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Dharma Dogs: Can Animals Understand the Dharma? Textual and Ethnographic Considerations¹

James Stewart²

Abstract

Pāli textual sources occasionally mention the existence of unusual animals with an aptitude for the Buddha's dharma. In the *Jātaka*, clever animals do good deeds and are thus reborn in better circumstances. In the *Vinaya*, the Buddha declares to a serpent that he should observe Buddhist holy days so he can achieve a human rebirth. But can animals develop spiritually? Can they move towards enlightenment? In this article I will be examining textual

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and ethnographic accounts of whether animals can hear and understand the dharma. Using ethnographic research conducted in Sri Lanka, I will show that although animals are thought to passively benefit from being in proximity to dharma institutions, there seems to be agreement amongst the monks interviewed that animals cannot truly understand the dharma and therefore cannot practice it. Animals are therefore severely hampered in their spiritual advancement. However, these ethnographic and textual findings do indicate that passively listening to dharma preaching, whether it is understood or not, has spiritually productive consequences.

Introduction

Anyone who has travelled or spent time in South and South-East Asia will be familiar with the many stray dogs and other animals that wander near Buddhist temples and monasteries. Despite the fact that the Pāli canon preaches non-violence and compassion towards all sentient creatures, these strays are not always treated with due respect and care. One memorable incident during my ethnographic work in Sri Lanka was at the Tissamahārāma Vihāra in Hambantota district in Southern Sri Lanka. A small, decrepit looking dog was staggering around the outer enclosure of the *stūpa*. As if from nowhere a lay temple attendant (*aebithyā*) appeared with a large stick to shoo the dog out of the enclosure. Having repeatedly struck the creature with the stick the dog quickly departed.³

³ Note on languages: Unless otherwise stated the italicised terms are Sinhala. Other Pāli terms, such as *Dhamma*, *stūpa* and *vihāra*, are commonly used in Sinhala and are for all

While the Pāli canon maintains that the good Buddhist should put down the “stick or sword” (DN 1.1.8 68) and that all sentient beings, even “tiny creatures,” should be treated with mercy and compassion (AN 10.3.21 23), it is clear that neither of these injunctions are always followed by Buddhist followers.⁴ In Sri Lanka, some animals are treated better than others, and dogs occupy one of the lowest tiers on the hierarchy of respectability. They are often considered impure, wretched creatures whose existence is owed to some misdeed in a previous life. One of the greatest insults in the Sinhala lexicon is to call someone a dog or a son of a bitch (*balagē putā*). The reason why the attendant was so quick to banish the dog was surely in part because the presence of the dog in proximity to the *stūpa* had a polluting influence on an otherwise sacred space.

Animals, and especially dogs, may be often afforded little concern by ordinary Buddhists. It may be the case that there is a desire to see these mangy animals banished from sacred Buddhist spaces. But even if animals do not benefit from being close to human beings, might their closeness to Buddhist sacred spaces indirectly or directly benefit them? Contrary to the concern that animals pollute Buddhist space, might it be the case that the space itself has a cleansing effect on the animal?

That is the question of this paper. In this paper I will be exploring Pāli and Sinhala Buddhist answers. To this extent, I will be focusing primarily on the positive effects of hearing the *Dhamma*.⁵

practical purposes part of the Sinhala lexicon. Pāli terms that are unfamiliar to Sinhala speakers are indicated with a (P).

⁴ For further details on the extent of non-violence in Buddhism, especially towards animals, see, for example: Harvey (2000); Keown (2005); Stewart (2015); Waldau (2002); and Chapple (1993).

⁵ There are other ways to encounter the Buddha’s teaching, of course. On gaining dhammic insight by simply *observing* representatives of the *Dhamma*, see John Powers’s

Radiating Power of the *Dhamma*

The question of an animal's proximity to the *vihāra* and *stūpa* raises the possibility of unintended spiritual improvement. There is a view held both in respect to textual sources and Buddhist practitioners that Buddhist sites constitute nodes of radiating *Dhamma* that can purify the heart/mind (*citta*) of all those who are in their proximity. The temple (*pansala*) is a place where Buddhist sermons are preached (*baṇa*) by knowledgeable monks. They are places where sacred Buddhist texts, such as Buddhist *suttas*, are recited. The recitation of such texts is encompassed by the term *pirit* (Gombrich 236; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 393). However, *pirit* also involves other ritual practices such as the use of *pirit nul* (*pirit* thread) that is tied around the devotee's wrist by a suitably qualified person—often a monk—and other related rituals. Another aspect of *pirit* ritualism is the sprinkling of sacred water (*pirit vatura*) (Abeyesekara 224). In the course of this *pirit* recitation, however, hearing the chanting of sacred texts is considered spiritually beneficial.

