

## **Buddhism and Other Animals<sup>1</sup>**

Paul Waldau, Preliminary Draft 2016Apr22

The diverse intersection of human lives with nonhuman lives has long been an ethically fraught meeting place. In many discussions around the world, however, the moral issues raised by the inevitable meeting of humans and nonhuman animals are subordinated to other concerns, for such concerns are deemed far less important than the issues generated by human-to-human encounters. Yet for Buddhists, some other religious traditions, a substantial number of small-scale societies around the world, and many individual citizens and animal protection organizations in industrialized societies, humans' inescapable interactions with nonhumans comprise a crucial subset of the moral issues raised when one living individual harms or extinguishes the life of another living being.

Buddhist ethical reflection, then, offers a profoundly moving example of humans' capacious abilities to care beyond the species line. At the same time, Buddhist reflections on humans' relationship to other animals represent well the complex, multifaceted challenges that arise regularly when a human desires not only to protect, but also to notice and take seriously, the living beings outside our own species.

**Diversities and Unavoidable Challenges.** Three noteworthy diversities impact significantly how anyone might talk about Buddhism and the diverse contemporary concerns collected under the term "animal rights." The first is the extraordinary range of differences evident when one surveys the living beings in the grouping that modern sciences label "nonhuman animals" but which many vernacular languages name "animals" as distinguished

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from humans. A second, altogether different kind of diversity is found within the Buddhist tradition and its sub-traditions on the place and significance of nonhuman animals in humans' lives. The final diversity is that encountered when one examines the multiple meanings developed over more than a century as humans have deployed phrases like "animal rights" and "animal protection" to explore the ethically charged intersection of humans with nonhuman lives.

These diversities pose a wide range of challenges that are unavoidable in several senses—nonhuman living beings are ubiquitous, not only surrounding each human but also living on and in each other living being. Many of the consequences and harms that humans sometimes cause to the most visible nonhumans (think of these as "macro animals" easily discerned to be individuals) are obvious because we share environments with these possible subjects of any human's moral concern.

Humans' ethical abilities with respect to such harms, though capacious, are unquestionably finite in a number of ways. As is well known, harms to others may in some circumstances be a practical necessity, as in matters of self-defense or survival. In addition, there are a number of fundamental limitations on humans' abilities regarding other living beings. An unnoticed aspect of humans' finite ethical capacities is that the trials and tribulations which our daily choices visit upon countless living beings invisible to humans are discernible only with aids, such as microscopes, developed since the late 17<sup>th</sup> century (think of these as harms to "micro animals" that our unaided senses cannot detect or relate to as discreet individuals). Such micro animals, it turns out, dramatically outnumber macro animals. For example, the population of micro animals on and in any one human individual (or any other macro animal) is unfathomably large—"In adults, the

combined microbial populations exceed 100 trillion cells, about 10 times the total number of cells composing the human body.”<sup>2</sup>

About the many “macro” nonhumans that are easily visible to us, however, much has been learned in the last few centuries, making it far easier to assess the direct and immediate consequences of holding them captive, disrupting or destroying their habitat, or hunting them for food and materials. The upshot is that every ethical tradition today faces new challenges to respond in caring, nuanced ways that take account of what today is demonstrably true of the more complex of our nonhuman neighbors.

The result of such increased human awareness about nonhuman animals around the world since the latter half of the twentieth century has been an expanding series of ongoing discussions that focus on how both long-standing and new ethical visions might respond to human impacts on other-than-human living beings. One option is to bring certain nonhuman animals into the center of ethical discussion, thereby moving away from an exclusive focus on humans. Another option has been to study the fact that some ancient cultures, such as the Buddhist tradition, have long insisted that the human-nonhuman intersection *necessarily* raises ethical concerns of the highest order. One result of such discussions has been a renaissance in many of the ethical circles within the Euro-American sphere that have been for centuries radically human-centered. This has been possible in part because of a richer engagement with Buddhists’ long-standing ethical attitudes about nonhuman animals. Such comparative work has prospects of helping everyone see the different ways that extending ethics across the species line can produce valuable insights about the ethical challenges that humans face on a daily basis.

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<sup>2</sup> Kurokawa, K. et al. Comparative metagenomics revealed commonly enriched gene sets in human gut microbiomes. *DNA Research* 14(4), 169–181 (2007), 169-170.

**Balances to Strike.** When engaging Buddhist views of nonhuman animals, there are several balancing acts that one must consider. First, it is obvious that one can laud Buddhists' obvious concern for living beings outside the human species even as one assesses whether Buddhist attitudes toward nonhuman had some effects that, by certain modern approaches, were ethically questionable.

Second, balance is needed as one encounters a justifiable excitement evident in scholars impressed by the deep commitment Buddhists asserted from the beginning of the tradition about the importance of refraining in daily life from killing other animals. While this particular commitment marks the Buddhist tradition as astonishing in its concern for other animals, balance is needed because heavy focus on this particular achievement can, if too exclusive, obscure other features of the tradition. For example, even a cursory review of Buddhist scriptures makes it clear that Buddhists at times failed to notice serious harms to nonhuman animals there were given center stage in the societies in which the Buddhist tradition was born. This issue is addressed below by asking about the consequences to certain nonhuman animals who suffered nonlethal harms that Buddhists not only tolerated, but at times may have indirectly promoted. A critical evaluation of Buddhist attitudes toward nonhuman animals prompts one, then, to ask if Buddhist attitudes to certain nonlethal harms were consistent with the spirit and driving insights of Buddhist ethics that led this tradition to give a preeminent place to injunctions that humans should work on a daily basis to avoid killing other living beings (see, for example, the section below discussing the issue of many scholars' failure to ask such questions).

A third balance to strike relates to a crucial feature of Buddhism that is different in spirit from a foundational value evident in contemporary animal protection discussions. Buddhists were not, as are today's animal protectionists, concerned to inventory the world. One risk to consider, then, is whether it is unfair to an

ancient religious tradition to ask how that tradition dealt with concerns framed in terms drawn from discussions developed millennia *later*—such unmindful attributions are known as anachronisms, that is, projecting ways of thinking backward (from the Greek, *ana*) in time (*khronismos*).

