

THE GENERATIVE POWER OF DISGUST: AESTHETICS, MORALITY, AND THE ABJECT *PRETA* BODY¹

ADEANA MCNICHOLL

At one time, a story goes, a husband and wife who struggle to conceive a child decide to bring a second wife into the family.² In time, the second wife becomes pregnant, inciting the senior wife to jealousy over her position in the household. For if a younger wife conceived and successfully gave birth to a child, she could succeed a barren senior wife's position.³ The barren wife deliberately causes her pregnant co-wife to miscarry.⁴ The younger wife's family discovers what happened and confronts the principal wife, who lies. Called upon to make an oath, she obliges, saying: "If I administered a substance that would cause the destruction of a fetus, then may I become a *pretī* and consume the sons to whom I give birth."⁵

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² This story is found in Avś 49, PvA I.6, and PvA I.7. In PvA I.7 the senior wife already has two sons who reach the age of maturity, but she becomes too comfortable in her position and neglects her husband, prompting him to take a second wife. The narrative provided here follows the events as they occur in Avś 49.

³ Cabezón 2017: 457, n. 1152. For an example of this occurring in *preta* literature, see PvA II.3, the *Mattā Peti Story*. The verses portray Mattā engaging in various vicious behaviors toward her co-wife out of jealousy. The commentary explains that Mattā had been barren. After her co-wife, Tissā, became pregnant and safely gave birth to a son, she became mistress of the house, superseding Mattā's position. For an English translation see U Ba Kyaw 1980: 89.

⁴ In PvA I.6 the jealous wife has a female ascetic cause the miscarriage through the administration of some sort of food; in PvA I.7 the jealous wife pays a physician to cause the pregnant wife to miscarry.

⁵ Avś 49: *tato 'sau prathamapatnī jñātimadhye śapathaṃ kartuṃ pravṛttā: yadī mayā garbhaśātanaṃ dravyam anupradattaṃ syāt*, ahaṃ pretī bhūtvā jātān jātān putrān bhakṣayeyam iti* (Vaidya 1958: 123). The *Pañcaputtakhādaka Petivatthuvaṇṇanā* (PvA I.6) reads: "sace tayā gabbho na pātito, sapathaṃ karohī"ti. "Sace mayā gabbho pātito, duggatiparāyaṇā khuppipāsābhībhitā sāyaṃ pātaṃ pañca pañca putte vijāyitvā khāditvā tittim na gaccheyyaṃ, niccaṃ duggandhā makkhikāparikiṇṇā ca bhaveyya"nti musā vatvā

When she dies, she is reborn as a *pretī* (masc. *preta*), a female ghost occupying one of the five or six realms of rebirth. At a later point in time, the monk Nālada encounters the *pretī*:

He saw a *pretī* near Vulture Peak who looked like a *rākṣasa* [demon] of Yama; she was spattered in blood and surrounded by skeletons [of the children she had eaten], as though she were in the middle of a cemetery. By night and by day she gave birth to five sons, then, after experiencing suffering like this, she devoured those sons despite her maternal love, because she was debilitated by hunger.⁶

She continually consumes her own children in this manner, their bones piling up around her, and still she receives no relief for her hunger.

This was, by all accounts, a popular story in the first millennium of Buddhism's development in South Asia. The above summary follows the events of the *Sons Avadāna* in the *Avadānaśataka* (Avś 49), but this narrative appears twice in the *Petavatthu* and its commentary (PvA I.6 and I.7). The tale is also cited elsewhere in early South Asian Buddhist literature, including the *Abhidharmakośa*⁷ and the *Ratnāvadānatva* (no. 11, *Pretikāyāḥ*

sapatham akāsi (“‘If the embryo was not lost because of you, utter an oath!’ ‘If the embryo was lost because of me, then may I be reborn in a bad state, overcome with hunger and thirst. And, having given birth to five sons at night and five in the morning, may I eat them, yet obtain no relief; may I constantly smell bad and be swarmed by flies!’ Having falsely spoken, she made an oath”). The *Sattaputtakhādaka Petivatthuvaṇṇanā* (PvA I.7) is similar: “*sapatham karohī*” *ti vuttā* “*sāyaṃ pātaṃ satta satta putte vijāyitvā puttamaṃsāni khādāmi, niccaṃ duggandhā ca makkhikāparikiṇṇā ca bhaveyya*” *nti sapatham akāsi*.

⁶ *sa gḍhrakūṭaparvatasāmantake pretiṃ dadarśa yamarākṣasasadyāṣiṃ rudhirabinducitām asthiśakalāparivṛtām śmaśānamadhya ivāvasthitam* | rātriṃdivena pañca putrān prasūya tādrśaṃ duḥkham anubhūya putrasnehe saty api kṣuṭkṣāmatayā putrāṃs tān bhakṣayantīm** / Avś 49; Vaidya 1958: 121.

⁷ Vasubandhu cites one *pretī* story in his discussion of the four types of rebirth (moisture-born, egg-born, womb-born, and born through apparition). Gods, hell beings, and *pretas* are born by apparition – meaning they simply appear in their world of their own accord. Vasubandhu, however, notes that *pretas* can also be born from a womb. As evidence, he provides the story of a *pretī* who told Maudgalyāyana that she gives birth to five sons by day and five sons by night. *Kośa* 3.9d and commentary reads: *pretā api jarāyujāḥ* //3.9d// *apīśabdād apyupapādukā iti | āyuṣmate mahāmaudgalyāyanāya pretī nivedayate | pañca putrān ahaṃ rātrau divā pañca tathāparān | bhakṣayāmi janitvā tān nāsti tṛptis tathāpi me* // (Pradhan 1975: 119). “‘*Pretas* are also viviparous.’ From the word ‘also,’ we understand they are also born through apparition. The *pretī* told the Venerable Mahāmaudgalyāyana: ‘Having given birth to five sons each night and another five each day; I eat them and still there is no satisfaction for me.’” This verse appears in the *Avadānaśataka*’s *Putrāḥ Avadāna* (Avś 49.1), whose first verse reads: *pañca putrān ahaṃ rātrau divā pañca tathāparān** /

kathā) (see Takahata 1954: vi–ix). Despite minor variations, the different versions of the story agree in the major narrative elements, in which a woman kills the unborn child of her co-wife, denies it, and is reborn as a *pretī* who eats her own children. What are we to make of such a story, and of this *pretī*'s revolting body? What does it tell us about Buddhist somatic discourses? What can we learn from abject bodies, such as the one possessed by this *pretī*? And what do non-human bodies tell us about discourses on the human body?

In this article, I examine depictions of the abject bodies of disgusting *pretas*⁸ in early South Asian narratives. I ask what these abject bodies reveal about early Buddhist attitudes toward embodied normativity and human difference. Where previous studies about the body in Buddhist literature have focused on human bodies or other virtuous bodies, I focus on the (frequently abject) extra-ordinary body of the *preta*. In doing so, I respond to Michael Radich's advocacy for further research on non-human bodies in Buddhist texts. He encourages us to attend not only to embodiment in relation to the ordinary human flesh-and-blood body, but also in relation to "divine beings or other beings ascribed the status of ultimate reality" (Radich 2016: 21). Radich focuses on the ways that divine bodies propose a vision of the perfected body. This, he proposes, renders divine beings a vital dimension to the way people think about bodies. The extra-ordinary body of the *preta*, which is often deficient in some manner, would serve the opposite purpose of the perfected body. The bodies of *pretas* feature some obvious differences from those of humans. *Pretas* can fly (a power available only to spiritually advanced humans), their bodies magically

bhakṣayāmi janitvā tān nāsti tṛptas tathāpi me // (Vaidya 1958: 122). However as noted above, it is Nālada, not Mahāmaudgalyāyana, who converses with the *pretī* in Avś 49.

⁸ I do not use the common translation of "hungry ghost" (based on the Chinese *egui* 餓鬼) for *preta*. I choose to do so for multiple reasons. First, "hungry ghost" is not an accurate translation of the Sanskrit *preta* ("departed"). Second, not all *pretas* in early South Asian literature are hungry. In texts like the *Petavatthu* and the *Avadānaśataka*, "*preta*" was a flexible term that could refer to several different beings, including departed relatives, suffering ghosts, terrestrial deities, and dangerous demons – sometimes even within the same text. To translate *preta* as "hungry ghost," I contend, incorrectly assumes that *pretas* emerged on the South Asian landscape as a neatly bounded cosmological entity and obscures the variety of beings described as *pretas*. Throughout this article I leave *preta* untranslated, and use the Sanskrit term even though I rely on both Sanskrit and Pāli texts. I only use the term "hungry ghost" when translating Chinese texts that employ the word *egui*.

regenerate while undergoing constant torture, and they exist on a different plane than that of human beings. Not only is this plane not always visible to humans, but time also operates on a different scale there. Despite these distinct features, the body of the *preta* is nevertheless still inscribed with social meaning. For this reason, *preta* bodies can reveal some of the ways that various Buddhist authors made sense of human embodied identities.

In this article, I bring into conversation Indian and Western aesthetic theories to show how *preta* literature combines literary aesthetics and somatic descriptions. In this way, these tales convey meaning just as much by what they do – evoking reactions in their audience – as by what they say. By examining abject *preta* bodies in accordance with their aesthetic description and function in relation to Buddhist understandings of karma, rebirth, and impermanence, we can observe two overlapping somatic discourses at work. The first speaks to the ultimately impermanent nature of the body. The second depicts bodies as simultaneously ethical subjects and objects. Both discourses primarily function through the cultivation of aesthetic moods, most prominently the aesthetic of repulsion. In the first discourse, disgust ideally instigates a state of shock, a mediating feeling that helps give rise to a peaceful aesthetic once the audience understands the doctrine of impermanence. The second somatic discourse joins literary aesthetics with a Buddhist socio-karmic discourse that is fundamentally physio-moral in nature. In their mature form, *preta* narratives, with their focus on the non-human body, form a vital part of a Buddhist karmic-somatic discourse in which bodies and morality constitute one another. Disgust in these tales is used to equate physical deviancy with ethical deviancy, and in the process generates hierarchies of normative and deviant bodies in accordance with the values of two major nodes of power in ancient India: the patriarchal householder society and the monastic institution.

