

An elephant good to think

The Buddha in Pārileyaka forest

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Living in solitude is better,
for there is no companionship with a fool.
Let one wander alone, not doing evil, living at ease,
like an elephant [wandering] in an elephant-forest.
Dhammapada, v. 330¹

Animals, as Lévi-Strauss so famously noted, are not only “good to eat,” they are also “good to think.”² Human beings in all cultures use animals as signs, metaphors, and tropes, and “recruit animals to symbolize, dramatize, and illuminate aspects of their own experience and fantasies.”³ Because animals are both similar to and different from human beings, they allow for simultaneous identification and distance; and because, in their enormous diversity, they are both similar to and different from each other, they allow for endlessly complex modes of comparison and classification (such as we find in the phenomenon of totemism, of which Lévi-Strauss was speaking). These features make animals especially “good to think.” Moreover, animals seem to hold a privileged place among the possible tools for thought; as Daston and Mitman have noted, “they do not just stand for something, as a word stands for a thing...they *do* something...there is some added value in the fact

¹ Dhp i, 62.

² Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89. Throughout this article, I use the term ‘animal(s)’ to refer to nonhuman animals. I recognize, of course, that human beings are also animals – but for the purposes of this article, I prefer to avoid the repetitive use of the clumsy phrase ‘nonhuman animals.’

³ Daston and Mitman 2005: 2.

that the blank screen for these projections is an animal.”⁴ This ‘added value’ stems from the fact that the animal is *alive*. Animals are “symbols with a life of their own...their animated gaze moves us to think.”⁵ Though amenable to serving us as tools for thought, their *aliveness* finally resists our complete control – and this makes them particularly compelling.

There was an occasion, I will argue, when a particular elephant served the Buddha himself as an effective tool for thought.⁶ Frustrated and annoyed by the quarreling monks of Kosambī, who had refused to give up their fighting even after being reprimanded repeatedly, the Buddha had retreated in a state of disgust to the Pārileyyaka Forest, where he lived in isolation and quietude, attended only by a magnificent elephant, also known as Pārileyyaka. Only after spending an entire three-month rainy-season retreat in the company of this elephant did the Buddha feel ready to return to human society and finish dealing with the quarreling monks. This intriguing story, which seems to have attracted little scholarly attention, exists in three major versions in Pāli canonical and commentarial literature: one from the *Vinayapiṭaka* (chapter 10 of the *Mahāvagga*), one from the *Udāna* (a discourse called the *Nāgasutta*), and one from the *Dhammapada Commentary* (the commentary on verse 6 of the *Dhammapada*).⁷ In the summary

⁴ Daston and Mitman 2005: 12 (emphasis added).

⁵ Daston and Mitman 2005: 13.

⁶ The role of animals in Buddhism – to which this article aims to make a minor contribution – has not been the focus of much scholarship (especially if one leaves aside those works that are concerned specifically with Buddhist environmentalist ethics). For some general overviews, however, see McDermott 1989; Singh 2006; Forsthoefel 2007; Waldau 2002; Harris 2006; Vargas 2006; Jaini 1987; Deleanu 2000; Story 2009; and Kemmerer 2012: 91–126.

⁷ Vin i, 337–359 (trans. Horner 1938–1966: 4, 483–513); Ud 41–42 (trans. Woodward 1935: 49–50); Dh-p-a i, 53–66 (trans. Burlingame 1921: 1, 175–183). There is another version of the story in the *Samyuttanikāya Commentary* (commentary on the *Pārileyyasutta*), but it contains nothing that is not found in one of the other three. In addition, several texts deal with the dispute among the monks of Kosambī without relating the Buddha’s sojourn in the Pārileyyaka Forest; see, for example, the *Kosambiyaḷātaka*

and analysis that follow, I weave all three versions together, while treating the *Vinaya* version as primary.

The Buddha in Pārileyka forest

The story begins with a dispute over monastic discipline breaking out among the monks residing at Kosambī.⁸ The two disputing factions grow larger and larger – even spreading up to heaven in one version – with the monks fighting and quarreling day and night, resisting the repeated attempts of the Buddha to bring about peace between them. The Buddha encourages the two sides to reconcile, reprimands them when they refuse to listen, warns them of the dangers of schism, relates the cautionary tale of Prince Dīghāvu, and recites several verses about the futility of wrath – yet nothing has any effect. The monks remain recalcitrant, day after day, and even tell the Buddha (in so many words) to butt out. Finally, the Buddha is fed up. In one account, he exclaims – “These foolish men are out of control, and it isn’t easy to convince them!”⁹ – while in another, he thinks to himself – “Now, I am living miserably among this crowd, and these monks do not heed my words. What if I were to live alone, secluded from the crowd?”¹⁰ He leaves Kosambī abruptly – “without inviting any attendant or informing the Order of Monks”¹¹ – and, after two brief intermediate episodes,¹² comes

(No. 428) (Jā iii, 486–490; trans. Cowell 1895–1913: 3, 289–291) and the *Kosambiyasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (MN i, 320–325; trans. Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995: 419–423).

⁸ The dispute involves the suspension of a monk from the Order at Kosambī, with one side arguing that the suspension is valid because the monk committed an offense, and the other side arguing that the suspension is invalid because the monk did not recognize his action as an offense.

⁹ Vin i, 349.

¹⁰ Dh-p-a i, 56.

¹¹ Ud 41.

¹² In the first episode, he goes to Bālakaloṇakāra village and visits the solitary monk Bhagu, preaching to him about the virtues of solitude; in the second episode, he goes to the Eastern Bamboo Grove and visits the monks Anuruddha, Nandiya, and Kimbila, conversing with them on the topic of harmonious living. Both contexts (solitary living and harmonious dwelling)

to dwell in the tranquil Pārileyaka forest. Once there, he reflects upon the pleasant change in his circumstances: “Before, when I was crowded around by those monks of Kosambī, who cause quarrels, fights, arguments, disputes, and legal cases within the Saṃgha, I did not live at ease. But now, being alone and without anyone else, I live comfortably and at ease!”¹³ The Buddha is glad to be free of his tiresome, quarreling monks.

It is at this point that we are introduced to an elephant – one whose back-story runs directly parallel to that of the Buddha, for he, too, has withdrawn from an oppressive situation:

[Now, at that time,] a certain great elephant had been dwelling, crowded around by male elephants, female elephants, young elephants, and elephant-cubs. He was forced to eat blades of grass whose tips had already been destroyed [by them], while they took and ate the branches that he had broken off [for himself]. He had to drink water that had already been muddied [by them], and whenever he descended [into the water], the female elephants would go diving down to rub up against his body. Then it occurred to that great elephant... “Suppose I were to live alone, secluded from the crowd?”¹⁴

Here, we are given a remarkable portrait of an elephant who suffers from the bondage of a life lived within society: constantly jostled by women and children, being forced to eat grass defiled by their feet, having his own food stolen away from him, and being the victim of unwanted sexual advances. Like a human householder who longs for renunciation, this elephant longs for the secluded life of the forest and gives voice to his longing in terms exactly parallel to those of the Buddha – “Suppose I were to live alone, secluded from the crowd?”

Departing from the herd, the elephant retreats into the Pārileyaka forest, where he encounters the Buddha and begins to

contrast sharply with the quarrelsome atmosphere of Kosambī. These two episodes are included in the *Vinaya* and *Dhammapada Commentary* versions, but do not appear in the *Udāna* version (though they do appear in its commentary).

¹³ Vin i, 352.