The Pāli canon speaks broadly about the virtues of hearing the Buddha's teaching, i.e., that hearing is a condition for understanding and progress on the Buddhist path. In fact, a common term for Buddhist devotees, both in the Pāli canon but also in Sinhala Buddhist communities, is the name *sāvaka*, which means "hearer," that is, one who loves to hear the *Dhamma*.

study where he reports on the ability of the Buddha to convert followers simply by appearing in front of them (31); or Andy Rotman's study of the concept of faith in Buddhism and its rootedness in direct observation (30); or Susanne Mrozik's study of the importance of physical appearance in Buddhism and its relation to the arising of faith (76). This study will focus more on hearing and also being generally proximate to Buddhist sites where *Dhamma* is transmitted.

It is perhaps unsurprising to learn that in Buddhist Theravāda communities there has developed the idea that simply passively hearing the *Dhamma* can result in the cultivation of merit. Naomi Appleton's study of the use of the *Jātakas* has revealed how some contemporary Buddhists accept that hearing the *Dhamma*, even if there is no understanding, is enough to produce positive results (*Jātaka* 140). Melford Spiro's study of Burmese Buddhists reveals that some lay Buddhists maintain that "witnessing of hearing a meritorious act" can influence the welfare of nearby non-human beings (126). Spiro mentions the Burmese chant of "*tha-du*" ("Well done!"), a devotional phrase that is uttered during merit-sharing ceremonies. This is the Burmese pronunciation of the Pāli term "*sādhū*," which Sinhalese laypeople also say during scriptural recitation and preaching. The uttering of this phrase indicates that the preaching has been heard and is being celebrated. The simple joy of hearing the *Dhamma* is itself productive of merit.

The power of passively hearing the *Dhamma* is also confirmed in other ethnographic studies such as Gombrich and Obeyeskere's who note that it is believed by Sinhala Buddhists that *pirit* recitation has the effect of transforming passively listening beings including even evil spirits: ". . . another orthodox theory simply assimilates the recital and hearing of the scriptural texts into the general category of meritorious actions" (394). The idea is that scriptural recitation and preaching is so inherently good at effecting moral change in listening beings that it almost has a magico-transformative property to it. The operation of this is unclear, but it seems that listening to the *Dhamma* subconsciously generates good thoughts and feelings in the hearer. This general idea is summed by the following claim made in the *Buddhavaṃsa*: "Living beings were gladdened by the mere sight of that Buddha/Those who heard his voice as he was speaking attained deathlessness" (Trainor 178).

Hearing dharma is one avenue for merit cultivation. Another mechanism is simply being in the presence of *Dhamma* sites or representatives of the Buddha, such as monks and nuns. Pilgrimage activities in Buddhist nations speak to the importance of being in the presence of important dharmic sites as a way to improve one's spiritual standing. Kevin Trainor's research into relic veneration in Sri Lanka has demonstrated that some Buddhists hold the view that being in the mere presence of the Buddha is enough to affect a positive spiritual outcome. For example, attending the various locations where the Buddha is said to have visited on the island is considered in itself a pious act. In part, this is because the effort that is entailed by visiting these locations is often quite onerous and is therefore a display of faith (*saddhā/pasāda*) in the Buddhist teaching. However, should a person be in proximity to Mahiyaganaya or the Sri Daḷadā Maligāva or Nagadīpa or Adam's Peak or the Ruvanvalisaya *stūpa*—just some of the Buddhist holy sites in Sri Lanka—this would potentially be considered a morally edifying achievement regardless of motive or effort. This would mean that tourists who visit these sites unintentionally better themselves.