Sources

Over time, *preta* tales matured into a standard format, in which an individual performs bad deeds and is punished with rebirth as a *preta*, whose embodied form typically matches the crime. Because of their focus on illustrating the relationship between actions and their fruits through the body of the *preta*, *preta* stories are ideal candidates for an examination

of the ways that Buddhist doctrine is combined with somaesthetic literary depictions. My research is based on *preta* tales preserved in Pāli and Sanskrit, composed between approximately the last few centuries BCE to the sixth century CE. The bulk of my analysis in this article is focused on the Pāli *Petavatthu* and its commentary, the *Petavatthu-aṭṭhakathā*, found in Dhammapāla's *Paramatthadīpanī*, as well as the fifth chapter of the Sanskrit *Avadānaśataka* and the fourth chapter of the Sanskrit *Sad-dharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra*. While *preta* tales take many forms, I primarily concern myself with those that illustrate the fruition of one's deeds in the next life.

This plot – in which a human commits bad deeds and is reborn as a *preta* – represents what is likely a later maturation of *preta* narratives, as the departed became integrated into a karmic eschatology. The earliest *preta* tales that we have available to us are contained in the *Petavatthu*, a collection of 51 stories told in verse contained in the Pāli *Khuddakanikāya*. The form in which the *Petavatthu* has been preserved is generally considered to represent a later addition to the Pāli Canon, conservatively dating to around the second century BCE (Norman 1983: 71). It is probable that the *Petavatthu* took shape gradually over the last few centuries BCE. In addition to dialogues between *pretas* and humans, the collection also preserves *Jātaka* tales, lessons about the dangers of excessive grief to a departed (*preta*) loved one, and exhortations to donate to monks on behalf of the deceased. The variety of stories reflects the long compositional period of the *Petavatthu* and the presence of multiple authorial voices.

Within the *Petavatthu* we can observe an eschatological shift, as the departed (*preta*) became karmically-reborn ghosts. Multiple tales in the collection portray *pretas* as simply departed individuals. The purpose of such stories is typically to discourage excessive mourning of the dead and to encourage giving alms on their behalf. Other tales blur the distinction between deity and *preta*. Some narratives within the *Petavatthu* portray *pretas* as miserable beings, and it is this feature that became most popular in later literature, like the *Avadānaśataka* (stabilized perhaps as early as the fourth century CE).⁹ The transition of the *preta* from departed

⁹ For a discussion of the dating of the *Avadānaśataka* see Appleton 2013; Demoto-Hahn 2006; Muldoon-Hules 2017.

to miserable entity reborn on account of its karma and populating a distinct realm of rebirth involved various negotiations of understandings of cosmology, karma, and ritual.

Tales in which good, bad, and mixed actions become embodied by beings in a future life as a *preta* assume, even while constructing, a Buddhist physio-moral universe in which karma can be observed in, and operates through, the body. This process is clearly illustrated in the *Avadānaśataka*, whose fifth chapter contains ten *preta* tales that follow a similar structure. First, the narrative sets the scene in the Buddha's lifetime. We then witness an encounter between a monk, frequently Maudgalyāyana, and a *preta* or *pretī*. Seeing the *preta* under extreme duress, he asks it what deed it committed in the past to experience such torment. Although aware of the karmic connections resulting in their present state, the *preta* or *pretī* directs the monk to the Buddha, recognizing the Buddha's superior wisdom on the matter. The monk approaches the Buddha, who recounts the past life of the *preta* for the assembly of monks. Occasionally a ritual is performed to assist the *preta*. The story concludes with a moral: since wholly dark deeds result in wholly dark fruits, wholly light deeds result in wholly light fruits, and mixed deeds result in mixed fruits, one should renounce bad deeds. Thematically the *Avadānaśataka* is more consistent than the *Peta-vatthu*. Its *pretas* have a standardized appearance and the didactic tales focus on the consequences of stinginess (*mātsarya*), particularly in relation to giving offerings to mendicants.

Compared to the *Avadānaśataka* with its nearly singular focus on stinginess and giving, the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra* (Saddhsu) presents a more varied understanding of the actions that lead one to become a *preta*. The Saddhsu, which Daniel Stuart proposes was composed between 150 and 400 CE,¹⁰ lays out a meditative program through which a practitioner gains an understanding of karma and its fruits. Since the practitioner's progress through the various stages of practice allows him to observe the realms of rebirth, the Saddhsu also contains a cosmological compendium, with each realm receiving its own chapter. The fourth chapter is dedicated

¹⁰ See Stuart 2015: 43–45 for a discussion on dating. The manuscript as we have it was written in a proto-Bengali script sometime between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE. We only have the first half of the text, comprising 256 extant folios. This includes the entire *preta* chapter.

to the *preta* world and its inhabitants.¹¹ The *Saddhsu* divides *pretas* into 36 categories, detailing each type's appearance, location, and the misconduct that leads to its rebirth. Like the *Avadānaśataka* and the later layers of the *Petavatthu*, the *Saddhsu* primarily uses *pretas* to illustrate the relationship between bodies and actions.

In the sources I examine, the *preta*'s body is front and center, given primary place in the creation of a discourse on the fruits of actions. For this reason, early *preta* literature sheds light on the creation of a Buddhist cosmology centered on karma as a moral law of cause and effect that is inherently and intimately connected with bodies. In the next section I focus on the aesthetic depiction of the bodies of abject *pretas*. I examine the literary aesthetics of repulsion and its concomitant emotion, disgust, within *preta* tales. I show how the aesthetics of repulsion helps reinforce the impermanent and disgusting nature of all bodies, which are to be rejected in the quest for *nirvāṇa*.

The Aesthetics of Disgust

We can observe even in the *Petavatthu* early signs of a proclivity for the disgusting and grotesque in Buddhist literature. While, as noted, revolting *pretas* do not entirely encompass *pretas* as a category, we possess a great number of narrative depictions of such *pretas*. Extant *preta* literature suggests there was an increase in descriptions of revolting *pretas* as their cosmological status became more fixed. The growing popularity of disgust in *preta* narratives also likely reflects the rise of *kāvya* poetry and Sanskrit aesthetics in the first few centuries of the common era, as Buddhist monastics increasingly participated in a broader aestheticized court society (Ali 1998; Langenberg 2017). As Amy Langenberg has noted in her study of disgust imagery in the *Garbhāvakraṅti Sūtra*, in the early centuries of the first millennium CE, Buddhist monks “became increasingly sophisticated aesthetes” (Langenberg 2017: 79). This would include an increasingly sophisticated ability for cultivating the aesthetic of repulsion.

¹¹ The Sanskrit manuscript of the *Saddhsu*, being recently discovered, has been little researched, with the most notable exception being Daniel Stuart's monograph on the second chapter of the text (2015). The *preta* chapter stretches across 14 folios (88a6–102a7), with 7 lines on the recto and verso.

The *pretī* tale at the beginning of this article demonstrates one way in which Buddhist authors developed an aesthetic of disgust through somatic depiction. Her body is painstakingly detailed in its description, almost shocking in its ability to evoke repulsion in the reader. The authors cultivate a carefully crafted image of a monstrosity grotesque female figure, lying on the spot of ground serving as her birthing bed, spattered with the afterbirth from countless pregnancies and the blood from her own children, whose skeletons lie piled up around her. Her tale is not unusual in its ability to provoke disgust. In story after story, deformed *pretas* consume blood, pus, vomit, and feces; gaping, oozing, flesh wounds adorn their bodies; and animals rip them apart. Disgust, in these stories, renders such *pretas* into carnivalesque-grotesque spectacles that fascinate us while generating multiple embodied discourses.

While, comparatively speaking, Western philosophers have only recently begun to generate theories of disgust, disgust has a prominent place in Indian aesthetic theory. Indian aesthetic theorists afforded disgust an aesthetic value that could evoke a visceral mental and physical response in the viewer or listener. Disgust forms a vital part of the *bībhatsa rasa*, or the “aesthetic flavor” (*rasa*) of repulsion (*bībhatsa*).¹² The earliest articulation of *rasa* theory for which we have evidence is Bharata’s ca. 300 CE *Nāṭyaśāstra* (*Treatise on Drama*), which lists eight types of *rasas* that describe the aesthetic mood within a drama: erotic (*śṛṅgāra*), comic (*hāsyā*), tragic (*kāruṇya*), violent (*raudra*), heroic (*vīra*), fearful (*bhayānaka*), repulsive (*bībhatsa*), and fantastic (*adbhuta*). Four of these are considered generative causes of the other four *rasas* – in the case of repulsion, it is the generative cause of the fearful *rasa*. Each *rasa* corresponds to eight permanent states (*sthāyibhāva*, often translated as “stable emotions”),¹³ from

¹² *Bībhatsa* is derived from the desiderative form of the verb root √*bādh*, meaning to abhor, loathe, detest, to shrink from, or to be disgusted with. In its desiderative form, the word indicates a desire to abhor, loathe, or shrink from an object. *Bībhatsa* has variously been translated as “repulsive” (Langenberg 2017: 83), “macabre” (Pollock 2016: 53), “hideous,” “disgust” (Chakrabarti 2001: 352), and “horror” (Sathaye 2010: 362). Here I follow Langenberg in translating *bībhatsa* as “repulsive,” because it conveys the sense of a physical and mental desire to recoil from a disgusting object.