**The Question of Lethal Harms.** One of humans' surpassing achievements in ethics appears in the Buddhist tradition's commitment to what is often described as "the First Precept," which is stated in a variety of ways but most of which focus on, at the very least, avoidance of killing any living being.<sup>3</sup> One of the most respected of Buddhist scholars suggests, "in the First Precept, and hence also for a Buddhist lay person, society is not to be taken in the narrow sense of human society, but in a broader sense of a community comprising all living or sentient beings."<sup>4</sup> Such a commitment ensures that Buddhist ethical views will have many affinities with early twenty-first century animal protection advocacy which challenges, among many other harms, the systematic killing of animals known as "factory farming" in modern industrialized societies (the yearly number of deaths around the world in 2015 from this practice, which is spreading, totaled in the range of 60-80 billion). This particular modern practice, which emerged as a commercial reality in the mid-1950s (its origins were in England in the late 18th century), is questionable for reasons beyond death, as it were. Factory farming is driven by a concern for economic efficiencies, not the interests of the animals confined indoors from birth to death in a system touted as technologically advanced but which in fact involves highly unnatural conditions of confinement and treatment that lead to much suffering before death.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For variations, see Waldau 2001, pp. 146-149.

<sup>4</sup> Schmithausen 1991a, 40. See, also, Schmithausen, Lambert, *The Problem of the Sentience of Plants in Earliest Buddhism* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> A summary of these and references to other sources appear in Singer 1990.

The historical Buddha is quoted repeatedly in Buddhist scriptures as observing that an awful fate awaits those who kill other animals, such as deer hunters, pig butchers, sheep butchers, and fowlers.<sup>6</sup> One could also argue that the historical Buddha condemned those who confined animals in the manner of factory farming, for Gotama is reported to have observed that those who hold animals captive for entertainment purposes suffer the same fate.<sup>7</sup>

The First Precept very likely pre-dates the Buddhist tradition. As one scholar suggested, a commitment to refrain from killing is “the heritage of an earlier cultural stratum—a stratum in which killing animals (and even plants, earth and water) was, in a sense at least, as serious as killing people (not of course one's own ethnic group), because animals, too, were believed to take, if possible, revenge on the killer in the yonder world.”<sup>8</sup> But other reasons are given as well for this key prohibition. Particularly common, for example, is a claim related to the Buddhist adherence to the characteristic Indian subcontinent belief in rebirth—every other being now living was in a prior life one's parent (either father or mother).<sup>9</sup> Echoes of this sort of familial thinking can be found in the Metta Sutta: “Just as a mother would protect with her life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings, and loving kindness towards all the world.”<sup>10</sup>

One scholar noted that although there is no definitive statement as to which forms of life are valued and why, Buddhists value forms of life that are “karmic” or “telic” (having a telos, or goal), with

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Saīyutta-Nikāya* (referred to below as S.) II, 171. The translation used is that by Rhys Davids, Mrs. (assisted on the first volume by Sāriyagoōa Sumangala Thera, and on the second volume by Woodward), and F. L. Woodward (last three volumes), *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saīyutta-Nikāya) or Grouped Suttas*; five volumes in PTS translation series, Nos. 7, 10, 13, 14, and 16 (London: Oxford University Press, the first volume has no date, but the preface is dated 1917; the date on the last volume is 1930).

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Mrs. Rhys Davids at S. II, 172, Footnote 1.

<sup>8</sup> Schmithausen 1991a, 38-9, Paragraph 42. See, also, McDermott 1989, 274, as to the self-interested as well as moral reasons for not eating the flesh of other animals. Snakes, for example, were thought to take offence that snake flesh was eaten, retaliating against the perpetrator. Other animals were thought to sense the odor of flesh eaten, this odor encouraging an attack by that kind of animal.

<sup>9</sup> This appears in a wide range of Buddhist sources, such as S. II, 128; the *Laiḱāvatāra Sātra*; the *Fan-wang-ching (Brahmajāla Sātra)*; and the *Nihon ry'iki of the Monk Ky'kai*. The last three are cited by Chapple 1993, 27, 29, 40.

<sup>10</sup> *Suttanipāta* 149-150. The translation used is *The Group of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta)*, Volume I, translated by K. R. Norman, with alternative translations by I. B. Horner and Walpola Rahula (London and Boston: Pali Text Society/Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), Pali Text Society Translation Series No. 44. This text is referred to as Sn.

the basis for doing so possibly the assumption that other living beings, by virtue of being living beings, have an “intrinsic” value, that is, each being is “affirmatively valued for its own sake rather than as a means to something else (i.e. its value is not instrumental).”<sup>11</sup> Another scholar addressing why the First Precept is so central to the Buddhist tradition has argued that “no doubt a mixture of motives operated.”

... Such championship may have seen in non-harming a way to increase the moral welfare of the monks; it may have been part of a disinterested social reform movement; it may have been, as in the case of sacrifice, polemical in nature, anti-brahminical; and it may have been due to the presumption that animals have as much right to their lives, and to compassion, as have human beings.<sup>12</sup>

This analysis also suggests that the life of Buddhist monks, who are the paradigmatic model of the Buddhist adherent, cannot be properly understood without reference to how the foundational ethical undertaking of the First Precept shapes the Buddhist outlook.

Whatever the particular reason given for a Buddhist undertaking the daily vow not to kill any living being, this commitment works to broaden the range of beings about whom one should care, that is, those who are deemed morally important enough to protect their lives. Such an affirmation honors (and is also anchored in, of course) the Buddhist affirmation that our lives are lived within an overarching moral order that has as a corollary the sanctity of individual lives. The upshot is an engendering of animal protection and the positioning of de facto compassion at the heart of the tradition. It is hard to miss that this key feature of the Buddhist

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<sup>11</sup> Keown 1995, 36 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Horner 1967, 27.

tradition promotes a way of living that is consonant with modern animal protection sentiments.

This achievement has, it is true, been matched in a number of other religious traditions and cultures, of which the Jains are perhaps the best known. One can also find similar commitments in various Chinese traditions, some small-scale societies, and a number of sub-traditions within the large and diverse Hindu, Chinese and Abrahamic traditions. The occurrence of such commitments in multiple places and different historical eras can be used to suggest that humans have recognized that they can, if they choose, live an encompassing ethical vision regarding the larger community of living beings. With confidence, however, one can say that few human communities, if any, have done so more impressively than Buddhists even though they operated with limited awareness of the nonhuman neighbors who shared ecological and geographical space with the human community.

