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Animal Doubles of the Buddha

The life-story of the Buddha, as related in traditional Buddha-biographies from India, has served as a masterful founding narrative for the religion as a whole, and an inexhaustible mine of images and concepts that have had deep reverberations throughout the Buddhist tradition. The basic story is well-known: The Buddha — who should properly be referred to as a *bodhisattva* (or “awakening-being”) until the moment when he attains awakening and becomes a buddha — is born into the world as a human prince named Prince Siddhārtha. He spends his youth in wealth, luxury, and ignorance, surrounded by hedonistic pleasures, and marries a beautiful princess named Yaśodharā, with whom he has a son. It is only at the age of twenty-nine that Prince Siddhārtha, through a series of dramatic events, comes to realize that all sentient beings are inevitably afflicted by old age, disease, death, and the perpetual suffering of samsara, the endless cycle of death-and-rebirth that characterizes the Buddhist universe. In response to this profound realization, he renounces his worldly life as a pampered prince and “goes forth from home into homelessness” (as the common Buddhist phrase describes it) to become a wandering ascetic. Six years later, while meditating under a fig tree (later known as the Bodhi Tree or Tree of Awakening), he succeeds in discovering a path to the elimination of all suffering — the ultimate Buddhist goal of *nirvana* — and thereby becomes the Buddha (the “Awakened One”). He preaches his first sermon — setting into motion the Wheel of the Dharma (or Buddhist teaching) — and gathers disciples around himself, thus initiating the Saṃgha (the monastic community of monks and nuns). After forty-five years of peripatetic wandering around North India, spreading and solidifying the Dharma, the Buddha dies at the age of eighty — or, more properly, he attains *parinirvāṇa*, “final nirvana” or a permanent release from all suffering and from the cycle of samsara.

Traditional Buddha-biographies from India that relate this founding narrative have been studied and mined in depth by the academic discipline of Buddhist Studies for perhaps two hundred years, and the story has been read, analyzed, and explicated through a great variety of interpretive lenses. Yet two centuries’ worth of work on the rich narrative traditions surrounding the life of the Buddha have thus far still failed to pay any sustained attention to the episodes in his life involving close interactions with animals. Though such episodes are few in number, those that exist employ animal characters in profoundly interesting ways that are worthy of careful analysis. Animals

appear in the Buddha's life-story not as incidental creatures, but as effective and valuable tools that perform certain functions in the depiction of the Buddha's character.

In this article, I look at the narrative traditions surrounding two animals who play a significant role within the Buddha's life-story — a horse named Kanthaka, who appears at the beginning of the Buddha's career, and an elephant named Nālāgiri, who appears at the height of the Buddha's power. The sources I draw upon are traditional Buddha-biographies composed in Sanskrit (S.) and Pāli (P.) and dating anywhere from the first or second centuries BCE up to the sixth century CE — including the *Buddhacarita*, *Mahāvastu*, *Lalitavistara*, and *Śaṅghabhedavastu* portion of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (all in Sanskrit), the *Nidānakathā* (in Pāli), and the *Abhinīṣkramaṇa Sūtra* (originally composed in Sanskrit but now preserved only in Chinese) — as well as shorter biographical passages from several Pāli canonical and commentarial works. Because my discussion is aimed at a general audience who may not be familiar with Indian Buddhism, I have avoided referring to the (often unwieldy) names of individual texts, although they should be clear from my citations. With the exception of those passages quoted from Samuel Beal's English translation of the *Abhinīṣkramaṇa Sūtra* (inaccessible to me in the original language, since I do not read Chinese), all translations appearing in what follows are my own.

In interpreting the narrative traditions surrounding Kanthaka and Nālāgiri, I will argue that both animals can be seen as “doubles” or shadows of the Buddha — illuminating his character through identification, contrast, or parallelism with an animal “other.” The doubling of a human character by means of an animal alter-ego is common, of course, in many traditions of literature. Because human beings *are* animals, yet also define themselves in opposition to all nonhuman animals, there is a simultaneous *kinship* and *otherness* in humanity's relationship with the animal. This flexible interplay between identity and difference makes animality a fruitful resource for defining what it means to be human. And since the Buddha, in some sense, constitutes the Ultimate Human Being, we should not be surprised to find that his character is clarified through the functioning of such animal “doubles.” As doubles, however, Kanthaka and Nālāgiri function in significantly different ways. I will argue that the horse Kanthaka serves as a *scapegoat* for the Buddha, absorbing some of the blame and moral censure that are due to him, yet without tainting his perfect character. The elephant Nālāgiri, on the other hand, serves as a *billboard* for the Buddha's power and charisma, allowing these features of the Buddha's character to be publicly displayed to the cosmos at large. Yet even while these “doubles” of the Buddha are made to serve their functions as *scapegoat* and *billboard*, the texts in question also engage in several strategies of asserting human

superiority to animals and human dominance over the animal world. The Buddha, too, thus shares with the rest of humanity a contradictory desire to both dominate and find oneself reflected in the animal “other.”

Animals and Humans in a Buddhist Worldview. Because the dynamic of *kinship* versus *otherness* in humanity’s relationship to the animal differs significantly from one cultural context to another, a brief word about how this dynamic operates within a traditional Buddhist worldview is perhaps called for, before turning to consider Kanthaka and Nālāgiri’s functioning as animal “doubles.” Traditional Buddhist thought lacks the modern, scientific notion that human beings *are* animals; there is, for example, no Sanskrit term that refers to “(human and nonhuman) animals” without also including a variety of other types of beings, such as gods, demons, and spirits. Nevertheless, the essential *kinship* between human beings and animals is emphasized in several ways: Both animals and human beings belong to the larger category of “living beings” (S. *sattva*, *bhūta*, or *prāṇin*), and thus, both are subject to the moral forces of karma and the endless cycle of death and rebirth known as samsara. In practice, this means that animals can be reborn as human beings, and human beings can be reborn as animals—which significantly weakens the boundary between them. In fact, every human being has been an animal during countless of his or her previous lives, just as every animal has been a human being. One ethical result of this fluidity is the Buddhist belief that both human beings and animals are worthy of moral consideration and compassionate treatment—as reflected in the first and most important precept of the Buddhist moral code, which prohibits the taking of any sentient being’s life. In these and other ways, Buddhism provides certain resources allowing human beings to experience kinship with the animal world around them—seeing animals as “a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects.”¹

On the other hand, Buddhist thought equally emphasizes the *otherness* of animals and the *hierarchy* between human beings and animals by seeing them as two wholly distinct realms of rebirth (S. *gati*) — with human beings classified as a “fortunate realm of rebirth” (S. *sugati*), brought about by positive moral deeds and involving pleasant and beneficial karmic rewards, and animals being classified as an “unfortunate realm of rebirth” (S. *durgati*), brought about by negative moral deeds and involving unpleasant and deleterious karmic rewards. Human beings are thus *categorically* superior to animals, and human exploitation and abuse of animals — while certainly not condoned — tends to be taken for granted and is frequently depicted in Indian Buddhist texts. In scholastic sources, moreover, great care is taken to maintain the ontological distinction

between the human and animal realms: though an individual being, over time, can (and often does) move back and forth between them, the categories themselves remain distinct.

Perhaps the most significant difference between human beings and animals, according to a famous passage in the Pāli *Milindapañha*, is that while animals may possess some elements of reason or rationality (P. *manasikāra*), their mental faculties are *ayoniso* (P.) — “disorderly,” “distracted,” or “superficial” — rather than *yoniso* (P.), “systematic” or “sustained” (Trenckner, *Milindapañho* 32). Animals thus have enormous difficulty controlling and cultivating their minds or “maintaining calm mental states” (Harris 208). More importantly, animals lack the crucial human faculty of *prajñā* (S.) — “wisdom,” or the ability to attain discriminative insight into the nature of reality. It is for this reason that animals are relatively lacking in moral agency and are “not capable of growth” in the teachings of Buddhism (Oldenberg 1:62) — the animal rebirth being one of the eight “wrong times and wrong occasions for living a spiritual life” (Morris 4:225). Indeed, the animal’s lack of *prajñā*, as Schmithausen and Maithrimurthi have stated, constitutes “the decisive difference between man and animals, and the one which, from a Buddhist point of view, constitutes the *essential* superiority of human existence over animal existence” (87).

Thus, although the boundary between human beings and animals may be drawn differently in traditional India than it is in the Western theological and philosophical traditions, we still find the same basic dynamic between *kinship* and *otherness*, *identity* and *difference*, *attraction* and *repulsion*, in humanity’s relationship to the animal. This dynamic makes the animal particularly effective in serving as a “double” for the human.

