

Towards a Buddhist Social Anthropology

Will Tuladhar-Douglas

Abstract

This article attempts to advance both anthropology and Buddhist philosophy through a mutual critique strongly informed by recent advances in biology. It is proposed that Buddhism must abandon its pre-21st century understanding of the human as a single organism, in the face of biology's new understanding that all organisms are symbiotic; and that Buddhism's relational and biocentric logic can assist anthropology to reground itself in post-human and fully relational agency. A side effect is that Buddhism is shown to be the best presently available ground from which to practice both anthropology and biology.

My intention in this paper is to bring a post-Enlightenment academic discipline, sociocultural anthropology, into fruitful conversation with the Buddhist philosophy of persons, a more ancient discipline, in the hope of improving both. Anthropology and religious studies, as academic disciplines legitimated in a post-Enlightenment political system, have often been used by colonial powers as a tool to contain and limit the transformative power of Buddhist theory and practice. Here, instead, I hope to use Buddhist theory about persons (the Buddhist equivalent of Christian 'theological anthropology') to liberate sociocultural anthropology from some of its present discontents, especially those that emerge from its unquestioned inheritance of human exclusivism. When we have begun the work of unshackling anthropology, we will in turn discover that this conversation also asks that we decolonize Buddhist studies—that we dismantle the process by which 'serious' scholars in a global context are called upon to objectify Buddhism before beginning to study with, in, or through its many doctrines, insights and debates. No Scottish, American or French scholar is ever asked to justify why they think and write from the particular intellectual history that includes the classics in Greek and Latin, the Reformation, European Enlightenment, and establishment

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of modern nation-states; but any scholar hoping for a global audience who chooses to write from the ground of some other intellectual history does in fact have to explain and justify their beginnings, be they Thai, Japanese, Tibetan or Newar. Hence we also find that we may begin to liberate ourselves from a historicist trap that prevents us, Buddhist scholars of Buddhism and many other disciplines, from theoretical innovation and fresh ethical work. This might include condemning the appalling political forms that have recently emerged from the colonization of Buddhism, such as Buddhist bigotry and ethnic nationalism. My personal aspiration is that it opens the door to an authentic Buddhist environmental ethics, freed either from being a 'resource for ethics' or having to express itself in Western terms.

This paper is a thank-offering and memorial for the Nineteenth Supreme Patriarch. It was never my good fortune to meet him. When my family and I were unexpectedly marooned in Bangkok in 2012, we discovered that Wat Bovoranives, where he was still abbot, was an island of forest tranquility in the midst of a Bangkok that had grown in size, pollution and confusion. The conversations that took place in those months with colleagues in monasteries and universities—some of whom were indigenous Himalayan Newars—were a precious solace. We discovered, when I was invited to give a *dhamma-desana* in the Nepali language, that Wat Bovoranives had even become a sanctuary for the Burmese Nepali community. Now, I am hardly the first person to observe the capacity of Thai society to generate new and powerful conversations between Buddhist scholars and conservation activists—Don Swearer, Les Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, Susan Darlington, and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists all make this point in different ways—but I do hope that something stronger will emerge. We do need a genuinely Buddhist, international scholarship that eschews the sectarian tendencies inherited from European notions of religious identity, recognising and harnessing the converging and multiplying strengths of many distinct Buddhist intellectual histories from the several literary cultures of Southeast Asia, the Himalayas, East Asia and beyond as we engage with the ethical, philosophical and material crises of the twenty-first century.

The central project here is an attempt to draw Buddhist philosophy and sociocultural anthropology into a diffractive encounter. I am here drawing on Karen Barad's notion of *diffraction*, as opposed

to *reflection*, as a governing metaphor that indicates reading projects or disciplines through each other without privileging either, in full awareness of the political and material effects and contingencies of disciplinary boundaries. She writes, ‘the point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences but that *practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world*’¹ (Barad’s emphasis). This claim is commonsensical for Buddhists, who are well aware that awareness, the senses, and that of which we are aware are entangled and interdependent, and thus that training one’s awareness affects the world. We do not consider enough, though, that the way in which we know about Buddhism in an academic context is shaped by material traditions and in turn constrains or opens up new possibilities for what we might do as scholar-activists. For anthropologists working in the Western academy—and by attraction, those anthropologists from a variety of non-Western backgrounds who aspire to the Western style of academia and its associated material comforts—there are any number of inherited assumptions that constrain how we are able to think with our informants. One particular inheritance, the rule of human exclusivism, has come to be an increasingly difficult legacy for anthropology to insert into each study and reassert as a founding principle, and I hope to exploit this difficulty as the crack through which to achieve my refractive exercise.

