

# An Assessment of the Buddhist Practice of Life Release in North America

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**Extension**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



# What do we already know about this practice?

- Theology
  - Compassionate acts earns karma
  - Saving lives
- Impacts
  - Limited to studies in Asia
- Origin of practice
  - It could be just as much cultural as religious

So what do we know about this practice  
in North America?

N.Y. / REGION | GOOD FOR KARMA. BAD FOR FISH?

# Buddhists Release Animals, Dismaying Wildlife Experts

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From the MagazineJanuary– February 2014

## A Buddhist Ritual Gets an Ecologically Correct Update

*"Release life," the practice of freeing caged animals into the wild to generate good karma, is now an environmentally friendly act of kindness.*



By Rachel Nuwer  
January-February 2014

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- Why a Hawk Is a Hummingbird's Best Friend



Photo: Photograph by Matt Carr



WILDLIFE WATCH

## A Buddhist Tradition to Save Animals Has Taken an Ugly Turn

A religious revival  
Animal spirits

Releasing animals into the wild is in vogue—with unwelcome consequences



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## Buddhist Ceremonial Release of Captive Birds May Harm Wildlife [Slide Show]

Buddhists across Asia release wildlife as a show of compassion, but conservationists find that the practice tortures the animals and may impact threatened species

# In the peer reviewed literature

## LETTER

### The influence of traditional Buddhist wildlife release on biological invasions



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<sup>2</sup>Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, University of Florida/IFAS, 110 Newins-Ziegler Hall, PO Box 110430, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

## Diversity

### Site and species selection for religious release of non-native fauna

Ryan J. Wasserman <sup>1,2</sup>, Jaimie T. A. Dick,<sup>3</sup> Rebecca J. Welch,<sup>4</sup> Tatenda Dalu <sup>5</sup> and Kit Magellan<sup>6</sup>

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## ECOSPHERE

### Ecological knowledge reduces religious release of invasive species

XUAN LIU,<sup>1</sup> MONICA E. MCGARRITY,<sup>2</sup> CHANGMING BAI,<sup>1,3,4</sup> ZUNWEI KE,<sup>1,3,5</sup> AND YIMING LI<sup>1,†</sup>

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**Table 1** Evidence for global occurrence of religious wildlife release: Results of a search of literature and news reports

Source <sup>a</sup>	Location	Taxa released <sup>b</sup>							Religion <sup>c</sup>				
		I	F	A	R	B	M	U	B	T	C	P	O/U
Sherwood (2001)	Australia	•	•			•	•		•				
Rutledge (2005)	Australia	•							•				
Severinghaus & Chi (1999)	Cambodia					•							•
Shiu & Stokes (2008)	Canada (Vancouver)							•	•				
Shiu & Stokes (2008)	Canada (Toronto)							•	•				
Shi <i>et al.</i> (2009)	China (Mainland)				•				•				
Shiu & Stokes (2008)	China (Tibet)							•	•				
Anonymous (2007)	Hong Kong					•			•				
Chan (2006)	Hong Kong					•			•	•			
Severinghaus & Chi (1999)	Hong Kong					•							•
Severinghaus & Chi (1999)	Malaysia					•							•
Lim & Lim (1992)	Singapore				•								•
Agoramoorthy & Hsu (2005)	Taiwan	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•			
Agoramoorthy & Hsu (2007)	Taiwan	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•			
Chen & Lue (1998)	Taiwan				•				•				
Liao <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Taiwan		•										
Ling (1972)	Taiwan				•				•				
Severinghaus & Chi (1999)	Taiwan		•		•	•			•	•	•	•	•
I-chia (2011)	Taiwan		•			•			•				•
Kastner (2011)	Taiwan		•		•	•			•	•			•
Harvey (2007)	Thailand					•			•				
Severinghaus & Chi (1999)	Thailand					•							•
Anonymous (1993)	USA (California)				•				•				
Zimmerman & Herrmann (1996)	USA (Illinois)				•								•
Anonymous (2004)	USA (Maryland)		•										•
Guilfoil (2011)	USA (Massachusetts)	•											
West (1997)	USA (New Jersey)		•						•				
Fuoco (2001)	USA (Pennsylvania)	•							•				
Severinghaus & Chi (1999)	Vietnam				•								•
Anonymous (2003)	Vietnam				•				•				