As we learn in the *Cakkavatti Sutta*, closeness to the Buddha himself or the Buddha-*sāsana* is in itself a beneficial state of affairs (DN 26). This is because the Buddha is able to ensure the integrity of *Dhamma* transmission and practice. But as time goes on, and as the Buddha's presence in the world diminishes, dharmic practice becomes increasingly unstable and polluted. This means that the best of all state of affairs is to be in the direct presence of a buddha—be that Gautama Buddha or a future buddha such as Maitreya. In such a presence real spiritual progress is possible. But this idea also introduces the notion that the *Dhamma*, as an intellectual artifact, has a purificatory quality to it the effect of which transforms nearby beings for the better. Trainor's study of relic veneration in Sri Lanka shows just how Buddhist relics at these sacred sites have become identified with the real presence of the Buddha

and therefore constitute stand-ins for the Buddha in his absence (96). A similar point is made by Chris Clark in his study of *Avadāna* literature where he observes that venerating Buddha relics is as efficacious as venerating the Buddha himself (27). As Andy Rotman has argued, observing images of the Buddha can trigger immediate feelings of faith and devotion (30).

Therefore, in such instances, it is not necessary to hear the teaching; sometimes it is merely enough to be in the vicinity of a Buddhist relic. Like a person absorbing the nutrients of the radiating sun, one can absorb the positive qualities of the doctrine unintentionally and automatically. If this is true, then these spiritual nodes must also benefit animals. This outcome, which will be discussed shortly, was endorsed by the monks I interviewed.

There are many questions here: to what extent does the idea of spiritual improvement through passive hearing apply to animals? Is it only an opportunity available to humans? To what extent do these contemporary ideas deviate from the Pāli textual tradition?

How to Hear the *Dhamma*

The question of whether the dog at the Tissamahārāma temple benefited from nearby preaching may be said to depend in part upon whether passive hearing counts as being spiritually relevant in Buddhist soteriology. Because this article is concerned with case of Sri Lanka, I am confining myself to canonical materials that are of relevance to Sinhalese Buddhism, namely, the Pāli canon, other writings such as the *Mahāvamsa*, and the commentaries.

To begin with, there is a distinction in the canon between hearing (P: *suṇāti*) *Dhamma* and understanding (P: *vijānati*) *Dhamma*: “There are

beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma” (SN 6.1 232). This passage raises the scenario that there exists unlucky folk who, though they have the capacity to hear the *Dhamma*, they lack the opportunity. The passage maintains that this state of affairs should be corrected. But the passage also implies that understanding is also necessary: the phrase “little dust in their eyes” refers not only to proximity to *Dhamma*, but capacity to be able to see the truth. Seeing can mean comprehension, but it is also the condition for having authority over the truth of the *Dhamma*, a point made by Andy Rotman. Rotman observes that in early Indian Buddhism a trustworthy person is someone who has directly observed the truth of the *Dhamma* (30). Faith follows from trusting in such an authority. Hearing is a necessary condition for being acquainted with the *Dhamma* in the first place, but witnessing the *Dhamma* first hand leads to true belief.

Because animals lack the ability to comprehend or understand *Dhamma*, they are excluded from substantially benefiting from the *Dhamma*, even though they have opportunity to hear it. Likewise, it is maintained that hearing the *Dhamma* with the correct accompanying attitude is a possible condition of spiritual edification. It is said that those who listen “with eager” ears will enjoy the fruits of the *Dhamma* while those who do “not want to hear” the *Dhamma* are inferior (AN 7.68 1082). Open mindedness is key. So even here, a capacity to understand is not enough if the mind is not receptive, one must also make a leap of faith. Elsewhere the Buddha states that those who have a “mind bent on criticism” cannot easily advance on the Buddhist path (AN 10.76 1436). The question is, therefore, whether animals can even be receptive to teaching, leaving aside the ability to hear and understand. Like the Brahmin priest, an animal might simply be unmoved by the content of the *Dhamma*. These questions turn mostly on the character and nature of an

animal's mind. In the next section we will see that some Buddhist texts maintain that an animal's mind is capable of higher thought of this type.

These textual statements imply that merely hearing is not enough, it is necessary to be capable of understanding and be receptive to the meaning. But there is also justification for the view that while understanding is necessary for genuine progress on the path, merely being able to hear the *Dhamma*—even if no understanding occurs—can have minimal benefits. The Pāli texts state that “hearing the true *Dhamma*” will lead to “true practice” seemingly out of necessity (MN 75.25 616). The implication may therefore be that an animal that hears the *Dhamma* will be on a pathway towards the possibility of correct practice, if not now then in a future life. Those who are skeptical of the teaching may be blessed with the possibility of a more receptive future rebirth because of their proximity to *Dhamma* talk.