¹⁴ Vin i, 352–353.

serve him, keeping the area free of grass and providing the Buddha with drinking water and bathing water. As the two of them live peaceably together, the elephant, too, reflects upon the pleasant change in his circumstances: “Formerly, being crowded around by male elephants, female elephants, young elephants, and elephant-cubs, I did not live at ease...But now, being alone and without anyone else, I live comfortably and at ease!”¹⁵ The exact parallelism between the Buddha’s thoughts and the elephant’s thoughts is remarked upon by the Buddha himself:

Then the Blessed One, being aware of his own solitude and also discerning the thoughts of the great elephant, gave rise, at that time, to this solemn utterance:

“The mind of this great elephant, whose tusks are as long as chariot-poles,
agrees with the mind of the Elephant-[Among-Men],
since each one of us delights in being alone in the forest!”¹⁶

The parallelism is heightened, of course, by referring to both characters as “elephant” (*nāga*) – which is a common epithet for the Buddha. The *Vinaya Commentary*, in explaining this passage, emphasizes yet further the similarity between their mental states:

Because this great elephant delights in being alone and secluded in the forest – just like the Buddha-Elephant does – therefore, the mind of [one] elephant agrees with the mind of the [other] elephant. The meaning is that their minds are one and the same in terms of the delight they find in seclusion.¹⁷

The Buddha and the elephant, their minds in perfect sync, thus dwell together harmoniously, with the elephant attending upon the Buddha. Once the Buddha has stayed there “for as long as he wishes” (*yathābhirantaṃ*)¹⁸ – which the commentary specifies as a three-month rainy-season retreat¹⁹ – he leaves the Pārileyyaka for-

¹⁵ Vin i, 353.

¹⁶ Vin i, 353.

¹⁷ Vin-a v, 1152.

¹⁸ Vin i, 353.

¹⁹ “Here, one should understand that the Blessed One stayed there for

est behind and journeys to Sāvathī, for he is ready to rejoin human society. Meanwhile, the quarreling monks of Kosambī – who have been suffering mightily in the Buddha’s absence – soon arrive in Sāvathī to seek the Buddha’s guidance. There, the two factions in the dispute quickly reconcile with each other and make peace. Just as fast as it ignited and spun out of control, the dispute among the monks of Kosambī is resolved and brought to an end.

The Buddha and the elephant

What are we to make of this strange interlude in the Buddha’s life, when he ran away from his own followers and dwelt peaceably with a noble elephant? We should begin by noticing again the basic parallelism between the Buddha and the elephant: Both have been living in society with others; both are disgusted by the inappropriate behavior of those others; both have retreated into the forest to find solitude; and both now live “comfortably and at ease” – free from the hassle of other beings. The Buddha explicitly reflects upon this similarity and recites a “solemn utterance” (*udāna*) that emphasizes it. What function, then, does the elephant fulfill for the Buddha?

Here, we might observe that this is one of the few rare instances in his life in which the Buddha is depicted as being *annoyed* by his own followers – so much so that he sneaks away secretly in order to find relief.²⁰ One might wonder whether this is conduct befitting of a fully enlightened Buddha: Should a fully enlightened Buddha be annoyed by his own disciples, and respond to this annoyance by essentially *running away*? The possible discomfort occasioned by this scenario seems to be reflected in a passage from the *Udāna Commentary*. Here, the commentator Dhammapāla expresses some disturbance at the very idea that the Buddha could feel “crowded” (*ākiṇṇo*) by others – and takes pains to refute it by emphasizing the

three months” (Vin-a v, 1152).

²⁰ In addition to the sense of annoyance discernible in the Buddha’s own words, the *Vinaya Commentary* mentions this annoyance explicitly when it states: “Word spread everywhere that the Blessed One was so annoyed (*ub-bāḷho*) by the monks of Kosambī that he entered the forest and stayed there for three months” (Vin-a v, 1152).

Buddha's great compassion for beings. He states:

But was the Blessed One really "crowded" [by others] or surrounded [by others]? No, he was not. For nobody is able to approach the Blessed One against his will, since Blessed Buddhas – due to their lack of taint – are unapproachable! Nevertheless, out of compassion for beings, with a desire for their welfare, and in conformity with his vow to free others (just as he had been freed), he would allow the eight assemblies [of beings] to come into his presence from time to time, with the purpose of helping them to cross over the four floods. Moreover, he himself, motivated by his great compassion and knowing it was the proper time, would also approach them. This is the customary practice of all Buddhas – and this is what is meant by the words "dwelling, crowded around."²¹

Dhammapāla's explanation seems determined to absolve the Buddha of any feelings of annoyance and any criticism one might level against him for abandoning his quarreling monks. We know, furthermore, that these monks *suffered* as a result of the Buddha's withdrawal: In the *Dhammapada Commentary* version, we are told that the monks of Kosambī resolved their dispute soon after the Buddha had left for the forest – yet the laypeople of Kosambī refused to give them any alms until the Buddha himself had forgiven them. And "because it was the rainy season and they were thus unable to go to the Buddha" to seek his forgiveness, they "spent the rainy season most miserably" – while the Buddha, in contrast, "dwelt happily, attended by the elephant."²²

There are hints, in other words, of the questionable nature of the Buddha's retreat into solitude – hints of his selfishness, wrongdoing, and guilt. And this is where the elephant perhaps becomes useful: The Buddha's actions and decisions, while questionable on their own, are mirrored by, reflected in, and validated through the parallel actions and decisions of a magnificent elephant – an especially appropriate mirror, since the Buddha himself is known as an "Elephant-Among-Men." For both the readers of the tale and the Buddha himself, there is something reassuring about this par-

²¹ Ud-a 248.

²² Dhp-a i, 57.

allelism: The man's actions are mirrored by the noble animal, the man finds validation through the noble animal, and the man takes delight in this validation, which seems to absolve him of any guilt. The man is restored by three months' worth of having his feelings and decisions validated through the mirroring presence of the elephant – after which he is ready to face human society once again.

Yet in spite of the restorative effect of identifying with the animal, the man must also discount this identity in favor of human superiority to the animal world. This is often how animals function. Thomas Forsthöfel, in writing about the didactic effectiveness of animal characters in the *jātakas* and *Pañcatantra*, has discussed the manner in which animal characters allow for simultaneous identification and distance on the part of their human readers. Animal characters allow for “a certain safety, a certain non-identification: ‘these characters are not me’” – yet precisely because of this ontological gap, the human reader's guard is let down, and he finds himself identifying with the animal nevertheless – “I am like this after all.”²³ The relationship Forsthöfel posits between human readers and animal characters is similar to the relationship between the Buddha and the elephant: The Buddha identifies himself with the elephant and feels validated in the process – yet this identification is only rendered safe by a simultaneous assertion of the *hierarchy* between man and animal.

In the story, this hierarchy is achieved by having the elephant *serve* the Buddha submissively and with great devotion. While the *Vinaya* account describes this service only briefly, the *Udāna Commentary* gives us a long and rich description of the profound effect the Buddha has on the elephant and the many services the elephant performs on the Buddha's behalf:

Dissatisfied with living in a herd, the great elephant entered the forest tract, and when he saw the Blessed One there, he became quenched (*nibbuto*), like a fire that has been extinguished by a thousand pitchers [of water], and he stood in the presence of the Blessed One with a heart full of faith (*pasannacitto*). From then on, making this his foremost duty, he would keep the area...free of grass by sweeping it with

²³ Forsthöfel 2007: 31–32.

bunches of twigs. He would give the Blessed One water for rinsing his mouth, bring him water for bathing, and give him his toothbrush. He would gather sweet fruit from the forest and bring them to the Teacher, and the Teacher would eat them ... He would gather pieces of wood with his trunk, rub them against each other, start a fire, and get the fire going; then he would heat up rocks in the fire, move them around with a stick, and throw them into a tank [of water]. When he knew that the water was hot, he would approach the Blessed One and stand there. The Blessed One would think – “The great elephant wants me to bathe” – and go there and do his bathing duties. This same method was also used in regard to the drinking water, except that he would approach [the Blessed One] once [the water] had become cool.²⁴

So solicitous is the elephant that he even heats up the Buddha’s bath water! The *Dhammapada Commentary* further adds:

He would perform [various other] duties [for the Teacher], and fan [the Teacher] with a branch. At nighttime, in order to ward off the danger posed by beasts of prey, [the elephant] would roam throughout the forest tract until sunrise, carrying a large club in his trunk, with the intention of protecting the Teacher. And from that time on, this forest tract has been known as the *rakkhita* [protected] forest tract. At sunrise, [the elephant] would give the Teacher water for rinsing his mouth, and so on. And in this way, he would perform all of the customary services.²⁵

The elephant thus has a dual nature: In relation to the other elephants, he is a powerful and superior leader who has retreated from the rabble in search of noble solitude, but in relation to the human Buddha, he is a devoted and submissive servant. This dual nature allows the Buddha to identify with the elephant, yet also maintain his human superiority. The Buddha, too, shares with the rest of humanity a contradictory desire to both dominate and find oneself reflected in the animal ‘other.’