¹³ Translators of *rasa* theory (Chakrabarti 2001, 2016; Pollock 2016; Sathaye 2010) frequently translate *bhāva* as “emotion.” They usually acknowledge that “emotion” does not adequately convey the Sanskrit notion of *bhāva*, which includes the meaning of becoming/

which the *rasas* have their origin. In Indian aesthetic theory, the origin for the repulsive *rasa* is disgust (*jugupsā*). Disgust is understood to arise through association with disagreeable sounds, sights, smells, or objects. Disgust then gives rise to the aesthetic flavor of repulsion, which can subsequently generate the aesthetic flavor of fear. Having been repulsed, one might experience a variety of mental and physical responses, including convulsions, trembling, agitation, fainting, sickness, and even death. Disgust is conveyed through bodily performance by wrinkling one's facial features, covering the nose, or turning away.¹⁴ Therefore, Indian theorists acknowledged that disgust held literary and dramatic value. Disgust, in generating an aesthetic flavor of repulsion, could evoke a visceral mental and physical response in its audience.

Indian and Western theorists largely agree on the types of things that can give rise to disgust. Objects that trigger disgust include contaminated food; bodily products (vomit, pus, mucus, excrement); vermin; and violations of bodily integrity, such as wounds and decaying and rotting flesh (Korsmeyer 2008: 372). Aurel Kolnai lists nine traits of the “materially

being, condition, state of mind or body, and disposition. While emotion can refer to more than just a purely mental state, some of the *bhāvas* listed in the *Treatise* (such as death or fainting) do not easily lend themselves to the English notion of emotion. For this reason, I choose to *sthāyibhāva* as “permanent state,” which should be understood as not just mental, but also physical.

¹⁴ See the prose before verse 73 and the corresponding verse: *atha bībhatso nāma jugupsāsthāyibhāvāmakāḥ | sa cāhṛdyāpriyācoṣyāniṣṭaśravaṇadarśanakīrtanādibhir vibhāvair utpadyate | tasya sarvāṅgasamhāramukhavikūṇanollekhananiṣṭhivanodvejanādibhir anubhāvair abhinayaḥ prayoktavyaḥ | bhāvās cāsyāpasmārodvegāvegamahavyādhimaraṇādayaḥ | atrānuvaṁśye ārye bhavataḥ: anabhimatadarśanena ca gandharasaparśaśabdadoṣaiś ca | udvejanaīś ca bahubhir bībhatsarasaḥ samudbhavati || BhN 6.73 || mukhanetravikūṇanayā nāsāpracchādanāvanamitāsyaiḥ | avyaktapādapatanaīr bībhatsaḥ samyagabhineyaḥ || BhN 6.74 || “The repulsive (*rasa*) has its origin in the stable emotion of disgust. It may arise as a result of the *vibhāvas*, which are hearing, seeing, narrating, etc. something disagreeable, unpleasant, or undesirable. The dramatic representation (of the repulsive) is said to be through dramatic gestures, (such as) drawing together all of one's limbs, grimacing one's face, vomiting, spitting, trembling, etc. And the physio-mental states (*bhāva*) of that (*rasa*) are: convulsions, trembling, agitation, fainting, sickness, death, etc. Here there is a list: The repulsive *rasa* arises from seeing what is disagreeable, from smelling what is offensive, from coming into contact with what is offensive, and hearing what is offensive, and from the many (other) things that cause agitation [6.73]. The repulsive is correctly represented dramatically by, without resorting to articulating anything, wrinkling the face and eyes, covering one's nose, and bending over [6.74].” Translation my own.*

disgusting,” including putrefaction, excrement, bodily secretions, dirt, disgusting animals (like swarms of insects), certain foods, close human bodies, exaggerated fertility, disease, and deformation (Kolnai 2004: 16). Much of this list can be found in Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which differentiates two types of repulsion. The first, repulsion produced from disturbance (*kṣobhaja*), arises from association with feces and maggots. The second type, caused by agitation (*udvegī*), comes from association with blood, entrails, and corpses.¹⁵ Both types are associated with lower life forms, agents of decay, and bodily fluids. These disgusting instigators for repulsion, which all violate the integrity of the body, also appear in the Brahmanical legal tradition. The *Law of Manu*, for example, lists all secretions from the body as impure, including semen, blood, urine, excrement, earwax, phlegm, tears, rheum, any discharge from the eyes, and sweat.¹⁶ The disgusting nature of human bodily products is integral to the aesthetics of repulsion.

¹⁵ Chakrabarti 2001: 355. The Sanskrit verse reads: *bībhatsaḥ kṣobhajaḥ śuddha udvegī syāt dvitīyakaḥ | viṣṭhākṛmibhir udvegī kṣobhajo rudhirādijaḥ ||* (BhN 6.81). This verse is not in all manuscripts (Tripathi and Tiwari 2015: 141). Various scholars translate this verse differently. Sheldon Pollock translates the verse as “the macabre can be pure or impure: the former is disturbing, and is brought about by the sight of blood and the like; the latter is disgusting, and is brought about by the sight of excrement, maggots, and so on” (Pollock 2016: 53). Masson and Patwardhan translate it as “*Bībhatsa* is of two kinds: *kṣobhaja* (that which arises from agitation) and pure *udvegī* (that which is nauseating). *Udvegī* (*bībhatsarasa*) comes from (seeing) faeces, worms (etc.), and the other comes from (seeing) blood etc.” (1970, Vol. 1 Pt. 2, 56–57). Arindam Chakrabarti summarises this verse as follows: “Bharata distinguished between two types of hideous: *due to anxiety*, associated with saliva, excreta, worms, slime, dirt; and *due to agitation*, associated with blood, entrails, corpses etc.” (2001: 355). Presumably his summary relies on Abhinavagupta’s commentary on the *Treatise*. A more exact translation might be “repulsion may be caused by a disturbance, or it may be a second, pure type, that which causes agitation. Repulsion caused by agitation is brought about by feces or maggots, and repulsion caused by disturbance is produced through blood, etc.” Part of the problem of this verse is deciding what noun the adjective *śuddha* (pure) qualifies. Pollock believes *śuddha* qualifies *kṣobhaja* (disturbance), while Masson and Patwardhan believe it qualifies *udvegī* (agitation). Another difficult aspect of translating this verse is differentiating between *udvegī* (Pollock: disgusting; Masson and Patwardhan: nauseating; Chakrabarti: anxiety) and *kṣobhaja* (Pollock: disturbing; Masson and Patwardhan and Chakrabarti: agitation). The two words overlap in meaning. *Kṣobha* is derived from the root $\sqrt{kṣubh}$, carrying the meanings of shaking, agitation, disturbance, or trembling, while *udvegī* derives from $ud\sqrt{vij}$, meaning to agitate, to be afflicted, to tremble, to fear, or to shrink from.

¹⁶ MDŚ 5.132–133; Olivelle (2004) 2009: 94–95.

The reaction of disgust is tied to “the loss of bodily integrity” and to objects that socially and bio-medically pollute the body.¹⁷ Objects of disgust, according to Kolnai, “share the impression of life gone bad, of flesh turning towards death, and of a primordial and profuse regeneration of life from the muck of decaying organic matter” (Kolnai 2004: 16). Disgusting things do not represent the static state of death, but rather the oozing biological processes. This is what William Ian Miller calls “life soup, the roiling stuff of eating, defecation, fornication, generation, death, rot, and regeneration” (Miller 1997: 18). Mikhail Bakhtin similarly emphasizes the grotesque body as a body that is in the constant process of becoming. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body is never complete, nor closed to the world (Dentith 1995: 67ff.). Discharged bodily products, for example, generate disgust because they conjure up the process of disintegration, harm our bodies when ingested, and transgress the boundaries of the single body. Maggots that feed on decomposing flesh blur the boundaries between death, decay, and life. All the above instigators of disgust combine in the abject body of the repulsive *preta*.

Here I use the term “repulsive *pretas*” to signify those *pretas* that cultivate an aesthetic of repulsion through their disgusting bodies. Their status as both otherworldly-being and reincarnated human helps connect their (vaguely) anthropomorphic bodies to human bodies. Reincarnated *pretas* are at once human and not human. The *preta* never conjures images of the static dead, but always the *process* of decaying, dying, and decomposing. *Preta* bodies in Buddhist literature are rarely mere clean skeletons. Rather, their bodies are barely held together by sinew, they drip with blood and ooze pus; their bodies undergo continual devastation, be it from wild animals, each other, or their environment. Repulsive *pretas* are constantly in motion, trapped in a perpetual state of decay. *Pretas* that lack skin, flesh, and fat draw the mind to images of bodies decomposing in cemeteries, while the animals that rip apart some *pretas* also scavenge corpses. *Pretas* who cannot satiate their hunger through ordinary means are forced to rely on the bodily waste of others, feeding on blood, pus, urine, excrement,

¹⁷ Korsmeyer 2011: 122. Aurel Kolnai links disgust with negative feelings about decay, death, and decomposition (Kolnai 2004).

and vomit. In this way, they create another connection with the putrefying human subject. They violate and blur the boundaries of a single human body, deteriorating themselves while taking in the disgusting and disease-inducing products of other decaying bodies. Their bodies are skillfully crafted to invoke disgust and repel us.

And yet, as Carolyn Korsmeyer argues, the reflective insight that disgust affords into the fragility and mortality of the body allows the aversive feeling of disgust, or repulsion, to be transformed into a positive mode of appreciation, into something aesthetically valuable (Korsmeyer 2011: 121). There is an allure to disgust that goes beyond morbid fascination, and something behind disgust that lends itself to reflection.¹⁸ The notion that disgust not only fascinates, but also holds space for reflection, is also expressed by the eleventh-century commentator on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Abhinavagupta. In his commentary, Abhinavagupta argues that the repulsive *rasa* holds the potential to transmute the putrid into a reminder of the body's impermanence. Western theorists and Abhinavagupta both treat disgust as involving a physical and mental response of revulsion based on the association between the putrid object and bodily disintegration. An aesthetic appreciation of disgust arises when one understands this connection and realises the impermanence of the body.