<sup>a</sup>Bibliographic results of a search of literature and news reports, see Appendix S4.<sup>b</sup>Taxa released: I = invertebrates; F = fish; A = amphibians; R = reptiles; B = birds; M = mammals; U = unspecified.<sup>c</sup>Religions: B = Buddhism; T = Taoism; C = Catholicism; P = Protestantism; O/U = other/unspecified.





▲ In Paterson's West Side Park Sunday, followers of a New York Amitabha Buddhist sect took part in a ritual in which live reptiles were released into the Passaic River. Environmental officials in two states are trying to track down the group.

Specimen ID	241066
Group	Fishes
Genus	Monopterus
Species	cuchia
Common Name	cuchia
State	NJ
County	Passaic
Locality	Passaic River at Paterson's Westside Park
Mapping Accuracy	Accurate
HUC8 Name	Hackensack-Passaic
HUC8 Number	02030103
HUC10 Name	Lower Passaic River
HUC10 Number	0203010308
HUC12 Name	Peckman River-Passaic River
HUC12 Number	020301030802
Map	
Collection Day	11
Collection Month	8
Collection Year	2007
Year Accuracy	Actual
Potential Pathway	released for food

So what did we know about this practice  
in North America?

Not a lot



- Who is practicing it and how often?
- What is being released?
- What are the requirements of the practice? What is open to interpretation?
- How can we meet the intent of the practice while reducing/eliminating the risk of introducing invasive species?

# MRBP Scope of Work

- Literature review
  - Develop understanding of the practice
  - Risk assessment
- Practitioner interviews
  - Develop understanding of the practice
  - Risk assessment
  - What other practices meet the intent of “life release” teachings?
  - How can we engage with the Buddhist community?
- AIS professional survey
  - What options that meet the intent of the practice are acceptable to managers?
- Communication products
  - Fact sheets
  - Peer reviewed literature

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# Literature Review

- Chinese literature
  - Peer-reviewed, popular literature, social media
- English literature
  - Peer-reviewed, popular literature, social media
- Complete
- What we've learned
  - Theology
  - Motivations
  - Compassion/“Virtuous mind”
  - Discussion of environmental issues

## 放生的意义、实施与注意事项

陈昱桥

放生是佛教的一项重要法事。由于历代高僧大德的提倡,它与素食一样,早已成为中国汉地佛教徒的一种习俗。近年以来,随着人们动物保护意识的增强和生活水平的提高,各地佛教徒的放生活动也日渐增多。但为什么要放生,应如何放生,不仅许多教外人士不清楚,就是许多佛教徒也不清楚。以致盲目放生,造成一些事与愿违的情况,或遭到外界的利用,非议甚至阻挠。放生本来是一件善事,但善事要办好,就离不开积极的宣传与正确的引导。在当今多元开放的法制社会,正确认识、合理规范放生活动尤其必要。

还是在佛教传入中国之后。

佛教是一个注重培养慈悲心、主张非暴力的宗教,佛门第一戒即为戒杀,佛经中讲述佛陀及其弟子过去生中放生护生的故事很多。尤其是大乘佛教,认为一切众生皆有佛性,无量劫中同为六亲眷属,强调要普度众生。极力宣扬戒杀茹素、放生护生,这些与儒家所谓“亲亲而仁民,仁民而爱物”、“己所不欲,勿施于人”、“人皆有侧隐之心”、“君子远庖厨”的理念不谋而合,从而为国人从文化心理上理解和支持佛教的放生活动奠定了基础。

