

Liberating Life Ceremony

Hōjō-e from Sōtōshu Gyōji Kihan, translated by Hubert Nearman, edited by Kōkyō Henkel

Set up altar at the site where the ceremony is to be conducted. When the ceremony is performed indoors the live animal(s) – such as crickets ransomed from a pet store – are placed in the center on a table, along with water sprinkling vessel and hand-held incensor, and a cushion is set up in back of zendo behind table (traditionally doshi's chair faces south, away from altar). Assembly sits on either side. Doshi enters, offers incense, and sits. Jiko sits also. Doshi picks up water-sprinkling vessel and purifies it over incensor. While single-mindedly thinking of Shakyamuni Buddha and chanting the following over and over again, sprinkle water in the usual way:

“Homage to our great beneficent original teacher, Shakyamuni Buddha, who with great kindness and great compassion has sympathy for all living beings.”

Doshi holds hand-held incensor in front with two hands, offering chip incense, while ino recites:

Verse of Explanatory Words (ino recites)

“Homage to our great beneficent original teacher Shakyamuni Buddha, homage to Ratnashikhi Tathagata of the Golden Light Sutra, homage to the Three Treasures in ten directions. May their kindness and compassion protect and sustain us now. For the sake of these living beings at death's gate, we give rise to the mind of kindness and compassion and perform the bodhisattva practice of liberating life, setting creatures free so they may have long lives, able to roam where they will. In accord with the profound Mahayana Sutras, we will confer upon them the Three Refuges, recite for them the Ten Epithets of Buddha, and explain to them the twelve links of dependent co-arising. Because these living beings are unable to comprehend the wondrous Dharma, we respectfully invoke the spiritual powers, awesome virtues, and profound imperceptible aid of the Three Treasures. May their kindness and compassion open the hearts and liberate the minds of these living beings so that they may swiftly respond to the wondrous Dharma, transform their karmic retribution, and receive a birth that will help them to realize complete liberation.”

Conferring the Three Refuges (doshi puts down incensor and recites)

“O you living beings, from beginningless time you have failed to hear of the Three Treasures and have not understood how to take refuge. For this reason, you helplessly turn upon samsara's wheel of birth and death through the three realms. For your sake I will now give you the Three Treasures; may you endeavor to always protect and remember them, so as to open your hearts and liberate your minds. I will now bestow upon you the profound and wondrous Dharma of the One-Bodied Triple-Treasure. “Buddha” means perfect awakening, “Dharma” means perfect purity, and “Sangha” means perfect harmony. These three are one, neither the same nor different. That which cannot be grasped by discriminating mind is called a “Profound Treasure.” Whatever in this world and beyond this world is supreme and most valuable is called a treasure. As Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are the Three Treasures, all beings cannot fail to take refuge in them. Although this all-pervading principle extends far and wide, perfect awakening, perfect purity, and perfect harmony are also the nature of your very mind here and now, so they are never apart from you; may you have deep trust in this principle and take refuge in this way.”

(next, confer Three Refuges in the usual way, three times, as follows)

I take refuge in Buddha
I take refuge in Dharma
I take refuge in Sangha
I take refuge in Buddha as the perfect teacher
I take refuge in Dharma as the perfect teaching
I take refuge in Sangha as the perfect support
Now I have completely taken refuge in Buddha
Now I have completely taken refuge in Dharma
Now I have completely taken refuge in Sangha

(doshi recites) “You have returned to your original, nature free from attachments and limited ways. From now on perfect awakening is your teacher, Buddha is your teacher. Do not be fooled by other ways. This is the path of great kindness, great compassion, and great mercy.”

Ten Epithets of Ratnashikhin Tathagata (ino recites)

“O good disciples of Buddha, I will now tell you of the merit of the Ten Epithets of Ratnashikhin Tathagata. On your behalf, we respectfully call upon this compassionate Honored One whose original vow was this: ‘If there are living beings in the ten directions who hear my name, may they be born in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas and thereby awaken to original mind and verify the unborn for themselves.’ May you now today hear our recitation of the Ten Epithets of Ratnashikhin Buddha and verify the unborn original mind yourselves.”