Kanthaka in the Great Departure. One of the most significant moments within the life-story of the Buddha is the sequence of events through which Prince Siddhārtha renounces his worldly life as a prince to become a wandering ascetic — events which are collectively referred to as the Great Departure. The Great Departure is a major turning-point within the life-story, for it represents the crucial moment — later repeated, in a sense, by every Buddhist monk and nun — when Prince Siddhārtha renounces worldly life and all of its attachments (including wealth, kingship, marriage, and children) in favor of life as a celibate ascetic devoted to spiritual pursuits. And it is at this crucial juncture that a *horse* — the magnificent horse Kanthaka, “eighteen hands in length ... and thoroughly white, like a bleached-out shell” (Fausbøll 1:62) — effectively fulfills certain functions within the story.

Kanthaka is closely identified with the bodhisattva from the very moment of his birth through the tradition of the seven “co-natals” — seven people, animals, or objects that came into existence at exactly the same moment as the bodhisattva was born, most of which were destined to play an important role within his life. Kanthaka is always included in this list, in addition to other crucial figures such as the bodhisattva’s future wife Yaśodharā, his future charioteer Chandaka, and the Bodhi Tree underneath which he would succeed in becoming a Buddha. This tradition of the seven co-natals has the effect of suggesting that the bodhisattva’s future destiny is assured from the very moment of his birth and that other living beings — including Kanthaka — must live parallel lives in order to play their necessary roles in the unfolding of this destiny. Kanthaka’s status as a co-natal immediately elevates him above all other horses, as well as individualizing him such that he is no longer just a generic embodiment of the “horse” species. Kanthaka’s uniqueness is further reinforced through the fact that he has a *name* (which is relatively unusual for the animals featured in Indian Buddhist literature) and through his elaborate physical description, which makes him worthy of being associated with the bodhisattva. Kanthaka is “an excellent horse, endowed with strength, spirit, speed, and good lineage” (Johnston 1:55); his “limbs have the finest features” and he is “ready, swift-footed, and moves with the foremost grace” (Senart 1:156); in fact, he is “capable of traversing the entire universe from end to end ... yet still make it back before breakfast-time to forage and eat his meal” (Fausbøll 1:64). Clearly not your ordinary horse!

Kanthaka features most centrally in the episode of the bodhisattva’s Great Departure. The basic story is the same in all sources: determined to renounce worldly life and become an ascetic, Prince Siddhārtha, in the middle of the night, wakes up his charioteer Chandaka and asks him to prepare the horse Kanthaka. Overcoming various obstacles and benefitting from the help of the gods, who have caused everyone in the palace to sink into a heavy slumber, the three of them succeed in passing through the locked gates of the city and escaping from the kingdom. They travel through three kingdoms in a single night and arrive upon the banks of the Anomā River at sunrise, whereupon Prince Siddhārtha dismisses Chandaka and Kanthaka to continue on his journey alone — cutting off his royal topknot and throwing off his princely clothing in favor of the rags of a wandering mendicant.

The first thing we should notice is that throughout this sequence of events, Kanthaka is not merely an animal upon which the bodhisattva happens to ride, but is instead

depicted as an active, conscious, and willing participant — one who is keenly aware of the bodhisattva's quest and closely identified with it. In one biography, for example, as soon as Chandaka begins to saddle him, Kanthaka immediately understands: "This saddling is very tight; it is not like the saddling of other days.... It must be that my master wishes to go forth on the Great Departure this very day!" In response, he neighs loudly out of joy, and "the sound of it would have spread throughout the entire city, but the gods silenced it, so that nobody could hear it" (Fausbøll 1: 62). In another source, Kanthaka assures himself: "There will be no danger, misfortune, or calamity for me, when I am carrying the World-Protector! Each and every deity celebrates [me], for I am the vehicle for the Guide of the World!" (Tripathi 195). And in another source, Kanthaka tells us that when he learned of the bodhisattva's intention to renounce the world, "I gave rise to abundant joy. I was happy and elated, and I fervently wished for [him to succeed]!" (Jayawickrama 119). Throughout this sequence, then, there seems to be a concerted effort to fuse Kanthaka's will and motivation with those of the bodhisattva himself.

The bodhisattva also seems to recognize the importance of Kanthaka's assistance, for in several sources he speaks directly to the horse, asking Kanthaka to help him with his renunciation and giving him credit for the part he will play in bringing about the bodhisattva's buddhahood. Thus, in one text, he asks Kanthaka to "exert yourself with speed and valor" and "act such that I may attain the deathless state!" (Johnston 1:56) — and in another text he tells Kanthaka that "when I have awoken to perfect full awakening, I will be grateful to you" (Gnoli 2:91). In such passages, Kanthaka appears not as an ordinary beast of burden who cannot help but respond to the master's whip, but rather, as a fully autonomous actor who has the *choice* to participate in the bodhisattva's quest and to share in its ultimate reward. Though animals in Buddhist doctrine are generally devoid of such moral agency, Kanthaka's agency in this episode is a direct reflection of the bodhisattva's own. Attributing such agency to the horse furthers the close identification this episode seeks to establish between Kanthaka and the bodhisattva's impulse to renounce. In some passages, moreover, Kanthaka's physical "carrying" of the bodhisattva upon his back is explicitly compared to the future Buddha's spiritual "carrying" of the world from this shore of samsara to the farther shore of nirvana (a common metaphor). In one text, for example, he says directly to Kanthaka: "Tonight, dear Kanthaka, carry me across in a single night, and through you, I will become a Buddha and carry across the world, together with its gods!" (Fausbøll 1:62). Thus, the bodhisattva acknowledges that he will become a Buddha *through* Kanthaka's assistance, and the horse's physical "carrying across" is directly parallel to the Buddha's spiritual "carrying across" from this shore of suffering to the

farther shore of peace — a parallelism that is concretized when Kanthaka crosses over the Anomā River in a single leap to land “on the farther shore” (Fausbøll 1:64). Kanthaka’s movements as a horse are thus a physical foreshadowing of the Buddha’s saving work as a buddha.

Our sources thus make it very clear that Kanthaka is not just an ordinary, generic horse who happens to be ridden by the bodhisattva on this particular evening. Instead, Kanthaka is a named, individualized, completely unique being, born at the same moment as the bodhisattva, destined from the moment of his birth to play a role in the bodhisattva’s Great Departure, fully conscious of the role that he plays, and closely associated with the bodhisattva’s impulse to renounce the world. In all of these senses, Kanthaka can be described as a “double” of the bodhisattva — an animal “other” who silently reflects and reinforces the will, motivations, and actions of the bodhisattva himself. The functions such an animal “double” might fulfill will hopefully become apparent as we continue the story from here.

Kanthaka as the Buddha’s Scapegoat. At daybreak, on the banks of the Anomā River, the bodhisattva engages in a number of actions that clearly indicate, as John Strong has noted, that he is “making himself into a monk” (60) — actions, in fact, that would later come to be ritually reenacted by candidates for monastic ordination in many Buddhist cultures. These actions vary slightly from one source to another, but generally include: cutting off his hair with a sword, throwing his topknot into the air (where it is caught by deities and enshrined within heaven), removing his royal garments and jewelry, and putting on the rags of a wandering mendicant. The final act within this sequence is the dismissal of Chandaka and Kanthaka: “Chandaka, my friend,” he says, “take my ornaments and Kanthaka and go. I will go forth!” (Fausbøll 1:64).

As Strong has noted, “The dismissal of Chandaka and Kanthaka is important because they represent the bodhisattva’s last tie binding him to his home” (60). Indeed, from this point onward, the bodhisattva is completely alone, and the gods, who had played such a major role in the Great Departure, now seem to retreat from the scene. In fact, I would argue that the dismissal of Chandaka and Kanthaka represents a crucial turning-point within the Buddha’s life-story — the exact moment when the bodhisattva makes a decisive break with his former life as a prince and severs all of the emotional ties still binding him to his home. The great significance of this moment — the need to *mark* this moment in some manner — is suggested in several sources. In one source, the location of the dismissal is later commemorated by a shrine called the “Turning Back of

Kanthaka" (Fausbøll 1:63), and in another source, as soon as the bodhisattva dismounts from his horse, he declares: "This is the last time I will ever dismount from my steed; and this is the spot where for the last time I have alighted" (Beal 140). Yet another text tells us explicitly *why* the moment is so significant, for with the dismissal of Chandaka and Kanthaka, the bodhisattva "cut the bonds that tied him to his home, threw all of it away, and departed with indifference" (Senart 2:166).