In fact, the canon frequently makes mention of the idea that hearing the *Dhamma* leads to the “fixed path” towards enlightenment, that is, the status of non-returner (P: *anāgāmi*). Being a non-returner is the third stage on the path towards enlightenment. The text puts it to the reader that hearing the *Dhamma* and seeing the visage of the Buddha is a necessary condition for entering the “fixed path”—he will benefit only if, “. . . he gets to see the Tathāgata, not if he fails to see him; only if he gets to hear the *Dhamma* and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, not if he fails to hear it” (AN 3.21 217-18). Likewise, in the Sinhala *Mahāvamsa*, the story of a householder who hears a monk named Mahāsumma preaching *Dhamma*, simply hearing this preaching causes the householder to achieve stream-entry (P: *sotāpatti*), the first stage towards enlightenment (Mahanama 236).

Merely hearing the *Dhamma*, that is, the *Dhamma* being available, is very much a condition for advancement on the path. There appears to be textual disagreement on the extent of this advancement, but it is ap-

parent that hearing alone is not enough for complete enlightenment. This idea is emphasized elsewhere in the Pāli canon where the Buddha sets out the causal conditioning that is required to fully access the Buddha's teaching (SN 5.5 1792-3).

The Pāli texts frequently state that it is a very rare thing that someone should encounter the Buddha dharma and be able to advance significantly along the path. One passage notes that there are, “. . . few who get the Dhamma and discipline expounded by the Tathāgata; more numerous are those who do not get to hear” (AN 1.333 121-22). The simile of the turtle whose head bobs up from the water once every thousand years and, by chance, may put his head through a loop, is another example used of the rarity of a rebirth where advancement on the dharmic path is possible (SN 56.47.7 1871-2). Such passages note that a human birth is a rare event and should be made the most of because human beings are uniquely able to have motive for self-development (because of their struggles with *dukkha*) and at the same time have the ability (because of their cognitive abilities).

This can be compared with the gods who are in such a state of perpetual bliss that they do not think to practice *Dhamma*, and animals who are so beset with sufferings they do not have the time nor the ability to maintain proper dhammic practice. Even humans, though they are born into the perfect circumstances to follow the teaching, frequently fail to do so. There are some who hear the *Dhamma* but do not care to seriously consider it. We may see, however, that it is not enough to be a human being—one must also hear the *Dhamma*. Further, the passage notes that there are few who are “inspired by a sense of urgency” and so diligently follow the eightfold path. The point here is that serious advancement along the path is a combination of good fortune and good past karma. An animal rebirth is generally such that dhammic practice is unavailable. On the other hand, it seems that these Pāli passages imply

that an encounter of any sort with the *Dhamma* is an inherently positive event.

Buddhaghosa, in his commentarial writings, maintains that animals can be receptive to *Dhamma* and can thus benefit from hearing it: “. . . for when animals can, through listening to the Blessed One’s Dharma, acquire the benefit of a (suitable rebirth as) support for progress, and with the benefit of that same support they come, in their second, or third rebirth, to partake of the path and its fruition” (Vis 203). Buddhaghosa then tells the story of a frog who is crushed to death by a cowherd only to be reborn in Tāvatiṃsa heaven. This was because: “. . . it was none other than because his apprehension of the sign in the Blessed One’s voice” (Vis 203).⁶ In Rotman’s study of Indian Buddhism, animal encounters with the *Dhamma* have a similarly limited effect and animals are usually promised only a better rebirth for their expressions of faith. For example, the *Aśokavarṇa-avadāna* recounts the tale of a bull that, after seeing the Buddha, has a moment of faith (*pasāda*). The Buddha, once again, predicts that the creature will be reborn in a better station (Rotman 105). Again, while moments of insight into the Buddha’s genius may have some positive effect, glimmers of faith summoned in an animal’s mind are not sustained enough to have very positive ongoing soteriological consequences.

Such accounts are consistent with the previous discussion: by merely hearing *Dhamma* an animal can benefit spiritually, such as being reborn in heaven, but they cannot advance on the Buddhist path until they have developed sufficient understanding which, for the most part, requires a human birth. Buddhaghosa elsewhere maintains that genuine spiritual advancement requires a “concurrence of circumstances” such

⁶ Naomi Appleton discusses the story in her own study and observes that there is a similar account in Jain literature (*Narrating* 32).

as “existence as a human being, the rise of the Buddha, and the stability of the good law, etc.” (Atth 80). He is clear, therefore, that being a human being is a condition for actual progress on the path to Nirvana.