**Modern Protection Movements.** Although the spirit of the First Precept's prohibition on unnecessary killing has impressive consequences and thus much in common with contemporary protectionist ideas and the social movement known variously as "animal rights," "animal protection," and "animal liberation," the First Precept by no means exhausts either the insights of this worldwide movement or many other contemporary commitments to notice other animals and then take them seriously. Simply said, both the practical steps taken in modern animal protection and the narrative that ties the animal protection movement together include much that has no analog in Buddhist views of nonhuman animals. It is these additional features of today's admittedly diverse efforts at "animal protection" that create risk for those who compare Buddhist views with animal rights sentiments. Most seriously, the comparison risks an unfair, anachronistic imposition of alien ideas on Buddhist insights. Such a comparison is, however, a natural and perhaps even inevitable enterprise, for both movements, in



impressive ways, underscore the ethical dimensions of humans' intersection with other animals. Here additional features of the early twenty-first century's contemporary ideas about nonhuman animals and modern animal protection efforts are briefly described so that one can compare and contrast, on the one hand, Buddhist views about nonhuman animals and, on the other hand, contemporary views of other animals. In the end, if the risk of anachronism is kept in mind such that a critically thought out comparison is constantly one's goal, then comparison can be very productive because the risks of anachronism are minimized, although never banished entirely. In this spirit, questions about "Buddhism and animal protection" or even the more modern "Buddhism and animal rights" can illuminate not only key features of the ethical claims found in the Buddhist tradition about nonhuman animals, but also, importantly, the features of contemporary animal protection efforts that are dominated by dysfunctional forms of human-centeredness that in important ways are much less impressive than key Buddhist insights about, for example, the morally charged nature of killing other living beings.

Contemporary animal protection efforts, which are often collected under the term "the animal rights movement," are, like the Buddhist tradition, surprisingly mixed on the issue of the fundamental protections for nonhuman animals. It is true that modern animal protection includes approaches that propose *fundamental* limits on killing nonhuman animals, as does the Buddhist tradition through its emphasis on the First Precept. Both movements, then, foreground protections that shield certain interests of individual nonhuman individuals in ways that imply such interests are more important than humans' interests in using the protected nonhumans as mere resources. For example, "The worldwide animal protection movement today features a great variety of efforts aimed at abolition or amelioration of the harms done

intentionally to the macroanimals used for research, food, companionship, entertainment, and so on, as well as wildlife.”<sup>13</sup>

But “animal rights,” to use one framing of animal protection that is hotly debated, is not a uniform set of ideas any more than Buddhism is. Indeed, upon closer examination, “animal rights” functions as an umbrella term under which, so to speak, sit several distinguishable notions, of which four are listed here. “Animal rights” includes, for example, both the notion of “moral rights” for certain nonhuman animals and also the altogether distinct idea of “*legal* rights” for individual nonhumans of a small number of species.<sup>14</sup>

A third concept called “animal welfare” must also be distinguished because, while it signals forms of animal protection that many people associate with the term “animal rights,” this term carries two dramatically different senses. Separating these two helps immensely with the task of illuminating the sentiments expressed in the First Precept.

The more substantial idea of welfare involves the animals’ freedom from harms like captivity and pain, as well as the freedom to move around. When any of these important freedoms is violated, as it so often is when the minor sense of “animal welfare” prevails, there is very little true “welfare” that is being proposed ... [as is the case when what prevails is] a more robust [animal welfare] concept along the lines of true moral protections for other animals because the latter matter in and of themselves.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to this robust sense of “animal welfare” is a far weaker sense which is dissimilar from the kinds of animal protection

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<sup>13</sup> Waldau 2013, 121.

<sup>14</sup> These two concepts are contrasted and explained at length in Waldau 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Waldau 2011, pp. 95 and 99.

associated with the First Precept or legal rights that shield a living being from serious harms.

[M]any people today use the idea of “animal welfare” to preserve human domination over certain animals. Some advocates of human superiority have rationalized humans’ domination over other living beings by focusing on attempts to ameliorate in minor ways the terrible conditions that such domination creates for animals. Such rationalizations lead some to think that when we concede minor welfare improvements to farm animals or research animals, our domination of these animals is “gentler” or “less harsh”, and thus ethically adequate. This version of “animal welfare” leads with the suggestion “let’s improve their welfare” *but at the same time* maintains the right of humans to total domination as we do experiments on them or use them for food or resources. ... When “animal welfare” comes to mean primarily that tough conditions for the animal are made better in some minor respect, ... the meaning of the word ‘welfare’ has been stretched so dramatically that it misleads ... thus harming listeners’ ability to make informed moral choices.<sup>16</sup>

**Comparing Animal Rights with Buddhist Views of Animal Protection.** The modern animal rights movement has limits that can be used to reveal how powerful the insights are that undergird the First Precept. The modern movement does not, as a practical matter, offer all nonhuman animals protection. Characteristically, the nonhumans protected in early twenty-first century animal protection efforts are either familiar animals (such as dogs, cats, horses and other familiar companion animals) or charismatic wildlife that is far away and not used in food or other economics-driven industries. In other words, the living beings focused on by major animal protection groups in the secular world comprise only

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<sup>16</sup> Waldau 2011, 95-96.

a few hundred species of the millions of nonhuman animal species. The First Precept is not nearly so limited.

The narrowness of modern animal protection is in part explained by the youth of the modern, secular animal protection movement, which became a popular movement during the second half of the nineteenth century in certain western European countries. The early twenty-first century version of this movement is considerably expanded, although its heavy concentration on the nonhumans known widely now as “companion animals” (those animals formerly referred to as “pets” and including dogs, cats, horses and many other mammals and a few birds) reveals that the animal protection often remains an eminently human movement in the sense of protecting primarily the animals that humans have domesticated and still dominate. In an altogether different sense as well, the modern animal protection movement reflects “human” features because it uses techniques of change developed in modern civil rights movements (such as efforts to secure law-based protections as a way to promote changes in social morals).

As the secular animal protection movement faces many contemporary difficulties of the kind that arrive when the early stage of a revolution has to move into the challenges of sustaining early successes, it can be meaningfully contrasted with the maturity of Buddhist commitments evident in the First Precept, which are anchored in ancient spiritual commitments.

Further, since many different nations today feature *only* versions of the modern animal protection movement that foreground altogether *limited* approaches, such as the weaker, human-centered form of “animal welfare” described above, that do not protect nonhuman animals substantially from death or the great harms occasioned by confinement or loss of habitat, they are different in tenor from the commitment driving the First Precept. There are, without question, animal protectionists who seek to go as far as the Buddhists’ First

Precept, and many who live squarely within the ethical spirit of that commitment. Yet, to date, there are virtually no legal or national policy victories around the world that put into place protections matching either the absoluteness or scope of the First Precept commitment.

**Less Flattering Similarities and Comparisons.** The comparisons above illuminate well the achievement that is the First Precept. There are other similarities described below that are informative about features of the Buddhist attitudes toward other animals that are not so impressive as the First Precept.

