animal liberation has become a major part of Tiantai Buddhism.

The Lianchi monk of the Jingtu sect is known for promoting the animal release practice. He compiled a guidebook for animal release practice, made writings on refrain from killing, and built two ponds to free animals in Shangfang and Changshou regions. Ouyi monk and Yinguang monk of the Jingtu sect also emphasized the importance of animal release practice benefits. This showed how important the development of animal release practice is for Jingtu Buddhism in China (Shiu and Stokes, 2008).

### **Brief Description of Traditional Animal Release Practice**

Practitioners' motivations for carrying out animal release practices are varied (Shiu and Stokes, 2008), such as to gain prosperity, long life, health, and to cultivate feelings of compassion for sentient beings. Besides, some practitioners carry out animal release practices to accumulate great merits to bestow on their loved ones, including those who are sick or deceased.

Animal release ritual in China is usually performed by monks (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). The monks usually invite Buddhists to take refuge in the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, recitation of the MahaKaruna Dharani, and Xin Jing. Then the monks called out to invite Buddha, spread the *Dharma* about the law of karma to the animals to be freed, and invited the people to call out the Tri Sarana which was addressed to the animals to be released. The ritual was continued with two hopes for the animals. The first hope is that after being released they will no longer be caught by fishermen and hunters. The second hope is that they will be reborn as humans in their next life to perfect the teachings they have heard and walk in the path of Buddha. The ritual ends with the bestowing of merits, the personal prayer of each devotee, and the recitation of Buddha Amitabha's name several times to lead to Buddhahood.

The types of animals that are released in the ritual are varied (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). The released animals usually are birds, turtles, fish, crabs, and ants. In the current practice, releasing birds and turtles are becoming more popular in China, as the turtle symbolizes longevity in China, and releasing birds creates an impressive effect during the completion of the ritual.

### **Animal Release Practice in Modern Time**

The animal release practice in modern times is unclear. This occurred as the practitioners' lack of knowledge regarding animal release practice due to several factors (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). The first factor is that Buddhist scholars only carry out a small research on the practice of animal release, thus the data obtained only covered based on Taoist traditions. The second factor is the unclear research sources, making the basic references and important aspects of animal release practice are blurred. Eventually, these scholars became reluctant to further research on animal release practice.

The unclear animal release practice in modern times was expressed by Sherwood (2001). In his survey, the Vajrayana Buddhist community in Australia is very active in the practice of animal release as they viewed this

practice have a profound effect on the accumulation of good karma for animals near death and for those who perform the animal release. However, he added that he did not find any Theravada Buddhist community in Australia involved in the practice.

Similarly, de Bien (2005) also expressed that practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism in Australia admitted that animal release practice is an important practice in Buddhism. Whereas in Canada, animal release ritual has been carried out for 13 years by practitioners of Jingtu Buddhism, with 25,000 animals being released into the Pacific Ocean (Shiu and Stokes, 2008).

Sherwood (2001) added that 11% of Buddhist organizations have programs for animal release practice. Some organizations still use traditional animal release practices. Several others are no longer using the traditional practice of liberation, but by buying poultry from farmers.

A different result was shown in Severinghaus and Chi (1999) findings who interviewed 1,040 Taiwanese, selected randomly, regarding their involvement in animal release practice. The results showed that 29.5% of residents living in Taipei have performed animal release rituals with 64.4% of the group performed it individually, without a religious organization. In general, the results showed that women with low education and wealth were more involved in the ritual. Interestingly, the results also showed that few practitioners believed that those released animals would survive.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was carried out by conducting an in-depth interview with the respondents. This research is explanatory survey research to explain. The survey was conducted to take a sample from the research population to be questioned in the discussion.

This research was conducted in areas in Indonesia resided by the Mahayana tradition Buddhists population. The location was selected purposively. The location selection was made with the following consideration: Mahayana tradition Buddhist groups in Indonesia, with its smaller groups in Central Java, and Jakarta was selected as the *Sangha* (association) of Mahayana Indonesia Headquarters was in Jakarta.

The unit of analysis in this study is a group. The determination of the group was conducted by using the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a sampling method with certain relevant considerations or can represent the object studied (Mantra, Kasto, and Tukiran, 2014). The method was selected as the groups had the same situation and characteristics as follows: (1) decision making occurred in the group regarding animal release ritual (2) the group has a group leader, and (3) have 10 to 20 members. The situations and characteristics of the groups mentioned above are expected to represent the Mahayana tradition Buddhist in Indonesia.

