

Buddhism and the Suffering of Non-human Animals

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Abstract

This article attempts a cursory overview of some of the conceptual issues surrounding the status of non-human animals in early Buddhism and the Pali Canon.² It examines to what extent 'degrees' of suffering (*dukkha*)³ impacts on the conditions of possibility for enlightenment, and also explores whether the relative position of animals in Buddhist cosmology results in their denigration. The first section looks at the Pali terminology standardly used to refer to non-human animals⁴, and the next section reviews traditional depictions of the animal realm. The result of human-animal co-habitation is briefly touched on in an appendix.

Keywords: Buddhism, Animals, Suffering

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² That is, no attention will be paid to the Mahayana notion of an original Buddha-nature inherent in all living things.

³ Pali terms will be printed without diacritics throughout.

⁴ The use of 'non-human animals' is standard practice in most current scientific discourse about animal experimentation, as well as in the animal rights movement generally. It replaces more antiquated terms such as 'sub-human or lower animals'. An example of the former is The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness by cognitive neuroscientists in July 2012: "...the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, ...also possess these neurological substrates." - a rather banal conclusion for those who have spent any time with companion animals. In the animal rights movement, the term is used to emphasize the similarities between humans and other animals. It is felt that the denial of kinship with the animal realm rationalises the plight of what is perceived to be an oppressed group. In the present article, 'non-human animals' draws attention to what is often masked by colloquial usage, to wit, the fact that humans are taxonomically animals. Although we are aware of this fact, we often write and speak as if 'human' and 'animal' were two completely unrelated categories. Once this aspect has been highlighted, 'animal' and 'non-human animal' will be used interchangeably as the latter is often cumbersome.

ศาสนาพุทธและความทุกข์ของสัตว์

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอภาพรวมโดยสังเขปของประเด็นความคิดเกี่ยวกับสถานะของสัตว์ตั้งแต่สมัยต้นพุทธกาลจนถึงในพระไตรปิฎก โดยพิจารณา "ระดับ" ของผลกระทบจากทุกข์ต่อความเป็นไปได้ในการตรัสรู้ และค้นหาว่าสถานะของสัตว์ที่กำหนดในไตรภูมิทำให้สัตว์ถูกลดคุณค่าลงไปหรือไม่ บทความตอนแรกพิจารณาถึงคำในภาษาบาลีที่กล่าวถึงสัตว์ บทความต่อมาเป็นการทบทวนการอธิบายเรื่องวงชีวิตสัตว์แบบดั้งเดิม ส่วนเรื่องผลจากการอยู่ร่วมกันระหว่างมนุษย์และสัตว์มีกล่าวถึงสั้นๆ ในภาคผนวก

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"One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter."

Dhammapada, 10. 131

"...it is not at all clear if the biological form of consciousness, as so far brought about by evolution on our planet, is a desirable form of experience, an actual good in itself."

Thomas Metzinger, quoted in Žižek (2008), p. 45

"But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?"

Jeremy Bentham (1789), *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter 17, Section 1

Introduction

It is uncontentious for many scholars and theorists that Buddhism has a wider moral circle than the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁶ This is chiefly because the sacred scriptures of the latter are widely construed as putting the animal realm wholly at the disposal of human-kind, to be used instrumentally in whichever way deemed appropriate. In the Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, the First Precept (*I undertake the precept to abstain from killing living beings*) is seen as providing *prima facie* protection to sentient creatures other than humans⁷. Furthermore, animals feature as amongst the possible objects of moral acts *simply because* they are sentient, and not because they might share, to varying degrees, attributes like rationality or language with human moral agents. And animals feature in this way for various reasons, including the pan-Indian aversion to violence (*ahimsa*), the effects of *kamma*, and the rebirth continuum.

⁶ In fact, some of the characterizations of this 'wider circle' from secular off-shoots of the Western tradition are positively effusive, even when articulated by radical movements like the Animal Liberation Front: "Buddhism considers non-human life to be Divine, just as is human life. Animals are seen to be an evolving kingdom of living creatures destined in time to attain perfect enlightenment." [emphasis added]. This remains to be seen, however. Available online at <http://www.animalliberationfront.com>.