In anthropology, the principle of human exclusivism means that anthropology is about *human* societies and *human* culture. Anthropology prides itself on the detailed, patient learning of the lifeways, rules, bodily habits, language, even the mental habits of another society through immersion. The process is often described as a kind of apprenticeship; the researcher (a human) goes to stay with a host community and accepts that they are themselves childlike in terms of the host culture. She struggles to learn correct physical and verbal etiquette for eating, walking, asking questions, behaving politely within or across genders, recognising authority and so on. Through learning the language and the proper physical decorum, or so the theory goes, the researcher-apprentice will learn to see the world in a manner somewhat like the way in which her host society does. This process is called participant observation, and while it is usually supplemented with interviews, questionnaires, listening to traditional stories, learning important craft skills and a range of other

¹ Barad (2007: 90).

formal techniques for discovering cultural patterns, the assumption is that the researcher will somehow observe herself as she changes to conform with the explicit and implicit norms of the society who is hosting her. Yet there are profound limits to this process imposed by the principle of human exclusivism. If anthropology is supposed to be about *human* society, what should the researcher do when the host society understand itself to be comprised of a wide range of persons that extends beyond the human in some respects, or—going the other way—refuses to regard all humans as persons? I do not think I am alone among anthropologists in having been told, with no insult intended, that I am not actually a person. So, too, many communities have kinship relations or ritual relations with people—crows, cows, possessing deities, mountains—who simply cannot be people according to the laws and customs that frame my university, its city, and the financial and legal transactions that bound my research. The usual answer is to relegate all the nonhuman persons to the domain of belief—this is Tylor’s foundational move—and the nonperson humans to the failures of an unenlightened society—and that judgement creates endless awkward moments in discussions about relativism. In this sense, the category of religion, especially as it is realised in the normative discipline of religious studies, is not a descriptive category but an instrument for defending the boundaries and privileges of a Euro-American worldview.

Yet within a number of subdisciplines across anthropology the oppressive, ethnocentric relegation implied in the notion of ‘belief’—what I have elsewhere called the ‘jail of religion’—has been challenged not just because it is morally bankrupt, but also because it is a serious hindrance to empirical data collection. On the one hand, where the locals in many, many communities see their society as comprised of a wide range of persons, then to impose a barrier at an arbitrary point in the field of persons does violence to the data. On the other hand, it has become clear from meticulous studies with a number of non-human communities (crows, whales, chimpanzees) as well as mixed human-and-non-human (monkey and human populations sharing a temple site, human bodies as sites of symbiosis) that neither culture nor consciousness are unique to humans. Indeed, the emergence of ecological and cultural diversity and patterns now seems deeply interdependent and entangled. Any attempt to draw a human/nonhuman line, for example, through the human organismal

response to the onset of an intestinal disease has to contend with the microbial flora in the human gut, without which the human host dies; the cultural processes by which which specific societies invest their infants with gut flora through, for example, fermented or rotted foods such as yoghurt and food sharing practices such as pre-chewing food for weaning children; the history and function that commensals and domestic animals and plants may play in these processes; the human discovery and invention of a wide range of kinds of medicine; and, most recently, the cultural, scientific, economic and political battles around the overuse of antibiotics, the human creation of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and the human creation of a whole range of diseases characterised by an inadequately rich or lost gut flora. At this point an insistence on human exclusivism becomes a millstone around the neck of anthropological research as well as an actual cause of suffering.

This is the crack opening up in the wall of human exclusivism. To use this as an opening through which to diffract anthropology and Buddhist psychology, though, we might want to ask what work the rule of human exclusivism does—why it is so dear a principle in liberal democratic states. Briefly put, it serves to define a basis for agency and culpability in law; but it is also closely bound up with the distinction between the secular and the religious that formed the basis on which European nations were able to end the wars that followed the Reformation and at the same time assert their superiority over colonized civilizations and societies. By defining the human as a special creature that had a dual aspect, a private aspect turned towards god and concerned with beliefs and a public aspect concerned with civic responsibilities (such as voting, holding office, serving on juries and in armies), economic production (using banks, earning wages, buying goods) and especially the production of knowledge (like money, guaranteed to be morally neutral through the internal division of the human), the special place of humans in creation was preserved—a key theological principle—and yet theology itself was apparently removed from the public sphere. Challenging human exclusivism is thus a threatening proposition—it reeks of fundamentalism, of ‘going native’, of missing the whole point of science—and this I think explains in part why I have encountered remarkable hostility on occasion to proposals to extend the persons that comprise the social of social anthropology to include other-than-human persons.