The number of samples studied was 5 groups. Five members of each group were selected to represent the group, which totals to 25 respondents selected for this research. The reason for selecting 5 people from each group was because this study contained statements regarding the understanding of

environmental communication and community responses related to environmental communication in animal release ritual. All respondents in this study were monks and Buddhists of Mahayana tradition, as the Mahayana *Sangha* performed group services and guidance in the region.

The data used in this study are primary and secondary. Primary data were obtained through interviews and discussion by giving questions to the selected respondents. Interviews were conducted following the question guidelines in the questionnaire, and field observations were also conducted to observe several realities related to environmental communication in animal release practices. During the interview and discussion, 5 group members were selected to represent the group. So that their answers are considered as a group answer based on the agreement made by the five members of the group so that there are no differences in their answers. To complement and explain further the data obtained from interviews and discussions, other interviews were also conducted with several group members who were *Sangha* elders or pamoka.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

##### Ethical Issues of Animal Release Practice

The increase of animal release ritual causes an increase in demand for releasing animals which leads to animals commercializing activity (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). This resulted in many practitioners often ordered animals for the ritual, which involve catching and hunting animals. In other words, the practice of animal release is currently Liezi's practice.

Williams (1997) revealed that a large number of special orders on animals to be released in constant animal release rituals will cause a greater number of animals' death to occur before they are released. Furthermore, the ritual will become a practice that institutionalizes the need for releasing the captured animals.

Currently, an insufficient supply of birds to meet the needs of the monthly rituals will result in the necessity of imported birds from other regions or countries. This was revealed by the Environment & Animal Society of Taiwan in 2004, out of 155 pet shops in Taiwan, 63 shops supply birds of more than 35 species to Buddhist organizations to fulfill the needs of animal release rituals (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). As a result, there is a cycle of catching and releasing birds for the ritual. The cycle is that Buddhist organizations made the orders, hunters caught the birds, wholesalers collected them, birds are sold to retailers, retailers sold the birds to Buddhist organizations, birds are released in rituals, and hunters wait for the ritual to end to recapture the birds. This has become an important issue as it causes a high mortality rate and deteriorating health of the released birds. Similar problems have been reported to the authorities, for example in Cambodia (Sipress, 2006) and Australia (de Bien, 2005).

Sipress (2006) revealed that the practice of animal release in Cambodia has raised concerns about the birds' health that are about to be released. Also, it raises concerns for human health because released birds often carry the bird flu virus. This was confirmed by the Wildlife Conservation Society for the

discovery of birds that are tested positive with the H5N1 bird flu virus around temples in Cambodia.

Benitez (2007) also argued that prohibiting the practice of animal release in Hong Kong is a good choice. The prohibition was conducted following many discoveries of dead birds due to the avian flu virus in crowded areas of Hong Kong, and the massive number of unvaccinated birds around Hong Kong.

### **Animals Hunting Issues**

The animal release practice has created problems with animal hunting. Currently, many scientists are considering the impact of poaching on global communities around the world as it leads to climate change and land usage changes (Vitousek et al, 1997). The World Conservation Union made a warning for countries to establish institutions for endangered species protection from poaching on a big scale. Therefore, the act of introducing, establishing, and disseminating information on the prohibition of animal hunting practices is carried out in various regions and the world (Duggan, 2006).

Biological scientists in Hong Kong have collaborated with Buddhists to form a team that facilitates monitoring bird hunting practices that occurred in the region (Leven, 2004). Likewise in Australia, before the Vajrayana Buddhist Institute conducted a ritual of animal release, they collaborated with the Minister of Agriculture and Maritime Affairs of Australia to perform local hunting practices around the nearest port (de Bien, 2005). This act can reduce the damage to Australia's ecosystem due to animal hunting in the animal release ritual.

Even so, still there are countries that are not assertive and inattentive to the survival of endangered species due to animal release practice. For example, in 1996 scientists determined that the Brazilian tortoise is a common animal in every river in Brazil (Severinghaus and Chi, 1999). However, in 2006, many Brazilian tortoises were found in local lakes in Guangzhou, China (Shiu and Stokes, 2008), where they were released for the animal release practice. This triggered the extinction of the Brazilian tortoise.