In one passage in the *Vinaya*, the Buddha expels a monk from the *Sangha* because the monk was found to be an animal in disguise as a human. In the story, a Nāga (a snake person) decides that he wishes to escape his miserable animal fate so he transforms—through magic—into a human and, through his duplicity, joins the monastic order. The Buddha soon uncovers this plot and declares, “. . . You serpents are not liable to growth in this *Dhamma* and discipline” (Vin-MV 1 111). The Buddha maintains that serpents—and therefore, presumably, other animals—cannot properly practice *Dhamma*. This appears to be the case even in instances where animals have a willingness do so. The Buddha seems to be of the view that animals may wish to practice *Dhamma* but ultimately lack the ability. However, they can improve their lot through annual religious observances: “. . . You, serpent, go away, observe the Observance Day (*poya*), precisely on the fourteenth, fifteenth, and eighth day of the half month. Thus you will be freed quickly from birth as a serpent and get back to human status” (ibid).

There are other examples in the *Vinaya* of animals participating in religious observances. Take, for example, the case of the elephant who picks lotuses from a pond and gives them to the Buddha (Vin MV 6 292). This attitude towards animals in the *Vinaya* is consistent with the view of the *Jātaka* where animals frequently go about doing good deeds in accordance with Buddhist doctrine (Appleton *Narrating* 30). In the *Jātaka*, animals are treated as being of similar intelligence to human beings. They are able to participate in morally edifying activities and are thus able to be reborn in a better circumstance (ibid). However, even in the *Vinaya* and *Jātaka* it is typical that animals can merely be reborn in better *circumstances* because of their actions—they cannot accelerate quickly on

a path towards nibbāna which, as Buddhaghosa maintains, requires a human birth. So while the *Vinaya* and *Jātaka* are forgiving of animals they are also consistent with the *sutta* literature which holds that understanding is necessary. The best possible situation is that an animal may engage in merit cultivation, which may be achieved either intentionally or unintentionally. Monastic informants focused in particular on unintentional merit cultivation through accidental acts of veneration.

Faith is also a condition for genuine spiritual advancement. As Rotman notes, there is the possibility that animals can be roused to have faith in the *Dhamma*, though it would seem that this occurs in only rare circumstances (278). The rarity—near impossibility—of animals advancing enough to have faith in the *Dhamma* is confirmed by Appleton whose analysis of the Buddhist *Jātakas* leads her to conclude that sometimes events arise such that animals achieve a state of “mental calm” conducive to peace. Nonetheless, the scriptural evidence is that animals are too overcome with baser desires to be able to conjure faith in the Buddha’s teaching (*Narrating* 29). Faith in the *Dhamma* requires the type of second order engagement that is mostly beyond the capabilities of the average animal. Her research confirms, however, that the condition for this peace is “. . . made possible by the proximity of the Buddha or hearing a few words of his teaching” (36). This further confirms just how potent the *Dhamma* is—even unintentionally hearing the *Dhamma* can have positive effects. Such encounters can lead animals to perform good deeds, produce merit and, through this mechanism, have the possibility of a better rebirth.

In summation, it appears from textual statements that hearing is not enough for substantial soteric gains, but that, despite this, animals can passively benefit in certain ways by being proximate to the *Dhamma*. This idea was confirmed by some of the monks interviewed.

Monastic Opinion

The ethnographic work on the question of whether animals benefit from hearing *Dhamma* was conducted in Sri Lanka in 2010. The monks interviewed in the course of this work were drawn from temples in Colombo and in the Kegalle district. In total 17 monks were interviewed for the research. Some of the temples were small temples populated by only a few monks. Other locations were *piriveṇ* or Buddhist seminaries where monks are trained. Some of the ambiguities of the texts were represented in the opinions of the monks who provided a range of answers to the question of whether animals benefited from hearing *Dhamma*. There was, however, a generally positive attitude towards the possibility of at least a small amount of spiritual progress.