What sorts of person are there? In Euro-American thought—which might now be called the cosmopolitan normative model—there is only one kind of person and it can be located within concentric domains. The universe is comprised of different sorts of matter and energy. Some of that matter and energy circulates within complex self-organising systems, called life. Among living beings there is one special kind of living being, the human, that has a unique capacity for higher cognitive acts such as aesthetic experience, language, religion and so forth—and that is why only humans can be persons, but all humans are persons. There are some borderline cases, such as saints, ancestors, and perhaps a god, any of whom may have social agency or the capacity for ethical judgement, but all of whom are also held only to exist outwith the principles that give biology and psychology their scientific authority; and we will later see that there are some limited challenges to human exclusivism arising from biology and psychology.

For Buddhists, we can make a spatial model but it is not so neatly concentric. The edges of the model are the edges of *saṃsāra*; it is understood that it is possible to transcend the cycle of rebirth and redeath, but also that we cannot give any adequate account in language of what that might be like.² The entirety of *saṃsāra* consists of the world of insentient things, which comprise a sort of stage or container—the *bhājanaloka*, and the world of sentient beings who undertake actions and undergo reincarnations, called the *sattvaloka*. This is our first distinction.

Among sentient beings, there are many different kinds of rebirths, almost all of which can hear, understand, and respond to the preaching of the Dharma to different degrees. This traditionally includes a wide range of living things such as bugs, elephants, tree- or water- spirits, minor and major gods of more or less tranquil disposition, hell-beings and hungry ghosts, and many sorts of human. Neither plants nor microbes are included in the traditional list; and a modern apologist for Buddhism might or might not accept some of these kinds of birth as literally true. Hungry ancestors, for example, seem quite strange to some Scottish audiences but make perfect sense in Singapore or Bangkok.³ Among all these, the human rebirth is

² This does not preclude any number of poetic or performative strategies, such as the Vajrayāna notion of ‘taking the result as the path’.

³ I set aside here the proposal, current among some ‘secular Buddhists’, that rebirth as a whole is just a myth. It seems to me a rather timid over-accommodation in order to

one of three 'higher' rebirths, and it is special for two reasons. First, humans are particularly receptive to the Dharma because they are balanced between pleasant and unpleasant experience; and second, *only* humans can ordain as nuns or monks. It is perfectly possible for non-humans to be Buddhist—to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha (if it exists at that particular moment)—but they cannot become nuns or monks. This, then, is our second distinction.

Among those who do take the refuges, there are particular humans who, by taking up vows such as those around renunciant ordination as nuns or monks, become fields of merit for others. While these individuals do not necessarily attain any particular liberation at the moment of taking their vows, they do function differently than other sentient beings with respect to karma. They are both held to a higher standard of behaviour (and suffer more profound consequences if they waver), and also serve to liberate other sentient beings from undesirable rebirths through teaching the Dharma and through the transfer of merit. It is at this point that the Buddhist system ceases to be concentric, for the subsequent rebirths of those who have been nuns or monks often do take place as non-humans. While Theravāda texts describe a fairly orderly progression through higher rebirths to release for such people, the Mahāyāna picture is much more complicated; bodhisattvas may move among the ways of birth depending on need and postpone their release indefinitely. Moreover, although textual norms suggest that the formal rituals of ordination as a nun or a monk are, or create, the conditions whereby there is a change in the operation of karma that makes a field of merit, ethnographic and historical evidence suggests that a wide range of Buddhist renunciants and religious experts who may or may not have taken traditional monastic vows act as fields of merit.⁴ This domain—the domain of reincarnating fields of merit—is a fascinating and specifically Buddhist problem but an attempt at its elucidation would not contribute to the

achieve credibility in the face of secular ideology which, as Asad and others have shown, is intimately linked with specific Abrahamic theologies.

⁴ Two examples are (1) the various orders of women ascetics in Theravāda culture areas and (2) non-monastic teachers in Indo-Himalayan Buddhism, such as the South Asian Mahāsiddhas, Newar Vajrācāryas and Nyingma or Kagyu *sNgags pa*. All of these are humans who see themselves as bound by vows and who act as fields of merit, but who might be excluded using a stringent definition. For a good ethnographic discussion of the perception of fields of merit between Thai *bbikku* and *mae chii*, see Falk (2007), especially chapter 6 and p. 152 and 155.

problem presently before us. Hence, though it forms a useful third distinction, and its importance will become clear below, we will not delve into its details here.