Throughout the early Buddhist scriptures, there is a pronounced move to distinguish *and elevate* humans above nonhumans. This gambit gives Buddhist approaches to the human/nonhuman intersection features that are not unlike those that drive the weak sense of animal welfare noted above—in effect, there is a human-centeredness evident in the Buddhist description of nonhuman animals that fosters both separation and a sense of superiority and privilege that militate against compassion and recognition of the obvious shared features between humans and other animals.

It is surely true that Buddhists' background assumptions about all living beings clearly entail awareness of continuity (all animals, human and nonhuman alike, are subject to birth, death, karma, and constant rebirth). Continuity also appears in the views that dominate the modern animal rights movement because the movement relies heavily on scientific views anchored in evolutionary insights. For this reason, the animal protection movement highlights the fact that many nonhuman animals feature traits, such as emotions, intelligence, sentience and suffering, that are typical of humans. Yet, even though both Buddhists and the modern animal protection movement recognize that humans and nonhumans are rightfully understood to belong in one category, each at crucial strategic points distinguishes humans from other

animals in ways that produce human advantage and nonhuman disadvantage, such as human-generated harms.

Although a human/nonhuman dualism prevails in certain segments of both the Buddhist tradition and animal protection circles, the origins and psychological anchors of such dualisms are no doubt quite different. In the modern movement, the weaker “welfarist” forms of “protection” are blatantly in the service of human privilege, while the dualism in the Buddhist tradition prevails for deep-seated, complex reasons, just as do certain gender-based explanations.

Whatever one’s conclusion about why such dualisms appear, the result is a sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit human-centeredness that carries actual or potential exclusions, both of which undergird the peculiar phenomenon of human exceptionalism, which can be defined as

the claim that humans are, merely by virtue of their species membership, so qualitatively different from any and all other forms of life that humans rightfully enjoy privileges over all of the earth’s other life forms. Such exceptionalist claims are well described by Rachels as “the basic idea” that “human life is regarded as sacred, or at least as having a special importance” such that “non-human life” not only does not deserve “the same degree of moral protection” as humans, but has “no moral standing at all” whenever human privilege is at stake.<sup>17</sup>

I think it plausible to argue that the Buddhist tradition has long been, in *practical* terms, far less exceptionalist than are many modern approaches, such as contemporary law.

Two other noteworthy similarities are these—both movements feature (1) great diversity (subtraditions in Buddhism, and

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<sup>17</sup> Waldau 2013, 8.

variation at the grass roots level in the animal protection movement) and (2) weaknesses when institutionalized. As to the latter problem in Buddhism, consider advice that senior Buddhist monks gave to the Sri Lankan king Duttagāmani when he expressed remorse about the great loss of human life during war.

That deed presents no obstacle on your path to heaven. You caused the deaths of just one and a half people, O king. One had taken the Refuges, the other the Five Precepts as well. The rest were wicked men of wrong views who died like (or: are considered as) beasts.<sup>18</sup>

Buddhism is not, by any measure, a religious tradition heavily burdened by institutional ossification, as has happened in some other traditions. But it is nonetheless interesting that at the level of advising a government, key adherents (the monk advisors) provided a crass rationalization that clearly violates the letter and spirit of the First Precept. Counting the individual who had taken only the three refuges (that is, refuge in the Buddha, in the *dhamma* and in the *sa.mgha*) but not the five precepts as *only* “a half people” reveals, ironically, that while the five precepts were considered by the monks a defining aspect of adherence to the tradition, these monks ignored the substance of the very first of these foundational precepts by dismissing the deaths of many humans (other features of this passage dealing with the nonhuman animal side of the dualism are discussed below).

The modern institutionalized side of animal protection is, matching what has happened in other social movements, a venue where many of the deepest values of the social movement get watered down. The reasons are diverse, of course, but one surely is that the very compromises that bring political advantage also bring dilution of both the message and commitment that are far more apparent at

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<sup>18</sup> Gombrich 1988, 141. The cite is from the *Mahāva.msa* XXV, 108–111.

the grass roots level. The modern movement is increasingly diverse, though, and continues to sustain the most basic values that parallel the vision evident in the First Precept. The movement's present state might thus be seen to augur a better future for nonhuman animals, although various advances involving public policy and the private policies of mainline institutions such as government, education and business continue to promote very mild versions of animal protection that curtail on a few of industrialized societies' most entrenched practices favoring human advantage.

**Seminal Dissimilarity and Challenge for Buddhism—Other Animals' Realities.** The question “what *are* other animals' *realities*?” is a question that has, in a wide range of contexts, more power than its answer. Evidence-based and critically thought out answers are hard to develop for many reasons. These include many other animals' penchant for avoiding humans, as well as a set of ethical problems (such as harms) that are occasioned by merely attempting to remain in certain other animals' presence. Perhaps most challengingly, though, are the inherent difficulties of discerning elusive phenomena like intelligence, feelings and other kinds of awareness in any living being.

What makes attempts to discern other animals' realities so relevant are at least three factors. The first is the common sense proposition that the harms one causes by one's own intentional and unintentional actions are relevant to any evaluation of the ethical features of one's actions. The relevant factor is another common sense proposition, namely, that other animals have their own realities that are distinguishable from humans' (mis)construction of these realities. The third factor is a historical trend evident in only some human societies—a salient consequence of humans' failure to inquire about other animals' realities has all too often been a facile dismissal of such realities. Absence of evidence about other animals has been, tragically (for other animals, but also for the



human community), taken to be *evidence of the absence of important traits in other animals* that are like, perhaps even compete with, some of the special abilities characteristic of humans.

Evaluation of Buddhist attitudes toward and claims about other animals suffers from a particular disadvantage. As happened regularly with ancient traditions, writings given an honored place had purposes entirely unrelated to inventory-like listings of other animals or reality-based descriptions of their lives. Such inventories are, to be sure, the stock and trade of sciences, not religious traditions—but as shown in *The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals*, Buddhists did in fact know some very important features about other animals' lives.<sup>19</sup> But as one of the most respected scholars of Buddhism observed, “the statements of Buddhist writers are not meant to be descriptive propositions about features of reality, but advice on how to act, statements about modes of behaviour, and the experiences connected with them.”<sup>20</sup> This same scholar adds, “*If one ... isolates the Buddha's statements from the task they intend to perform, then they become quite meaningless, and lose all their force.*”<sup>21</sup> Such points have been made by many other scholars of Buddhism as well, as with the following metaphor about the non-inventory nature of such writings: “The Word of the Buddha has only one flavour (*rasa*): that of deliverance....”<sup>22</sup>

When assessing Buddhist writings that mention other animals, it is important to note such features, for while references to other animals might be deemed quite revealing “between the lines,” their use is limited precisely because “Buddhism as such is not about this world. Such spheres of human activity as the arts and sciences

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the information known about elephants described in Waldau 2001, Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>20</sup> Conze 1975, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Conze 1975, 17, emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Lamotte 1991, 46.

are not part of its concerns.”<sup>23</sup> Buddhist comments about other animals, then, often have at best an *indirect* relationship to the particulars of nonhuman lives that an interested human observer can, if she wishes, discover by empirical investigation. Far more often, such comments reflect *not* a principal purpose of description of the animals mentioned, but, instead, existing conventions of discourse about the “deliverance” or soteriological preoccupations of the tradition’s founder.