It is in this context that the bodhisattva's final interactions with Chandaka and Kanthaka become significant. In several sources, Chandaka either argues against the bodhisattva's decision to renounce the world or expresses the wish to join him in his renunciation. These discussions are sometimes quite lengthy; in one biography, for example, the back-and-forth dialogue between the bodhisattva and Chandaka goes on for almost fifty verses and functions as an extended discourse on the possible arguments one might make both for and against the practice of world-renunciation (a discourse that was well-developed in premodern India). The bodhisattva's final interaction with Kanthaka, on the other hand, is dealt with more briefly — but packs a greater emotional punch:

The excellent horse Kanthaka licked the bodhisattva's feet and shed warm tears. The prince stroked the horse with his hand ... and spoke to him like a friend: "Don't cry, Kanthaka, you've shown what a good horse you are! Be patient, and this exertion of yours will quickly bear fruit." (Johnston 1:65)

In another text, Kanthaka himself recalls of this moment: "I licked his copper-nailed feet all over and wept as I watched the Great Hero leaving" (Jayawickrama 170).

If we consider the contrast between the bodhisattva's final interaction with Chandaka and his final interaction with Kanthaka, we can see that the two characters are performing different functions, brought about by their human-vs.-animal status. The human character of Chandaka allows for a conversation to take place: the bodhisattva can explain his motivations in renouncing the world, and Chandaka can argue against him or express a wish to join him. Rational arguments both for and against the practice of world-renunciation can be expressed in order to justify the bodhisattva's departure. With Kanthaka, however, such rational discourse is not possible — for Kanthaka, as an animal, is unable to express himself through human speech, nor is he capable of understanding complex arguments concerning renunciation.² Thus, in lieu of words and arguments, we instead get a focus upon the *physical* manifestations of Kanthaka's

enormous grief: he *licks* the bodhisattva's feet, he *weeps*, and he *looks* at the bodhisattva for as long as he can. The emotional poignancy of this scene, the collective grief brought about by the prince's rejection of worldly life, the cruelty of the prince's severance of all emotional ties — all of these elements of Buddhism's founding story (and, I might note, the "founding story" for every monk and nun) are far better captured by the mute animal Kanthaka than by the talkative human Chandaka. It is precisely because Kanthaka is an *animal*, I would argue, that he becomes the bearer of all of the emotional consequences of that original act of severance — from family, community, and kingdom — that gave birth to the Buddhist path. Displaying an animal's response to the bodhisattva's departure allows these emotions to find powerful, yet also silent, expression. Kanthaka seems to mourn the prince's loss of worldly life on behalf of the prince himself — and because Kanthaka is an animal, this moment of poignant mourning is allowed to remain unopposed by any rational justifications or opposing reasons. One sense in which Kanthaka serves as a *scapegoat*, then, is by acting as a kind of container for all of the highly fraught emotions surrounding the bodhisattva's departure — a container that is definitively separated from the bodhisattva upon the riverbank, so that the bodhisattva can continue on "with indifference."

While some sources tell us that Kanthaka actually died out of grief right there on the riverbank, I would here like to focus on the alternative plotline found in some of the other sources, according to which Kanthaka does not die at this point, but returns to the capital city of Kapilavastu along with Chandaka. Now that he has been separated from the bodhisattva, he is full of grief, a mere shell of the magnificent horse he once was:

The powerful horse Kanthaka walked onward, soberly and exhausted in spirit. Though he was still adorned with ornaments, now that the bodhisattva had abandoned him, he seemed bereft of majesty.... He neighed loudly and pitifully again and again. Even though he was hungry, he did not welcome or consume the grass and water along the road, as before. (Johnston 1: 77)

In another text, Kanthaka is so weakened by grief that it takes him eight days to get back to the city, even though the journey out had taken only a single night (Beal 146).

It is within the context of this scenario that an even stronger sense of Kanthaka's functioning as a *scapegoat* comes into play. For as soon as he returns to Kapilavastu, Kanthaka seems to become a convenient target for the loved ones the prince has left

behind — an object of longing, blame, and censure who, as an animal, is powerless to defend himself or respond. The bodhisattva, in a sense, is spared from bearing the brunt of these emotional reactions because Kanthaka — his animal scapegoat — bears them for him.

In several sources, this sequence begins with a rather heartbreaking episode in which the human inability to interpret animal sounds correctly comes into play. According to one text:

Entering the king's residence, Kanthaka looked around with eyes full of tears and let out a loud neigh, as if announcing his grief to the people. Then the birds living within the king's residence and the favored horses tied up nearby, assuming that the prince had returned, echoed that horse's cry. And the people standing near the king's harem apartments, deceived into an abundance of joy, thought to themselves: "Since the horse Kanthaka is neighing, surely the prince has arrived!" (Johnston 1: 80)

Kanthaka neighs out of *grief* — yet his animal cry is ambiguous and is misinterpreted even by the other animals, resulting in an animal cacophony that deceives the palace folk into thinking that the prince has returned. This is followed by a long and pathetic description of the women of the palace rushing "hopefully" toward Chandaka and Kanthaka, only to discover that the bodhisattva is *not* with them, whereupon they weep, wail, faint, swoon, and beat their breasts in a great paroxysm of grief. Similarly, in another text, upon entering the palace complex, Kanthaka neighs "in recognition of his home" — whereupon people come rushing to their windows, crying out, "the Prince has come back! the Prince has returned!" Upon seeing that they have been deceived, however, "they left their places of observation in sorrow and retired within the precincts, weeping and with great lamentation" (Beal 147).³ The ambiguity of Kanthaka's neighing thus causes a cruel deception of the loved ones the prince has left behind. This episode seems to set up Kanthaka as an object of blame and censure — which then comes to fruition in the reactions to the horse of the bodhisattva's wife Yaśodharā and his father King Śuddhodhana.

The wife responds to the horse with a poignant mixture of both longing and anger. In some texts, it is the emotions of grief and longing that seem to predominate: Upon seeing Kanthaka, she throws her arms around the horse's neck and "babbles and laments incoherently" — "Alas, Kanthaka, noble [horse], my husband's companion,

where did you take him?" (Tripathi 192-93). In other texts, however, grief and longing quickly morph into accusation and blame:

Yaśodharā, weeping, threw her arms around Kanthaka's neck and said: "Where have you taken the prince, Kanthaka? How have I offended against you and Chandaka such that you would take the prince and leave while I was happily sleeping? Now I and the sixty thousand women of the harem have been made into widows!" (Senart 2:189)

In another source, in fact, her words are full of anger and vitriol, and it is once again the frustrating unreliability of the horse's neighing that comes to the fore:

This horse Kanthaka must surely wish me misfortune in every way, since he took away from here my everything, at night, while people were sleeping, like a jewel-thief!.... Today, he neighs loudly, as if he were filling up the king's abode. But when he was carrying away my beloved, this vile horse fond of ignoble deeds remained mute. For if he had neighed, waking up the people, or made a noise on the ground with his hooves, or produced a loud sound with his jaws, then I wouldn't be experiencing such grief. (Johnston 1:83-84)

Despite the seeming contrast Yaśodharā draws between her husband — "my everything" — and Kanthaka — "this vile horse fond of ignoble deeds" — it is clear that Kanthaka can be seen here as a *substitute* for the bodhisattva, a *scapegoat* for the bodhisattva, and a convenient target for all of the turbulent emotions Yaśodharā feels toward her husband. (We should remember, after all, that the Buddha's buddhahood was only made possible by a husband's sudden abandonment of his wife.) The bodhisattva is spared from suffering the full onslaught of these emotions because his horse is there to do it for him.

The bodhisattva's father, King Śuddhodhana, also takes this opportunity to vent his feelings upon the animal scapegoat. "Lying on the ground and looking up at the horse with eyes full of tears," he wails:

O Kanthaka, after doing so many favors for me in battle, today you have done me a great disfavor!—for you have carried off into the forest my beloved ... as if you were an enemy, even though you are a friend. So take

me to him today, or go there quickly and bring him back! — for I cannot live without him, just as one whose disease is advanced cannot survive without the right medicine. (Johnston 1:90-91)

King Śuddhodana not only castigates the horse as an “enemy,” but also seems to place his very life in the horse’s hands, threatening to *die* if Kanthaka does not undo the enormous damage he has brought about.

In arguing that Kanthaka here fulfills the classic functions of a scapegoat, it is important to point out that Chandaka, too, plays this role to some extent; in fact, in several sources, the accusations Yaśodharā levels against Chandaka — *how could you let him leave? why didn’t you wake anyone up?* — are even more extensive than the accusations she levels against Kanthaka. Nevertheless, there are several important differences between Chandaka and Kanthaka, differences that are the direct result of Kanthaka’s animality. One difference is that Kanthaka, as a horse, is able to serve as a physical object of Yaśodharā’s longing. Given the cultural context, it would be inappropriate for her to throw her arms around a human male such as Chandaka, and equally inappropriate for her to engage in physical contact with an impure or lowly animal, such as a dog, pig, or jackal. But she *can* throw her arms around Kanthaka the horse, clinging desperately to the horse as a stand-in for her absent husband — for the horse is a highly favored animal in India, replete with royal and aristocratic associations (Doniger). In just the same way, King Śuddhodana can lie on the ground and look *up* at the horse — a highly inappropriate posture if the object of his gaze were a human being subservient to the king. Kanthaka’s animality and his specific status as a horse thus allow for raw expressions of intimacy that are unencumbered by the norms of behavior operative among humans.