The relationship I have posited between the Buddha and the elephant can be further supported by reconsidering the larger context of the story as a whole, and recognizing that the story itself is en-

²⁴ Ud-a 250–251.

²⁵ Dhp-a i, 59.

gaged in a complex manipulation of the categories of humanity and animality. The quarreling monks of Kosambī are *human beings*, but through their stubborn fighting, they behave as if they were *animals* – whereas the Buddha is a *human being* who lives up to this label by behaving in a noble and civilized manner. The elephant, on the other hand, is an *animal*, but through his devoted religious behavior, he behaves like a *human being* – whereas the other elephants are *animals* who act like *animals*. Likewise, Kosambī is technically a human city, but in moral terms, it has become a wilderness full of mindless animals – whereas the Pārileyyaka forest, though technically a wilderness, is the only realm in which civilized human behavior seems to prevail. The story thus conveys the message that one's outward form does not necessarily match up with one's internal state: What makes one *truly* human has nothing to do with biological species or habitat.

This interpretation of the larger story can be further supported by taking a closer look at the cautionary tale of Prince Dīghāvu, which the Buddha (before retreating to the Pārileyyaka forest) relates to the monks of Kosambī in an effort to convince them to give up their fighting. In this tale,²⁶ Prince Dīghāvu sees his family's kingdom conquered and stolen away by a rival king, King Brahmadata, and watches helplessly as his own parents are cruelly executed. His father, just before dying, manages to recite a verse to him (a variation on verse 5 of the *Dhammapada*), warning him of the futility of seeking vengeance: “Wrath (*vera*), dear Dīghāvu, is not appeased by wrath; wrath, dear Dīghāvu, is appeased by non-wrath.”²⁷ Several years later, when Prince Dīghāvu has a perfect opportunity to exact his revenge against King Brahmadata for killing his parents, he stops himself at the last minute by remembering his father's verse. The two men make peace and grant each other security, King Brahmadata restores Prince Dīghāvu's kingdom to

²⁶ Prince Dīghāvu is a previous birth of the Buddha; the latter half of this story is also told in the *Dīghītikosajātaka* (No. 371) (trans. Cowell 1895–1913: 3, 139–140).

²⁷ Vin i, 345. Verse 5 of the *Dhammapada* reads: “In this world, wrath is never appeased by wrath; wrath is appeased by non-wrath – this is an eternal law” (Dhp i, 50).

him, and Prince Dīghāvu then explains to King Brahmadata the meaning of his father's verse:

King, my mother and father were killed by you. But if I were to deprive you of life, then those who are desirous of your welfare would deprive me of life – and then those who are desirous of *my* welfare would deprive *them* of life. In this way, wrath would not be appeased by wrath. But now, the King has granted me life, and I have granted the King life. Thus, wrath has been appeased by non-wrath. This is why, King, my father said to me at the time of dying – “Wrath, dear Dīghāvu, is not appeased by wrath; wrath, dear Dīghāvu, is appeased by non-wrath.”²⁸

Here, it is striking to note that the endless cycle of violence invoked by Prince Dīghāvu bears a stark resemblance to the “law of the fishes” (*matsyanyāya*) that Indian thought posits as being *the* defining characteristic of the animal world – a law of chaos by which little fish are eaten by bigger fish, bigger fish are eaten by still-bigger fish, and so on (what we would call the ‘law of the jungle’).²⁹ By exercising restraint and giving up his desire for revenge, Prince Dīghāvu has rejected the “law of the fishes” – choosing to behave like a civilized human being rather than like an animal. Thus, when the Buddha relates this cautionary tale to the monks of Kosambī, he is telling them, in effect, to *stop behaving like animals and start behaving like human beings*. It is only when they refuse to

²⁸ Vin i, 348.

²⁹ The classic statement of the “law of the fishes” appears in Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra*. In discussing the king’s fundamental duty to maintain law and order by exercising the “science of punishment” (*daṇḍanīti*), Kauṭilya states: “When, [conversely,] no punishment is awarded [through misplaced leniency and no law prevails], there is only the law of fish [i.e., the law of the jungle]. Unprotected, the small fish will be swallowed up by the big fish” (*Arthaśāstra*, Book I, Chapter 4) (trans. Rangarajan 1992: 86). Buddhism shares this characterization of the animal world. In the *Bālapaṇḍitasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, for example, the Buddha states: “O Monks, I could speak in so many ways about the animal realm, but it is not easy to convey, through speaking, how miserable the animal realm is! ... O Monks, in that realm, there is no moral conduct, upright conduct, wholesome action, or meritorious action. In that realm, Monks, there is [only] mutual devouring and devouring of the weak!” (MN iii, 169).

heed his advice that the Buddha is forced to withdraw into the forest and dwell harmoniously with a *truly* ‘human’ companion – who happens, of course, to be an elephant.³⁰ The humans have turned into animals, while the animal has become human.

And yet – the ontological distinction between human and animal must occasionally be reasserted. In the *Dhammapada Commentary*, this distinction is reestablished both verbally and spatially in a particularly striking passage dealing with the Buddha’s alms-gathering. Here, we are told that while the Buddha was dwelling in the Pārileyayaka forest, he would go to a nearby village for alms, and the elephant would accompany him and carry his bowl and robe. However:

Once the Teacher reached the outskirts of the village, he would say [to the elephant]: “Pārileyayaka, you cannot go any farther than this! Give me my bowl and robe.” And having retrieved his bowl and robe, he would enter the village for alms. And until the Teacher came back out, [the elephant] would stand right there, and when he came out, [the elephant] would go forth to meet him.³¹

The humanity attributed to the elephant thus has its limits: Ultimately, the village is a *human* realm, and the elephant – as an *animal* – is barred from entering. The ontological distinction between animal and human is embodied by the physical border of the

³⁰ In the *Dhammapada Commentary* version, five hundred monks later say to the Buddha: “Lord Blessed One, you are a refined Awakened One, a refined Khattiya. We think it must have been difficult for you to spend three months [in the forest] standing and sitting alone, for you had no one to perform the major and minor duties [for you], and no one to give you water for rinsing the mouth, and so on” (Dhp-a i, 61). By referring to the Buddha as a “refined” (*sukhumālo*) human being, and automatically assuming that no other “refined” human being was present to fulfill the customary duties for him, the monks betray their limited understanding of what it means to be truly ‘human.’ The Buddha immediately corrects them: “Monks, the elephant Pārileyayaka performed all these duties for me. When one obtains such a companion as him, it is proper to live in communion, but for one who does not obtain such a companion, it is better to dwell alone” (Dhp-a i, 61–62). The Buddha thus suggests that the elephant is a more “refined” human being than the quarreling monks he left behind.

³¹ Dhp-a i, 59.

village and the Buddha's explicit command that the elephant is *not permitted to cross*. He can "go forth to meet" the Buddha, but he cannot cross the line. In this way, human superiority to the animal world is once again upheld. As we will see, this is only the first of several examples of the salience of borders and border-crossings in the *Dhammapada Commentary's* version of this tale.

Perhaps we can now pause to summarize what kind of function the elephant fulfills for the Buddha: He mirrors and thus validates the Buddha's actions and decisions; he illuminates – through contrast – the 'animalistic' behavior of the quarreling monks of Kosambī; yet he also maintains his subservient status as an animal and humble devotee. Moreover, as a figure who is both alive and yet lacking in the outward language characteristic of human beings, the elephant fulfills these functions *silently*.³² He exerts his effects in a way that requires no conscious acknowledgment – either from the readers of the story, or from the Buddha himself.