The revelatory nature of disgust, and its potential for reflection, is apparent in stories of repulsive *pretas*. As a literary genre, *preta* narratives build audience reception into these texts. These stories illustrate how audience members respond to *preta* tales recited by the Buddha or his monks, and they tell us what kind of physical or mental reaction characters experience when they encounter *pretas*. Quite frequently, individuals experience shock (*saṃvega*) in response to *pretas*. Sixteen stories in the *Petavatthu-aṭṭhakathā* (PvA) employ some variation of the word *saṃvega*.¹⁹ Out of the ten stories dedicated to *pretas* in the *Avadānaśataka*, half use *saṃvega* or the related *saṃvigna* to describe the reaction of monks and ordinary beings upon encountering *pretas* or listening to tales about them. *Pretas* in

¹⁸ In Simon Dentith's analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin, he notes that the grotesque body "has also structured the most apparently intimate and 'given' elements of historical consciousness, namely our very sense of our own body" (1995: 82). This interpretation also sees value in the grotesque body for provoking a sense of our own mortality.

¹⁹ *Saṃvega* appears primarily in the commentary, except in Pv IV.1.51 and IV.3.

these texts generate a feeling of anxiety and agitation that can be productive in propelling one along the Buddhist path. The PvA's version of the cannibalistic *pretī* story (*Story about a Petī Who Devours Her Five Sons*, PvA I.6) demonstrates some self-reflection on this point. When a monk observes this *pretī* swarmed with flies as she gives birth to and consumes five children at dawn and at dusk, he inquires after her identity and how she acquired such an embodied state. She explains these circumstances out of a desire to produce *saṃvega* in living beings. In this story, *saṃvega* is the expected reaction of one listening to the description of this grotesque *pretī* and the karmic cause of her suffering.

What is this sense of shock experienced by those who encounter *pretas*? Ananda Coomaraswamy defines *saṃvega* as “a state of shock, agitation, fear, awe, wonder or delight induced by some physically or mentally poignant experience. It is a state of feeling, but always more than a merely physical reaction” (Coomaraswamy 1943: 176). As an experience, *saṃvega* involves both the initial shock as well as its after-effects, in which one's mind is stirred into understanding the realization behind the meaning of that initial shock (Coomaraswamy 1943: 178). *Saṃvega* frequently refers to a feeling of fear or mental stirring that instigates a sense of moral and religious urgency (Heim 2003: 546). As Torkel Brekke has argued, fear (*bhaya*) and agitation (*saṃvega*) often appear in South Asian Buddhist texts as productive states of mind that encourage the subject to escape *saṃsāra*. Thus, fear has a double meaning in the Buddhist context. On the one hand, fear is a characteristic feature of the chaotic nature of *saṃsāra*. The soteriological goal of Buddhism is to escape *saṃsāra* and attain a state of fearlessness. On the other hand, fear simultaneously instigates soteriological motivation and insight (Brekke 1999).

Previous studies have observed the ability of a variety of stimuli to produce *saṃvega* in their viewers/listeners. Pāli texts frequently depict the Buddha inciting *saṃvega* in monks, rival ascetics, and ordinary people. He shakes up languid minds, producing shock and awe at the truth of the impermanence of all things and the dangers of *saṃsāra* (Brekke 1999; Coomaraswamy 1943; Heim 2003). Nathan Katz has proposed that *saṃvega* refers simultaneously to a feeling of disgust and renunciation as well as a “positive religious sentiment, such as that arising from pilgrimage to holy places” (Katz 1982: 157). Kevin Trainor defines *saṃvega* as “a powerful

emotion that arises when one contemplates the arising and dissolution of the constituents of experience” – namely, the contemplation of impermanence (Trainor 1997: 82). He additionally notes the ability of the Buddha, his relics, and pilgrimage sites to all invoke a sense of wondrous shock – *saṃvega* – in the listener (Trainor 1989: 185). Trent Walker adds another item to this list, citing three dimensions to *saṃvega*, “trembling out of fear, being emotionally moved, and having an empathetic response to suffering” (Walker 2018: 280). We can see, then, *saṃvega* is a productive emotion in Buddhist literature – but what does this have to do with *pretas*?

Simply put, *pretas* generate *saṃvega* because they resemble other things that instigate *saṃvega* in Buddhist literature, most specifically, disgusting objects that were understood to generate *saṃvega*. As mentioned above, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* cited “agitation” (*udvega*) as one reaction elicited by disgust and repulsion. Brekke has observed that impermanent phenomena – specifically depictions of birth, illness, and death – have the ability to induce *saṃvega* in Pāli literature (Brekke 2002: 82–83). The *Bhojjaṅga Saṃyutta* (“Discourses on the Limbs of Wisdom,” SN V.130), for example, explains that meditation on a skeleton, a worm-infested corpse, a livid (bluish-grey) corpse, a fissured corpse, or a bloated corpse can generate *saṃvega* (Bodhi 2000: 1618–1619). Buddhaghosa, in the *Visuddhimagga*, likewise advocates foulness contemplation as a method of instilling *saṃvega* in the practitioner. The examples provided in *Visuddhimagga*, and in other texts that describe meditation of foulness, refer to real physical bodies – bodies that are shared by repulsive *pretas*, who are likewise skeletal, infested with worms, corpse-like, riddled with holes from the scavenging activity of jackals and crows, and bloated. The inclusion of *saṃvega* in *preta* stories speaks to the ability of the monastic authors to combine aesthetics and somatic depiction to allude to Buddhist doctrine, namely the impermanent nature of the body. As a result of viewing the repulsive body of the *preta*, one might produce a feeling of detachment from sensory desires and *samsāra*.

There is another way in which characters in *preta* literature, upon experiencing a mental jolt, are stirred to action. The *preta*’s body provides visual proof of the connection of actions and their fruits, and thereby instills in the viewer a new-found urgency to generate merit. This interpretation of *saṃvega* as an aesthetic experience seems to be understood

by Dhammapāla. In the opening verses to his commentary on the *Peta-vatthu*, he claims that the teaching of actions and their fruits, illustrated in the *preta* tales, produces *saṃvega*.²⁰ As an example, in the *Kaṇṇhamuṇḍa Petī Story* (PvA II.12), a king who visits a *pretī* palace becomes shocked (*sañjāta-saṃvego*) when the *pretī* becomes distressed at his departure. Having returned home, he performs acts of merit, such as giving, so that he may be reborn in heaven.²¹ In the *Uttaraḥ Avadāna* (Avś 46). Uttara's mother, after refusing to give offerings to *śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*, arises as a *pretī* in her next life. She seeks out Uttara and entreats him to give gifts on her behalf. Uttara assembles the community of monks with the Buddha and convinces the *pretī* to appear before the Buddha. At the time of the food offering, a great crowd gathers to marvel at the appearance of the wretched *pretī*. Upon gazing at the deformed *pretī*, the crowd experiences shock (*saṃvega*) and then becomes well disposed (*cittaṃ prasādayāmāsuḥ*) toward the Buddha. This crowd has no apparent business at the assembly, except to gaze upon and marvel at the spectacle of the grotesque *pretī*. Their reaction appears to mirror the intended reaction of the real audience outside the world of the text.²²

In *preta* narratives, *saṃvega* operates as a transitory reaction between what we might identify as the aesthetics of repulsion and the *śānta*, or peaceful, *rasa*. The peaceful *rasa* is a ninth *rasa* proposed by the later theorists Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. It corresponds to the permanent state (*sthāyibhāva*) of detachment (*vairāgya*), which Langenberg (2017: 85) notes is similar to, but less somatic than, disgust. While the

²⁰ PvA 61th, *ganthārambhakathā*. For an English translation see U Ba Kyaw 1980: 3.

²¹ *dānādini puñṇakammāni katvā saggaparāyaṇo ahoṣi*. The king desires to leave the palace after he sees the tortures endured by the *pretī*. Although she allows him to leave the palace, she bursts into tears at his departure. Her sorrow prompts the king's agitation, but the acts of merit performed afterwards suggests that his agitation prompted some sort of understanding about the terrible nature of the realm of the *pretas* and the need to generate merit to warrant a heavenly rebirth.

²² Other instances can be found in the *Pāṭaliputta Peta Story* (PvA IV.11), where a great crowd of people hears about a *preta* and becomes shocked (*saṃvega-jāto*). They subsequently devote themselves to good actions, such as giving. In the *Sānuvāsīn Peta Story* (PvA III.2), a great crowd becomes shocked (*sañjāta-saṃvego*) after listening to the Buddha tell the *Thread Peta Story* (a reference to PvA II.11). They then become devoted to acts of merit, such as giving and morality (*dānasīlādīpuñṇakammanirato*). In each story, the feeling of *saṃvega* is used to encourage devotion to acts of merit, giving, and morality.

peaceful *rasa* post-dates the *preta* stories I examine, it arguably corresponds to another state that features prominently in this genre: the state of *prasāda* (Pāli: *pasāda*), the aesthetic opposite of *saṃvega*. *Prasāda* can be translated as “clarity,” “stillness,” “brightness,” or “serenity,” or as Walker phrases it, “figuratively the stilling of the heart, a joyful experience of settled conviction” (Walker 2018: 275). *Prasāda* always refers to one’s state of mind in relation to the Buddha, his teaching, and the monastic community, resulting in characters being motivated toward Buddhist soteriological goals – namely rebirth in heaven or escape from *saṃsāra* altogether. Walker proposes that *saṃvega* and *prasāda* function together “as *rasa* (aesthetic experiences) that are essential to Buddhist soteriology” in Cambodian Dharma songs (Walker 2018: 276). Early *preta* narratives function in the same way, using *preta* bodies to give rise to an aesthetic experience of shock that gives way to *prasāda*.