A second and more important difference between Chandaka and Kanthaka is that Kanthaka — as an animal — cannot defend himself or respond. Lacking the ability to express himself through human language, he can only mutely absorb (and thus nullify?) the anger and blame being cast his way. In fact, it is striking to note, in one source after another, that Chandaka feels compelled to speak on Kanthaka’s behalf and defend the noble horse against these accusations. In one text, for example, he pleads with Yaśodharā: “Please do not blame Kanthaka, my queen, nor should you be angry with me! Know that we are completely guiltless” (Johnston 1:84). In another, he likewise protests: “What wrong have I committed? For I cried out in a loud voice — and Kanthaka, too, as he was taking the prince away, neighed loudly, yet none of you woke up!” (Senart 2:189). The very fact that Chandaka feels compelled to provide a defense

for the defenseless horse further highlights the animal's complete inability to speak up on its own behalf. The muteness of the animal and its inability to communicate thus make it a more effective scapegoat.

A final feature that distinguishes Chandaka from Kanthaka is the fact that Kanthaka *dies*. Whereas Chandaka survives the attacks upon his character and later goes on to become a monk, Kanthaka does not. In one biography, Kanthaka's death is a direct result of the accusations made against him by the bodhisattva's father: "The horse Kanthaka having heard the reproachful words of the King in his affliction, unable to bear the sorrow that afflicted him, lay down and died" (Beal 151-52). In other sources, it is more generally the result of his continuing grief at being separated from the bodhisattva. Especially poignant is a passage in which Kanthaka starves himself to death out of grief, despite the desperate measures people take to save his life:

Sweetmeats coated in honey were placed before him, and other foods and sweetmeats, fit for a king, were piled up before him — yet Kanthaka did not eat. Constantly remembering the bodhisattva, he wept. Some women of the harem used their regal and costly garments of cotton, silk, and wool to wipe away Kanthaka's tears. Others stroked his head, others his neck, others his back ... flanks ... forelegs ... joints ... tail ... and hooves. Others held morsels of food coated in honey up to his mouth... Yet Kanthaka would not take food. Unable to see the bodhisattva, starving himself out of grief for the bodhisattva, Kanthaka died. (Senart 2:189-90)

Kanthaka's death immediately after bearing the brunt of the anger, blame, and other negative emotions vented by the bodhisattva's loved ones reinforces his function as a *scapegoat*. First, he is closely identified with the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva's impulse to renounce the world. Then, the two of them are wrenched apart, and it is Kanthaka alone, as the bodhisattva's substitute, who returns to bear the consequences of the prince's departure. After mutely absorbing blame and moral censure on behalf of the absent bodhisattva, Kanthaka dies, thus nullifying and taking these negative emotions away. Though Chandaka, too, fulfills some of these functions, Kanthaka's animality, muteness, and death make him a more effective scapegoating vehicle.

The final step in this scapegoating process, I suggest, is to *reward* or *compensate* the scapegoat in some way — and this is brought about by Kanthaka's immediate rebirth as a deity in heaven. "As soon as he died," we are informed,

he was reborn among the gods of the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven.... He was a god of great supernatural power and enormous authority, and he surpassed the thousands of other gods who had been reborn there before him in the ten divine qualities — that is, divine lifespan, appearance, happiness, sovereignty, retinue, forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. (Senart 2: 190)

Thus, Kanthaka is assaulted with blame and criticism and suffers death as a result, yet he is also amply rewarded by an immediate rebirth in heaven. Here, we should observe that the quick death of an animal, followed by its immediate rebirth in one of the lower heavens of the Buddhist cosmos — usually as a result of giving rise to “faith” (*prasāda*) in the physical presence of the Buddha — is a very common motif in Buddhist sources from India and constitutes a standard way of depicting the highest spiritual attainment that one can gain within the body of an animal.⁴ While adhering to this common pattern, however, the sources pertaining to Kanthaka’s death and rebirth in heaven seem particularly concerned with the theme of *compensation*. In several sources, in fact, we later hear Kanthaka — now reborn as a deity — explicitly emphasize the causal connection between his role in the Great Departure and the fruit he now enjoys: “Because of that auspicious deed, I am now enjoying this fruit.... See how this pure deed succeeded for one who was only a horse!” (Senart 2:195) In such passages, we see how determined the tradition is to compensate the animal scapegoat. The same animal whose neighing was confusing or deceptive, who was blamed as a “vile” and “ignoble” beast, and who suffered starvation and death as a result now appears in a form that can confidently reassure us that he was perfectly willing to perform this role and enjoyed a more-than-adequate divine reward. Human language replaces muteness, and divine rewards make up for the abuse and mistreatment suffered earlier. Here, the scapegoating process has come full-circle and reached its satisfying resolution.

Kanthaka as Sacrificial Animal. In Kanthaka’s functioning as the bodhisattva’s scapegoat, there is a sacrificial logic at work, and Kanthaka can be likened to a *sacrificial animal* — one who is closely identified with the sacrificer and loses his life on the sacrificer’s behalf, allowing the sacrificer to undergo a profound transformation and often serving as a scapegoat for the sacrificer’s moral failings. This analogy with animal sacrifice is intended to be loose and suggestive only, for there is no explicit invocation of sacrifice within our sources. Nevertheless, in spite of Buddhism’s thoroughgoing condemnation of the pre-Buddhist Brahmanical Vedic tradition of animal sacrifice that

preceded it, it has been shown, time and again, that Buddhist discourse in India remained deeply indebted to the logic, imagery, and themes of Vedic sacrifice.⁵

Kimberly Patton has enumerated four cross-cultural features of the sacrificial animal, and it is striking to note the extent to which these four features, taken together, constitute an almost-perfect reflection of the concerns driving the depiction of Kanthaka. First, she notes, animals offered for sacrifice “must be ‘perfect’ according to certain ideologically determined categories: male, unblemished, and whole; they must be in the prime of life” (394) — which is reminiscent of Kanthaka’s physical description as a magnificent and powerful white stallion. Second, Patton notes, the animal victim must be depicted as a willing participant in the sacrifice and as assenting to its own demise; it must be “an active, even self-conscious ritual participant” and “never divested of agency and free will” (396) — just as we have seen to be the case for Kanthaka’s willing and conscious participation in the Great Departure. Third, the sacrificial animal is characterized by extreme *individualization* and *elevation* above all others of its type; by being chosen for sacrifice, it is uniquely removed from “a life among countless other domesticated animals” to become “a player in a sacred drama,” one who bears “a kind of charged individuality” (397) — features, as we have seen, similarly brought about by Kanthaka’s personal name and his status as a “co-natal” of the bodhisattva. And fourth, far from suffering a cruel and ignoble death, the sacrificial animal’s already semi-divine state “is often rendered permanent, and its eschatological future assured in a kind of glistening light” (401). Here, she cites the Vedic horse sacrifice or *aśvamedha* as her primary example, noting that according to Brahmanical Vedic texts, “the horse will dwell among the gods” and undergo a “spectacular apotheosis” by means of its sacrifice (401). Thus, a hymn from the *Rg Veda* directly addresses the sacrificial horse and asserts: “You do not really die through this, nor are you harmed. You go to the gods on paths pleasant to go on” (O’Flaherty 91-92; qtd. in Patton 401) — just as we see Kanthaka immediately reborn as a god in heaven who can confidently reassure us that he is happy with his reward.

All four features of the sacrificial animal enumerated by Patton, then, apply equally to the horse Kanthaka — and this is because, I would argue, a similar sacrificial logic is operative in both cases. Just as the animal in a Vedic sacrifice is closely identified with the sacrificer, so the same is true of Kanthaka’s close identification with the bodhisattva, who is sacrificing his former life and identity as a prince. Just as the animal in a Vedic sacrifice is elevated, individualized, consecrated, and made sacred prior to its death, with its death resulting in a powerful release of vital energy that either transforms the

sacrificer or purifies his misdeeds (or both) — so the same might be said of Kanthaka, whose death simultaneously allows the bodhisattva to annihilate his identity as Prince Siddhārtha, turn himself into a fully enlightened buddha, and expiate the guilt and blame he might otherwise incur for abandoning his worldly duties. The *practice* of sacrifice may be absent from our story, but the same basic logic is at work: Kanthaka, the Buddha's animal scapegoat, is sacrificed upon the altar of the Buddha's quest for buddhahood. Though he is, of course, amply rewarded for the role that he plays, the memory of the horse's pain still lingers. For it isn't Kanthaka the talkative *deity* who finally moves us. It is Kanthaka the *horse* — weeping, grief-stricken, refusing oats and honey, and mutely licking the bodhisattva's feet with affection.