As we look more closely now at one particular version of the tale, we will see many of these same themes further elaborated.

The monkey's gift of honey

Among our three versions of the Pārileyaka story, the *Dhammapada Commentary* version is unique in including an additional animal character – a monkey who observes the elephant's actions and is inspired to behave in similar ways. Here, too, we see the same tension between fellowship and otherness – between human identification with the animal and an assertion of human dominance. The monkey is humanized and ennobled – but ultimately, the story tells us, he is only a monkey.

The passage begins as follows:

Now, at that time, a certain monkey, having observed the elephant getting up and exerting himself, day after day, to perform minor duties for the Tathāgata, thought to himself: "I will do something, too." One

³² I do not see any indication (in any version of the story) that the elephant makes use of verbal language.

day, as he was roaming around, he saw a beehive that was free of flies. He broke off the beehive, brought the beehive together with its honeycomb to the Teacher, pulled a leaf off a plantain tree, deposited [the honeycomb] there, and gave it [to the Teacher]. The Teacher accepted it. Looking to see whether or not [the Teacher] would eat [the honey], the monkey saw [the Teacher] sit down holding [the honeycomb, but without eating any honey]. Wondering why, [the monkey] used the tip of a stick to turn [the honeycomb] over and examine it. Seeing some tiny eggs there, he gently removed them and again offered [the honeycomb to the Teacher]. The Teacher ate [the honey].³³

Here, we see that just as the elephant is moved by the presence of the Buddha to engage in human devotional behavior, so the monkey is similarly influenced by his observation of the elephant. Due to this salutary influence, the monkey leaves behind his animalistic ways and behaves like a human devotee. The movement from *elephant* to *monkey* represents a considerable rise in the stakes, for while the elephant is one of the favored animals of Buddhist literature – a noble animal often associated with royalty and frequently used to symbolize the Buddha himself³⁴ – the monkey in Indian literature is the quintessential wild animal (*miga*), often referred to as the “*miga* of the trees” (*sākhāmiga*), and famous for its destructive and capricious nature, as it leaps from branch to branch.³⁵ In a typical passage from the *Samyuttanikāya*, for example, the untrained human mind that flits about aimlessly from one idea to the next is compared to “a monkey roaming in a forest or woodland [who]

³³ Dhp-a i, 59–60.

³⁴ On the imagery of elephants in Buddhist literature, see Ramanathapillai 2009; Waldau 2002: 113–136; and Deleanu 2000: 91–98.

³⁵ Doniger (1989: 9), for example, states: “Monkeys are known in Sanskrit as *mrigas* of the trees – deer of the trees, or wild animals of the trees – an indication that they are, like deer, a defining category of wildness: monkeys are us in the wild. The ingenious (and sometimes sinister) mischievousness of the monkey is brilliantly and minutely observed in Indian sculpture and cunningly recorded in Indian folklore.” Similarly, Waldau (2002) notes that “the overall view of these animals is quite negative” (119), and in much of Buddhist literature, “they are stupid and malicious” and “have a nature that precludes them from making anything constructive” (120). See also Deleanu 2000: 103–105.

grabs a branch, releases it and grabs another, then releases that and grabs yet another...³⁶ It is precisely such capricious ‘wildness’ that the human mind should strive to overcome through spiritual discipline.

In line with the greater degree of ‘wildness’ characteristic of the monkey, the Buddha does not simply accept the monkey’s service, as he willingly accepted the elephant’s service. Instead, he *tests* the monkey’s humanity by refusing to partake of any honey until the monkey has removed the eggs from the honeycomb and thus prevented tiny creatures from being killed. In this way, the monkey proves – much like Prince Dīghāvu – that he has rejected the animalistic “law of the fishes” and left animality behind. It is only at this point that the Buddha accepts the monkey’s offering, for the monkey has earned his membership in this odd ‘human’ community of the forest. The Buddha thus humanizes the monkey – but perhaps the monkey also does something for the Buddha. I would surmise that the monkey functions for the Buddha much as the elephant does, for the Buddha’s own humanity and nobility – despite his abandonment of his followers – is now *doubly* reflected and mirrored by both the monkey and the elephant.

The end of this episode, however, is perhaps equally instructive, for here we learn that the monkey is, after all, just a monkey – and human dominance over the animal world is thus reestablished:

Being pleased in mind [i.e., because the Buddha ate the honey], [the monkey] leapt from one branch to another as if he were dancing. Then, the branch he had grabbed and the branch he had stepped on both broke, and [the monkey] fell down onto the tip of a certain stake and was impaled.³⁷

³⁶ “O Monks, that which is called ‘thought’ or ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ arises as one thing and ceases as another thing, all day and all night long. O Monks, just as a monkey roaming in a forest or woodland grabs a branch, releases it and grabs another, then releases that and grabs yet another, in just the same way, Monks, that which is called ‘thought’ or ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ arises as one thing and ceases as another thing, all day and all night long” (SN ii, 94).

³⁷ Dhp-a i, 60.

The monkey, it seems, has *not* totally eradicated his animalistic instincts after all, for now he jumps around carelessly – like a monkey – and this results in his sudden and painful death. Once the monkey has fulfilled his mirroring function, we might say, he is forcefully returned to animal status.

When I first read this passage, I found it to be strangely reminiscent of a famous episode from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*³⁸ involving the monkeys who serve as allies of the hero-god Rāma. In this episode, the monkey troops led by Hanumān, having just discovered the location of the kidnapped princess Sītā, are hurrying back to bring this urgent news to Rāma when they unexpectedly stop at a pleasure-grove. There, they get intoxicated on honey-wine and engage in a "Rabelaisian orgy of drunkenness and destruction,"³⁹ leaping around violently and causing utter mayhem. For the reader of the epic, this odd episode seems to come out of nowhere, and has the effect of suddenly pulling us back from the heroic nature of the monkeys and forcefully reminding us that they are *animals*. Likewise, in our story, the same monkey who, a moment earlier, had carefully plucked each tiny egg off a honeycomb out of respect for living beings, now leaps around with wild abandon, breaking branches left and right and managing to impale himself in the process. The monkey's humanity has been abruptly negated.

Overall, then, the episode of the monkey seems to move back and forth between the categories of humanity and animality – collapsing the border between them only to forcefully reinscribe it once again. This movement encourages us to meditate further on the characters of the elephant, the Buddha, and the quarreling monks, and *their* locations along the human/animal spectrum. In this way, the monkey and the elephant work together – they are doubly "good to think."

³⁸ See book 5 (*Sundarakāṇḍa*), chapters 59–62 (trans. Goldman and Goldman 1996: 278–289).

³⁹ Goldman and Goldman 1996: 4.

More borders, border-crossings, and tests

The *Dhammapada Commentary* version now continues the story with further playful manipulations of humanity, animality, borders, border-crossings, and tests. As the Buddha dwells contentedly in the Pārileyyaka forest, attended upon by the elephant, five hundred monks back in Sāvattthī grow increasingly anxious to see him and soon demand that Ānanda take them to where the Buddha is dwelling. Ānanda brings the five hundred monks to the edge of the Pārileyyaka forest, but then thinks to himself – “It wouldn’t be proper to approach the Tathāgata with this many monks when he has been dwelling alone for three months.”⁴⁰ Thus, he leaves the monks outside of the forest and approaches the Buddha alone.