In the next section it is asked, “Given that Buddhist comments mentioning other animals are not primarily concerned with evaluation of this world and the particulars of the beings mentioned, how might one assess what appears to be Buddhist acquiescence to harmful practices that fall short of death?” In the end, an evaluation of this important issue cannot focus *solely* on Buddhists’ preoccupation with the existential issue of deliverance. Ethics-fraught claims involving potential harms to other animals may, for example, be so ill-informed that harms are glossed over even as an outsider who has more familiarity with the subject animals finds the ignored harms evident and easily discernible for those who would inquire. In such cases, frankness and scholarly integrity require one to be fair to *both* Buddhists and nonhuman animals.

Clearly relevant, too, are *intentions*, which were the focus of the historical Buddha’s revolutionary understanding that the goodness or badness of an act was not primarily a byproduct of the sequence of actions done in the proper order and form (as was emphasized by the then contemporary brahminical religion), but, instead, a matter of intention. As Gombrich frames this key point, Gotama ethicized the notion of karma, focusing on intention over a slavish compliance in pursuit of ritual correctness.<sup>24</sup> Arguably, the same or

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<sup>23</sup> Gombrich 1991a, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Gombrich 1988, 46.

a kindred insight about intention appears in a modern form in contemporary animal rights claims that it is morally problematic to override intentionally a nonhuman animal's major interests in order to advance minor human interests (such as luxury, non-vital food, or any other non-essential "need"). Below, to make the point that anyone assessing the ethics of an act impacting other animals must factor *all* levels of intention into the analysis, an example that challenges broad generalizations about Buddhist always being "good to animals" is given regarding the failure of Buddhists to challenge certain long-standing practices that clearly required serious harms to elephants.

It is argued here that not only does such a test matter ethically, but that it is important enough to permit one to run the clear risk of anachronism when discussing Buddhist views of nonhuman animals, for doing so allows one to assess background features of Buddhist ethics and related attitudes toward nonhuman animals. The question asked here about whether or not the practice in question produced discernible, intentionally inflicted harms is as fully diagnostic as any test can be of the depth and breadth of an ethical claim. This kind of analysis bringing a number of modern concerns to bear in assessing Buddhist attitudes towards animals must stay in full contact with Buddhists' clarion call to practice the First Precept, for the latter is equally a key diagnostic tool needed when assessing the nature and scope of Buddhist ethics in the matter of nonhuman animals. It must also be added that the First Precept can, as fully as any other ethical position, alert people of any culture to the moral dimensions inherent in humans' interfaces with the Earth's countless nonhuman living beings.

**The Diagnostic Question of Non-lethal Harms.** Consider how and whether one might challenge those humans who fail to notice other animals. Dismissal of other animals can happen in any number of ways, but one particularly prevalent form of such

dismissals in the modern world is a facile dismissal of nonhuman animals' realities based on inherited caricatures of them as "dumb animals" (in English, meant to demean nonhuman animals but originally, from use of the Latin *mutus*, meaning that nonhuman animals do not speak human languages, which meaning still prevails in English uses of "dumb" in the description of a non-hearing, non-speaking human as "deaf and *dumb*"). Dismissals can also happen implicitly, as when someone is dominated by a complete refusal to inquire, or when someone is so focused on another task that no time and no energy is given to either noticing other animals or in any way taking them and their lives seriously.

Consider the following line of argument about what might be cast as Buddhist acquiescence to clearly harmful practices that fall short of death. This question is asked more in the spirit of helping twenty-first century readers concerned to do justice to both Buddhists and nonhuman animals discern what is arguably a gap—"imbalance" and "blind spot" also capture some nuances of this issue—in Buddhist claims about humans in relationship to other animals. The nonlethal harms examined are profound, such that they move one in the direction of harms that Buddhists clearly noticed as they worked out the First Precept. Gotama speaks in the following scriptural passage of certain traits in an elephant that are not to be desired, while other traits are.<sup>25</sup>

Monks, possessed of five things a rajah's elephant is not worthy of a rajah.... Take the case, monks, of a rajah's elephant going forth to fight, when he sees a force of elephants, horses, chariots or foot soldiers, he loses heart, falters, stiffens not and cannot go down to battle.... And ... when he smells the smell of the dung and urine of those finely bred rajah's elephants, whose home is the battle ground, and loses heart.... [Or] ...

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, A. II, 120–1 (this section is titled "The Elephant") and A. III, 117–119.

when, pierced by the piercing of arrows, he loses heart....<sup>26</sup>

Gotama here is making a point about traits that make monks worthy of offerings. The background metaphor is the prevailing instrumental use of elephants in war. Notice how, in an indirect way,<sup>27</sup> instrumental uses of elephants are accepted without comment and thus in a sense normalized, rather than condemned outright. The normalization continues in the characterization of what is worthy in an elephant, which follows:

[H]e is a hearer, destroyer, a warder, an endurer and a goer.... And how is he a destroyer?... the rajah's elephant gone forth to fight, destroys an elephant, destroys the rider ... chariot ... horse ... foot soldier.... And how is he an endurer?... He endures the blow of the spear ... sword ... arrow ... axe....<sup>28</sup>

While there are many passages in the Buddhist scriptures that make it clear that elephants were deemed important by Buddhists, honored with individualized names and titles of distinction and understood to be presences or at least images to which a Buddha could be compared, there are *at least as many passages*, and very likely more, *that normalize humans' instrumental uses of elephants*, including ones like the above passage in which elephants were held to possess qualities that make them fit possessions of a human king. Such images, while clearly conveying respect, also prompt the question of whether elephants were valued *not* for their individual selves, but primarily as tools and property. The challenge here is that the “valuing” of elephants as tools and property is not openly challenged as raising ethical problems.

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<sup>26</sup> A. III, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Argued more fully in Waldau 2001, Chapter 6, p.132ff.

<sup>28</sup> A. III, 121–2.