In what follows, we will explore and compare these concentric models; but in each case we will have cause to ask how we might improve our understanding of these categories. In so doing, I hope to expose and break the implicit bonds between sociocultural anthropology and Christian theological anthropology: this is the project of re-grounding the social science of anthropology in other possible anthropologies, beginning here with a Buddhist anthropology. As we will see, this refraction also requires us to rethink long-accepted Buddhist definitions of ‘sentient being’ that are no longer coherent.

To begin with, let us explore the boundary around living things. There is a trap here, that of presuming a dichotomy between Buddhist thought and ‘Western’ science, that I wish to avoid. As Pamela Asquith⁵ has shown, Japanese scientists working outwith the Enlightenment intellectual heritage nonetheless do good science and I have certainly had the privilege of working with ecologists and biologists from Thailand, Nepal and elsewhere who saw no irresolvable conflict between experimental biology and their own assumptions, inherited from quite different intellectual traditions, about the nature of life and reincarnation. Thus the terms of our comparison here are, on the one hand, a very recent and emerging scientific consensus on the domain of life itself and some reflections on the occurrence of sentience across that domain, and on the other a normative model derived from canonical sources for mainstream Buddhism. As we will see, they each have something to learn from the other.

Within Buddhism, the entire world of transmigration falls into two parts: the social world of sentient beings (*sattvaloka*) and the tables-and-chairs realm within which they experience rebirth (*bhājanaloka*).⁶ Already here a major difference opens up: for Buddhists, there are no insentient beings, no mindless life that simply breeds. All sentient beings are possessed of intentions and faculties; all sentient beings inherit a context for their actions from past karma, and with their intentional acts at the present moment generate new frameworks for the future. This contrasts to the post-Enlightenment view that

⁵ Asquith (1983, 1986, 2002), Asquith (2002).

⁶ Rahula et al. (2001: 82) यश्च सत्त्वलोको यश्च भाजनलोकः कर्मक्लेशः जनतिः कर्मक्लेशाधपितेयश्च सर्वमुच्यते दुःखसत्त्वम् (Abhidharmasamuccaya, II.1.1).

posts a potentially vast domain of living things, most of whom have little or no capacity for intentional action but rather act on ‘animal instinct’. In a biology class, a sentence such as ‘the wasp chooses to paralyse the spider for the sake of her children’ would be criticised as anthromorphism—the inappropriately sentimental imputation of human attributes to a dumb beast.

The *sattvaloka/bhājanaloka* distinction is comparable to the distinction between actors and the stage; the drama of enlightenment happens for and through the actors, but in a theatre. The relation between the two depends on shared karma; in brief, karma generated and experienced in common gives rise to consensus reality, including many elements of the nonliving and some aspects of the social, while unshared karma affects the lives of particular living beings.⁷ The question of what natural types fell into the domain of sentient beings and what natural types constituted the container realm was argued largely in terms of faculties (*indrīya*), a term which includes both senses, such as touch, sight or thought, and also capacities such as the capacity to move. This is a very different division to the division between living and nonliving that we now take to be an obvious feature of the world around us. The earlier Buddhist textual sources eventually settled on a position that there were some developing, reproducing things that were nonetheless not sentient and not part of the round of rebirths. The clearest example, from these early sources, of this category is plants.

Schmithausen⁸, and following him Findly⁹ have reviewed the evidence for the location of plants in early Buddhist texts. Findly focusses on the possibility that plants are single-sense-endowed sentient beings that, regardless of the restrictions imposed by the canonical sources, nonetheless deserve consideration in the karmic narrative. Schmithausen’s studies form part of a longer meditation on the resources available in early Buddhist texts for environmental philosophy. Indeed, in his writing he almost always uses the terms ‘sentient’ and ‘living’ together, and it is clear he (as also Findly) finds

⁷ Rahula et al. (2001: 118–9) साधारणं कर्म कतमत् । यत्कर्म भाजनलोके नानावधिं वकिल्लं करोति ॥ असाधारणं कर्म कतमत् । यत्कर्म सत्त्वलोके नानवधिं वकिल्लं करोति ॥ अपि च सत्त्वानामन्योन्याधपितेयं कर्मापि । येन कर्मबलेन सत्त्वानामन्योन्याधपित्पित्तयः प्रोक्तः । तेषामन्योन्याधपित्तिलतसत्तदप्युच्यते साधारणं कर्म । (Abhidharma-samuccaya, II.1.2).

⁸ Schmithausen (1991).