Billboard for the Buddha: The Elephant Nālāgiri. Just as Kanthaka might be seen as a “double” of the Buddha at the very outset of his career, so another animal serves a similar function at the height of the Buddha's power. This is the cruel and fierce elephant Nālāgiri, sent forth on a rampage in order to kill the Buddha, yet instantaneously tamed and made docile by the enormous power of his presence. In the following, I will argue that Nālāgiri serves as a *billboard* for the Buddha's power and charisma. The Buddha's effortless and instantaneous taming of the maddened elephant Nālāgiri dramatically demonstrates to the cosmos at large his absolute mastery over the forces of nature, animality, and passion. Yet while Nālāgiri is thus dominated, vanquished, and reduced to the status of a helpless billboard, this billboard also shares in the identity of the one whose powers it advertises. The Buddha thus experiences both kinship and otherness in his relationship to the animal.

The episode involving Nālāgiri takes place within a larger cycle of stories involving the Buddha's arch-enemy Devadatta. According to various sources, Devadatta was the Buddha's cousin and joined the Saṃgha (the community of monks and nuns) shortly after it was established. His early career as a monk seems to have been exemplary, but over time, he grew more and more jealous of the Buddha's fame and charisma and became determined to replace the Buddha at the head of the Saṃgha. Eventually, this results in Devadatta undertaking three attempts to assassinate the Buddha. In his first assassination attempt, he dispatches a series of men to go and kill the Buddha, but all of them are overcome by the Buddha's majesty as soon as they approach him and end up becoming devoted lay-followers. In his second assassination attempt, Devadatta climbs to the top of a mountain and hurls down a great stone in the Buddha's direction. At the last minute, however, two lower mountain peaks magically come together to intercept the stone, and only a tiny fragment hits the Buddha. Finally, in his third attempt, Devadatta bribes the king's mahouts to get the fierce war elephant Nālāgiri intoxicated

on liquor and to set him loose on the road where the Buddha is walking for alms, confident that Nālāgiri will attack and kill the Buddha. But this attempt, too, is foiled when the Buddha unhesitatingly approaches Nālāgiri, suffuses him with waves of benevolence (*S. maitrī*), and reaches out his right hand to stroke the elephant's forehead, whereupon Nālāgiri is immediately tamed: he falls at the Buddha's feet, listens to a few words of the Dharma preached on his behalf, and becomes docile and nonviolent forever after. As a result of these many misdeeds, Devadatta is ultimately swallowed up into the lowest hell of the Buddhist universe.⁶

The episode involving the Buddha's confrontation with Nālāgiri thus takes place within a larger cycle of episodes, all of which allow the Buddha to demonstrate his overwhelming power and majesty. In particular, we should note the utter ease and effortlessness with which the Buddha foils the three attempts upon his life. In each case, the threat is neutralized immediately and with virtually no effort on his part. In fact, as the Buddha himself notes, "It is impossible, Monks, it cannot come to pass that a Buddha would lose his life by being attacked by another. Monks, Buddhas do not attain final nirvana by being attacked" (Oldenberg 2:193). Perhaps it is also significant that by means of these three attempts, the Buddha is shown to have mastery over *human beings*, the *world of nature*, and the *animal realm*, respectively. While the Buddha himself remains passive and serene, each one of these realms responds, willy-nilly, to the force of his presence, becoming a billboard for his extraordinary power.

Man Vs. Beast. Keeping this larger context in mind, let us take a closer look now at the nature of the Buddha's encounter with Nālāgiri. Throughout his lifetime, the Buddha encounters a great variety of men, women, animals, deities, and supernatural beings, and these encounters take many different forms — involving teaching, worship, friendship, patronage, and hostility. Yet the Buddha's encounter with the elephant Nālāgiri is not an ordinary or typical encounter, by any means. Instead, it is constructed and set up as a direct confrontation between Man and Beast.

The Buddha can be seen as the quintessential Man; in fact, he is referred to as the "Great Man" (*mahāpuruṣa*), one who brings to perfect fulfillment all ideal human qualities — qualities that define what it means to be human and that distinguish human beings from the brutish animal realm. Standing opposed to the Buddha as the quintessential Man is Nālāgiri as the quintessential Beast. Elephants, though often idealized in Buddhist literature and attributed with many noble and quasi-human qualities, are also one of the paradigmatic "wild" animals, associated with the forest, the jungles, and the

wilderness. Nālāgiri embodies these “wild” qualities to an extraordinary degree, for he is described as a “fierce, cruel, man-killing” elephant (Fausbøll 5:333-34), one who “approaches as if Death itself were attacking” (Horner 210). As he rushes toward the Buddha, he utterly destroys all signs of human civilization (such as houses, buildings, and gateways) and kills many people and other animals along the way. His entire body is “dyed with blood,” his eyes are “permeated by an inner blaze,” and he “devours [the remains of his victims] like a man-eating demon.” Significantly, at the time when this episode takes place, Nālāgiri is also described as “flowing with the juice of musth in seven places.” Musth is a periodic condition experienced by male elephants and characterized by soaring levels of testosterone, sexual passion, extreme violence and aggression, and a telltale secretion from the elephant’s temporal glands. The features of musth were well-understood in the elephant-lore of ancient India (known in Sanskrit as *Gaja-Śāstra*), and the elephant in musth is frequently used in Sanskrit literature as an image of uncontrollable aggression and sexuality (Sukumar 48-51). Not content with the level of ferocity available through the condition of musth alone, however, our sources also tell us that the mahouts have fed Nālāgiri abundant liquor to make him intoxicated, as well as striking him with spears and lances in order to further enrage him.

Nālāgiri is thus a perfect embodiment of brutish animality and passion, unchecked by any restraint and mindlessly driven forward by the natural impulses of sexuality, violence, and aggression — an extreme embodiment of the difficulty all animals experience in controlling and calming down their mental faculties. As such, he stands opposed to the Perfect Man represented by the Buddha — one who has restrained, suppressed, and finally eradicated all passions and afflictions in favor of civilized human qualities that need to be *cultivated*. Indeed, the Buddha stands at the very apex of the human’s ability to engage in conscious mental cultivation, whereas Nālāgiri is motivated solely by animal instinct, uncontrolled passions, and intoxicating drink. The confrontation between them — the confrontation between Man and Beast — is thus a direct contest between brute, animalistic passion and the human capacity for self-transformation.

The *animality* of Nālāgiri is thus central — and this is clearly recognized by the Buddha himself, who refers directly to Nālāgiri’s unfortunate rebirth “from an inferior animal womb,” as a result of which he “takes delight in killing others and destroying their lives” (Gnoli 2:189). Nālāgiri’s animality is also central for Devadatta, for in formulating his plan, he refers explicitly to the fundamental difference between human beings and animals:

No human being is able to approach the ascetic Gotama once they have seen his beautiful and majestic person. But the king has a fierce, cruel, man-killing elephant named Nālāgiri, who *knows nothing* about the virtues of the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha — and he will be able to kill him. (Fausbøll 5: 333-34, emphasis added)

Repeatedly referring to the elephant as one who “knows nothing” about Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha, the story emphasizes the lack of discriminative insight (*prajñā*) that Buddhist doctrine characterizes as most distinguishing the animal from the human, and forever condemning the animal to behavior driven primarily by passion (Schmithausen and Maithrimurti 87). Human beings endowed with *prajñā* and thus capable of *knowing* the virtues of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha — Devadatta suggests — could never go through with actually killing the Buddha (as he learned, no doubt, from his first attempt at assassination). It is in this sense that the contest between the Buddha and Nālāgiri can be seen as a contest between Man and Beast.

At the same time, however, we should further understand that this confrontation between paradigmatic Man and Beast is also a contest between nirvana and samsara. Nālāgiri can be seen as an embodiment of the forces of samsara, whereas the Buddha embodies the ability — belonging to human beings alone — to overcome the forces of samsara and attain the goal of nirvana. In fact, it is quite clear that the confrontation between the Buddha and Nālāgiri is a shadow-image of the Buddha’s original battle with Māra (a divine personification of death and desire) on the night of his awakening — or that which allowed him to attain nirvana in the first place (Bautze-Picron). Significantly, the figure of Māra — ruler and fundamental embodiment of the forces of samsara — is commonly depicted as riding upon an elephant in musth (Ramanathapillai), and he presides over troops that are characterized, first and foremost, by *animality* — described as having the faces of horses, buffaloes, asses, goats, rams, camels, deer, lions, tigers, panthers, bears, dogs, hogs, cats, ravens, cocks, vultures, eagles, and fishes (Johnston 2:192; Jones 2:364). Animality is thus used in the battle with Māra to represent the nefarious forces of samsara, which find their most potent expression in the maddened elephant in musth. In a further parallel with the Nālāgiri episode, the Buddha, in a famous gesture, defeats Māra by extending the fingers of his right hand and touching the earth as witness to his virtue and merit — just as he later tames Nālāgiri by extending his right hand and gently stroking the elephant’s forehead. And just as Nālāgiri responds to the Buddha’s touch by falling at the Buddha’s feet, so does Māra’s elephant “fall to the earth on his knees” (Fausbøll

1:74) at the moment of the Buddha's attainment of buddhahood. The contest between the Buddha and Nāḷāgiri is thus symbolic of the larger cosmic drama pitting the freedom of nirvana against the bondage of samsara. Yet it takes the particular form of *Man confronting Beast*.