⁷ At first blush, because the very terminology used in the formulation 'Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami' abstracts from mere human sentience. The word 'pana' denotes that which breathes, and hence excludes only plants when it comes to abstention from killing (cf. section 2). Furthermore, many commentators and practitioners have so interpreted the First Precept. In fact, the so-called Engaged Buddhist movement extends its scope to include preventing others from harming all sentient creatures. The implication of the inclusion of non-human sentients can thus stand until conclusively refuted.

The fact that it is a *continuum*, and that the Buddha himself was reborn⁸ in various animal guises as recounted in the *Jataka Tales*, is itself an indication of the conceptual centrality of non-human creatures in Buddhism, of the fact that species boundaries are 'malleable' from a moral point of view.

This is the crux of the matter: what is the spiritual fate of non-human creatures within the early Buddhist universe? Can it ever be one of steady progress towards enlightenment independently of species membership? These issues will be examined with respect to the standard terms for animals employed in the Pali *suttas*, as well as the possible moral culpability inherent in rebirth as an animal.

Horizontal-goers: some etymological groundwork

The Pali canon uses numerous terms for living beings, including *satto*, *pano*, *jivo*, and, most importantly, *tiracchano*.⁹ Pano is often applied to animals other than humans. It is related to the word for 'breath' (*pana*, from Vedic *prana*), and hence designates 'breathers'. It occurs in many important contexts, for example, the *Vinaya* passage outlining the obligations of a monk to other living creatures:

Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a living thing [*panam*] of life, there is an offence of expiation.¹⁰

However, the term most frequently used for animals occurs in the subsequent clarification of what is to count as a living being:

Living thing [*pano*] means: it is called a living thing that is an animal [*tiracchanogatapano*].

⁸ The conceptual problematic surrounding the notion of rebirth given the doctrine of anatta, 'no-self', may be bracketed for the purposes of the present discussion. Briefly, even if the notion is a mere extended metaphor whose allegorical use is intended to morally instruct the less educated, there are still distinct normative preferences regarding being born as a non-human animal, a god, a hungry ghost, or a human being, and it is these evaluations that are of interest in the present context.

⁹ Cf. the analysis in Waldau, (2000), "Buddhism and Animal Rights", as well as the *Pali Society Pali-English Dictionary*, available online at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/>

¹⁰ *Vinaya Pitaka*, 3. 1

Tiracchanogatapano is a compound noun, of which the *pano*, 'breathing', portion has already been explained. - *gata* is a past participle meaning 'gone or arrived at', and hence also 'to have come into a certain state or condition'. *Tiracchanogata* therefore refers to the realm of non-human animals, a realm of which humans are not a part. This aspect will be examined further in the next section.

It should be borne in mind that this entire etymological tale begins with the adverb *tiraccha*, which means 'deviating, going wrong, swerving from the right direction'. Once one proceeds to construct compounds with *tiraccha* as the root meaning, there might always be an implication that things are not quite 'as they should be'. So it proves to be once one looks at the *literal* meaning of *tiracchano*, when it refers to all animals other than humans. It literally means 'those who go about horizontally', that is, 'not erect, an animal'. It is in this sense that the term for non-human animals is often translated as 'horizontal-goers.' Waldau (2000) discerns a 'derogatory hint' in the term 'horizontal-goers', and further substantiates this by referring to related compounds that also seem to belittle animals. For example, the term *tiracchanakatha*, which literally means 'animal talk', but is usually translated as 'wrong or childish talk, unedifying speech'.

Tiracchanogata: States of woe and unhappy goings

1. A life of torment

The animal realm is one of the *duggati* in Buddhist cosmology, that is, one of the three states of woe into which a sentient being may be reborn. It is contrasted with the 'happy goings', *sugati*, which include human beings and two types of godly existence.