Prasāda is closely connected to *śraddhā* (Pāli *saddhā*), carrying the meaning of confidence, trust, or faith. The transformative character of aesthetic shock and its correspondence to *śraddhā* is observed by Jeffrey Shirkey in his study of the *Petavatthu*, in which he relates *saṃvega* to the Pāli *saddhā*. Although frequently translated as “faith,” Shirkey roughly defines this term as trust in the efficacy of the hospitality relationship between guest and host, following Stephanie Jamison’s work on the term *śraddhā* in the Vedic and Brahmanical context.²³ Shirkey observes that *saddhā* in the *Petavatthu* always refers to an emotional state that people possess before they offer hospitality to religious experts (Shirkey 2008: 258). He likewise relates this transformative mental state to *prasāda* (translated by him as “serene joy”). *Saddhā*, he argues, is the ideal state of mind that a lay person has when listening to *preta* tales. Andrew Rotman has likewise observed the connection between seeing (here, the encounter with a *preta* that generates *saṃvega*), faith (*śraddhā* and *prasāda*), and giving. In relation to the *Divyāvadāna*, he defines *śraddhā* as “confidence or trust,” often in a message rather than just an individual, that develops after a direct personal experience (Rotman 2008: 30, 42). This message is frequently the Buddhist understanding of karma and the efficacy of offering alms, particularly for the deceased (Rotman 2008: 44). As such, *śraddhā*

²³ Shirkey 2008: 246ff.; see Jamison 1996: 177–178.

is a mental state that includes “complex bodily practices that involve the performance of ethical deeds” (Rotman 2008: 15).

The disgusting bodies of repulsive *pretas*, therefore, helps develop an aesthetic mood, and provokes emotional responses from the characters in *preta* tales. The audience is encouraged to cultivate an associated sense of detachment, or even repulsion, from *saṃsāra* and the impermanent human body, or, failing that, to realise the urgency of generating merit and cultivating ethical action to avoid rebirth in an abject body in the future. These two goals point to two interrelated discourses of the body in Buddhist texts. The first refers to the ultimate nature of bodies: that they are all impermanent and disgusting. This discourse, discussed in this section, aligns with Suzanne Mrozik’s observation that “abjection is key to the formation of determinate types of bodied beings,” most specifically those who are virtuous/liberated and understand impermanence (Mrozik 2006: 25). The second bodily discourse indicates a conventional (though still real) truth within the Buddhist worldview: some bodies are better than other bodies. When paired with a socio-karmic discourse that is physio-moral in nature, the aesthetics of repulsion helps reflect and reinforce hierarchies of normative and deviant bodies, making abject *pretas*, like other abject beings, “vital to the ethical and religious development of a wider community of beings” (Mrozik 2006: 32).

Disgust, Gender, and the Cultivation of the Ethical Subject

The transformation of the *preta* as a category from ancestral departed to ghost corresponds to the development of a Buddhist cosmological system characterized by a socio-karmic discourse in which morality is mapped onto bodies. Mrozik characterizes this discourse as “physio-moral.” In her work on Śāntideva’s *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (*Compendium of Training*), Mrozik defines physio-morality as “a positive discourse that underscores the inextricable link between body and morality” (Mrozik 2007: 6). The physio-moral discourse “links body to morality and links physical transformation to moral transformation” (Mrozik 2007: 7). While Mrozik uses physio-moral discourse to refer primarily to virtuous bodies, this concept applies equally to all Buddhist bodies, both divine and grotesque. Physio-morality refers to the process through which virtue and embodiment constitute one

another. The ancient Indian Buddhist worldview is one in which virtue is inscribed onto the body.²⁴

As a normalizing discourse, physio-morality generates selves that are “at once an ethical subject and object, both an ethical cause and effect” (Jolles 2012: 302). In somaesthetic theory, this can refer to the ways in which beings carry out ethical actions through their body, even while their bodies reveal their morality. In the case of the Buddhist karmic universe, we can specify this further. It is not just that action is carried out through the body, but, as Mrozik has observed, embodiment limits the types of actions one can take in the world, thereby determining our ability to generate merit and achieve soteriological goals (Mrozik 2006: 23).

Buddhist doctrine understands certain bodies to be incapable of carrying out soteriologically efficacious actions, like giving alms to monks or nuns or entering the monastic institution. Hell-beings are isolated in the depths of the earth, burdened with grotesque, misshapen bodies, and endowed with angry minds. They are so overwhelmed with suffering that they cannot even think to give offerings to monks, even if they were to have opportunity. Animals are understood to generally lack the requisite mental faculties to generate faith in the Buddha and his teaching and to make donations (Ohnuma 2017: 45ff.). As for *pretas*, the situation depends on their body and physical location. A semi-divine *preta* may be theoretically capable of giving offerings to monks and nuns. But an abject *preta* is not. Although they frequently understand the karmic conditions leading to their current circumstances,²⁵ their bodies and material conditions place severe restrictions on their ability to make donations. A common condition of their embodiment is that they are unable to touch food, water, or clothing

²⁴ On this see also Mrozik 2002, 2006; Powers 2009, 2011. Demons, as Simona Lazzerini has observed (private correspondence) might be one exception to this rule and merit further research.

²⁵ A possible explanation for this is that *pretas* are born by apparition. Naomi Appleton, in her discussion of memory in multi-life stories suggests that one doctrinal cause for Jain and Buddhist depictions of past-life memory among gods (and hell beings in the Jain case) is that they are born spontaneously, without undergoing vaginal rebirth. According to South Asian belief, the traumatic process of childbirth erases past-life memory (Appleton 2014: 167). Although Appleton does not mention *pretas*, this would likewise apply to them. With the sole exception of the *pretas* born to and consumed by the *preti* at the beginning of this article, *pretas* are also born spontaneously.

without such items transforming into maggots, pus, or blood, catching fire, or turning into iron. Abject *pretas*' inability to touch the most common objects donated to monks effectively sidelines them from the Buddhist merit economy, in which merit is an essential form of capital. In a system in which one's body is constituted by and reflects one's prior moral actions, *preta* stories encourage normative ethical behavior by threatening the possibility of rebirth in abject bodies (Mroziak 2006: 22).

The physio-moral discourse disciplines a normative body, in which the interior matches the exterior and bodies are both ethical cause and effect. This is an example of embodied normalization, defined by Marjorie Jolles as the process through which bodies and human subjectivity are both produced and constrained "according to socially and discursively enforced hierarchies of value that establish codes of norm and deviation within diffuse networks of power."²⁶ Here she highlights the dual aspect of disciplining discourses, which are not merely punitive, but also productive. In the *preta* literature I examine, networks of power intersect around two nodes. The first is the (predominantly) male monastic order composing and circulating *preta* literature. The second is the patrilineal and patriarchal householder structure of ancient South Asia, under which "a single adult male controlled not only society's smallest units of land and wealth, but also most likely a fair number of other human beings" (McGovern 2019: 126). The householder system, which valued women primarily in their role as wives, mothers, and religious hosts, is reflected and reinforced within *preta* literature, which simultaneously supports the codes of norm and deviation valued by its monastic authors.

If physio-morality produces embodied difference along hierarchies of power, then it also works to generate gender difference. While it is important to conduct more studies on the generation of norms of masculinity and of male bodies in Buddhist literature, in this section I primarily attend to one side of this discourse: how the aesthetics of disgust operates concurrently with physio-morality to women as ethical subjects and objects in relation to the norms of the patriarchal householder society and the anti-natalist monastic institution. Here I follow Langenberg's critique of the

²⁶ Jolles 2012: 303. Here she notes that she is influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and Cressida J. Heyes.

(mis)application of the secular-liberal feminist hermeneutic to Buddhist texts. In Buddhist Studies, this hermeneutic is characterized by an assumption of the universal categories such as “woman,” “female,” “equality,” and “empowerment” (Langenberg 2017: 12). Scholars of the secular-liberal feminist hermeneutic primarily concern themselves with questions about how Buddhism relates to contemporary feminist values, such as whether Buddhism is misogynistic and promotes women’s equality. Langenberg argues that we should instead use poststructural and postcolonial feminist theory to examine how “womanhood (and manhood), are built up, contended, and negotiated in a cluster of historically contiguous Buddhist texts” and “how a woman is a woman (and in some cases, how a man is a man) even at the level of the body in Buddhist communities” (Langenberg 2017: 13). She is concerned with “the gendered forms of knowledge that produce subjective emotion, aesthetic perception, and bodily practice” in early first millennium South Asian Buddhist communities (Langenberg 2017: 13). From this perspective, we should not assume “woman” (and “man”) to be a natural category in *preta* literature, nor should we ask whether *preta* tales portray women in misogynistic ways. This is an important caveat to stipulate, as the nature of these didactic tales, which are overwhelmingly negative in their portrayal of the protagonist’s behavior, makes it easy for us to quickly label them as “misogynist.” After all, the central plot of these stories is that someone generates bad karma that results in their rebirth in the abject body of a *preta*. Following Langenberg, we should instead investigate how *preta* stories construct women as women. How are “women” created as ethical subjects and objects in these texts, and through what matrices of power?

By focusing on how “women” are created in these texts, this allows us to shift our focus in a way that avoids elevating *preta* narratives to representative of the entirety of Buddhist discourse on the body or of women. A study of multi-life narratives in which protagonists are reborn in ideal bodies, as in the *Vimānavatthu* where generous humans are reborn as deities, would yield a more positive story. However, the nature of both types of texts, and their shared goal of demonstrating Buddhist ideas about karma and the physio-moral nature of the universe, result in a similar cultivation of human female bodies around their reproductive capacity and supportive role in the household. Tales like those in the *Vimānavatthu*

reward women who adhere to the values of female domesticity, thereby encouraging the self-cultivation of a particular type of ethical subject-object. *Preta* literature focuses on the negative side of this discourse, centering the disciplining of women around their essentially stingy, petty, and jealous nature.