Beyond this first issue is another, which can be summarized as the cultural belief that enjoyment of the benefits of instrumental use of elephants is a *reward* for acting in accord with the moral norm which the Buddhist tradition held to be the key to reality and an ethical life. This belief is evident in a passage where Gotama is in a teaching mode and commenting upon fishermen who have caught fish and are selling them. Addressing monks, he asks if “as a result of such deeds, of that way of living [that is, killing the fish]” the fishermen have then been seen “going about on an elephant or on horseback ... or living in the abundance of great wealth.”<sup>29</sup> Gotama *clearly* is condemning the killing of living things, and he does so by pointing out that there are negative karmic consequences to such acts. In the background, though, is again an implicit sanctioning of utilitarian uses of elephants—the fisherman do not get the *reward* of “going about on an elephant.” The lesson about the problems of fisherman killing fish reveals that there were not negative consequences to riding around on a captive elephant, which is clearly a reward for *good* acts: “Indeed, monks, he who gloats evilly on creatures being slaughtered ... shall not go about on elephants...”<sup>30</sup> The subtext, as it were, is an acceptance of the propriety of instrumental use of elephants.

What is possible to discern *if one chooses to notice elephants and take them seriously* is that domestication of elephants is ethically *very* problematic. The basis for this conclusion appears between the lines, as it were, of a description of contemporary Thais breaking a young wild elephant:

After tying it to a tree, men would poke and prod and beat it with sticks for days on end ... until the youngster quit lashing out at its tormentors and stood dazed and exhausted and wholly subdued. Once the animal

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<sup>29</sup> A. III, 216–7.

<sup>30</sup> A. III, 217.

stopped reacting, the men would start touching it with their hands rather than sticks, and, rather quickly, the animal accepted their dominion and became receptive to their demands. If it did not, it might have wounds inflicted in its neck and salt rubbed into them, then a rattan collar with embedded thorns placed around the neck to make the animal more responsive.<sup>31</sup>

This modern example involves an ancient technique, for as can be seen in Gotama's comment, domestication of elephants, which has always required this kind of domination, was already an old, established tradition in India when the Buddhist scriptures were composed. A specific example conveys that the intentional infliction of pain and torment does not stop once dominion has been established. Significant injuries and harms continue, and although they fall for obvious reasons short of death, they would certainly have been noticed in both early and later Buddhist communities.

Some of the traditional methods of handling elephants in India are extremely harsh. To restrain a newly captured, willful, or musth animal, its leg may be clamped in an iron hoop with inward-pointing spikes. The harder the animal strains against the device, the deeper the points bite. A long pole, called a *valia kole*, is used to prod the giant in the sensitive ankle and wrist joint while the handler keeps out of reach of the trunk and tusks. Some of these goads have blunt ends and are thrust so as to bruise the small bones that protrude near the surface of the lower foot. Others are actual spears but have a hilt on the blade to limit penetration.

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<sup>31</sup> D. Chadwick 1994, 378.

Mahouts usually carry a *cherya kole*, a short rod with a blunt metal end, also used for walloping joints or, when mounted, the top of the skull. Close to the Nepal border, I rode on several occasions behind mahouts who whacked the top of the elephant's head with the dull edge of the large, curved *kukri* daggers men carry in that country. Crueler yet is the technique I saw of incising a wound atop the elephant's head and worrying it with a knife blade to get the animal to respond. One Nepali mahout carried a hammer for pounding on his elephant's head. Whether the weapon was a hammer, knife, or *cherya kole*, the giants would stagger with a loud groan when struck.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond recognizing the intentional choices made to inflict pain and other suffering so as to dominate the captive elephant, it is important to convey how easy it is for any observer to recognize that the interests of a large, trainable, intelligent mammal's interests are abridged by captivity. This is, however, particularly evident when humans eliminate the multiple dimensions of an elephant's fuller life, namely, the dimensions available to elephants growing up in the intensely social reality that is elephant society.<sup>33</sup>

The serious harms caused by such deprivation, as well as a context in which an entire Buddhist society supported the willingness to go along with such harms, are evident in the following modern example.

And he rocked, constantly, tugging on chains that bound his legs to the slightly raised platform on which he stood.... [T]his bull was never let out of the pavilion.... So for decades now, he had been here on his raised dais, rocking, straining, surging back and forth

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<sup>32</sup> D. Chadwick 1994, 297.

<sup>33</sup> The details of these animals' lives are widely available—see, for example, Waldau 2001, 75-80.



with unfathomable power.... Surging, swaying, pulling this way and that, forever and a day—the heaven-sent king of elephants, born of clouds and rain, colored like the sacred lotus, a captured god but now an obsolete one, something out of a distant time and kingdom, his purpose all but forgotten.... [A]lone in his dark, golden-spired pavilion. Forever alone. Colossal. And very likely insane. That was the message in those eyes: madness.<sup>34</sup>

This elephant's name was Pra Barom Nakkot. An irony, of course, is that this individual was an honored elephant, chained on the dais Chadwick describes because he was considered a white elephant, that is, he had, from the human vantage point, a distinctive appearance.<sup>35</sup> An accident of geography meant that Pra Barom Nakkot's was born "[a]mong the predominantly Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia, [where] white elephants are seen as descendants of the original winged elephants that roamed the cloudscapes above Earth and as avatars of the Buddha."<sup>36</sup>

Said another way (in terms that might be drawn directly from early twenty-first century animal protection discourse), Pra Barom Nakkot was, as a *direct* consequence of his status with the Buddhist humans who captured him, deprived of any chance at a normal life. He was not allowed in any way whatsoever to grow into his potential for developed interests of the kind that wild-living elephants natively possess. He could not interact in the complex social network which characterizes all young elephants' lives. He did not have the chance to develop alongside his mother who possessed a large brain, was a member of complex social

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<sup>34</sup> D. Chadwick 1994, 352–3.

<sup>35</sup> He is not to the ordinary observer white in appearance, but is rather merely lighter in color than most elephants. The key features are seven traditional marks that range from the lighter colored skin to gait, carriage and overall shape (D. Chadwick 1994, 348).

<sup>36</sup> D. Chadwick 1994, 346. Young 1900/1982, 388–399, describes the significance of “white elephants” in the Siamese kingdom. Veneration of white elephants is not an exclusively Buddhist phenomenon, for the legend of flying white elephants, usually supposed to have an affinity for clouds and rain, is found across Asia with local variations, and M. W. Thomas (1908, 514) and Crooke (1896) describe African peoples which venerate white elephants.

systems, had the ability to teach Pra Barom Nakkot to communicate in rich ways, and lived amid a long-standing social group full of experienced individuals (her own matriarchs).