At one *piriveṇa* in Kegalle, a novice monk called Ven. Kalupitiya* discussed this question with great enthusiasm.⁷ Kalupitiya began by observing that the entire reason animals are in the predicament they are in is due to past bad karma. As intimated in the canonical texts above, understanding the *Dhamma* is already a difficult matter even for educated human beings. Kalupitiya remarks that, “an animal’s mind has not developed enough to understand the *Dhamma* (*sadhamma*, good/holy *Dhamma*). Even only a very small group of human beings are able to understand it.” He concludes rhetorically by asking how, under these circumstances, “can animals even understand it?” Kalupitiya is concerned with a matter raised in the canonical texts: the distinction between merely hearing and understanding. It is not enough to be passive in one’s consumption of *Dhamma* teachings, one must also engage it actively. This might involve interpreting and analyzing the doctrine, musing

⁷ In accordance with the University of Tasmania ethical requirements of my research all names given are pseudonyms. For the sake of clarity, this has been noted with a (*) in the body of the text.

on its deeper meaning, or perhaps meditating and therefore actually implementing the practical dimension of the teaching. Sadly, animals are limited in their ability to understand and apply the Buddha's teaching because of their obvious cognitive and physical limitations.

Despite this negative appraisal, as the interview proceeded, Kalupitiya softened and refined his position: "After suffering a long time, in rare circumstances, some animals can be born and—now, I am not saying they cannot understand *Dhamma*—but they are able to accumulate merit." Kalupitiya seems to be suggesting that under a unique set of circumstances, animals can escape their imprisonment in the animal realm through engaging in good Buddhist deeds that will later lead to a human rebirth where understanding of *Dhamma* is possible. Some animals, because of the good deeds they do, will one day be reborn such that they can summon sufficient cognitive awareness to hear and understand dharma. Perhaps they will be reborn as a pious human.

But how do animals do meritorious deeds? This is especially problematic when, in the first instance, an animal lacks awareness of what counts as a good deed in the first place. The answer is: they do good deeds by accident or by human artifice. "As an example, the great royal elephant (*rajā attha*) that is in the Daḷadā Maligāva (the Temple of the Tooth), like that, and as with other animals who have lifted the sacred tooth (*daḷadā dat*), they can receive merit (*pin*)." During the annual Kandy procession (*esala pērahara*) a special elephant carries the sacred tooth relic through the streets to be displayed to devoted attendees. According to Sinhala Buddhist tradition, the sacred tooth is one of the few remaining relics of the Buddha and is therefore an object of intense veneration. Merely viewing the relic is considered a meritorious deed. Kalupitiya's view here is that the act of carrying the relic, regardless of the animal's cognitive abilities, endows the creature with some merit. In this way the

elephant can be reborn in better circumstances. Therefore, human artifice plays a role in animals doing good deeds.⁸

Notice that this leads to a hierarchy of animals: because elephants are used to assist human endeavors such as in the carrying of the tooth relic, they have the opportunity to create merit. But other animals will never have such an opportunity and are consequently stuck in a fallen state. This inequity is owed to arbitrary human decision making.⁹ The case of the royal elephant carrying the Buddha relic echoes a story in the Pāli *Apadāna*. In the section titled Uttiya, a crocodile who is eating by the river's edge offers to let Siddhartha Gautama ride on his back so that he can cross the water. "On the far bank of the river, Siddhartha, leader of the world, comforted me there, saying, 'You will attain the death-free'" (Clark 253). The crocodile, after death, is then reborn in heaven from being blessed by Siddhartha and consequently is never reborn in a bad condition again (Clark 253). As with the royal elephant, the action of carrying Siddhartha was enough to produce this good result, not actually practicing *Dhamma*. The chief difference between the case of the royal elephant and the crocodile in the *Apadāna* is that the royal elephant did not volunteer to carry the relic, while the crocodile did volunteer to car-

⁸ Accident could also play a role in these matters. There is an apocryphal Tibetan story of a fly that lands on a piece of cow dung being carried away by running water that accidentally circumambulate a *stūpa* three times. Because it is carried around in this manner the insect gains sufficient merit that a seed of liberation is implanted and thus they become destined for liberation (Rinchen 86-87).