我国佛教的放生,是与戒杀念

佛之行紧密相连的。戒杀是五戒、十戒等之第一戒,向来为佛教徒所严守。南朝齐、梁之际,佛教徒即依据《楞伽经》卷四中“不应食肉”等语而行断肉。梁武帝萧衍下诏禁止杀生,并令各寺院放生,又废止宗庙供献牺牲之制。我国大规模放生则始于隋代天台智者大师。智者大师居浙江天台山时,为使临海居民免以捕杀杀生为业,曾自舍身衣,并劝募众人购置放生船,发佐餐施中蔬菜“三般戒”,为该寺撰《金光明经》、《法华经》等,以弘慈悲,从而开天台放生会之盛。其后,唐肃宗于乾元二年(759)下诏,在山南道、剑南道、岭南道、

一、放生习俗的源流与形成

中国汉地的放生活动古已有之。《列子·说符篇》载:“正旦放生,示有恩也。”“客曰:‘民知君之欲放之,竞而捕之,死者众矣。君如欲生之,不若禁民勿捕。捕而放之,恩过不相补矣。’”黄子曰:“善!”可见,早在春秋战国时代,我国汉地即有在特殊日子放生的记载,甚至已出现了专门捕杀以供放生情况。但持续、广泛的放生习俗的形成,



日本赤大寺教养寺的多摩川,慈航自舟于僧人之间,成为罕见一景。

# Practitioner Interviews

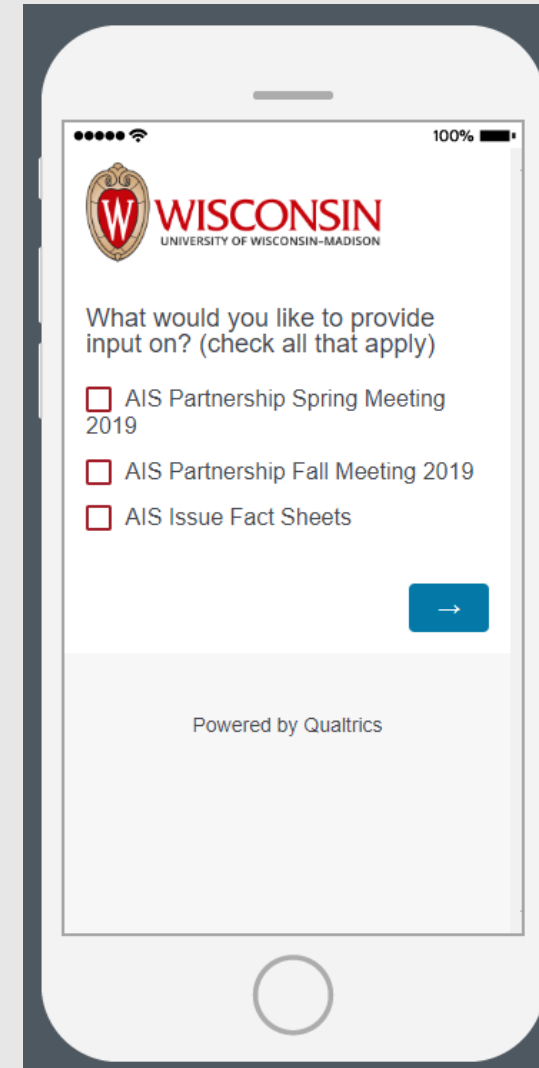
- Recruitment
  - Student used snowball sampling approach
  - 440 locations contacted throughout United States
    - Temples
    - University programs and clubs
  - Took way longer than we thought
- Interviews and analysis
  - 11 Interviews of ~30 minutes
  - Interviews were coded by 3 people
  - Codes were combined and an evaluation report created
  - Hopefully an MBI ICAIS pub!





# AIS Professional Survey

- Will be starting soon
- Nationwide
- What variations of the practice are people comfortable with?
- What level of engagement are managers willing to invest in?
- Are you willing to engage with the community?