Homage to Ratnashikhin Thus Come One, (Assembly chants together three times)
Worthy One,
Perfectly Awakened One,
Endowed with Knowledge and Conduct,
Follower of the Good Way,
Knower of the World,
Unsurpassed One,
Guide of People to be Tamed,
Teacher of Divine and Human Beings,
Blessed One.

(doshi recites) “Ratnashikhin Tathagata, ever-abiding without extinction, may you by your original vow convey these beings to the other shore, verify this recitation of your names and help these living beings swiftly realize complete awakening.”

Twelve Links of Dependent Co-Arising (doshi recites)

“O good disciples of Buddha, for your sake we will now explain the profound and wondrous teaching of the twelve links of dependent co-arising. May the power of the Three Treasures help you to comprehend this teaching. The Dharma of dependent co-arising has the three virtues of great nirvana: wisdom, compassion, and the ending of all hindrances. Because of beginningless delusion, you have fallen into suffering and confusion. Cause and effect keep you cycling around the wheel of birth and death. For your sake we will now chant the twelve links of dependent co-arising and the twelve links of cessation. May you fully realize this teaching of arising and cessation; this very life is unborn and undying, this very life is completion, this very life is purity, this very life is freedom. One completion is the completion of all, one purity is the purity of all, one freedom is the freedom of all. Like all Buddhas, verify great nirvana for yourselves.”

(Assembly chants together)

Dependent on ignorance, karmic formations arise
Dependent on karmic formations, consciousness arises
Dependent on consciousness, name-and-form arise
Dependent on name-and-form, the six senses arise
Dependent on the six senses, contact arises
Dependent on contact, feeling arises
Dependent on feeling, craving arises
Dependent on craving, grasping arises
Dependent on grasping, becoming arises
Dependent on becoming, birth arises
Dependent on birth, old age, sickness, death, and suffering arise

Cessation of the Twelve Links of Dependent Co-Arising (doshi recites)

“This is the arising of conditions. Next, listen to the cessation of conditions:”

(Assembly chants together)

With the cessation of ignorance, karmic formations cease
With the cessation of karmic formations, consciousness ceases
With the cessation of consciousness, name-and-form cease
With the cessation of name-and-form, the six senses cease
With the cessation of the six senses, contact ceases
With the cessation of contact, feeling ceases
With the cessation of feeling, craving ceases
With the cessation of craving, grasping ceases
With the cessation of grasping, becoming ceases
With the cessation of becoming, birth ceases
With the cessation of birth, old age, sickness, death, and suffering cease

(doshi recites) “O you living beings, in accord with the profound and wondrous meaning of the Mahayana Sutras, we have now conferred upon you the Three Refuges, recited the Ten Epithets of Buddha, and explained to you the twelve links of dependent co-arising. Because of ancient twisted karma, know that you have fallen into this realm of samsara. May you now turn around and face the Three Treasures, and avow your past karma with a sincere heart. In this way, may you instantly be freed from karmic hindrances, so you can be born in a heavenly realm where, being close to Buddha, you may receive confirmation of Buddhahood. Since beginningless time, you have not awakened to your original mind and have turned upon the wheel of birth and death in various states of existence. Now, having encountered this assembly’s expounding of the Mahayana Dharma, however boundless and heavy your hindrances and obstacles, it is as though you see what Buddha sees and as though you know what Buddha knows. May your karmic hindrances be completely extinguished.”

Verse of Closing Wishes (ino recites)

“May you, as living beings set free, never encounter traps, snares, or harm. May you live out the fullness of your natural lifespan and, after the end of this life, having received the power of Ratnashikhin Buddha’s original vow, be born in a heavenly realm and find true joy. May the Buddha who appears in your realm graciously offer you the profound and wondrous Dharma. As your mind awakens to the unborn, you will personally receive the Buddha’s confirmation of Buddhahood. We sincerely wish this as we release you, disciples of Buddha. From today on, your conduct and vows to realize awakening, moment after moment will increase in brightness. May the rescuing of living beings from suffering be always in your thoughts and, by means of this, may you be able to be born where your heart is at peace and life is easily sustained, where you can see Buddha and the assembly of sages and quickly realize the unborn so that you may save living beings far and wide, and attain true perfect awakening. We dedicate the merit arising from this ceremony to the freedom from suffering and complete awakening of all living beings.”