⁹ While not a Sri Lankan or early Buddhist example, Lama Thubten Zopa (a noted Tibetan Buddhist) has recommended in his writings that Buddhists should circumambulate *stūpas* while carrying animals such as stray dogs in order to endow the animal with merit (16-17). In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, there are other examples of animals being taught the *Dhamma* such as Ra Lotsawa who, ". . . established many dogs and mice in meditation" (Sengé 108). Ra Lotsawa's purported ability to induct animals into the Buddhist path is outlined in considerable detail in Ra Yeshé Sengé's biography.

ry Siddhartha. This distinction shows that there is at least some difference between the textual material and the opinions of the monks who are familiar with them. Regardless, these animals served the *Dhamma* and therefore performed meritorious deeds. Again, passive or involuntary association with Buddhism is enough to secure a good future outcome for these animals.¹⁰

Kalupitiya also suggests that there is evidence that animals can be positively affected by the presence of monks while monks are conducting their alms round (*piṇḍa pātaya*). He says, “. . . an animal cannot understand the *Dhamma*, but to some extent they can understand our thoughts. Our loving-kindness (*mēthriya*), our compassion (*karuṇā*), our affection (*dayāva*). . . this can be understood (by the animal) (*tēruṃ-gannē puluwaṇ*).” Kalupitiya goes on to provide examples of monks that meditate in caves in isolated areas who are never troubled by wild animals such as “bears and tigers” and that, when he goes on alms round, even when he encounters a wild elephant he is never bothered by them. Kalupitiya attributes this to the power of the *Dhamma* expressed through the monastic representatives. Like the Buddha who tamed the wild and raging elephant sent to kill him, the monks are able to placate animals and turn their minds towards good simply because of their presence. Another monk at a temple in Kandy provided a similar example of how he and his colleagues, while they go about their business outside late at night, are never threatened by dangerous snakes. This he also attributes to his compassion towards all creatures. This may remind us of Buddhaghosa’s story from the *Atthasālinī* (*The Expositor*) where he describes

¹⁰ There are other similar stories in the *Apadāna* such as the case of a lion who venerates the Buddha with a lotus flower. Having venerated the Buddha in this way, the Buddha predicts that lion will be reborn in greatly improved circumstances (Mellick 99-105). Uniquely, and as with many *Jātakas*, the lion has “faith” in the Buddha and also is said to “understand” his teaching.

the case of Pingalabuddharakita who is about to be crushed by a python (Atth 137). But Pingalabuddharakita recalls the first precept and this good thought is enough to drive away the snake, thus preventing the snake from doing an evil deed. These examples are meant to illustrate how animals can be receptive to the *Dhamma*, intentionally or otherwise, and how it can lead to their betterment simply by being in the vicinity of the *saṅgha*.

Still, Kalupitiya maintains that while animals can benefit in these incidental ways, to fully understand the *Dhamma*, “. . . they must come into the human world.” This is consistent with the Pāli textual points made earlier. Other monks were even firmer on this point and simply denied that animals had the capacity for any understanding. A young novice monk (*podhi hāmuduruwa*) at the same *piriveṇa* was adamant that animals lacked the cognitive ability to make use of the dharma: “. . . because animals don’t have an ability to understand (*tērun gānna hakiyak næ*) so they live in these places (i.e., apart from human society, in the forest, etc.)—there must be a difference, a difference from animals that live in the forest. . . but the belief is that animals don’t have the ability to understand.” The only way for animals to get out of such a situation is to expend the bad karma they have accumulated. This would be difficult to achieve when one considers the fact that many animals continue to act in morally impure ways by hunting and killing other creatures thus, only cementing their spiritual status.

This point was raised by a stately monk called Ven Rajaratana* also from the *piriveṇa*. He observed that, “. . . we may think what to do about an animal’s desire for misbehavior (*parattakama*). They don’t have an intelligent thought (*kalpanā bukkhiyak næ*). Yet because they might sometimes have the instinct to listen to *Dhamma* (*kriyāṭmaka karanna krimiyak nisā*) (they might benefit). That is because the teaching is good (*dhammiya hoṅdayi*).” Animals cannot think, but they may have a natural

instinct to listen when they hear *Dhamma*. Perhaps this natural instinct is a root desire to escape the suffering of *saṃsāra*.