The upshot of his captivity was that Pra Barom Nakkot had limited training by humans as a youngster, but none thereafter.<sup>37</sup> True, he was given many human-bestowed names and titles such as “he who will progress much among the elephants,” and it was even claimed that he “outranked” most humans, for he was said to be “like the highest of princes.”<sup>38</sup> Such names do not mention, of course, that Pra Barom Nakkot was reduced to merely a symbol, for he was a prisoner of a traditional belief that his presence augmented the power and prospects of the Thai royal family.

From ancient times, it has been suggested that human ownership of an elephant makes it unsocial and a psychological misfit.<sup>39</sup> Human intervention distorts an elephant’s reality, as can be seen in the impoverished life given Pra Barom Nakkot that stands in contrast to the full social envelope that he would have had if he been allowed to live his own life. In summary, this individual elephant was not noticed as individual, and clearly was not taken seriously *for who he was in reality*. He was dominated, instead, so that he could be made into a contemporary example of a longstanding reality in Buddhist-influenced cultures, namely, acceptance of the morality of those practices that had the direct effect of overriding the interests of creatures like Pra Barom Nakkot in favor of human interests.<sup>40</sup>

The challenge that an animal rights advocate might make to such practices must, in one sense, be only partial, for in the background

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<sup>37</sup> D. Chadwick 1994, 352.

<sup>38</sup> D. Chadwick 1994, 352. Young, 1900/1982, 392–3, lists prayers and entreaties by brahmins which reflect such beliefs.

<sup>39</sup> D. Chadwick 1994, 311.

<sup>40</sup> Other examples appear in D. Chadwick 1994, 382, re a Suay blessing ritual at which Buddhist monks chant, and at 383, where elephants are noted at Buddhist ordination ceremonies. See, also, Bock 1883/1986, Chapter Three, for a nineteenth century description of Southeast Asian and Buddhist example strikingly similar to the circumstances of Pra Barom Nakkot.

*but clearly nearby* are the life-affirming values driving the First Precept, which clearly favor the challenges that animal rights advocates make to so many different modern practices. But equally present, and in the passages quoted above actually foregrounded, are what amount to equivocations about non-lethal harms. Recall, too, the passage quoted above when the Sri Lankan king Duttagāmani is told about his remorse over slaughter during a battle—his Buddhist monk advisers rationalized that his killing of human opponents in a war was “no obstacle on your path to heaven” because the slaughtered humans were “wicked men of wrong views *who died like (or: are considered as) beasts.*” The subtext, of course, is that the death of “beasts” is a minor issue rather than, as the First Precept so consistently indicates, a high priority ethical issue. Not only does this ethical undertaking (along with three of the other four undertakings that comprise the five precepts) occur repeatedly in one of the oldest parts of the Buddhist scriptures (the opening group of thirteen discourses in the *Dīgha* known as the *Sīlakkhandhavagga*, or *Collection on Moral Practices*<sup>41</sup>), but they are also one of the principal reasons the well-known Buddhist ruler Aśoka is such a prominent figure in the tradition, for he famously attempted to integrate the First Precept into his rule. The text of the edicts that he had posted around his large realm testify again and again to a respect for the lives of other animals.<sup>42</sup>

It is not much of a conceptual leap to suggest that Buddhists’ proscription on killing of other living beings carries a spirit that also suggests the treatment of Pra Barom Nakkot was immoral. Given the First Precept is so central to the Buddhist tradition, and that it is one of the few common features across the vast Buddhist tradition and its many sects, strands and branches, it is also not much of a stretch to imagine animal activists would view the

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<sup>41</sup> Norman 1983, 32–33, and Keown 1992, 26. Keown also notes that although there are many preceptual formulae, the prohibitions of the first four precepts are always found as core parts of those formulae.

<sup>42</sup> See, Rastogi 1990, and in particular, Rock Edicts I–IV, VI, IX, XI, and XIII, and Pillar Edicts II, V, and VII.

Buddhist view of animals as containing radically inconsistent attitudes towards other animals.

In a similar vein, consider the next section's discussion of problems involved when scholars provide an account of Buddhism as friendly to nonhuman animals—in *some* ways, to be sure, this is true, but as a broad generalization, as the problem of nonlethal harms reveals, the story of Buddhist attitudes toward nonhuman animals needs to be far more nuanced—hence this paper's theme that a number of different balances need to be struck because both Buddhist issues and nonhuman animal issues are decidedly complex. In assessing claims about Buddhist views of animal, an important element to factor into the discussion (that is, an important balance to strike) is considering the welfare (the robust sense, not the modern human-centered sense described above) of the nonhuman animals themselves, which in turn requires some assessment of the realities of the nonhuman animals whose welfare and harms are at issue. While it is undoubtedly true that this kind of analysis opens the door to the possibility of anachronistic imposition of modern notions on the impressive and elegant Buddhist ethical vision, it is equally true that failing to raise such questions risks failing to state fairly what the on-the-ground realities were, and in a sense romanticizes the early Buddhists rather than speaks to their realities. Further, since Buddhism is a living tradition, not merely one that long ago was set in stone by its early history, there is a sense that the *present* state of the tradition is crucial. Buddhists today so clearly value many forms of life beyond the species line that it can be said that the First Precept's spirit continues to guide contemporary Buddhism. For these reasons alone, asking if specific practices that in the past entailed harms to elephants and other creatures are consistent with, or in tension with, the spirit of the insights that inform the First Precept honors the tradition as a *living* tradition relevant to contemporary problems of the kind that the animal protection movement attempts to rectify.

## **Reprise: Challenges of Diversity in a More-Than-Human**

**World.** Balance is a particularly important ingredient as one reads contemporary scholarship engaging the Buddhist tradition. Such scholarship is, like scholarship about all long-standing religious traditions, internally diverse. On the one hand, one encounters a justifiable excitement evident in scholars impressed by the deep commitment Buddhists assert from the very beginning of their religious tradition about the importance of refraining in daily life from killing other animals.<sup>43</sup> Against the background of the harms done to nonhuman animals in so many places around the world over the last centuries, such a commitment marks the Buddhist tradition as astonishing in its concern for other animals.

Excitement about this impressive feature of the Buddhist tradition, however, has led some scholars to make very positive claims along the lines of “*in Buddhist texts animals are always treated with great sympathy and understanding.*”<sup>44</sup> Such an evaluation can obscure, however, important features of the tradition that, if examined critically, reveal that, like all human cultures, Buddhists in ways eminently relevant to ethical inquiry failed to notice much about other animals. This is not a criticism of Buddhist achievements as much as it is an observation that takes into account the better collective understanding of how humans can, through humility and much cross-cultural sharing, better inquire into the invitation that other animals’ lives pose to humans’ moral abilities—indeed, this invitation is what led early Buddhists to constantly foreground the First Precept.