Ānanda’s action of preventing the monks from crossing the border into the forest immediately reminds the reader of the Buddha’s action of preventing the elephant from crossing the border into the human village – for in both cases, the *border* seems to carry some kind of significance. In the earlier instance, we saw that the elephant – despite acting like a civilized human being – was still technically an animal, and the Buddha made this clear by preventing the elephant from crossing the border into the human village. Now we see that the monks – though technically human beings – have been behaving like animals, and Ānanda seems to sense this when he prevents them from crossing the border into the forest – which, as we saw before, now constitutes the only truly ‘human’ realm. Thus, the elephant is technically an animal but morally a human being; the monks are technically human beings but morally animals; the city or the village is the literal human realm, but the forest constitutes the true ‘human’ realm – and all of these categories are illuminated by the emphasis placed upon borders and prevented border-crossings. It could, of course, be pointed out that the monks involved in this episode are *not* the quarreling monks of Kosambī, but rather other monks from the city of Sāvattthī. Nevertheless, I would argue that they serve here as stand-ins for the quarreling monks, symbolically playing the role of ‘animalistic humans’ who

⁴⁰ Dhp-a i, 60.

must be kept from entering the forest.

Ānanda now enters the forest alone, and at this point, the elephant – much like the monkey, earlier – seems to experience a momentary relapse into pure, animalistic instinct, for he rushes to attack Ānanda and must be forcibly stopped by the Buddha, who yells out: “Stop, Pārileyyaka, don’t obstruct him! This is the Buddha’s personal attendant!”⁴¹ (Perhaps we might see this as another instance of the Buddha’s assertion of human dominance.) Brought to his senses, the elephant immediately ceases his attack and resumes his civilized human demeanor – so much so, in fact, that he now enacts a sort of ‘test’ of Ānanda himself:

The elephant thought to himself – “If he is observant, he will not put his own requisites on the slab of stone where the Teacher sits” – [and, sure enough,] the elder [Ānanda] put his bowl and robe on the ground. For those who are observant do not place their requisites on the beds or seats of venerable [Teachers].⁴²

Here, we have yet another moral ‘test:’ Just as the Buddha tested the monkey for civilized human behavior, which consisted of rejecting the “law of the fishes,” so the elephant now tests Ānanda for civilized human behavior, which consists of being ‘observant’ of the forms of monastic etiquette. It is interesting to note that in the first case, a human being tests an animal, while in the second case, an animal tests a human being. Once again, we are made to understand that true ‘humanity’ is defined not by one’s outward form or species, but rather, by one’s conscious exercise of moral decorum and restraint. The monkey passes this test by showing respect for other beings’ lives, and Ānanda passes this test by showing respect for the exalted status of the Buddha. In this way, both prove themselves to be ‘human’ and earn their proper place in the civilized realm of Pārileyyaka.

Let us pass quickly now to the end of the story, where there are several further invocations of borders and border-crossings. Eventually, the Buddha summons the five hundred monks into the

⁴¹ Dhp-a i, 61.

⁴² Dhp-a i, 61.

Pārileyaka forest, recites some verses to them about the benefits of dwelling alone or with virtuous companions (from the *Nāgavagga* or “Elephant Chapter” of the *Dhammapada*),⁴³ and agrees to return with them to Sāvattthī. After the elephant has treated the monks to a lavish meal of sweet fruits gathered from the forest, the monks begin to depart, whereupon the elephant *blocks the Buddha’s path* to prevent him from leaving the forest. This is met by a rather stern rebuke on the part of the Buddha – a rebuke that explicitly invokes the inferiority of the animal-state and the spiritual uniqueness of human beings:

Then the Teacher said to [the elephant]: “Pārileyaka, I am not turning back! In your present state of existence, you cannot attain the transic states, or insight, or the fruits of the path. You must stay [here]!” Hearing these words, the elephant placed his trunk into his mouth, and slowly retreated, weeping.⁴⁴

In other words, now that the peaceful interlude in the forest is over, and the elephant has finished serving his mirroring function, the firm ontological distinction between humans and animals must be forcefully reinscribed: In Buddhist cosmology, of course, animals are karmically inferior to human beings, and the animal rebirth is one of the three “unfortunate destinies” (*duggati*). The major distinction between animals and humans is that animals lack the faculty of *paññā* – “wisdom,” but also reason, insight, cognitive knowledge, and the higher faculties of thought in general. Thus,

⁴³ “If one finds a wise companion, a resolute friend with a virtuous life, then let one walk with him, being pleased and mindful, overcoming all dangers. But if one does not find a wise companion, a resolute friend with a virtuous life, then let one wander alone, like a king abandoning the kingdom he has conquered, like an elephant [wandering] in an elephant-forest. Living in solitude is better, for there is no companionship with a fool. Let one wander alone, not doing evil, living at ease, like an elephant [wandering] in an elephant-forest” (*Dhammapada*, vv. 328–330) (Dhp i, 62). These verses are highly appropriate to the situation, since the mention of “an elephant wandering in an elephant-forest” reminds us of the elephant Pārileyaka himself, while the mention of “a king abandoning the kingdom he has conquered” reminds us of what King Brahmadata (in the story of Prince Dīghāvu) did – once he began acting like a human being rather than like an animal.

⁴⁴ Dhp-a i, 63.

animals cannot develop insight into the nature of reality, they cannot make progress in the Dhamma, they cannot attain Arhatship or any other level of spiritual attainment, they cannot be ordained into the Saṃgha, and in the *Vinaya*, they are often classified together with human matricides, parricides, hermaphrodites, thieves, and Buddha-killers.⁴⁵ As the Buddha succinctly puts it in the *Majjhimanikāya*, “O Monks, in the animal realm, there is no moral conduct, no upright conduct, no wholesome action, no meritorious action. In that realm, Monks, there is [only] mutual devouring and devouring of the weak!”⁴⁶ This Buddhist denigration of animal existence is implicit in the Buddha’s stern rebuke of the elephant and his command to stay behind in the forest. The forest, too, has been suddenly transformed: Now that the episode is over, the forest is no longer the truly civilized ‘human’ realm, but has reverted to its natural condition as the proper habitat for birds and beasts. Human dominance has been forcefully reasserted.

In spite of the Buddha’s command, however, it seems that the elephant does follow him for some way, for this is followed by one last border (and prevented border-crossing) – one that seems to introduce a final element of ambiguity into the story:

When the Teacher reached the entrance to the village, he said [to the elephant]: “Pārileyaka, you must not go beyond this point, for the habitations of men are full of danger. Stay here!” Weeping, [the elephant] stayed right there, and when the Teacher had gone beyond his range of vision, he died of a broken heart.⁴⁷

Once again, the Buddha prevents the animal from entering the human village – but this time, he does so because “the habitations of men are full of danger.” In saying this, the Buddha seems to suggest that it is the *elephant* who constitutes the civilized being, whereas the village is full of animalistic humans who – following the “law of the fishes” – might cause harm to the noble elephant.

⁴⁵ See, for example, McDermott 1989: 269–270; Waldau 2002: 113–155, passim; Harris 2006: 208; Deleanu 2000: 85–86; and Schmithausen 2003: 13–16.

⁴⁶ MN iii, 169.

⁴⁷ Dhp-a i, 63.

The humanity of the elephant thus receives one final (if subtle) acknowledgment. Moreover, unlike the monkey, who is killed as a result of carelessly jumping around, the elephant dies “of a broken heart” – which further suggests his noble human nature and unwavering faith in the Buddha. The subtle similarities and differences between the case of the monkey and the case of the elephant thus offer us further opportunities for comparison and reflection – in other words, they are “good to think.”⁴⁸

I hope I have succeeded in demonstrating that the story of the Buddha’s sojourn in the Pārileyyaka forest is far more than just a charming fable about Buddha/elephant companionship. Instead, the story is a complex construction that cleverly manipulates human and animal characters, human and animal habitats, and the abstract categories of humanity and animality themselves – sometimes collapsing these categories together, and sometimes using physical borders to forcefully reinscribe the divisions between them. Through this manipulation of elements, I contend, the story teaches us much about the self-discipline, control, and restraint that define what it means to be ‘human.’