# Communication Products

- Peer reviewed paper
  - Management of Biological Invasions
  - Religion and the Environment
- Fact sheets
  - For practitioners
    - Best practices for release
    - Potential laws to check on
    - Similar practices
    - Who to contact
  - For managers
    - About the practice
    - How staff can help
    - Conversation guide

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## Clean Boats – Clean Tournaments

Best-Management Practices to Inspect and Wash Fishing Tournament Boats

FISHING TOURNAMENTS HAVE THE POTENTIAL to spread aquatic invasive species (AIS) through both the movement of tournament equipment between tournament locations and through the movement of the tournament anglers themselves between events. These best-management practices (BMPs) are designed to be effective and easy to implement. Using a “Good-Better-Best” approach allows organizers to select their level of AIS prevention based upon available resources. AIS such as zebra mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil, diseases or pathogens, and AIS used as bait, can spread via tournaments. By implementing these BMPs, tournament organizers can prevent the spread of AIS, protect natural resources and help ensure the future of tournament fishing. Diligent record keeping in combination with use of the BMPs will document your commitment to AIS-free tournaments.

AIS can spread as visible plant fragments, organisms attached to plant stems or the boat and equipment. But AIS can also be invisible to the naked eye as minute eggs, larvae or pathogens in water. Taking a few, quick and simple steps will help assure that tournament or angling activities do not allow the spread of AIS between waters.

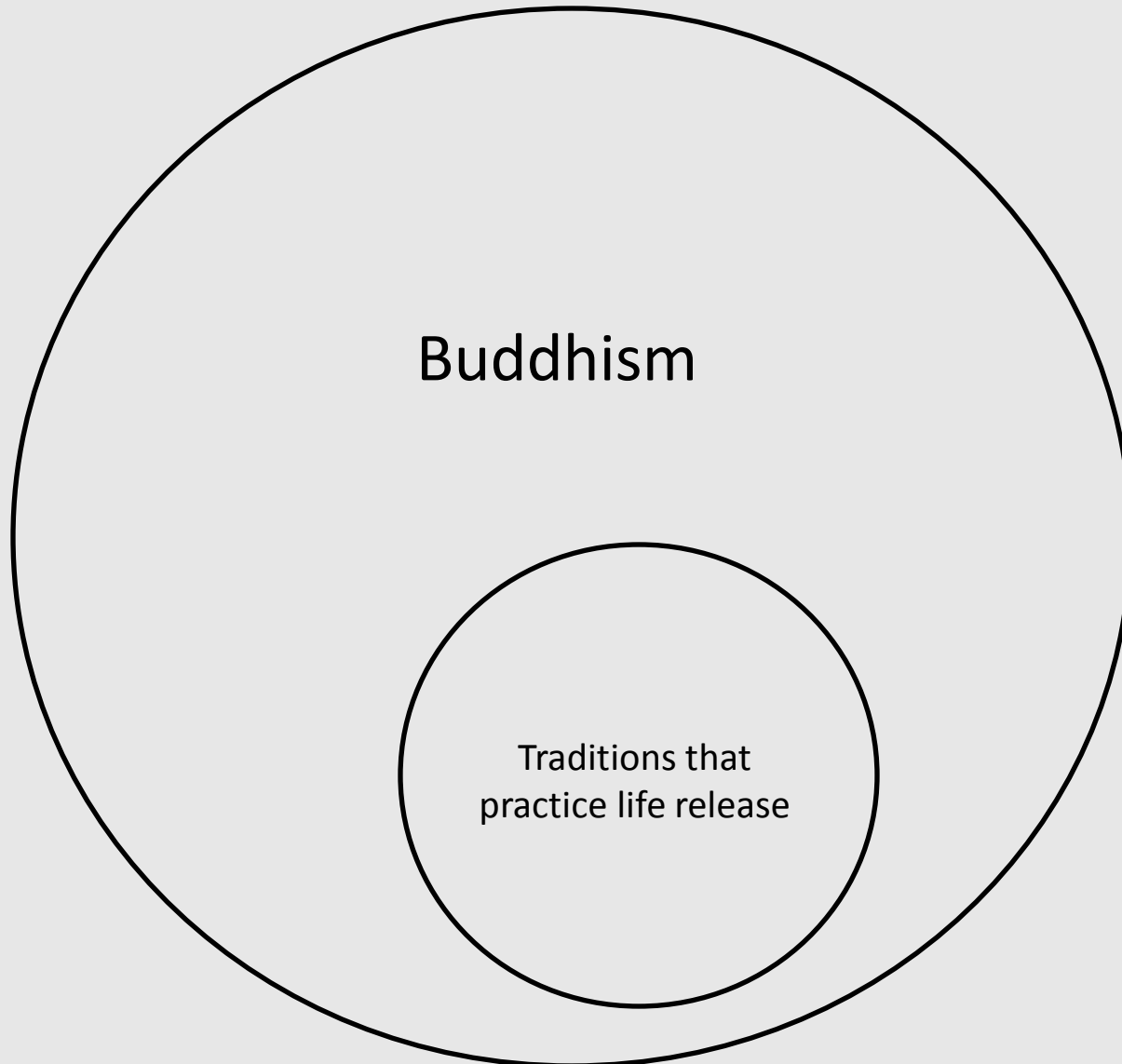
Inspection and removal of vegetation, organisms and debris is the first step and the backbone of the Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers! campaign. Drying tournament anglers’ boats for five days may not be possible, so rinsing the boat is an appropriate next step. Rinsing with high pressure water removes nearly all the organisms visible that may be adhering to the hull and trailer. *Hot*, high-pressure water kills attached organisms as well as removes them.