Now the government is becoming more aware of the threat which encourages law enactment to restraint and tightens the animal hunting practice. The National Parks Board in Singapore has taken assertive action on hunting issues, namely by monitoring the rituals of animal release during the Vesak period (Shiu and Stokes, 2008). The Singapore government's move resulted in a significant reduction of hunting cases, from 44 cases in 2004, seven in 2005 (Wong, 2006), to five cases in 2006. Also, poachers were fined \$50,000 per individual or imprisonment for six months as punishment for attempting on releasing animals into the wild (Tan, 2006).

The role of the government in overcoming animal hunting and release is essential for the creation of ecosystem balance and the survival of animal species from hunters. As for Buddhists, they can practice animal release deliberately, such as by maintaining the biodiversity of an ecosystem, so that the ecosystem function and environment long-term integrity are better preserved (Hooper et al, 2005).

The solution to solve animal release issued around the world today does not always refer to the practice banning imposed in Singapore. However, efforts made by the Australian government which permit the prudent practice of releasing animals within government monitoring can also be an option.

Another solution that can be implemented is for Buddhist organizations to collaborate with nature conservation community organizations to complete animal release ritual as an act of compassion. For example, Buddhist organizations in Canada are collaborating with nature conservation organizations of the Hindu community by placing offerings on animal release practice in rivers, to avoid polluting Canadian watersheds (Mohan, 2006). By establishing good partnerships with government or regional authorities, the Buddhist organizations will be able to conduct an animal release practice following the real compassionate aspects of Buddhism. Compassion act from animal release practice can be more effective if the practitioners are aware and look for solutions to the ritual's negative impacts on the environment, economy, and health aspects.

## V. CONCLUSION

Further systematic research of Buddhist animal release practices is essential to understand the diverse traditions around the world and their potential impact in other fields, such as health, environment, economic, and community concerns. Furthermore, by knowing the dangers and negative impacts of the practice, Buddhist practitioners can reflect the existence of compassion as taught by Buddha in the current animal release ritual. Therefore, the animal release practice has become a Buddhist ritual that encourages all practitioners to have greater concern for finding solutions according to Buddhist teachings and to provide and achieve long-term welfare and compassion for the released animals and those involved.

It is not a simple matter to change the comprehension and resolute belief that has been passed down for generations concerning the essence of animal release ritual. The real condition faced today is mainly related to environmental conditions. It corresponds to the basic rationale for current generations with an active role in the ritual to have an open mind and understanding of the essence and true philosophical values of animal release ritual concerning understanding environmental communication from a different view. Environmental communication can provide a new perspective for practitioners and people to participate in preserving the environment.

The real contribution by Buddhist practitioners to the animal release is releasing animals into the wild based on the comprehension that the chosen habitat is suitable and under the conditions and needs of the released animals. With the premise of thinking and understanding that the animals are released will get freedom in nature and will not be threatened of recapture by hunters.

The knowledge and understanding, as well as the role of Buddhist leaders and administrators of Buddhist worshiping place in providing an understanding of the true values and essence of animal release rituals, made a good impact on practitioners' or Buddhists' comprehension in carrying out animal release

rituals. The basis for this understanding will certainly have a better impact on animal release rituals, which initially only focused on rituals and a narrow understanding of the assumption that releasing animals is only intended as a means of getting rid of misfortune. The input from religious leaders and administrators by incorporating new understanding related to environmental communication is the harmony aimed in participating in preserving the environment.

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This research is based on the results obtained from environmental communication research in animal release practice according to Buddhist views and the people's understanding of the ritual as carried out by Mahayana tradition Buddhism in Indonesia. The accompaniment of Buddhists and human resources in the Indonesian Mahayana *Sangha* organization must regularly increase to support knowledge growth on animal release rituals based on the teachings of the Mahayana tradition. It can also provide precise knowledge to Buddhists of the Mahayana tradition of the rituals that are appropriate and accepted by the Indonesian *Sangha* Mahayana organization.

*Sangha* Mahayana Indonesia provides socialization related to environmental communication and comprehension to the people. This can affect people's proper comprehension related to animal release ritual. It is necessary to have supervision by the supervisor of the Indonesian Mahayana *Sangha* organization to reduce the bad influence of the ritual based on environmental aspects that need attention. It can also involve all members in providing opinions and decisions related to the animal release ritual that is made according to the needs of the field and to consider environmental communication factors and sessions of the animal release ritual itself.

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