It is clear from numerous canonical texts that non-human animals are separated from humans in quite a radical way, and they elaborate quite extensively on the sufferings inherent in animal existence. There is, for example, the general problem of predation¹¹ and the accompanying fear of attack; there are extreme environmental changes of heat and cold; there is the absence of any kind of secure and permanent habitation, etc. And these are merely some of the difficulties faced when no humans are present. Once human beings

¹¹ As Gould (1994) outlines, the fact of mammalian or reptilian predation pales into insignificance once account is taken of so-called extoparasites like the ichneumon fly, which paralyzes its victim, usually a caterpillar, and then lays its eggs inside the living host who must lie motionless until the guests are ready for their repast. And they eat ingeniously, first the fatty parts and smaller organs, keeping the heart and nervous system intact, and hence the 'food' fresh. For natural theologians in the Christian tradition, this parasitic ingestion was the greatest challenge to their concept of a benevolent deity.

enter into the picture, the fact of human-animal co-habitation leads to additional sufferings on the part of animals: they are forced to work; killed for their fur and leather; slaughtered for the flesh that their bodies provide, etc. This aspect is briefly touched upon in the Appendix.

Furthermore, at the epistemological level¹², animals live in ignorance because they do not understand what is happening to them in any significant way. This ignorance is an additional form of suffering; to dumbly suffer without knowing the causes, without being able to do anything about them.

In short, those in the *duggati* realms (non-human animals, hungry ghosts, hell beings) basically live a life of torment which precludes Buddhist practice. The note to Thanissaro Bhikku's translation of the *Khana Sutta* explains that "...in realms where sense objects are totally disagreeable or totally agreeable it is very difficult to practice the holy life, for in the former, one is too distracted by pain; in the latter, too distracted by pleasure." The relevant hell is called 'Six Spheres of Contact', and is described as a domain where, "Whatever form one sees there with the eye is undesirable, never desirable, ..", and so on for all of the other sensory modalities, including cognition. (*Samyutta-Nikaya*, 35. 135).

2. Opportunities for enlightenment

The upshot of these characterisations of animal existence, as it relates to the prospect of release from suffering, is as follows. Firstly, there is a keen awareness of *degrees* of suffering, and that those at either end of the spectrum have little hope of attaining enlightenment precisely because of the degree of *dukkha* to which they are subject. Animals experience far too much suffering to have any prospect of liberation. They will have no inclination to practice the *Dhamma*, even if they were to encounter it. On the other hand, godly beings experience too little suffering, and are distracted by the pleasurable lives that they lead.

The point may be restated in terms of the opportunity to encounter and realize the *Dhamma*. The lives of animals and godly beings contain too much and too little suffering, respectively, to make the attainment of enlightenment a realistic prospect. Given the criterion of 'opportunity for enlightenment', both animals and gods have to await rebirth in human form.

¹² Gaita (2004) talks about 'animal modalities', and claims that animals lack an inner life that reflects on experience. This lack prevents them from being ashamed of their fear, cursing the day they were born, living their lives shallowly or deeply, etc. On the other hand, as Sugatananda (2009) notes: "...no animal degrades itself with sham piety...For better or worse, animals live true to their own nature." p. 4

It would thus appear that the degree of suffering to which a living being is subject impacts directly on its possibilities for attaining enlightenment. More to the point, a condition for practising and realizing the *Dhamma* is birth in human form, this is the reason why a human birth is seen as uniquely precious. Human life is thus viewed as a precondition for attaining enlightenment; it is seen as the only means within which such a state becomes a realistic possibility. In the *Chiggala Sutta*, after recounting a parable in which the earth's surface is completely covered with water and a yoke with a single hole drifts at the mercy of the winds, the Buddha asks whether a blind sea-turtle coming to the surface once every hundred years would stick its neck into the hole. Satisfied with a negative answer, the Buddha continues: "It is likewise a sheer coincidence that one obtains the human state...that a doctrine and discipline expounded by a Tathagata appears in the world." The emphasis here is on the rarity, hence preciousness, of a human birth, not on the fact that one might coincidentally attain the human state, for that is precluded by the orthodox doctrine of *kamma* as, at the very least, rooted in necessary connections across lives as determined by intentions and acts. (*Samyutta-Nikaya*, 56. 48). In addition, the emphasis on human birth also explains why the *Vinaya* specifies, as the very first condition of becoming a monk, that one be a human being.¹³