(Assembly chants together): All Buddhas, ten Directions, three times...

Setting Live Creatures Free

Doshi stands, does usual two exit bows, and exits. Jiko picks up animals and follows, followed by assembly. Having completed the ceremony, set the animal(s) free in a pond for released beings or in some other pure place, safe from being killed by others.

Note: There is no set day or time for this ceremony. In ancient times it was conducted on one the six monthly fast days (full moon, new moon, lunar quarters), Buddha’s Parinirvana Day, Ullambana Day (Obon), or as part of a memorial service for a relative or friend. It can also be done for someone recovering from illness. It is a ceremony in which fish, birds, or other animals that are held captive for later killing are set free, the merit from which is offered to the deceased, etc. It is based on the Brahma Net Sutra (Brahmajala Sutra, minor precept 20) and the Golden Light Sutra (Suvarnaprabhasottama Sutra, chapter 17 on Jalavahana’s Fish Disciples).

Note: original text of “Ten Epithets of Ratnashikhin Tathagata” section above reads:

“In ancient times, the merchant’s son Jalavahana tried to save ten-thousand fish who had no water to breathe, bringing water and food, and reciting these Ten Epithets of Ratnashikhin Tathagata, as well as the twelve links of dependent co-arising, for the sake of those fish. Accordingly, the fish were able to be born in that heavenly realm. Jalavahana in a later life realized Buddhahood and was given the name ‘Shakyamuni.’ In time, those ten-thousand heavenly disciples were enlightened to original mind and deeply verified the unborn for themselves. They were then able to receive the Buddha’s prediction of their own attainment of the Ten Epithets.” (Golden Light Sutra)

Brahmajala Sutra, Minor Bodhisattva Precepts 20: Not Failing to Liberate Sentient Beings

A disciple of the Buddha should have a mind of compassion and cultivate the practice of liberating sentient beings. He must reflect thus: throughout the eons of time, all sentient beings have been my father and my mother. I was born of them, so now if I slaughter them, I would be slaughtering my parents as well as eating flesh that was once my own. This is so because all elemental earth, water, fire and air have previously been part of my body, part of my substance. I must therefore always cultivate the practice of liberating sentient beings and enjoin others to do likewise, as sentient beings are forever reborn, again and again, lifetime after lifetime. If a Bodhisattva sees an animal on the verge of being killed, he must devise a way to rescue and protect it, helping it to escape suffering and death.

Ten Epithets of Ratnashikhin Buddha (chant three times)

Homage to Ratnashikhin Thus Come One,
Worthy One,
Perfectly Awakened One,
Endowed with Knowledge and Conduct,
Follower of the Good Way,
Knower of the World,
Unsurpassed One,
Guide of People to be Tamed,
Teacher of Divine and Human Beings,
Blessed One.

Twelve Links of Dependent Co-Arising

Dependent on ignorance, karmic formations arise
Dependent on karmic formations, consciousness arises
Dependent on consciousness, name-and-form arise
Dependent on name-and-form, the six senses arise
Dependent on the six senses, contact arises
Dependent on contact, feeling arises
Dependent on feeling, craving arises
Dependent on craving, grasping arises
Dependent on grasping, becoming arises
Dependent on becoming, birth arises
Dependent on birth, old age, sickness, death, and suffering arise

Cessation of the Twelve Links of Dependent Co-Arising

With the cessation of ignorance, karmic formations cease
With the cessation of karmic formations, consciousness ceases
With the cessation of consciousness, name-and-form cease
With the cessation of name-and-form, the six senses cease
With the cessation of the six senses, contact ceases
With the cessation of contact, feeling ceases
With the cessation of feeling, craving ceases
With the cessation of craving, grasping ceases
With the cessation of grasping, becoming ceases
With the cessation of becoming, birth ceases
With the cessation of birth, old age, sickness, death, and suffering cease