Other animals

The interpretation I have offered above of the Pārileyyaka story can be further supported by recognizing that animals throughout Indian literature are frequently employed in such ways – as the foils, shadows, or doubles of their human counterparts, simultaneously similar-and-different, whose presence encourages us to reflect in new ways upon the human characters themselves. Here,

⁴⁸ After the death of the elephant, the story comes to a quick resolution: The Buddha and his monks return to Sāvattī, the repentant monks of Kosambī come there to seek the Buddha’s forgiveness, and the dispute is soon brought to a peaceful end. It is interesting to note, however, that when the monks of Kosambī first arrive in Sāvattī, the king of Kosala and the prominent layman Anāthapiṇḍaka *do not want to let them enter the city* – thus, another prevented border-crossing, perhaps suggesting the monks’ continuing ‘animality’ – but the Buddha, understanding that they are repentant, intervenes and allows them to enter.

I offer two brief examples taken from Hindu literature, both discussed by Wendy Doniger,⁴⁹ in lieu of a fuller treatment.

My first example is a story taken from the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* about a sage named Saubhari, whose situation both parallels and contrasts with that of the Buddha. Doniger translates the story as follows:

There was once a sage named Saubhari, who spent twelve years immersed in a pond. In that pond there lived a great fish who had many children and grandchildren. The young fish played around the great fish all day, and he lived happily among them. Their games began to disturb the sage's meditations; he noticed them and thought, "How enviable is that fish, always playing so happily with his children. He makes me want to taste that pleasure, too, and to play happily with my own children." And so the sage got out of the water and went to the king to demand a bride. He married the king's fifty daughters and had a hundred and fifty sons, but eventually he realized that his desires were self-perpetuating and hence insatiable, and that he must return to the meditations that the fish had disturbed. So he abandoned his children and his wives and returned to the forest.⁵⁰

The story offers an interesting contrast to the story of the Buddha in *Pārileyyaka*: Both the Buddha and Saubhari have abandoned human society and retreated into the forest alone. The Buddha encounters an elephant who has also abandoned (elephant) society to live a renunciant life; thus, the Buddha and the elephant are parallel to each other, and the elephant's actions mirror and validate the actions of the Buddha. In contrast, Saubhari, after retreating into the forest, encounters a fish who is fully immersed within (fish) society, and who negatively influences Saubhari to follow his example by abandoning his asceticism to rejoin the human world – only to realize later that he was mistaken and has wasted precious time. Thus, in the Buddha's case, the forest is a peaceful realm that confirms and celebrates one's heroic impulse to withdraw, while in Saubhari's case, the forest is the realm of mindlessly-procreating animals and thus constitutes a further source of human distract-

⁴⁹ See Doniger 2005.

⁵⁰ Doniger 2005: 19.

tion and entrapment.⁵¹ In the Buddha's case, the animal supports and validates the human being's humanity; in Saubhari's case, the animal subverts the human being's humanity and turns the human into an animal, too. It is also ironic that Saubhari only encounters the fish in the first place because he has become 'fish-like' himself, using his great ascetic powers to live immersed within a pond. Wendy Doniger successfully captures the complexity of the story's discourse when she observes that Saubhari "comes to learn that though other people may be like fish" – because they enjoy familial life – "he himself is not like them" – since he longs for renunciation – "and hence, though fishlike" – because he lives underwater – he is simultaneously "not like a fish" – in terms of sharing a fish's animalistic instincts.⁵² Both the readers of the story and Saubhari himself learn something about the difficulty of renunciation and the pull exerted by the world of nature through the silent presence of the fish. The fish becomes an effective tool for thought that allows us to reflect upon these themes.

A more complex and extensive example of the use of animal characters as tools for thought may be found, once again, in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* – in particular, its masterful depiction of the race of monkeys who aid the hero Rāma. Granted, these are not ordinary monkeys, but rather *vānaras* – monkey-like supernatu-

⁵¹ Though the former story is Buddhist while the latter story is Hindu, it is worth pointing out that such contradictory views of the forest are also present within Buddhism itself. For example, Lambert Schmithausen (2003), in his analysis of Buddhist views of nature, speaks of one strand of thought that sees "wild nature, e.g. the virgin forest or the jungle...[as] something disagreeable and full of dangers" (15), and holds that "existence as an animal is a very unhappy one, much more painful than human existence" (16) – which is somewhat similar to Saubhari's perspective. He contrasts this view, however, with the "hermit" attitude of the forest-dwelling monk, "who is no longer afraid of the wild animals because he on his part does not threaten them but offers them safety and friendship" (18); such a monk is "happy in the solitude of the wilderness because he has abandoned worldly desires and is content with little" (18), and may even recognize the "spiritual benefits of the wilderness" (19) – which is consonant with the attitude of the Buddha in Pārileyyaka.

⁵² Doniger 2005: 19.

ral creatures created by the gods themselves and possessing many divine and human qualities. Nevertheless, they do appear in the physical form of animals and often display animalistic traits – as we saw above in connection with their drunken destruction of the pleasure-grove.

Throughout the epic, these monkey characters often seem to constitute ‘shadows’ of the human heroes, simultaneously paralleling and contrasting their actions and decisions. The human/divine hero Rāma, for example, finds his ‘double’ in the exiled monkey-king Sugrīva, for both characters have experienced the usurpation of their thrones by a brother and the forcible taking of their wives. Thus, when Rāma agrees to assassinate Sugrīva’s brother Vālin in order to regain the throne of the monkey kingdom for Sugrīva – an act that has traditionally been considered one of the most morally problematic events in the epic – we see the extent to which Rāma identifies with Sugrīva and *uses* Sugrīva (his monkey ‘double’) to act out his own repressed feelings of rage. As Doniger puts it,

Rama’s cultural role as the perfect son and brother prevents him from expressing his personal resentment of his father and brother, and so the monkeys do it for him. In the magical world of the monkey forest, Rama’s unconscious mind is set free to take the revenge that his conscious mind does not allow him in the world of humans.⁵³

The human being thus retains his humanity by using the world of the animals to satisfy his own animalistic instincts (which is, in some sense, the *opposite* of what we see in the case of the Buddha). One of the consistent messages running throughout the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, in fact, is that human beings are defined by their ability to repress and control feelings of both sexuality and aggression.⁵⁴ And this message is illuminated, over and over again, by the similar-yet-contrasting examples offered by the monkeys (as well as by the demons, or *rākṣasas*, who function similarly to the animal characters).⁵⁵ Animal characters thus allow the epic story to “try

⁵³ Doniger 2005: 23.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of this theme, see, for example, Goldman 1984: 49–59.

⁵⁵ Two excellent discussions treating the *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as doubles, shadows, or foils of the human characters are Goldman 2000 and

out alternative plots and personalities” – they provide “a kind of narrative thought experiment” and present us with “possibilities that no mere doubling by means of another human subplot could.”⁵⁶ They are, in other words, “good to think.”

Because the *Rāmāyaṇa* presents us with a particularly rich and compelling example of the use of animals (as well as demons, gods, and other beings) to illuminate the category of the *human*, it is perhaps natural that it has been the object of such sustained and sophisticated analysis along these lines. I suspect, however, that Buddhist narrative literature from India may also be amenable to such analysis – and only awaits our closer examination.⁵⁷

The elephant Pārileyyaka in context

Let me conclude my analysis now with some comments about the special significance of the elephant Pārileyyaka, when compared to other animals in Buddhist literature, as well as the salience of the fact that he is an *elephant*.

Several scholars have pointed to the importance of drawing a distinction between the highly anthropomorphized animals found in so many of the *jātakas* and the more realistic and naturalistic animals found elsewhere in Buddhist literature (including the elephant Pārileyyaka). Ian Harris, for example, states:

Some care is needed in the proper interpretation of the *Jātaka* and other animal-oriented stories. Certainly, animals [in the *jātakas*] are often displayed in a positive light... However, it could be argued that the often highly anthropomorphic character of the essentially pre-Buddhist folk-tradition of these narratives is largely devoid of

Pollock 1991: 68–84.

⁵⁶ Daston and Mitman 2005: 7.

⁵⁷ The comparative study of the role of animals in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain literature also promises to be a fruitful area deserving of further work. For some general treatments of animals in Hinduism, see Doniger 1989; Doniger 2005; van der Geer 2008; Nelson 2006; Bryant 2006; Smith 1991; and Kemmerer 2012: 56–90. For animals in Jainism, see Chapple 2006 and Wiley 2006.