⁹ Findly (2002).

the status of plants as in some sense alive but definitely not sentient hard to accept. Nonetheless, after a careful review of the sources he determines that while plants may well have been regarded as living beings in some early texts and communities, a consensus developed that was quite firm by the time of the commentaries that plants were not properly part of the *sattvaloka* but rather belonged to the *bhājanaloka*. He speculates that this was, perhaps, in contradistinction to the Jains who do award sentience and rebirth to plants (on which see below) and did thus forbid a number of foods and activities, and that this categorisation formed a vital part of the ‘middle way’ that appealed to a wide range of potential lay supporters. The range of terms in the discussion is complex; are plants sentient beings (*sattva*); are they animate creatures with vital breath (*prāṇin*); are they unmoving but animate—and perhaps also sentient? Schmithausen neatly catches the divide between earlier and later sources, where he finds an early list of categories of animate beings, beginning with plants, at Sn 600ff with a later commentary that puzzles over why the list would have begun with what is clearly not an animate being.¹⁰ By the time of the *Sphūṭārtha* subcommentary to the *Abhidharmakośa* the line is drawn quite sharply; the pair *sattva* and *asattva*, sentient being as opposed to non-sentient being, is glossed as *prāṇi* and *vanaspatyādi*, creatures with vital breath, as opposed to forest trees and the like (*Sphūṭārtha* ad AKB 35ab).¹¹

This is an important distinction and worth chewing over for a moment: if we draw the line between the domain of sentient beings and the container realm in this way—if there are developing, changing, reproducing organisms who are not also sentient or animate beings—then certain consequences follow that we may not wish to accept. No sentient being can be reborn into the category of nonsentient living being,¹² and these living things have an existence comparable to the Materialist’s view of all life: it begins, endures and ends. Second, because these living things are part of the container realm, their existence and qualities are a result of the collective karma of sentient beings;¹³ they have no more independent existence than a crisp packet. There are other ways to draw the line between the sentient and the non-sentient; a common-sense answer that I often get from students is that the

¹⁰ Schmithausen (1991: 64–5).

¹¹ Vasubandhu (1981).

¹² Findly (2002: 253).

¹³ Findly (2002: 254).

sattvaloka contains all creatures who can experience *dubkha*. This latter criterion has some support in early Buddhist texts as there are Vinaya rules against injuring single-faculty creatures and the contradiction between the two formulations forms the substance of Findly's article.

I suggest that this is an area of Buddhist doctrine that warrants constant revision as biologists learn more about the actual processes of life within species and communities that are very unlike us. Were plants, for example, to be shown to have complex sensory capacities, the ability to communicate with each other and with other plants, and to participate in forward planning with other organisms against food shortages, our understanding of plants as not-particularly-sentient would have to be revisited—and that is exactly what we now know to be true.

Studies of individual plants and forest communities have, in the past three decades, shown that plants sense and respond not only to light and gravity, but also to attack by herbivorous insects, and that they communicate by airborne chemical signals with nearby plants of their own or other species about threats.¹⁴ Moreover, healthy topsoil comprises a rich community of fungal hyphae and plant root systems in a tight symbiotic relationship that allows for storing and redistributing scarce resources, so much so that some biologists now propose to use free-market economics as a tool for analysing the complex 'bargaining' among plants and mycorrhiza.¹⁵ A recent study¹⁶ has proved conclusively that these networks carry signals about insect threats between plants of the same species. What we think we know about the existence, diversity and inherent capacity of lifeforms is under constant revision, and because Buddhism generally takes an inclusive view towards the scope of rebirth, these discoveries have strong implications for Buddhist theories about rebirth, agency and ethics. In short, it behooves Buddhist philosophers to rewrite some foundational assumptions and include plants within the *sattvaloka*.

Yet the problem is not so easily solved. Schmithausen's detailed study of the status of plants dwells on the historical question of whether plants are sentient beings, but a different approach to the same question would be to ask if it is possible to be reborn as a plant.

¹⁴ Dicke (2003).

¹⁵ Fellbaum et al. (2014).

¹⁶ Babikova et al. (2013).