3. The culpability of animal birth

A final aspect to be noted is the issue of culpability. There are various instances in the Pali canon where it seems that a human life is a reward for previous moral conduct, whereas the animal state follows from misconduct or wrong views. For example: "Now there are two destinations for one with wrong view, I say: hell or the animal womb". *Kukkuravatika Sutta*, (*Majjhima Nikaya* 57. 5). the *Vipaka Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya* 8. 40), the results of not following the Precepts are outlined as follows:

"Monks, the taking of life - when indulged in, developed, & pursued - is something that leads to hell, *leads to rebirth as a common animal*, leads to the realm of the hungry shades". (and so on for the other Precepts). [emphasis added]

Waldau (2000) views the situation as follows: "...any being's current position is the just consequence of past acts; in other words, the karma system is exact and moral. A being in a low position is there because of wrong acts;...This provides a rationalization for negative views of those beings...lower in the hierarchy...To be ..[an] animal is to have previously led a less than appropriate series of lives..." (pp. 96 - 97).

He discerns in the Buddhist view of animals both a kind, compassionate face, and the harsher, hierarchal view outlined above. Given the latter view, he accuses the tradition of *speciesism*, a term in the animal rights movement that indicates discrimination without a

¹³ An animal, if unaccepted [for ordination as a monk], is not to be given acceptance. If accepted, he is to be expelled." Mahavagga, I. 63.5

rational basis, as in racism and sexism (in this case, giving preferential treatment to members of one's own species). The term is far from unproblematic, and will not be discussed here in any detail. In short, as Sciberras puts it: "As long as the higher evaluation of humans is merely a description of the positive aspects of existence as a human being, it does not amount to speciesism."¹⁴

Furthermore, the Buddhist apparent valorization of human beings has little to do with the *intrinsic* worth of this species, and more with the likelihood that its members will encounter and actually realize the *Dhamma*. What is really of value, in the Buddhist scheme of things, is the opportunity to attain enlightenment. Hence it follows that no sentient being is precious in itself, but merely a means towards the cessation of suffering. If evolution were to come up with another species more favourably situated in terms of *Dhamma* realization, then that species would be valorized, and not human beings. So the value ascribed to human beings is merely instrumental. If the final goal is liberation from both animal and human existence, life in general is not positively evaluated.

Schmithausen observes that:

"In the canonical texts of Early Buddhism, all mundane existence is regarded as unsatisfactory, either because suffering prevails, or because existence is inevitably impermanent . . . Nature cannot but be ultimately unsatisfactory, for it too is marked by pain and death, or at least by impermanence . . . Therefore, the only goal worth striving for is Nirvana, which [is] entirely beyond mundane existence."¹⁵

It might turn out, then, that the best of all possible worlds, from a Buddhist perspective, is one without any sentient life at all. ^{16,17}

¹⁴ Sciberras (2008), p. 217

¹⁵ Quoted in Sciberras (2008), p. 232

¹⁶ Leibniz was the first to use the notion of 'the best of all possible worlds' in a monotheistic context. He was concerned to give an answer to the traditional problem of evil. Given a personal creator god, the problem of evil asks how an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity could allow suffering. In other words, how a perfect being could permit evil to exist. The answer either takes away certain powers from the deity (the underachiever solution), or claims that suffering is a test of faith and character (the soul-making solution), or otherwise discerns hidden aspects in the universe discernible only from a god's eye point of view. Leibniz included the (unknown and unquantifiable) sufferings of all sentient beings, including angels and extra-terrestrials, in these 'calculations'. (Cf. his *Theodicy*).