While both men and women in *preta* tales misbehave and frequently display the fault of stinginess and are punished for it with rebirth in an abject body, the repertoire of misdeeds imagined by our texts is limited by the broader social context within which these tales are situated. In the *Petavatthu* and *Avś*, narratives about men who accumulate bad karma feature them in a variety of roles, including hunters, traders, butchers, torturers, executioners, merchants, ministers, princes, and monks. Some *preta* tales demonstrate concern about improper sexual desire on the part of men by featuring men reborn as *pretas* after pursuing other men's wives (PvA IV.6, IV.15) or after dying while in a state of attachment to a woman (PvA I.1, II.11, IV.11).²⁷ Women, however, are overwhelmingly portrayed as mother-wives and as hosts to religious guests. In this way, Buddhist *preta* literature echoes the religious concerns of Brahmanical texts, which holds out heavenly birth as the reward for a virtuous wife. Dharma literature depicts an adult woman as having "a single theological identity: she is wife-mother. Her identity and selfhood are thus derived from her relationships to males: husbands and sons" (Olivelle 1993: 186). Marriage gave women a socially-prescribed position and religious status. *Preta* tales reflect this social structure in its construction of womanhood around notions of beauty and domesticity.

We should note at least one way in which, by speaking about and to householder-wives, *preta* tales are distinctive in relation to other Buddhist literature. One group of women is notably absent in our extant texts. Very few *preta* stories mention nuns, whether as recipients of gifts, as givers

²⁷ The *pretas* in PvA I.1, II.11, and IV.11 are reborn as semi-divine *pretas* and do not undergo bodily torment. This absence is especially striking since one of these tales, PvA II.11 (*Sutta Petavatthu*), is followed by a tale of a woman also reborn as a *preta* due to her sexual appetite (*Kaṇṇamuṇḍa Petivatthu*, PvA II.12). This suggests the two stories were a set. However, where in PvA II.11 the man is reborn as a result of desirous thoughts, in PvA II.12 the woman acts on these desires, committing adultery. She's reborn as a semi-divine *pretī* who is consumed by a giant dog every night.

of alms, or as the main character reborn as a *preta*. While the *Avś* includes an entire decade of tales devoted to female renunciants, only one *preta* narrative in the *Avś* (no. 47) features a nun.²⁸ And while we find multiple stories in the *PvA* in which misbehaving monks are reborn as *pretas* (likely in part due to a concern that monks remain a fertile field of merit for lay people, particularly in regards to donations on behalf of the deceased),²⁹ we find no equivalent concern for female renunciants in our extant *preta* narratives.³⁰ This illustrates the complicated relationship between on-the-ground dynamics and the literary discourses created by various unknown authors with different agendas. As most extant Buddhist texts were composed and transmitted by men, it is difficult to access “real” women’s voices. We cannot know to what extent various individuals conformed to the ethical subjectivity constructed by *preta* narratives. Humans are complicated actors who never fully conform to normalizing discourses. They may varyingly identify with them or challenge them in local contexts. In this case, nuns would not adhere well to the ideal of female domesticity, beauty,

²⁸ While only one story in the *preta* decade of the *Avś* features a monk reborn as a *preta*, monks are prominent throughout the decade as the subject of gifts.

²⁹ The opening tale of the *Petavatthu* encourages giving to the departed through the intermediary of arhats and monks, who are likened to a field of merit (*Pv* I.1). This is then followed by two stories about monks who, though restrained in bodily conduct, are unrestrained in speech and as a result are born as *pretas* with divine bodies but possess a boar-face and putrid mouth (*Pv* I.2 and I.3 respectively). The themes in these three stories suggest some intentionality to the arrangement within the *Petavatthu*. For monks to be a fertile field of merit, they must be restrained in body, speech, and mind. By arranging the narratives in this manner, we see some concern about regulating the behavior of monks who might appear outwardly appear to be a good source of merit but lack restraint. This could make the whole monastic body subject to scrutiny from lay people. In this sense we can view these stories in line with John Powers’ observation that “the image of healthy, robust, clean Buddhist monks with dignified comportment is clearly designed to conform to Indian cultural ideals. The tropes of masculinity developed in Buddhist texts are part of a larger program of representing the community as worthy of alms and as the best choice for men considering a full-time religious vocation” (Powers 2009: 228). For other misbehaving monks reborn as *pretas* see; *Avś* 48; *DhA* XX.6, *DhA* XX.2; *PvA* IV.8.

³⁰ In *Avś* 47 the nun is expelled for lax behavior and afterwards criticizes the community of nuns, stops giving food to the nuns, and would shut her eyes when she saw monks. For this she is reborn as a *preta* who smells terrible, is attacked by animals, and is blind. While the text condemns her stingy behavior as a nun and acknowledges it as a factor in her rebirth as a *preta*, her bodily features primarily correspond to her behavior after expulsion, when she was a laywoman.

and motherhood promoted in *preta* literature.³¹ The one-sided portrayal of women in extant *preta* texts reflects an important social concern for the authors of these tales: encouraging individuals to give alms to religious mendicants (preferably Buddhist monks and nuns).

Preta tales draw on social anxieties about the jealous and stingy nature of women and combine them with a stock repertoire of stories. They portray the breaking down of the ideal notion of womanhood, as women who fail to uphold domestic harmony are punished with rebirth in an abject body. This is apparent in the cannibalistic *pretī* story, but also in several other tales that draw on the stock figure of the jealous co-wife. In narratives like the *Mattā Petī Story* (PvA II.3) and the *Nandā Petī* story (PvA II.4), bad wives refuse to serve their husbands and are abusive and jealous toward their co-wives. In the *Mattā Petī Story* a woman dumps dirt on her co-wife, scatters an itching herb over her bed, removes the co-wife's clothing in public, throws the co-wife's scents and garlands into the latrine, and squanders the household's wealth. She is reborn as a *pretī* who is naked, smelly, covered in dust, and perpetually itchy, forced to embody the bad deeds she committed as a human. The *Nandā Petī Story* describes a wife who is disobedient to her husband, lacks devotion, is rude, and loudly abuses her mother-in-law. As a result, she's reborn as a *pretī*. Such narratives participate in broader gendered perceptions about the breakdown of marriage in Buddhist texts. In Buddhist literature, men destroy their marriages through drinking, gambling, and consorting with courtesans. In Buddhist texts, misbehaving wives ruin marital harmony by backbiting, gossiping, fighting with their co-wives, and creating rifts with the extended family.³² This is similarly the case for *pretī* narratives in which women fail

³¹ Langenberg has argued that the anti-natalist monastic discourse, by criticizing “positive values traditionally associated with the reproductive female body,” “made it conceptually possible for monastic women to substitute Buddhist forms of discipline for other modes of behavior definitional to North Indian womanhood at the time” (2017: 155). This is a discourse that operated alongside the one that I identify: one in which a particular genre of literature, *preta* tales, play off stock tropes of stingy and jealous women while also implicitly valuing laywomen who do act in accordance with broader values of womanhood, particularly as householding wives.

³² Cabezón 2017: 457. The *Saddhsu* includes in its catalogue of *pretas* one type that is reborn due to a husband who neglects his wife and children. The “scent-eating *preta*” is the rebirth destination in store for a man who enjoys fine food himself while only withholding from his wife and children, who can only experience the food through smell.

to uphold domestic harmony and pay the price. In each case, their immoral deeds are given physical form in the afterlife, where their disgusting, abject bodies matches the interior.

The ideal wife, in *preta* literature, is not merely one who gets along with her co-wives, in-laws, and her husband. She also materially supports religious mendicants. Conversely, the petty wife is also frequently a wife who rejects her role as hostess and suffers the consequences in the next life. Hospitality in these texts concerns the reception of monastics and the provision of material support by lay people. Women had an important role in showing hospitality to guests, and typically it is women who were approached by mendicants on their begging rounds.³³ Although women in ancient India had limited rights to own property, they made daily decisions about the disposal of household goods. While Buddhist stories in both Sanskrit and Pāli highlight the extravagant gifts men of property bestow on the monastic community, Buddhist literature also incidentally features women as important hostesses within the household. These women generate good karma for themselves while also facilitating the generation of merit for their husbands and children. Sometimes it is the wife who advocates giving to monastics.³⁴ At other times a male householder supports donating to beggars and ascetics, but it is the wife who carries out acts of hospitality or makes the food. This is in keeping with the prominent role of women as managers of households in ancient India.³⁵ Women in *pretī* stories, however, flout societal expectations. They refuse to feed monastics, berate them, and physically abuse them.

The inversion of social hierarchy these stories depict is only temporary. Women who defy expectations to donate alms are swiftly disciplined with rebirth in an abject body that reveals their moral failings. This is the plot most frequently found in the *Avś*, whose *preta* stories overwhelmingly highlight the importance of proper hospitality. Apart from two stories (one about a nun who is stingy toward her co-religionists and the *Sons Avadāna* described above), the *pretī avadānas* in the *Avś* portray women who fail to do their duty of supporting the *saṅgha*. One remarkable example is the

³³ Jamison 1996: 194–195. Shirkey also draws on Jamison’s work when discussing hospitality in the *Petavatthu* (2008: 268).

³⁴ See, for example, the third *vimāna preta* in the *Koṭīkarṇa Avadāna* (Divy 1).

³⁵ This has also been noted in Shirkey 2008: 275.