In this contest between Man and Beast, between animalistic passions and human self-cultivation, between the forces of samsara and the human ability to attain nirvana, it is obvious who must prevail — definitively, completely, and instantaneously. Multiple versions of the story make this victory clear. According to one version:

Then the Blessed One suffused the elephant Nāḷāgiri with thoughts of benevolence. And the elephant Nāḷāgiri, permeated by the Blessed One's thoughts of benevolence, lowered his trunk, approached the Blessed One, and stood before him. The Blessed One stroked the elephant Nāḷāgiri's forehead with his right hand, and spoke to him in verse.... Then the elephant Nāḷāgiri took dust from the Blessed One's feet with his trunk, sprinkled it over his head, and shrank away, moving backward for as long as he could see the Blessed One. Then the elephant Nāḷāgiri went to the elephant stables and stood in his own stall. And in this way did the elephant Nāḷāgiri become tame. (Oldenberg 2:194-95)

In another version, the Buddha again suffuses Nāḷāgiri with benevolence and "summons him in a gentle voice," whereupon the elephant

opened his eyes, and when he beheld the beauty and splendor of the Blessed One, he felt a thrill. His state of intoxication was brought to an end through the power of the Buddha, and he lowered his trunk, shook his ears, and came and fell at the Buddha's feet. (Fausbøll 5:336)

Again, the Buddha speaks to him briefly and strokes his forehead, "and from then on, he became extremely gentle and was hostile toward no one" (Fausbøll 5:336). Similarly, in a third version, the Buddha suffuses the elephant with benevolence, "with his heart calmly pervaded by compassion," and the elephant,

the tendrils of his heart made soft by that suffusion of benevolence, became aware of the fault of anger within him. Unable to stand before the Blessed One, due to shame, he fell down with his head at the feet of the Blessed One, as if he were entering the earth. (Horner 212)

Again, the Buddha strokes his forehead with his right hand and preaches to him briefly, whereupon “that noble elephant attained discernment and became like the most well-trained disciple endowed with ethical conduct and good behavior. Thus did the Blessed One ... tame the noble elephant” (Ibid.).

The brute physical strength of the maddened elephant is thus no match for the Buddha’s virtue of benevolence (*maitrī*), assiduously cultivated over millions of lifetimes. The human ability to cultivate spiritual qualities such as benevolence and compassion is thus seen to prevail over the animalistic impulses of violence, sexuality, and aggression. Man overcomes Beast — and nirvana conquers samsara — in an effortless and spectacular display. Thus is human dominance over the animal world (and everything that it stands for) definitively proclaimed.

Elephant Vs. Elephant. The dramatic opposition I have thus far drawn between paradigmatic Man and Beast is complicated, however, by the contrasting *kinship* between humans and animals — or, in this case, the fact that animals in Buddhism are not solely the embodiments of brutish instincts and uncontrollable passions, but are, in fact, capable of some limited degree of reason, rationality, moral agency, and mental control (even if they do pale in comparison to human beings in regard to these abilities). Similarly, the Buddha himself, despite being the Ultimate Human Being, is not merely a “Great Man,” but is also frequently likened to powerful male animals — sometimes referred to, in fact, as a “Great Lion” (S. *mahāsimha*), a “Great Elephant” (S. *mahānāga*), or a “Bull of a Man” (S. *narāṛsabha*) (Powers). In specific regard to elephants, for example, the Buddha is frequently associated with a magnificent white elephant — his conception occurring when his mother dreams of a white elephant entering her right side — and is often metaphorically described as an elephant. Elephant imagery is pervasive in Buddhist literature, and the violent and passion-ridden elephant in musth (as embodied by Nālāgiri) stands at one end of a continuum that includes, on its other end, the noble and compassionate white elephant sometimes associated with the Buddha. In fact, as Rajmohan Ramanathapillai has noted, the Buddhist path of spiritual transformation can be envisioned as a sort of continuum of different kinds of elephants:

This continuum is illustrated with Mara’s musth elephant on the left (imperfection); earthly gray male elephants in the middle (potential to be tamed); and the perfect white elephant on the right. This image of a sacred white elephant embodying love and compassion illustrates the ... perfection toward which one must strive. (32)

The suggestion being made here, of course, is that in the contest between Human and Beast, the Beast is not something wholly “other” to the Human; in fact, it is really the Beast that lies within the Human himself that must be vanquished and transformed. The Buddha’s utter dominance over Nālāgiri is thus counterbalanced by a certain necessary kinship between them: both must be elephants.

This simultaneous parallelism and hierarchy come out clearly in the episode itself. Thus, in one source, when the mahout releases the fierce elephant against the Buddha, this is described as one elephant being released to pursue another elephant: “Then he sent that elephant, glorious among elephants ... to kill that other glorious elephant, the Elephant-Among-Sages” (Horner 210). Later on in the story, these two opponents are referred to as the “Buddha-Elephant” and the “Elephant-Elephant” (Horner 211). The two figures are obviously parallel — since both are “elephants” — yet the Buddha is insistent on asserting the superiority of one elephant over another. In one text, he says to Nālāgiri, “Elephant, do not mess with the Elephant[-Among-Men], for messing with the Elephant[-Among-Men], Elephant, leads to suffering!” (Oldenberg 2:194). In yet another source, the contrast drawn is between the “Buddha-Elephant” and the “Animal-Elephant,” and the Buddha states forthrightly: “Nālāgiri, you are an Animal-Elephant, but I am the Buddha-Elephant!” (Fausbøll 5:335-36).

The recognition of one “elephant’s” dominance over another — and thus, of a simultaneous kinship and hierarchy in humanity’s relationship to the animal — even becomes a marker for one’s commitment to Buddhism. For as the Buddha and Nālāgiri approach each other, huge crowds of people gather to watch. According to one source, “those among them who were non-believers, had no faith, and were of weak intellect” immediately assume that the huge and powerful animal Nālāgiri will easily injure the weaker human being. But “those among them who were believers, who had faith, who were wise, learned, and intelligent” understand that the human “elephant” will prevail, and joyfully think to themselves: “Soon, my friends, one elephant will come into conflict with another elephant!” (Oldenberg 2:194). In another source, the non-believers again assume that since Nālāgiri “does not know the virtues of the Buddha, [Dharma, and Saṃgha], he will destroy the golden-colored body of the ascetic Gotama and bring about his death.” But those who have faith confidently declare: “Today, for sure, there will be a battle between the Buddha-Elephant and the Animal-Elephant, and we will see Nālāgiri be tamed through the Buddha’s incomparable sport!” (Fausbøll 5:335). Those who have faith in Buddhism are thus depicted as understanding both the parallelism and the hierarchy between one elephant and the other. They know that Man and Beast

are co-existent, but also believe in Man's ability to overcome and dominate the Beast that lies within.

The human being's impulse toward simultaneous identification and dominance in relation to the animal is not unique to Indian Buddhism, but seems to be a common dynamic in many cultural contexts. Erica Fudge has described this dynamic through the insight that "anthropocentrism creates anthropomorphism" — that is, the desire to see human beings as central leads inevitably to contrasting human beings with animals, yet this contrast is only made possible by admitting a certain likeness between them. Speaking of early modern English culture, she observes that in writings dealing with the animal,

the animal is represented as the antithesis of the human. But in presenting the animal as the thing which the human is not — begging to be eaten, for example — writers give animals a status, that of beggar, which undermines the desire to make a clear separation between the species. To assert human supremacy writers turn to discuss animals, but in this turning they reveal the frailty of the supremacy which is being asserted. Paradoxically humans need animals in order to be human. The human cannot be separated because in separation lies unprovability. (4)

Fudge's insight allows us to recognize the Buddha's *dependence* upon Nāḷāgiri to showcase his own humanity and adds a certain sense of poignancy to their encounter. The Buddha's absolute mastery over the maddened elephant Nāḷāgiri is powerful and impressive, indeed. Yet it also suggests something about the frailty and fragility of the human project of attaining buddhahood — which finally depends, for its recognition, upon the miserable states of existence that surround it. The Buddha's dependence upon Nāḷāgiri becomes especially clear, moreover, when we consider his overwhelming concern with *public display*.