¹⁷ Other traditions, like that of late German Romanticism, have noted the 'infinite melancholy of all things'. The position has recently been eloquently stated by Derrida: "...[animal sadness] doesn't just derive from the inability to speak, ... if nature laments, expressing a mute but audible lament through sensuous sighing and even the rustling of plants, it is perhaps because the terms have to be inverted. ... nature (and animality within it) isn't sad because it is mute. On the contrary, it is nature's sadness or mourning that renders it mute...". Derrida (2008), p. 19

Conclusion

It has been seen that the spiritual fate of non-human animals is not one of steady ascent up the spiritual ladder. On the contrary, such ascent needs as its necessary condition the human state. In this sense, species membership is important, but what is valued in human birth is nothing intrinsic, merely the opportunities it affords for enlightenment, that is, the proximity of *this* (specific, yet contingent) life-form to the enlightened state. What is being valued, in fact, is a future enlightened being. Therefore, neither animals nor human beings are afforded ultimate value in the Buddhist analysis, merely the optimum possibility to transcend *samsara*, and this is currently to be found in the human realm.

Similarly, although some Pali terms for animals might sometimes seem less than flattering, there is little sign of the acute deprecation of animals that some animal rights advocates discern. The attitude that the terms embody is merely the result of an overarching teleology relating to future liberated beings.

Appendix: compassion at the table

Human birth gives instrumental access to the non-human animal realm, a realm that is put to uses that are often far from benign. If one is concerned about the well-being of all sentient creatures, compassion should perhaps extend to what one ingests.

One of the most incisive and searing indictments of the treatment of domesticated animals is the following:

"Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that *ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating*, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them." [emphasis added]. Coetzee (1997), p. 119

Jordan, *et. al* (2012), similarly talk about factory farms and their treatment of animals as a ... "disgrace...[an] expanding black hole of unacknowledged...and unproductive shame."

Proponents of the modern Animal Rights movement appear to be disappointed in Buddhists who eat meat. A common complaint will say that Buddhism *ought* to be an animal rights religion par *excellence* given its inclusive moral universe and the prohibition on taking sentient life. Animal rights activists therefore expect the tradition to oppose *all forms of animal exploitation*. Yet many Buddhists eat meat, and many defend meat-eating as consistent with Buddhist teaching. The orthodox position is usually that "...in the Buddhist tradition it is wrong to eat meat only if you have reason to believe that the animal

was killed specially for you." (Singer, 1998).

Modern animal rights activists, however, are asking for a new argument from Buddhist non-vegetarians. As Singer says "...this defense of meat eating was better suited to a time when a peasant family might kill an animal especially to have something to put in the begging bowl of a wandering monk than it is to our own era." (Singer, op.cit.)

In modern societies, there is obviously a causal link between the meat eaten today and animals being killed tomorrow. For meat to 'appear' tomorrow, other animals need to be slaughtered. Thus, when someone buys meat, he or she is literally placing an order for the next animal to be killed. This, the activists say, is to willingly include oneself in the class of people for whom animals are killed.

There are interesting questions about the division of moral responsibility in such cases. If one says that the death of one less animal makes no perceptible difference, one implicitly assumes that a person can do wrong *only by causing a perceptible harm*. A simple thought-experiment outlined by Glover (1975), shows that people are individually responsible for the harms that they collectively cause.

Glover imagines a village where 100 people are having lunch. Each person has a bowl with 100 beans. But 100 hungry bandits suddenly enter the village and each bandit takes the contents of the bowl of one villager. They are about to repeat the performance the next week, when one bandit feels guilty about stealing from the poor. The leader proposes that each bandit should rather take one bean from each of the 100 bowls. Since the loss of one bean cannot make a perceptible difference to any villager, no bandit will have harmed anyone. This is what they proceed to do. The result? The villagers are just as hungry as the previous week, but the bandits are guilt-free. *Reductio ad absurdum*.¹⁸

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¹⁸ The Latin terminology dates back to the Greek phrase *he eis to adunaton apagoge*, reduction to the impossible, as often used by Aristotle in his logical treatises. It is a mode of argumentation that attempts to establish a contention by deriving an absurdity from its denial.

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