“naturalistic” content... Indeed, the animals are not really animals at all, for at the end of each story the Buddha reveals that the central character was none other than himself in a previous life, with his monastic companions playing the supporting roles.⁵⁸

Similarly, Padmanabh Jaini, in an important article on the spirituality of animals in India, observes that “in almost all fables where the Bodhisattva appears as an animal-manifestation, he not only leads an exemplary life...but even preaches the dharma to human beings.” Yet, “magnificent as these stories are, they do not refer to the fate of ordinary animals, but only to the *bodhisattva* in the guise of an animal.” Jaini then contrasts these animal fables of the *jātakas* with “numerous other tales scattered throughout the Buddhist scriptures which relate how ordinary birds and beasts exhibit nobility and friendship comparable to that of human beings” – among which he includes both the elephant Pārileyaka and the monkey of the same story.⁵⁹

I believe that this distinction is crucial to maintain and tells us much about the power of the Pārileyaka story. The highly anthropomorphized animals of the *jātakas* are not truly animals at all; they are allegorical stand-ins for human beings – which is perhaps betrayed by the fact that they so often *speak*. If it is *language*, first and foremost, that distinguishes human beings from animals, then the chatty animals of the *jātakas* – in addition to being previous births of the Buddha and his disciples – are decidedly more *human* than animal.⁶⁰ In contrast, the elephant Pārileyaka, as we have

⁵⁸ Harris 2006: 208.

⁵⁹ Jaini 1987: 170–171. Florin Deleanu (2000: 81–82) similarly draws a distinction “between the apparently deliberate usage of animals as characters in parables and fairy tales, mainly occurring in the *Jātaka* and similar collections of stories, and the zoemes [i.e., animals as symbols or metaphors] spread throughout the Canon which seem to convey a genuine Buddhist conception (or misconception) regarding animals.”

⁶⁰ This is not to discount them, however, or suggest that they are ineffective. Daston and Mitman (2005: 9), discussing the effectiveness of animal characters in fables such as those of Aesop, state: “In fables animals are humanized, one might even say hyperhumanized, by caricature: the fox is cunning, the lion is brave, the dog is loyal. Whereas the same stories told

seen, performs his mirroring function silently: He *thinks* and he *feels*, but – as far as I can tell – he does not *speak*, nor is he simply the previous animal rebirth of an eventual human being. There is something powerful, I contend, about the mute presence of such an animal – its noble silence, its freedom from the glibness of human language, and its pure, blank animal gaze.⁶¹ And yet, this animal has faith in the Buddha, behaves like a human being, and engages in human devotional behavior – which makes him equally distinct from the many generic animals who merely populate the background of Buddhist texts. Poised halfway between the fully-human animal and the fully-animal animal, the elephant Pārileyakka constitutes a puzzling and thus effective tool for thought – and a powerful mirror for the Buddha.

The choice to make this animal an *elephant* is also highly resonant. As Daston and Mitman have noted, in order to convey any symbolic meaning, “an animal must [first] be singled out as a promising prospect for anthropomorphism. We do not choose to think with any and all animals.”⁶² Although the features that mark a particular species as a promising candidate may vary from one case to another (and one culture to another), Waldau has suggest-

about humans might lose the moral in a clutter of individuating detail of the sort we are usually keen to know about other people, substituting animals as actors strips the characterization down to prototypes. Animals simplify the narrative to a point that would be found flat or at least allegorical if the same tales were recounted about humans.” Likewise, Forsthoefel (2007: 32), regarding the animal fables of the *Pañcatantra*, notes that “while the text self-consciously aims to educate princes in the art of government...the issues presented in the collection...cut across class or caste,” and the use of animal characters “allows for universal appropriation, whether by princes or peasants.” Highly anthropomorphized animals thus function in effective ways – but their effect is different, I would argue, from that of animals such as Pārileyakka.

⁶¹ Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps alluding to a similar type of power when he said (of the cow): “Protection of the cow means protection of the whole dumb creation of God... The appeal of the lower order of creation is all the more forcible because it is speechless” (*Young India*, June 10, 1921, p. 36), <http://www.mk Gandhi.org/momgandhi/chap81.htm> (last visited 29-08-2013).

⁶² Daston and Mitman 2005: 11.

ed that we focus, in particular, on species characterized by “large brains, communications between individuals, prolonged periods of development in complex familial and social envelopes, and levels of both social integration and individuality that humans can recognize” – all of which contribute to the existence of “unique individuals with distinctive personalities, histories, and community membership.”⁶³ Within this group of species particularly prone to anthropomorphic imaginings, Waldau includes both elephants and great apes (though not specifically monkeys, which are lesser apes).

In regard to the Indian context, we might further note that the Indian Elephant (*Elephas maximus indica*) is native to the Indian subcontinent and has been a persistent and pervasive feature of life there since the time of the Indus Valley Civilization. Buddhist texts thus display “a high degree of familiarity with these animals’ natural history” in the wild, as well as their taming by human beings.⁶⁴ Frequently associated with royalty (since it was kings who owned elephants) and with great power (since elephants constituted an important element of the king’s military forces), elephants in India generally have positive, powerful, and auspicious connotations. Thus, the Buddha and the arhats are often referred to as “elephants;”⁶⁵ the Buddha’s birth is heralded by his mother’s dream of an auspicious white elephant; the “elephant-treasure” is one of the seven treasures that mark the reign of an idealized Cakkavattin monarch; and the Buddha of the *jātakas* is reborn as an elephant more frequently than any other animal except the monkey.⁶⁶ The elephant is thus a natural choice to represent the Buddha.

There are other aspects of elephant behavior and imagery, moreover, that are particularly pertinent to the specific religious themes explored by the Pārileyyaka story. In the wild, she-elephants and

⁶³ Waldau 2002: 60.

⁶⁴ Waldau 2002: 118.

⁶⁵ For references, see PTSD, s.v. *nāga*.

⁶⁶ In the *jātaka* collection, the Buddha is born as a monkey twenty-seven times and as an elephant twenty-four times (Singh 2006: 2). Given my earlier comments about elephants versus monkeys, the greater prominence of the monkey – though slight – is perhaps somewhat puzzling.

elephant-calves always live in herds, whereas mature bull-elephants live either in all-male groupings or completely on their own. This seems to make the wild bull-elephant a particularly apt image for the male monastic – who either lives in community with other male monks or dwells in the forest alone. As Florin Deleanu has noted, “this latter case” – of the lone wild elephant – “seems to have offered the Buddhist authors a model of majestic solitude”⁶⁷ and an appropriate image for the solitary, forest-dwelling monk. Such an elephant is often idealized in Buddhist ascetic literature: “Living in solitude is better,” as the *Dhammapada* says, “for there is no companionship with a fool. Let one wander alone, not doing evil, living at ease, like an elephant [wandering] in an elephant-forest.”⁶⁸ Likewise, in the *Theragāthā*, the monk who “lives in the forest, gathering alms, delighting in whatever gleanings come into [his] bowl” is encouraged to “destroy the army of death, as an elephant destroys a house of reeds!”⁶⁹ The image of an elephant destroying a house of reeds pays tribute to the wild elephant’s instinct to escape from the haunts of men and return to a peaceful life in the wild – much as the Buddha does within our story. When the elephant Pārileyyaka withdraws from the herd and retreats into the wilderness alone, therefore, he becomes a natural symbol for the solitary, forest-dwelling monk – and thus an effective mirror for the Buddha.

At the same time, however, the elephant imagery of the Pāli Canon is inherently unstable, for in other cases, it is the *tamed* elephant, rather than the *wild* elephant, that is idealized. As Rajmohan Ramanathapillai has noted,

Monks...observed that these massive animals can be extremely treacherous when they lose their temper but by using proper methods these intelligent animals could be trained and tamed. Once this

⁶⁷ Deleanu 2000: 94.