A Grand Public Spectacle. The Buddha's disquieting *eagerness* to confront Nāḷāgiri — which stands in contrast to the detachment one would ordinarily expect from him — is evident in several sources. In one source, for example, the Buddha's disciples, aware that the elephant has been let loose, urge him not to enter the city for alms but to remain within the safety of the monastery. In other words, why not avoid this dangerous situation altogether? The Buddha, however, insists upon entering the city and confronting the elephant. "Tomorrow," he declares, "I will tame the elephant Nāḷāgiri,

perform a miracle, and destroy the heretics!" (Fausbøll 5:334). On the following morning, moreover, he orders all of the monks residing in the eighteen surrounding monasteries — some five hundred monks altogether — to enter the city along with him, thus engineering a grand public procession through the streets of the city.

Once they enter the city and the monks see Nālāgiri rushing toward them, they again urge the Buddha to turn back, but the Buddha replies, "Don't be afraid, Monks! I am capable of taming Nālāgiri." At this point, a number of other people attempt to save the Buddha's life by offering to confront the elephant in his place — but the Buddha makes it clear that *he alone* must do the taming. A monk named Śāriputra, seeing himself as the "son" of the Buddha and observing that "when a duty arises for the father, it is indeed the burden of the eldest son," declares — "I alone will tame him!" The Buddha, however, sharply admonishes him with an aggressive statement of the absolute superiority of *his* power over that of his disciples: "Śāriputra, the power of the Buddha is one thing; the power of his disciple is something else altogether. Stop it." Eighty other senior monks make the same request, but the Buddha refuses them all. Finally, the Buddha's personal attendant Ānanda, "being unable to comply [with the Buddha's command] because of his powerful affection for the Teacher," yells out, "Let this elephant kill me first!" (Fausbøll 5:335). He throws himself in front of the Buddha and refuses to move, even after the Buddha has commanded him three times, whereupon the Buddha makes use of his supernatural powers to forcibly pluck Ānanda out of the way and deposit him back among the other monks. Clearly, the Buddha is concerned that *he alone* should confront the elephant.

These details make it clear that in addition to demonstrating Man's superiority over Beast, the Buddha is equally concerned with showcasing his absolute dominance over all other male disciples. There is a strongly *gendered* element to the scene, embodied by the Buddha's "macho" attitude and his aggressive belittlement of his male disciples' inferior powers. The Buddha is representative not so much of human potential as a whole, but of *male* humanity — he is the Ultimate Man, described in one text as "the Man, the True Man, the Great Man, the Bull Man, the Substantial Man, the Hero Man, the Elephant Man, the Lion Man, the Kingly Man ... the Chief Man, the Thoroughbred Man, the Foremost Man" (Senart 2:415).⁷ This Ultimate Man then goes on to demonstrate his protective powers over women and children, as well. For immediately following the failed interventions of Śāriputra and Ānanda, a mother carrying a baby on her hip and running away from Nālāgiri in a state of panic accidentally drops her baby in the path of the maddened elephant. The Buddha saves the baby by directly challenging Nālāgiri: "Hey there, Nālāgiri" — he yells — "They did not get you drunk

on sixteen pitchers of liquor so that you could seize somebody else; they did it so that you could seize me!" (Fausbøll 5:336). The Buddha *alone* — as Ultimate Man and Ultimate Father — *must* demonstrate his mastery over the maddened elephant.

Throughout this assertion of the Buddha's superior masculinity, there is also a strong emphasis on the presence of *spectators* and the element of *public display*. In one text, we are told that "people climbed up onto terraces, balconies, and rooftops" (Oldenberg 2:194) to watch the confrontation, and once the elephant is tamed, they honor the now-docile elephant "with fragrant garlands of flowers, sandalwood, perfumes, aromatic powders, ornaments, etc., and wave banners of cloth on all sides," while "the drums of the gods resound against the surface of the sky" (Horner 211). The drama of Man's instantaneous victory over Beast thus becomes a mass public spectacle and ritualistic display taking place in the very heart of the city. Far from edifying just a single animal, moreover, the Buddha's taming of Nāḷāgiri has far-reaching salvational reverberations that become famous in later Buddhist history. In one text, it is said that as a result of the taming of Nāḷāgiri, "eighty-four thousand living beings drank the nectar of immortality," whereupon the Buddha left the city "like a warrior who has won a victory" (Fausbøll 5:337)—and in another text, it is "ninety million living beings" (Trenckner, *Milindapañho* 349) who instantaneously attain nirvana. The taming of Nāḷāgiri thus takes on not only public, but perhaps even *cosmic*, proportions.

It is all of these elements taken together that lead me to view Nāḷāgiri not merely as a "double" of the Buddha, but more specifically, as a *billboard* for the Buddha's power, charisma, and masculinity. Through his instantaneous taming of Nāḷāgiri, the Buddha's absolute mastery and dominance over the forces of nature, animality, and passion are spectacularly displayed before an audience of cosmic proportions. At the same time, however, this billboard necessarily shares in the identity of the figure whose power it advertises: Man and Beast remain locked together in a symbiotic relationship.

Nāḷāgiri and the Spanish Bullfight. My interpretation of the Buddha's encounter with Nāḷāgiri has been inspired, in part, by Garry Marvin's classic analysis of the Spanish bullfight (*la corrida de toros*), which bears several striking similarities to the Nāḷāgiri episode. In brief, Marvin argues that the bull in a Spanish bullfight is a pure embodiment of Nature, while the human *matador* who confronts it is a pure embodiment of Culture. As an embodiment of Nature, the bull must be a *toro bravo* or "wild bull" — specially bred to possess the fierce and aggressive qualities of a good fighting bull and distinct from the ordinary domesticated bull subject to human control.

Moreover, the bull must never before have encountered a man with the cape — thus ensuring that the animal is free of any “training” or “learning” and is acting on instinct alone. In contrast, the *matador*, as an embodiment of Culture, is seen as the absolute epitome of Spanish cultural values — as reflected in his elaborate, gold-embroidered “suit of lights” (which emphasizes Culture through exaggeration), and his repertoire of highly controlled and stylized movements within the bullring. The meeting of *matador* and bull is thus not a meeting between an ordinary human being and an ordinary animal, but is instead constructed as an encounter between paradigmatic Man and Beast.

In the drama of the bullfight, the bull is removed from his own realm of Nature (the rural countryside) and brought into man’s realm of Culture; thus, the bullfighting arena (a symbolic town square) must always be in an urban location, never in a rural area. A direct confrontation between Man and Bull takes place, and — if all goes well — the man succeeds in controlling and finally killing the bull, thus demonstrating the superiority of Culture over Nature in a grand public spectacle that always involves the active participation and enthusiasm of a crowd of spectators. What do these spectators come to see? “In a sense,” Marvin observes, “the *matador* ... is a representative of humanity; he is a figure in whom key human qualities valued by this culture are epitomized, and it is those qualities the audience comes to see asserted” (142). In order for this display to be meaningful, however, there must be a real threat of *danger* to the man. Everybody in the audience knows that the bull is physically stronger than the man, and the only way the man can control and overcome the bull is, first, by using his human *intelligence* (which the bull lacks) and, second, by successfully suppressing his own animalistic instincts of fear and terror. “If the *matador* kills successfully he shows that he has not succumbed to the threat posed by the animal; he has dominated it and, through his mastery of it, triumphantly asserted his humanity” (141). Thus, the bullfight is “a cultural event which puts the definition of humanity ... in jeopardy precisely so that it may be dramatically reaffirmed” (141).

Though I cannot do justice here to the many details of Marvin’s analysis, I hope that its possible parallels to the Nāḷāgiri episode will be obvious. Nāḷāgiri’s status as an elephant in musth, further enraged by the use of intoxicating drink, runs parallel to the bullfight’s insistence on a specially-bred *toro bravo* who has never encountered a bullfighter before — both cases reinforcing the animal’s status as a pure embodiment of animal passion, unchecked by any training or restraint. Though it is perhaps more of a stretch to draw parallels between the Buddha and a Spanish *matador*, both figures do exemplify the human being’s unique ability to *cultivate* certain culturally-valued

qualities (such as benevolence and compassion in the case of the Buddha), as well as constituting paradigmatic embodiments of human intelligence and self-control. In both scenarios, we see an insistence on the confrontation taking place within the very heart of human habitation (the city), as well as in the presence of a large crowd of spectators. In both cases, as well, there is a necessary element of *risk*, with the spectators understanding that the Buddha might be killed, just as the *matador* might be gored. Thus, in both cases, we have an event “constructed in such a way that the imposition of human will is extremely uncertain because of the difficult circumstances; a situation which in turn generates tension, emotion and dramatic interest” (Marvin 131). If the situation does result in human victory, the cathartic effect upon the audience is thereby dramatically intensified — as attested by the “ninety million living beings” who attain nirvana.