Here the conceptual difficulties of a plant rebirth show up. An annual herb has a discrete, short life: seed, flower, seedhead, death, and then from the scattered seeds in the earth new herbs emerge after the next rains—a model which is used by Buddhists to explain the working of karma. A fruiting tree grows from a seed, flowers, and yields fruits that in turn contain seeds that make new trees while the parent is still alive. Yet fruiting trees such as the Bodhi Tree (an instance of *Ficus religiosa*) as well as many other plants can also be broken up and reproduce asexually. Both as part of normal reproduction and also through human intervention, plants can reproduce clonally, yielding multiple copies of an original plant that then live on independently, but in parallel. This is the process by which a cutting of the Bodhi Tree was taken to Sri Lanka where it is still said to flourish. Early Buddhists would also have been aware (without the concept of a ‘genetic clone’) that some kinds of bamboo form extensive clonal clumps that can extend across an entire forest, all blooming and dying at the same time. These are not life trajectories that fit easily with the neat sequence of birth, death, rebirth that is used, for example, as part of traditional explanations of the twelvefold chain of dependent origination across three lives. For Jains, this partibility is not a challenge; in her lively discussion of plant and animal rebirth narratives, Appleton remarks on the Mahāvīra’s prediction of the future lives of ‘a Sāl tree, a branch of a Sāl tree and a branch of an Umbara (Uḍumbara?) tree’ contained in the *Bhagavatī*.¹⁷ The two branches each had their first incarnations as whole trees,¹⁸ suggesting that moving back and forth between partial and entire plants made sense to the Jains—though there is no suggestion that one could be reborn as a dog’s liver, for example, which clearly could not survive and reproduce on its own. Hence, while the evidence in support of the sentience of plants weights in favour of changing the basic assumptions of Buddhism, in fact the actual change requires that we regard reincarnating beings as, in some cases, partible.

Recent developments in our understanding both of the scope of life, and the interactions across scales among different living beings, make this move to partibility the most elegant solution to a very complex problem. A very new set of challenges to the traditional Buddhist model emerge when we consider the multi-organismic composition of a human, or indeed any almost other organism, that has emerged

¹⁷ Appleton (2014: 38).

¹⁸ Deleu (1996: 211).

from the study of bacterial symbiosis. While a newborn human has very few organisms living inside their intestines, by the time they are a year old they will have a flourishing ecology comprised of millions of bacteria (as well as some single-cell eukaryotes and even some archaea) distributed across dozens of species, without which normal human digestion cannot happen.¹⁹ The sheer quantity of organisms involved is extraordinary; 'a human harbours a climax population of $\sim 10^{14}$ bacterial cells [and] can host 10^5 – 10^6 bacterial generations per human generation'.²⁰ The range of symbioses across living things is only just now being explored; bacteria themselves have bacteria living within them. Basic theories of organismal function are transforming: the theory of evolution has had to be modified to take into account horizontal gene transfer mediated by microorganisms, and even our understanding of how our bodies respond to disease now includes a recognition that in some cases human gut bacteria orchestrate the actions of own immune system in response to pathogens.²¹ These tiny organisms reproduce, and hence adapt to selective breeding pressures, in hours, not decades; and in simple numeric terms, they comprise the vast majority of the genetic diversity within our bodies. How they are passed to offspring is as yet not well understood, though it involves contact with the skin, milk, and mouths (at least) of parents, and quite probably among humans includes an element of transfer through foods prepared with the help of microorganisms such as yoghurts and beers.

The domains of life and our understanding of the biochemical and social interaction among lifeforms have radically expanded in the past fifty years. The most fundamental taxa into which life is organised now fall into three broad domains: the Archaea, the Prokaryotes, and the Eukaryotes, the last of which contains all plants, animals, algae and fungi.²² The very existence of organisms in the Archaea was unsuspected until the late 20th century, when whole ecologies were discovered living around deep sea thermal vents that depended on a completely different metabolic and energy pathway from that which we still assume to be 'normal', the chain beginning with solar energy and plant photosynthesis, passing by way of herbivores to carnivores

¹⁹ Cho & Blaser (2012: 262).

²⁰ Ibis.

²¹ Round & Mazmanian (2009).

²² Woese et al. (1990): Viruses remain enigmatic: they interact by necessity with living organisms at the cellular level, yet are not in themselves alive. For biologists, they post the same kind of category problem as the plants in early Buddhism.

and finally scavengers and decomposers.

We now have strong evidence for sociability and signalling among microbes, creatures far too small to have figured in the early Buddhist textual sources. We know that humans and other animals—especially ruminants—contain, and depend on, a significant and diverse population of microbes scattered throughout their bodies; the total genetic complement of a healthy human, for example, is mostly bacterial, yet we do depend on the adaptability of our microbial population to digest food and respond to disease. At the cellular level, fundamental components of the eukaryotic cell (most famously the mitochondrion) are the result of a symbiotic relationship between single-celled organisms yielding, eventually, a single organism—and higher organisms exhibit a similar multi-scaled symbiotic complexity. Even at the genetic level, the stable boundary between species is challenged by lateral gene transfer between taxonomically distinct species. We know much, much more about the astonishing variability of life through evolutionary time on this planet. We have extended our biochemical investigations to include spectral analysis of the planets orbiting other stars,²³ and there is considerable speculation as to the existence of life, even intelligent life, away from our planet.