seagrant.wisc.edu

# What we've learned

# Who is practicing life release?



- **Sects/traditions**
  - Mahayana
  - Tibetan Sutra
- **Texts**
  - Golden light sutra
  - Brahmajala Sutra
  - Chinese Bodhisattva
- **Quotes**
  - “unaware of specific requirements because it depends on the culture & people”
  - “texts are the same...but it might vary according to the culture”



It can be just as much cultural as religious



# Who is practicing life release?



# When and where of practice

- Planned
  - Hosted at temple or park
    - “Often in the United States, we have the event quite often during the summer.”
  - Perhaps associated with days of significance
    - “The day of the Buddha's enlightenment, which is usually in the spring, they say that the karma on that day is much, much higher “
  - Community event
    - We have ours at a park because it's nice to have a picnic afterwards
- Spur of the moment
  - For someone (celebration or for well wishes)
  - An act of compassion (fish at restaurant)
- Where
  - "may you live out your natural life span and not be eaten by other creatures. “



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- Where
  - "may you live out your natural life span and not be eaten by other creatures. “
- 11 interviews out of 440 contacts says something...
  - We didn't hear back from many contacts
  - Two common responses were “we do not know of that practice” or simply “We don't practice that”



# What is released



I think we're worried about this



# What is released



I think we're worried about this



But I think we're more likely to get this





We believe that we can help practitioners  
meet the intent of the practice in an  
environmentally sustainable manner  
and reduce invasion risk

# Alternative practices

- Specific variations of the practice
  - Brainstormed with local expert
- Wildlife rehabilitation programs
  - Animals would die otherwise
  - Release is an end goal
  - Pet rescue and rehoming programs could work, too
- Alternative solo practices
  - Releasing a fly outside vs killing it
  - Being vegetarian
- Every interview welcomed expert engagement
  - Experts can help make needed connections
    - You'll see how next slide
- Permit program
  - Could help standardize practices
  - Could lead to more engagement
  - Permit program vs voluntary BMPs
    - Could work for planned events, but solo practice?



An eagle regains its freedom after rehabilitation.

PHOTO: J. HESSION/CENTER FOR WILDLIFE



Oyster reef restoration





Unannounced stocking of put and take fisheries

# In Summary

- It happens
  - Planned events likely have the lowest risk
  - Unplanned events are likely riskier and hard to anticipate
- We believe there are low risk ways to practice this
  - Promote planned events with low or no risk species
  - Promote alternative acts of compassion for unplanned events
- Practitioners welcome engagement
  - It is likely needed to establish some of these variations of the practice





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