The possibilities humans have of creating a *modus vivendi* that does not require harms to other animal individuals and their communities have become more evident for many reasons in the early twenty-first century. One reason, of course, is the emergence

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<sup>43</sup> Lambert Schmithausen, *Buddhism and Nature* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1991)

<sup>44</sup> Story 1964, 6–7. The quote that prefaces Chapter One is part of this longer passage.

of science-based findings produced by those who have taken other animals seriously—such science, as noted throughout this article, makes it clear that in the early twenty-first century it is possible to know much about various nonhuman animals that Buddhists could not on their own have known. Thus, one must balance positive generalizations against evident harms to nonhuman animals that were the consequence of Buddhist claims about humans in relationship to other animals.

Another reason humans in the early twenty-first century know more about possible lifestyles in which humans live alongside other animals is increased awareness of other cultures, some of the most impressive of which have been inspired by the Buddhist vision behind the First Precept.

**The Question of an Overall View.** Given the attention to nonhuman animals that one easily finds in Buddhist materials of all kinds, it is a natural to ask about the place of individual living beings outside our own species in this deep and moving tradition. We can ask, in fact, a very personal version of that question—“how should someone convinced of the wisdom of the Buddhist tradition treat individuals from other species that exist in the world at this present moment?” What might a Buddhist who seeks to be true to her own tradition say about the place of either the most complex *or* the simplest living individuals, or the surviving elephants and nonhuman great apes in Africa and Asia? What might other Buddhists say about the morality of placing certain nonhuman animals in zoos and experimental labs? What might yet others suggest about the ethical significance of helping or harming the cetaceans off any coast away from terrestrial humans?

Clearly, because the Buddhist tradition from its inception has expressed significant ethical concerns regarding treatment of nonhuman animals as fellow voyagers in *sa.msāra*, it must be said that the Buddhist tradition gives nonhuman animals a special place.

There is, however, significant evidence to support the view that the tradition takes a *negative* view of nonhuman animals' existence, their moral standing relative to that of humans, and their abilities relative to those of members of the human species.

One basis for objecting to loose generalizations, whether positive or negative, about Buddhist views of nonhuman animals is that, like all long-standing religious traditions, Buddhism does not feature a single, definitive view on many subjects. One thus encounters in scholarship about Buddhism comments along the line of "About *all* Buddhists few valid generalizations are possible."<sup>45</sup> On the diverse and morally fraught issue of "other animals," then, considerable care must be taken when claiming any kind of unanimity. With careful qualifications of this, however, it can be argued there is agreement of a kind on the significance which real, live individuals of other species have in the minds of Buddhists. The existence of the First Precept testifies strongly that it is a central Buddhist notion that the lives of nonhumans matter to anyone who hold herself to be a moral agent. Alongside this primary face, however, there is another face, as it were, namely, that of deprecating other animals. I argued (Waldau 2001) that Buddhist scriptures feature "a constant disparagement or belittling of any biological being outside the humans species, and that this deprecation is closely allied with the coarse grouping of all other animals in a single category." I suggested further that the living beings outside our own species were conceived less than positively for a variety of reasons. First, Buddhists held "a negative view of the very fact of birth as any kind of animal other than a human animal." Second, "The product of bad conduct is existence as an(other) animal." It turns out that Buddhist scriptures also feature what appears, under modern standards, to be a disparagement of "those humans who are non-'standard,' that is, impoverished, ugly, or handicapped in some way." Third, the Buddhist scriptures

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<sup>45</sup> Gombrich 1988, 2, emphasis in the original.

feature the view that there is “a kind of culpability in (other) animality.” Fourth, any and all nonhuman animals were seen as “simple and easily understood by humans” and thereby lumped together in ways that “potentially limits adherents’ ability to notice the realities of the more complex nonhuman animals.” Fifth, “other animals are pests or not rightfully in competition with elevated humans” and even “anti-human,” “inhuman,” and “low by human standards.”

In combination, these features of early Buddhism produced descriptions and understanding of nonhuman animals that was, on the whole, decidedly negative.

This brings us back to the Buddhist view that, in a most fundamental way, (other) animals’ existence must be unhappy, for the “bourn” or realm comprised of all nonhuman animals is one of the places of woe to the Buddhist mind. Humans are the paradigm, or, better said, membership in the human species is one paradigm, and once a being has attained membership in the human species, there is an additional paradigm set out by Gotama’s teachings. The status of members of other species is set out by Gotama’s evaluation—“so many are the anguishes of animal birth”—which was considered by the early Buddhists, and indeed the whole tradition, to be a definitive description of other animals’ realities.

The net effect of such negative views was that “the tradition separates humans from all other animals as a result of claims about the paradigmatic nature of human existence relative to that of other animals.” Sustaining such views are the Buddhist tradition’s acceptance of a hierarchical understanding of life which prevailed throughout the Indian subcontinent. In addition,

...the tradition has never emphasized seeing other animals in terms of *their* realities. Rather, the dominant claims about other



animals tend to the ideological, in that there is a prejudgment about possibilities and an under-determination of views by factual realities. Further, the negative view of other animals *as other animals* results in systematic depreciation, and at times dismissal, of the diverse realities of the many different kinds of other animals. These views were adopted as a whole, and applied to all nonhuman animals. They have been maintained *regardless of the course of events* and without regard for careful investigations of the day-to-day lives of the more complicated of [nonhuman] animals.... In an important sense, then, the Buddhist tradition has not enhanced its adherents' abilities to understand animals beyond the species line.

## Conclusion

The many different Buddhist traditions have exhibit a profound commitment to the primacy of ethical reflection in human life. It is without question that they, individually and as a collective, offer a profoundly moving example of humans' remarkably alive and capacious abilities to care beyond the species line. At the same time, Buddhist reflections on humans' relationship to other animals represent the daunting complexities human face as they try to live the ethical life. Human abilities are limited, as every human knows; further, we have inherited imperfect evaluations of other living beings, whose lives, even when we are at our best, are hard to discern. In facing the complex, multifaceted challenges that arise regularly when a human desires not only to protect, but also to notice and take seriously, the living beings outside our own species, the Buddhists did not solve those problems, but they did clearly achieve much that demands respect and admiration. Whatever the shortcomings of this impressive tradition, modern humans have unique opportunities to evaluate humans' relationship to other living beings, that is, to notice and take other animals seriously in ways that go beyond what was possible for the Buddhist tradition on its own to discern. That said, the

achievements of the Buddhist tradition remain simply remarkable and, in their positive features, eminently worthy of respect and wonder.

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