Curiously, although the modern scientific worldview has extended the reach of life far beyond the imagination of the early Buddhist (or Jain) writers, it still assumes that sentience is an extremely rare property. There is now at least a debate as to whether a few species other than humans (dolphins, apes, crows, octopi) have an unusually high level of intelligence, that intelligence is scattered across a range of biological taxa, or even that some nonhuman species have consciousness. Behaviours such as play, which suggest strong sociability, have been described across a very wide range of animals²⁴ and there has been a move to formally declare consciousness as a property of some non-humans²⁵—a declaration which some found excessive, and others timid beyond belief.²⁶ There is no suggestion, though, that crows or bonobos might ever actually be scientists (or anthropologists); while the science that documents the diversity and capacity of living things is expanding rapidly, there is little sense that

²³ Salerno et al. (2007).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Low et al. (2012).

²⁶ Bekoff (2012).

this might ever encroach on the exclusive authority of humans to describe and define life.²⁷

I think I am on solid ground when I suggest that there are very few Buddhists, whether traditional experts, university academics, or lay practitioners, who would now define the realm of living things without recourse to the criteria of modern biology. Bacteria, life in parts of the world inaccessible to humans such as the deep ocean, macro- and micro-symbiosis, and extraterrestrial life are all pertinent topics. Yet the distinction between the merely living and the sentient remains a theoretical and practical challenge for Western biology and ethics. Could constructive Buddhist philosophy make a useful contribution here, or should we rather be even more timid than before? Has the grey area between 'the living' and 'the sentient' widened to include not only plants but also microbes, fungi, and indeed the thriving internal ecologies that are necessary for us to live? That, I think, would be both poor philosophy and bad science. Rather, we should take a properly Buddhist view informed by interdependence and embrace the widest possible domain of life.

At the same time we should recognise the philosophical challenge posed by the extraordinary symbioses among living things. What does it mean, for example, to claim that *tulkus* choose their subsequent births if those births involve not a single organism but billions? We must even more firmly wield the sword of Buddhist philosophy against the notion of an autonomous individual being both at the psychological *and at the biological* level. Buddhism has at its core a well-articulated bundle theory of psychology that accounts for experience, causality, history and sociability without recourse to an atomic person; and this theory is an excellent beginning for a theoretical account of how we can act as 'one person' when we are both psychologically and biologically irreducibly multiple. Buddhism alone among the world's great intellectual traditions already has a toolkit for understanding how what appears to be a single person is in fact a bundle of processes; we must now draw on that resource to build a theory that lets us understand how what appears to be 'one person' is in fact billions of organisms acting together. Such a view would recognise that each apparently individual *sattva* is porous; it depends on others for the illusion of a self and the arising of the *skandhas* as well as for

²⁷ The only imaginable exception is in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

digestion and metabolism. This move greatly expands the range of beings whom we acknowledge as taking part in the production of what seem to be individual awareneses, and it could also provide an account of the birth, death, and rebirth of persons in a plant-rebirth that does not get caught out by the problem of partibility. However, this approach privileges the problem of interdependence over the problem of reincarnation; how we will explain rebirth when each birth actually requires symbiosis is a new, and interesting problem that remains to be solved.

The second of our domains is a messy business. Buddhist texts repeatedly emphasize the great good fortune that is a human rebirth, using metaphors such as that of the turtle and the ring.²⁸ It is the only kind of birth that balances discomfort and ease in such a way as to focus one's mind on suffering while offering the possibility of reflecting on the origins of suffering and perhaps even undertaking formal Buddhist vows (*prātimokṣa*). Yet both the textual and the anthropological evidence suggest that what 'human' means in Buddhist texts and societies—certainly in the Himalayas and Southeast Asia, and arguably elsewhere—is substantially different from the universal and essentialised human-ness that Euro-American anthropology inherits from the Reformation and Enlightenment. In this section, I will explore the edges of the human rebirth in authoritative Buddhist texts and social rituals in some Buddhist societies, and for comparison, the same as reflected in British laws and rituals, using two sites of comparison: rituals and norms around the death of children, and texts about nonhumans who cannot join the Saṅgha.