Pot of Poop Story (Avś 44, *Varcaghaṭa Avadāna*). In this story, a man tells his wife to give a solitary buddha (*pratyekabuddha*) some food that the *pratyekabuddha* requires to cure an illness. The wife agrees, but as soon as her husband leaves, she becomes stingy, reasoning: “if I give him food today, then he will come back tomorrow.” Thinking to discourage the *pratyekabuddha*, she takes his alms bowl to one side, and defecates in it. She covers her excrement with some food and presents it to the *pratyekabuddha*. The *pratyekabuddha*, being momentarily inattentive, initially accepts the bowl. When the noxious smell wafting from the bowl alerts him to its disgusting contents, the *pratyekabuddha* empties it to one side. As recompense for this deed, the woman is reborn in hell and then as a *pretī* who cannot drink water, smells terrible, and subsists on excrement.³⁶ In the end, these tales reinforce the normative values of both the householder system and of the monastic order, punishing women who fail to hospitably receive religious guests.

The abject *pretī* body reveals monastic anxieties about the dynamics of hospitality and exchange between lay people and monks, even while warning women of the fruits of stinginess. “Violations of hospitality relations” in ancient Indian Sanskrit ritual, legal, and narrative literature, according to Stephanie Jamison, reveal ambivalent feelings about the host-guest relationship, which can be easily exploited by both parties (Jamison 1996: 153ff.). Read in this light, lay people who resist the expectation to give alms reveal some anxiety about the burden of continually hosting multiple *bhikṣus*. The mistreatment of *bhikṣus* and *pratyekabuddhas* within these stories might similarly point to concern about the vulnerability of the beggar in this relationship. The conventions of hospitality and lay-*saṅgha* relationships dictate that the *bhikṣu* accept all food that a lay person gives him, regardless of quality. *Preta* narratives hyperbolically dramatize the beggar’s worst nightmare – that not only will the host be stingy, but the food will be contaminated, the home of a stranger will turn into a trap, and the beggar will starve. The body’s physio-moral constitution facilitates the filtering of these anxieties through the body of the *pretī*. The rhetorical effect serves to encourage the audience to be generous to

³⁶ A similar story appears in Avś 41 (*Guḍaśālā Avadāna*). While the Sanskrit version features a male urinating in an alms bowl, in the Chinese translation it is a householder’s wife who urinates in the alms bowl and subsequently covers it with food.

guests while threatening rebirth in an abject body as the consequences of stinginess. Thus, with these stories we observe how the aesthetics of disgust combines with a physio-moral discourse to generate gender differences based on women's role in the home as mother-wives and as benefactors of renunciants.

One text goes so far as to make the connection between women, stinginess, and abject bodies explicit. This is the *Saddhsu*, whose *preta* chapter twice claims that women, being more jealous in nature, are more likely to populate the *preta* realm than men. According to the Chinese version, the introduction of the relevant chapter of the *Saddhsu* includes the following statement:

Women are frequently born among the hungry ghosts. Why is this? Women are more jealous³⁷ by nature, while men do not so readily give rise to jealous thoughts. It is for this reason that women are frequently born among the hungry ghosts.³⁸

A similar passage appears in the description of the needle-mouthed (*sūci-mukha*) *preta*. The *Saddhsu* explains that people are reborn as this type of *preta* for two reasons: (1) they executed people for the sake of wealth; (2) they were women who, despite being told by their husbands to have *śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* fed, pretend there is nothing at all in the house to feed them. The text continues as follows:

Because of the frequent indulgence and cultivation of stinginess, *pretas* constitute a rebirth in which women predominate – not in the same way does the rebirth of men occur. The cause of this is that women are afflicted by desire, jealousy, and stinginess – not so men. Women have small and weak minds – not so men. This is the cause and this is the condition for women being reborn among the *pretas*.³⁹

³⁷ Sanskrit: *īṛyā*. This word carries the meaning of both jealousy and envy. Jealousy is an emotion related to the fear of having something you own taken away, while envy is coveting what another person has. Both concepts work in this context, although jealousy most closely matches the prominent role that stinginess (*mātsarya*) plays in *preta* literature.

³⁸ 女人多生餓鬼道中。何以故? 女人之性, 心多妬嫉, 丈夫未隨便起妬意, 以是因緣, 女人多生餓鬼道中。T. 721 92a11–13.

³⁹ *tasya mātsaryāsyāsevitabhāvitabahulikṛtasya śrībahulopapādakā pretā na tathā manuṣyopapattiḥ kṛtā bhavati yatkāraṇaṃ kāmerṣyāmātsaryopahatā striyo bhavanti na tathā manuṣyā alpacetasaḥ striyo laḥucetasaś ca na ca tathā [manuṣyāḥ] ayaṃ hetur ayaṃ pratyaḥ pretopapattaye strīṇāṃ bhavati. Saddhsu 89a6.*

In both passages, the *Saddhsu* points to a fundamentally gendered difference between men and women – jealousy – that results in a disproportionately female-gendered *preta* realm. According to this text, when men are stingy, it is not reflective of men as a category. For women, however, stinginess is the natural product of their gendered bodies.

While the explicit distinction between men and women as a category appears only in this text, this portrayal builds on a stock literary trope about the so-called “faults of women” (*strī-doṣa*) found in other South Asian texts, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. For example, in the Pāli *Aṅguttaranikāya*, we read: “women are prone to anger; women are envious; women are miserly; women are unwise.”⁴⁰ The same collection connects these qualities with rebirth in a lower realm. The text proclaims: “women, with the breakup of the body, after death, are mostly reborn in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell. [...] When she possesses three qualities [...] a woman is reborn in the plane of misery.”⁴¹ The three qualities identified by the text are having a mind obsessed by the stain of stinginess, by jealousy, and by desire. Descriptions of women like this one were part of the pool of texts that *preta* narratives drew on in their portrayals of women. By portraying women as inherently stingy compared to men, the *Saddhsu* participates in the portrayal of a woman’s body as being inferior to that of a man – marked by its lack of poor qualities possessed by women. And in suggesting women are naturally closer to the *preta* realm, the *Saddhsu* additionally extends the abject nature of the *preta* body to women’s bodies. The same anxieties about women that influenced the *Saddhsu* also appear in other *preta* tales, even if they do not explicitly condemn women as a category in the same manner.

I want to conclude this section by returning to the story of the cannibalistic *pretī* mother that opened this article. In this tale, we can observe how a physio-moral discourse combines with the aesthetics of disgust to cultivate a normative ethical subject-object in line with the householder system, which values maternal and domestic harmony, and the monastic institution, which is anti-natalist in nature. Thanks to her own actions and the power of the false oath she made, the woman in this narrative is reborn as

⁴⁰ AN II.82, Sutta 4.81; Bodhi 2012: 465.

⁴¹ AN I.282, Sutta 3.129; Bodhi 2012: 360.

a *pretī* who spends her next life constantly consuming her own children. The fact that she is a child-eater is perhaps influenced by an understanding at the time that women whose children died in childbirth were known as “child-eaters.” Dhammapāla, the commentator on the *Petavatthu* notes this in his commentary on the verses for Sundarī in the *Therīgāthā*. Sundarī is called “someone who ate her dead sons/children” (*petāni puttāni khādamānā*).⁴² Dhammapāla explains that here *peta* (*preta*) means “dead,” and “a woman who eats her children” refers to a common reproach for women whose children die while in childbirth.⁴³ Although the tale does not indicate that the woman lost children in childbirth, this woman does still cause the death of a fetus. Reborn as a *pretī*, she now eats her *preta* children. As a woman who doubly fails at motherhood – by being barren herself while also sabotaging the motherhood of others – she receives a disgusting body that embodies her moral and social failure. Proof of her failed motherhood is spattered across her body along with postpartum discharge and the blood of her children. It is further evidenced by the skeletons of newborns piled up around her. Her former barrenness is juxtaposed with fecundity so hyperbolic as to enter the realm of the repulsive as she undergoes pregnancy, births quintuplets, and succumbs to cannibalism every half day. At the same time, her body also forms conditions for her moral capacity. For how can such a being ever generate good karma? Having violated the norms of the mother-wife, she is rendered morally and physically deviant, sidelined within the Buddhist physio-moral universe. Thus, this story neatly cultivates female bodies in line with the norms of the householder system that values women as mother-wives, while also contributing to a monastic anti-natalist attitude.

We should not assume based on the negative content of *preta* literature that such stories merely portray women in misogynistic ways, or that they are simply associating disgust with the female body. After all, all abject *pretas* are disgusting, men included. What we can observe, is that disgust

⁴² *petāni bhoti puttāni khādamānā tuvaṃ pure tuvaṃ diva ca ratto ca atīva paritappasi*: “My lady, in the past people called you someone who ate her dead sons, still you grieved hard for them day and night” (Hallisey 2015: 160–161).

⁴³ *loke hi yassā itthiyā jātajātā puttā maranti, taṃ garahantā “puttakhādinī” tiādīṃ vadanti*; for in the world, people reproach a woman whose children died in childbirth with the words “child-eater” and so forth (ThigA 13.4.1).

forms one aspect of a broader discourse in which both men and women are both encouraged to cultivate themselves into ideal subject-objects in relation to broader societal expectations and anxieties. This complicates the narratives of prior scholars who have argued that disgusting imagery is used to associate women with sensual desire and *saṃsāra*, like that of Liz Wilson who has argued that “horrific figurations of the feminine,” in which female bodies are vividly depicted as dead, dying, or disfigured, serve to promote male celibacy while simultaneously associating women with death, corruption, and *saṃsāra*.⁴⁴ These works have been important contributions to our understanding of ancient Indian representations of women’s bodies as polluting.⁴⁵ My analysis of the literary use of disgust in relation to Buddhist doctrine shows an additional discourse at work, one that generates gender difference beyond merely associating disgust with female bodies. The use of the aesthetics of disgust in *preta* literature to produce and discipline female bodies around their sexual and reproductive capacities echoes similar discourses elsewhere in classical South Asian Buddhist texts. Langenberg has noted in her study of the *Descent from the Embryo Scripture (Garbhāvakraṅti Sūtra)* that disgust imagery in birth discourse helps produce gendered distinctions between men and women. She concludes, “discursive treatments of human birth from the body of a woman sets the terms of Buddhist gender in basic and significant ways” (Langenberg 2017: 6). To this I would also add that *non-human* birth from the body of women can set the terms of Buddhist gender, just as the abject non-human body can set the terms of bodily difference in general.