Rajaratana goes on to explain that *piriṭ* or *sutta* recitation is so effective that should an animal hear it emanating from a temple ground then an animal's desire to hunt will go away. He goes on to add that in the case of deer who wander in the forest, ". . . sometimes by a (good) thought try to free themselves from the animal world (*sattu lōkiya nidihas venne yannave*)." Rajaratana maintains, unlike Kalupitiya, that animals lack the ability to fully comprehend the *Dhamma*. However, proximity to hearing *Dhamma* can have some positive effect on them and may trigger a spontaneous good thought. This spontaneous "idea" (*adahas*) may be enough to propel them out of the animal realm. This "good thought" is a moral insight that is something like a moment of faith. Again, the presence of the *Dhamma* has a kind of positive magico-transformative effect on those who bear witness to it. Kalupitiya notes that the mere presence of representatives of the *saṅgha* is enough to affect some good result. Needless to say, then, hearing the serene sounds of text recitation may lead to some lesser forms of liberation.

Another monk, Ven. Gunatilake*, who was the head (*nāyaka*) of a temple in Colombo, told a similar story. Gunatilake explained that "it is possible" for animals to benefit from hearing *Dhamma*. But the avenue here, as we have already encountered, is not a direct one. Gunatilake tells a story from the Anuradhapura period: ". . . there was a monastery (*vihāra*) called Uddhalōka." The monastery was renowned for its preaching (*baṇa*). Listening to the sweet sounds was "pleasant" (*mihiri*). Gunatilake explains that during the Anuradhapura period there were terrible droughts, hence why the kings ordered the construction of great reservoirs (*weva*): "Now, (during one) dry period (*payana kāliya*), pigs, deer. . . they all had come to the reservoir to drink water and people in the forest cut 'pig pits' (to catch the animals as they come to drink water)." By

“people in the forest” Gunatilake is referring to so-called “*væddā*,” the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, and people who live in the thick central jungles. Gunatilake goes on: “A baby deer, having eaten some leaves, goes to drink water from the reservoir, when suddenly he hears a sound (*hevisi sadda ahuna*). When he hears the sound, his ears lift up and the foot he had lifted had not even touched the ground, when a bushman emerges and kills the baby deer.” As the deer lay dying, his thoughts became concerned with the sound he heard in his last moments. The sound was, of course, the sweet preaching that emanated from the nearby temple. Gunatilake: “He (the baby deer) dies and then went to the temple’s monk’s sister’s stomach and was thus reborn. When he was about seven years old the child was bought to be ordained as a monk (*mahaṇa karana*). As his hair was about to be cut off (as part of the ordination process) the child cried out (*hat bha venneva*) and the servant (*goliya*) who heard the child became an *arahat* (*rahat vunā*).”

Again, Gunatilake’s view confirms a position clear from other monks that have been discussed: while animals typically lack the cognitive ability to become enlightened while an animal, if they are close in proximity to a source of *Dhamma*, they can be positively affected such that they may be reborn in circumstances where liberation is possible. In this instance, the deer hears the sounds of preaching and is reborn in a situation where he is ordained as a human monk. Not only is this good for the “deer” (or rather, the now human child), but it is also good for the nearby servant who inexplicably attains spontaneous enlightenment due to the sheer power of the sound of the *Dhamma* issued from the child-monk. Yet this also indicates just how merely hearing a sound can elicit a positive and immediate spiritual benefit from a being, even if understanding is limited.

Hearing the *Dhamma*, being proximate to dhammic institutions, or even merely witnessing representatives of the *Dhamma*, can lead to a

better spiritual condition. Many Sinhalese feel fortunate that they were born in Sri Lanka where Buddhism is propagated in a relatively pure form. The passive presence of Buddhist preaching can have helpful soteriic effects. This is perhaps partly why temples (*pansala*) loudly play pre-recorded *baṇa* early in the morning. Those who are waking to begin their day will stand to benefit from hearing this preaching as they go about their pre-work tasks of dressing, cleaning and preparing breakfast. Meanwhile, it seems that from the analysis of Pāli and Sinhala texts, as well as the ethnographic statements of monks, that even animals who overhear this preaching may also benefit. Our dog, though he was not well treated by the temple attendant, may have been better off for straying onto the Tissamahārāma Vihāra premises after all. Lacking understanding, merely hearing the *Dhamma* may only grant a better rebirth, but even a better rebirth provides the condition for future enlightenment.

Abbreviations

Atth Atthasālinī (The Expositor)

AN Aṅguttara Nikāya

DN Dīgha Nikāya

MN Majjhima Nikāya

SN Saṃyutta Nikāya

Vin MV Vinaya Mahāvagga

Vis Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification)

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