The *gendered* aspect I have attributed to the Buddha’s contest with Nāḷāgiri is even more apparent in the Spanish bullfight. Marvin observes that “although ... the fundamental distinction in the arena is between human and animal, one cannot fully understand the *corrida* without understanding that it is a totally male-orientated event, and that the values which underlie it and give cultural sense to it are essentially masculine values” (142). Thus, *matadors* — like buddhas — must be men, and there is great ambivalence shown toward the few rare female bullfighters who exist. Likewise, the bull must also be male, even though females of the species (wild cows) are equally capable of showing the aggressive qualities of a good fighting bull. There is a strong feeling within the culture that the bullfight *must* pit one male against another — just as it is equally difficult to imagine Nāḷāgiri as a female elephant. Moreover, since domesticated male animals are generally castrated in order to make them more amenable to human control, the fighting bull, as a representative of pure Nature, must be left *un-castrated* — just as the elephant in musth is characterized by soaring levels of testosterone and sexual passion. Further suggesting the theme of male sexuality, the *matador* in Spanish culture generally has the reputation of a sexual playboy or lothario — yet he is also expected to refrain from sex in the period just before the bullfight, since the bravery he needs to face the bull is believed to reside within his testicles. Similarly, the Buddha’s permanent state of celibacy suggests the enormous male sexual potency he has been able to redirect into cultivating the spiritual qualities of buddhahood. Because the gendered aspect of the bullfight is so explicit and overt, it can help us to discern a similar dynamic in the Buddha’s confrontation with Nāḷāgiri — which is necessarily a contest pitting Male against Male.

Marvin's analysis of the Spanish bullfight is equally illuminating, however, when we consider the *differences* between the matador/bull encounter and the Buddha's confrontation with Nāḷāgiri. One difference is that the Nature/Culture, Body/Mind, or Human/Animal oppositions expressed so starkly in the Spanish bullfight are significantly weaker in the Buddha's encounter with Nāḷāgiri — for the Buddha, as we have seen, is himself celebrated for his powerful physicality, while animals in Buddhist thought possess elements of reason and rationality. This difference is reflected in the different outcomes characteristic of each scenario. While the matador expresses dominance over the bull by physically *killing* him, the Buddha expresses dominance over Nāḷāgiri by suffusing him with waves of benevolence (*maitrī*) — an auspicious mental quality that Nāḷāgiri, as an animal, is perhaps unable to cultivate on his own, but *can* ultimately benefit from with the help of the Buddha. Thus, rather than being vanquished and killed, Nāḷāgiri emerges from the encounter with a pacified mind and becomes “like the most well-trained disciple endowed with ethical conduct and good behavior.” Human dominance over the animal world here takes the gentler form of a compassionate infusion of ideal human virtues into the recalcitrant mind of the animal. Nevertheless, the basic dynamic of simultaneous kinship and otherness is still present.

One final aspect of Marvin's analysis of the bullfight that is highly suggestive when applied to Nāḷāgiri is the contrast he draws between the bullfight and another cultural context in which an animal is brought under control: the taming and training of a horse. In Spanish culture, the taming of a horse is referred to as *desbravando*, which literally refers to the “de-wilding” of the horse, or “bringing the animal under control, making it manageable and subjecting its will to that of humanity” (133). This “breaking” of the horse's will is then followed by the process of *domando* (“training”), which consists of training the horse to perform certain useful functions, such as accepting a saddle and harness, responding to the will of the rider, and so forth. This entire two-step process (*desbravando* and *domando*) is highly *gradual* in nature, occurring over a significant period of time. Moreover, it takes place within a restricted context (such as a ranch), rather than being displayed for public view. It is when viewed against this context that the special nature of the bullfight becomes clear. In the bullfight, *desbravando* and *domando* are dramatically condensed into a very short period of time, as the *matador* simultaneously breaks the will of the bull and exerts control to make the bull do exactly what he wants it to do — with the bull being killed once this process has reached a climax. This entire spectacle, moreover, is enacted *in public*, before an enormous crowd of spectators. In the bullfight, the cultural values implicit in the taming and training of horses are thus given dramatic expression in a highly potent and public form.

Exactly the same contrast can be drawn between the Buddha's taming of Nāḷāgiri and the gradual training of an ordinary monk — which is, in fact, sometimes likened to the gradual training of a horse. In one famous discourse, for example, the Buddha says to a man named Bhaddāli:

Suppose, Bhaddāli, that a skillful horse-trainer obtains a good thoroughbred horse. At first, he subjects him to wearing the bit. As he is being subjected to wearing the bit, the horse is restless, squirming and struggling because he has never been subjected to that before. But through constant and gradual practice, he comes to excel at it. When, Bhaddāli, the good thoroughbred horse ... has come to excel at that, then the horse-trainer further subjects him to wearing a harness.... [*In a similar manner, the horse-trainer teaches the horse to keep in step, go in a circle, drag the hooves, race, gallop, etc. — with the horse gradually getting used to each skill.*] The good thoroughbred horse, Bhaddāli, who possesses these ten qualities is considered to be worthy of the king, the possession of the king, the mark of the king. (Trenckner, *Majjhima Nikāya* 1:446)

The Buddha then compares this process to the training of a monk, saying that a monk who gradually comes to possess the ten qualities of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right discernment, and right deliverance becomes “worthy of offerings, worthy of hospitality, worthy of gifts, worthy of reverential salutations, an unsurpassed field of merit for the world” (Trenckner, *Majjhima Nikāya* 1:447). This discourse is not alone in making such a comparison; in fact, multiple discourses make similar comparisons between the gradual training of a horse and the gradual training of a monk.

It is against this larger context that the Buddha's confrontation with Nāḷāgiri takes on a greater significance: Unlike the ordinary process by which a Buddhist monk is only gradually brought under control in a step-by-step disciplinary process, the Buddha's taming of Nāḷāgiri presents the entire Buddhist path of self-transformation in a highly condensed and potent form. For as soon as he encounters the Buddha, Nāḷāgiri's will is *immediately* broken, he falls down at the Buddha's feet in complete submission, he engages in the proper ritualistic behavior (taking dust from the Buddha's feet and sprinkling it over his head), and he is instantaneously transformed into a “well-trained disciple.” Thus, while the everyday hard work of Buddhist self-transformation may normally happen gradually and behind the monastery walls, the Buddha's taming of

Nāḷāgiri broadcasts this achievement to the cosmos at large — a display made possible through the functioning of Nāḷāgiri as the Buddha's *billboard*.

Conclusion. In constructing the life-story of the Buddha, early Buddhist authors in India were faced with a number of competing and contradictory demands. On the one hand, the Buddha had to be depicted as an ordinary, ignorant human being (much like you or I) in order to make him into an accessible model of emulation and convince other people that the path he had followed to the eradication of all suffering was within the reach of every human being. But on the other hand, in order to be worthy of respect and veneration, the Buddha also had to be depicted as an Ultimate Human Being, free of any imperfection or taint. These and other competing demands create a tension in the Buddha's personality that constantly needs to be managed as the life-story proceeds. Buddhist authors in India display enormous creativity in negotiating this process successfully, whether through imagery, metaphor, human characters, or narrative tropes. As I have hopefully demonstrated, at least some of this burden is borne upon the backs of animals like Kanthaka and Nāḷāgiri, who serve as the Buddha's animal doubles and thus allow the larger life-story to draw upon both the *kinship* and the *otherness* that characterize humanity's relationship with the animal world (and with everything that animality stands for). Moreover, like draught animals laboring underneath the hot sun, these animal doubles are all the more effective because they are *mute* and operate silently. As Hoyt Long has noted, "as the animal 'other' has not the means to voice any objection, at least linguistically, it has proved all the more useful for the acquisition and reinforcement of stable notions of the human 'self'" (24).

Notes

1. This phrase is attributed to Thomas Berry (although without a specific citation) and serves as the epigraph to Waldau and Patton.
2. Buddhist literature features both speaking and non-speaking animals, but those who speak are most often limited to animals who are previous births of the Buddha. With ordinary animals, the assumption is that although they are sometimes capable of *thinking* in human language and *understanding* human language, they remain incapable of speech itself.
3. Interestingly enough, this is immediately followed by another episode (perhaps occurring at just the same time?) in which it is Chandaka's human voice that is misinterpreted by the animals, causing *them* to cry out in joy at the prince's return. Regardless of whether an animal's sounds are misinterpreted by human beings, or a

human being's language is misinterpreted by animals, both passages speak to the frustrating inability to communicate across the human/animal divide.

4. For a discussion of this common motif, see Appleton.
5. For a few examples of this argument, see Egge, Gummer, and Wilson.
6. For a convenient collection of passages from the Pāli Canon relating to Devadatta and translated into English, see Nanamoli.
7. For a study of the Buddha's masculinity, see Powers.

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