Other Deviant Bodies

Up to this point I’ve focused up primarily on gender to illustrate how the study of non-human bodies can reveal discourses of embodied normalization in ancient South Asia. But as I conclude, I want to suggest one further avenue in which the aesthetics of disgust helps produce a physio-moral discourse that labels certain persons as morally and physically deviant opposed to others. Namely, the aesthetics of disgust capitalizes on and

⁴⁴ Wilson 1996. See also Strong 1992: 76ff.

⁴⁵ See also Lang 1986 and Ohnuma’s discussion of scholarship on this subject in 1997: 203–213.

reinforces perceptions of disabled, poor, sick, and old bodies as deviant. The connection between *pretas*, disgust, and disabled human bodies is most evident, not in tales where deviant humans acquire abject bodies to match their interior ethical subjectivity, but in stories in which we witness the return of the repulsive *preta* to the human realm following the natural exhaustion of its karma over time. The circular progression of human, to *preta*, and human again, is recounted in the Saddhsu's typologies of various *preta* types. Each section details not what actions performed as humans result in certain types of *pretas*, but also what kind of rebirth destiny awaits one who finally surfaces from the *preta* realm.

Invariably, rebirth following life as a *preta* remains somatically connected to one's former punishments as a *preta*. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the needle-mouthed *preta* (*sūcīmukhapreta*), discussed above. In the Saddhsu this *preta* has a mouth with an opening the size of the eye of a needle, a stomach as large as a mountain, and is constantly overcome by hunger and thirst (Saddhsu 89a4). According to the Saddhsu, one unfortunate enough to be reborn as this type of *preta* can expect the following rebirth:

After being liberated from that *preta*-world, she, being liberated, is reborn among the animals. If she is reborn due to an action that is to be experienced in another manner, she is constantly afflicted by hunger and thirst. She is reborn among the pied-crested cuckoos.⁴⁶ If she, being liberated from there, is reborn among humans due to an action that is to be experienced in another manner, by means of an action conducive to human rebirth, she is constantly afflicted with hunger and thirst. Whether man or woman, one constantly suffers, living at cross-roads and eating the alms of others, as the natural result of his [or her] karma.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The *cātaka* bird, also known as the Pied Crested Cuckoo, or the Jacobin Cuckoo, only drinks falling rainwater.

⁴⁷ *sa* [emend: *sā*] *paścāt tasmāt pretalokān mucyate muktās* [emend: *muktā*] *ca tiryakṣūpapadyate / yady aparaparyāyavedanīyena karmmaṇā upapadyate sā nityaṃ kṣut-pipāsonityaṃpahatā* [emend: *kṣutpipāsoṃpahatā*] *bhavati / cātakeṣu pakṣiṣūpapadyate / tasmād api muktā yady aparaparyāyavedanīyena karmmaṇā manuṣyasamvarttanīyena karmmaṇā manuṣyabhāgīyeṣu manuṣyesūpapadyate / sā nityaṃ kṣutpi-<pā>sopahatā bhavati / strī vā puruṣo vā nityaṃ duḥkhito bhavati / paraṇiḍāsī* [emend: *paraṇiḍāsī*] *rathyācatvaropajīvi* [emend: *rathyācatvaropajīvī*] *tasya karmmaṇo niṣyandena // Saddhsu 89a7–89b1.*

This *preta*'s embodied experience follows it throughout its series of rebirths, conditioning it in the animal realm, where the *preta*'s needle-mouth materializes in the form of a bird known for waiting to drink until the rains descend. Even multiple births later, when it is finally reborn among humans, its body is still conditioned by hunger and thirst. Being born as a beggar, the individual eats alms not out of moral virtue, but as evidence of his or her moral and physical deviancy.

Thanks to the reversal of the progression of human to *preta*, we can clearly see how disgust lends itself to certain types of human bodies. One example of the extension of disgust to disabled human bodies appears in the description of the excrement-eating *preta* in the *Saddhsu*. Humans are reborn as this *preta* as a result of having given leftover food offerings to *śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* under the pretense that the food is pure. If, somehow or other, the *preta* is reborn among humans, then:

He will be poor and sickly, constantly feeding himself through what is given away, dependent upon others for his livelihood. He will support himself with difficulty, and his food will be of varyingly poor quality. Despised by all people, his body broken, vulgar, and repulsive, he is secluded, such that he is barely visible. He will suddenly become toothless, and a putrid smell wafts from his mouth up to the atmosphere. This is the natural result of his or her karma.⁴⁸

Likewise, the *preta* who belongs to Māra's retinue and spends its time harassing monks, is born as a result of one's deluded views regarding the Dharma. Following that rebirth he undergoes rebirth in hell (since he generated still further bad *karma* as a *preta*) before finally attaining rebirth among humans once more. As a human, "he becomes blind, deaf, and mute. His memory is destroyed, and his body overcome with various diseases. His will be extremely impoverished due to the natural outcome of his karma."⁴⁹ In all these examples, the aesthetics of repulsion works not only to generate disgust with *saṃsāra*, but also to extend disgust from the non-human *preta*

⁴⁸ *sa daridravyādhitaparīttabhojananīyamparāyattaprāṇayātraḥ kṛcchradhigatavṛttir anekānarthabhojanabhūto bhavati | lakṣyālakṣyaprāvṛtavibhur ... pāṭitamalinabībhatsagātraḥ sarvajana-paribhūto mukhāc cāsyā pūṭigandhaḥ pravāyaty akāśām [emend: akasmāt] adanto bhavanti [emend: bhavati] | tasya karmaṇo niṣyandena || Saddhsu 89b6–89b7.*

⁴⁹ *so 'ndhabadhiramūko bhavati naṣṭasmṛtir anekavyādhirupahataśarīro bhavati | paramadaridras tasya karmaṇo niṣyandena. Saddhsu 101b5.*

body to the bodies of disabled, poor, sick, and old humans – rendered both physically and morally deviant.

This is not to say that there is not potential for a positive discourse to emerge from the study of Buddhist literature through the lens of disability studies, nor that Buddhist texts are entirely denigrating toward female bodies. Tales of disgust and repulsion, by their very nature, focus on the negative, abject body. A fuller picture of this discourse at work necessitates an examination of stories in which the physio-moral discourse works to discipline and produce normative bodies, such as those of the gods contained in collections like the *Vimānavatthu*, of men, and of virtuous women. Disgust is merely one half of a story in which the depiction of non-human bodies helps to shape understandings of human bodies and selves.

Conclusion

This brings us back to my original question: what do abject non-human bodies have to teach us about human bodies? As we have seen, disgust serves multiple functions in Buddhist literature, particularly in *preta* narratives. Disgust holds an aesthetic value, as part of the aesthetic of repulsion. The mental and physical “jolt” produced from repulsion can instigate insight over the true nature of the body and of impermanence. For Buddhist authors, disgust centered around the decaying, dying, and decomposing body and its implicit association with our own human bodies. This use of disgust alone, however, is not gendered – both *pretas* and *pretīs* can elicit disgust, as their bodies are disgusting in similar ways.

But as Langenberg reminds us, “evocations of disgust are eloquent of a broad range of concerns – gender hierarchy, sexuality, moral condescension, individuation, socially significant forms of physical beauty,” and are not limited to “flat doxastic discussions of the impermanent body or reminders that male celibacy is central to Buddhist monasticism” (Langenberg 2017: 81). When disgust is coupled with a physio-moral karmic discourse, it becomes capable of generating hierarchies of normative and deviant bodies. By linking somaticity with morality, this discourse encourages humans to shape themselves into normative ethical subjects and objects in accordance with the norms of the householder society and the monastic

order. One who succeeds is reborn in a desirable body that reflects their past virtue and capacity for acting toward soteriological goals (rebirth in heaven or cessation). One who fails receives a morally and physically deviant body that limits one's ability to generate karma and progress along the path to liberation. Such a discourse, by its very nature, renders certain types of humans both physically and ethically deviant. Therefore, portrayals of non-human bodies can set the terms of normative and deviant human bodies.

Abbreviations

- AN *Aṅguttaranikāya*. See Morris 1885 and 1888.
 Avś *Avadānaśataka*. See Vaidya 1958.
 BhN Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra*. See Tripathi and Tiwari 2015.
 Dhp-a *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*. See online edition of the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka (<http://www.tipitaka.org/index.shtml>).
 Divy *Dīvyāvadāna*. See Vaidya 1959.
 Kośa *Abhidharmakośa*. See Pradhan 1975.
 MDŚ *Mānavadharmasāstra*. See Olivelle (2004) 2009.
 Pv *Petavatthu*. See online edition of the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka (<http://www.tipitaka.org/index.shtml>).
 Pv-a *Petavatthu-aṭṭhakathā*. See online edition of the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka (<http://www.tipitaka.org/index.shtml>).
 Saddhsu *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra*. See Stuart 2015.
 Thī-a *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*. See online edition of the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka (<http://www.tipitaka.org/index.shtml>).

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ABSTRACT

What can Buddhist portrayals of the non-human body tell us about the human body? What can we learn from abject bodies in Buddhist literature? In this article I examine depictions of the abject body of disgusting *pretas* in early South Asian narratives for insight on what they reveal about early Buddhist attitudes toward human difference. I bring into conversation Indian and Western aesthetic theories to show how *preta* literature combines literary aesthetics and somatic descriptions. I argue that by examining abject *preta* bodies in accordance with their aesthetic description and function, we can observe two overlapping somatic discourses at work. The first speaks to the ultimately impermanent nature of the body, while the second depicts bodies as simultaneously ethical subjects and objects.