⁶⁸ *Dhammapada*, v. 330 (Dhp i, 62).

⁶⁹ The verse, which is attributed to Mahāmoggallāna, reads: “Living in the forest, gathering alms, delighted with whatever gleanings come into our bowls, let us destroy the army of death, as an elephant destroys a house of reeds!” (*Theragāthā*, v. 1147) (Thag 104).

precious insight was gained, monks began to compare the control of a wild elephant with controlling the human mind. Taming elephants becomes a central Buddhist analogy for taming passions.⁷⁰

Thus, the Buddha is like a mahout who uses the goad of meditation to tame the wild elephant of the unruly human mind. “Formerly,” the *Dhammapada* states, “this mind wandered about as it wished, wherever it liked, however it wanted. But now, I will thoroughly restrain it, just as [a mahout] uses his goad [to restrain] a maddened elephant!”⁷¹ Likewise, the monk Tālapuṭa, in the *Theragāthā*, says to his own mind – “I will bind you by force to the object of meditation, just as an elephant is bound to a post with strong rope!”⁷² In India, the process of taming an elephant was often cruel and violent, requiring the tamer to beat the animal into submission until it became pliant and docile⁷³ – a highly effective image for the rigorous spiritual discipline of a meditating monk.⁷⁴ It is interesting

⁷⁰ Ramanathapillai 2009: 31.

⁷¹ *Dhammapada*, v. 326 (Dhp iv, 326).

⁷² *Theragāthā*, v. 1141 (Thag 103).

⁷³ The *Dantabhūmisutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (No. 125) contains a long and evocative description of the process of taming an elephant, which tells us that “the elephant tamer plants a large post in the earth and binds the forest elephant to it by the neck in order to subdue his forest habits, subdue his forest memories and intentions, subdue his distress, fatigue, and fever over leaving the forest, get him to take delight in the town, and inculcate in him habits congenial to human beings.” In order to train the elephant in the “task of imperturbability,” the elephant tamer “ties a giant plank to his trunk;” then, “a man with a lance in his hand sits on his neck; men with lances in their hands surround him on all sides; and the elephant tamer himself stands in front of him holding a long lance pole” – such that the elephant “does not move his forelegs or his hindlegs; he does not move his forequarters or his hindquarters; he does not move his head, ears, tusks, tail, or trunk.” And once he is trained in this task, the elephant “is able to endure blows from spears, blows from swords, blows from arrows, blows from other beings, and the thundering sounds of drums, kettledrums, trumpets, and tomtoms.” Only then is he “worthy of the king” (trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 992–993).

⁷⁴ It is also significant, I think, that elephants are not truly a domesticated animal – for rather than being bred in captivity, they have to be captured in the wild and then forcibly tamed. Perhaps this suggests that one is not *born* as a monk, but must be ‘captured’ and ‘tamed’ by the Saṃgha.

to note that the elephant Pārileyaka equally partakes in this image of the idealized elephant as one who is *tamed*. For as soon as he encounters the Buddha, he stops his aimless wandering, his heart becomes “quenched” (*nibbuto*), and he settles down in one place to serve the Buddha with great devotion.

Elephant imagery in the Pāli Canon thus manipulates the categories of ‘wild’ and ‘tamed’ in contradictory ways in order to give expression to the religious themes of renunciation, ascetic solitude, meditation, and the spiritual discipline of the monk. The elephant Pārileyaka evokes both the ‘wild’ and ‘tamed’ images, to some degree: As a wild bull-elephant who has withdrawn from the herd to wander in the forest alone, he is like the solitary, forest-dwelling monk. But as a gentle and tame companion who serves the Buddha with total submission, he is like a monk whose mind is well-controlled and who is thoroughly versed in spiritual discipline. Thus, the elephant Pārileyaka is both ‘wild’ and ‘tamed’ in ways that reinforce the spiritual majesty of the Buddha. The larger context provided by the elephant imagery found throughout the Pāli Canon not only suggests that the elephant, as an animal, is particularly “good to think,” but also that the Pārileyaka story takes full advantage of these benefits.

Pārileyaka paradise

The specific analysis I have offered above of the Pārileyaka story may, of course, be subject to dispute regarding this or that point or detail. Nevertheless, I hope I have at least succeeded in convincing my readers to pause and take a closer look at the power of this odd little story – especially, at the most basic level, the power exerted by its depiction of man and animal living in harmony. As Wendy Doniger has noted, many cultures share “the myth of a magic time or place or person that erases the boundary between man and animals.” This myth might involve an “ancient time when humans spoke the language of animals,” or a type of paradise (like the Garden of Eden) where humans and animals live peaceably together, or a type of person (such as St. Francis of Assisi) “who lives at peace among the animals” or possesses the power of ani-

mal speech.⁷⁵ In the Pārileyyaka story, the Buddha *is* such a person, the Pārileyyaka forest *is* such a place, and the interlude the Buddha spends there *is* such a time. Within such myths of paradise, Doniger notes, wild animals do not become tame; instead, “wild animals remain wild and speak their own language, and humans become wild, humans become once again innocent of civilization, and can speak with animals. It is a world where wild and tame have not yet come to have any meaning for man, or therefore for animals.”⁷⁶ Frustrated by his quarreling monks and longing for such a paradise himself, there was an occasion on which the Buddha retreated into the Pārileyyaka forest, in a story that likewise collapses all such distinctions.

Abbreviations

All Pāli canonical and commentarial sources are cited from the Tipiṭaka (and commentaries) established at the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana or Sixth Buddhist Council held in Yangon, Myanmar, 1954–1956, and available online at www.tipitaka.org. However, as is customary, the citations given are to the standard Pali Text Society editions, as noted below.

- Dhp *Dhammapada*. See Dhp-a.
- Dhp-a *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*. Norman, Harry C., ed. 1906–1915. *The Commentary on the Dhammapada*. 5 vols. London: Pali Text Society.
- Jā *Jātaka and Jātaka Aṭṭhakathā*. Fausbøll, Viggo, ed. 1875–1897. *The Jātaka Together With Its Commentary, Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*. 7 vols. London: Trübner.
- MN *Majjhimanikāya*. Trenckner, Wilhelm, ed. 1888–1925. *The Majjhima Nikāya*. 4 vols. London: Pali Text Society.
- PTSD Rhys Davids, Thomas W., and William Stede. 1966. *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*. London: Luzac. Orig. pub. 1921–1925.

⁷⁵ Doniger 1989: 5.

⁷⁶ Doniger 1989: 5.

- SN *Samyuttanikāya*. Feer, Léon, ed. 1884–1904. *The Samyuttanikāya of the Sutta-piṭaka*. 6 vols. London: Pali Text Society.
- Thag *Theragāthā*. Oldenberg, Hermann, and Richard Pischel, eds. 1990. *The Thera- and Therī-gāthā: Stanzas Ascribed to Elders of the Buddhist Order of Recluses*. 2nd ed., with appendices by K. R. Norman and L. Alsdorf. Oxford: Pali Text Society. Orig. pub. 1966. 1st ed. orig. pub. 1883.
- Ud *Udāna*. Steinthal, Paul, ed. 1885. *Udāna*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Ud-a *Udāna Aṭṭhakathā (Paramatthadīpanī)*. Woodward, Frank L., ed. 1926. *Paramattha-Dīpanī Udānaṭṭhakathā (Udāna Commentary) of Dhammapālacariya*. Pali Text Society Text Series 143. London: Pali Text Society.
- Vin *Vinaya-piṭaka*. Oldenberg, Hermann, ed. 1879–1883. *The Vinaya Piṭakam, One of the Principal Buddhist Holy Scriptures in the Pāli Language*. 5 vols. London: Williams and Norgate.
- Vin-a *Vinaya-piṭaka Aṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā)*. Takakusu, Jikidō, and Makoto Nagai, eds. 1924–1977. *Samantapāsādikā: Buddha-ghosa's Commentary on the Vinaya Piṭaka*. 8 vols. Pali Text Society Text Series 167. London: Pali Text Society.

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