It is possible to explore the edges of the human in a way that throws sharp light on the distinction between particular British and Asian ritual boundaries for personhood in humans. Such an investigation reveals a rather different aspect of the human rebirth: it is gradually attained, not acquired through the simple fact of being born. There is ample anthropological evidence to show that personhood in Himalayan and Southeast Asian Buddhist societies is not an automatic property of human bodies. Rather, it is attained stepwise through rituals performed during childhood, managed through rituals across adolescence and adulthood, and dispelled at no small risk as it persists after death. This blurred boundary around the properly human is most

²⁸ See, for example, Mātṛceta's Śatapañcāśatka I.5.

apparent at the ends of human existence, around the time of birth and death; for that reason, many of my ethnographic examples will focus on rituals around death during childhood, both in Europe and among Buddhist societies in Asia, as this unfortunate event happens to combine entrance and exit to the human state. Having considered the messy edges of the human state, we will return to look at those non-humans who do nonetheless benefit from the teaching of the Buddha or the Saṅgha.

The death rituals of very young children in the Himalayas show that they are not fully human. Ramble reported that infants in Lo Mustang who die before they have had their mother's milk are buried with little ritual²⁹ and Ben Campbell reports a similar minimal ritual handling for dead infants among Rasuwa Tamangs whose bodies are left in caves (personal communication). Gellner, working with Lalitpur Newar Buddhist priests, learned that they buried newborns anywhere conveniently out of the way, buried small infants in a special place, but after three months cremated the child.³⁰ For Newars, I have been told that the boundary is marked by the ritual of naming; before naming, a child is buried but afterwards they are cremated. Children who have not yet had their rice-feeding ritual (around six months) are not allowed to offer *pūjā*—that is, they are on their way to being people and will be cremated, but they're not yet competent to perform even the simplest rituals themselves.

A specific asymmetry caused by this gradual attainment is demonstrated by the ritual in middle-hills and lowland Nepalese societies of Younger Brother Worship (the ritual is common to many communities, not just Buddhists). In a family with only daughters, the birth of a son is a source of happiness for the daughters as they will be able to perform Younger Brother Worship two days after Lakṣmī Pūjā (usually in September or October). For Newars, this ritual comes immediately after Mha Pūjā, the self consecration that is the first ritual of the new year. However, in a family where a son is still a newborn at that time—before he acquires a name—he cannot be worshipped; his sisters will have to wait a year to perform the ritual. By the same logic, a new younger brother who has a name but has not yet eaten rice can be worshipped, but cannot in turn offer worship to his sisters until the

²⁹ Ramble (1982: 343).

³⁰ Gellner (1993: 208).

next year when he both has a name and has eaten rice. This sequential attainment to personhood is, we might observe, intrinsically gendered: the rituals and relations all create and locate boys and girls, not people regardless of their gender.

This stepwise attainment of human status contrasts sharply with the personhood of infants in Euro-American countries. The right and obligation to have a name, to be recognised and registered in government records as a person, is guaranteed even for an abandoned, possibly preterm, stillborn—and the need to uphold that right can involve all those around, including total strangers. The United Kingdom and Scottish governments have webpages dedicated specifically to the problem of registering still births. Under Scottish law³¹ the parents must register a stillbirth with three weeks, though if they are unable to do so, the obligation then passes to relatives of the mother or, if they are legally married, relatives of the father; then to the person who was living where the stillbirth happened so long as they were aware of it; and finally to any person who was present when it happened. The necessary connection of the stillbirth with its mother's kin, but only by marriage with its father's kin, is the only element of gender here. It neither remarks nor creates any gender for the dead child; it is only that being related to the *genitor* does not carry the legal obligations of being related to the *pater*.

Outwith Scotland, the law governing England and Wales says a stillbirth should be registered within six weeks.³² Moreover, at the end of the list of those who may register a stillbirth we find a final category not present in Scotland: 'the person who found the stillborn child, if the date and place of the stillbirth are unknown'. The poignant images summoned up thereby occlude the astonishing extension of responsibility conveyed in these words. In short, any citizen who happens to discover a stillbirth has an implied duty to take up minimal kinship—becoming a secular godparent, if you will—with the unregistered, unborn, undead child so as to sort out their personhood and settle the case. No fuzzy borders are allowed: any human must become a named person, even if they were never completely alive, so as to be properly dead. One wonders if an suspected illegal immigrant to the UK would be granted some brief amnesty if they were to report

³¹ National Records of Scotland n.d.

³² UK Government n.d.

and register an abandoned stillbirth, or if they would nonetheless be imprisoned and deported.

In fact this legal requirement in Scotland and England reflects a theological debate that was central to the Reformation, and the legal position reflects this controversy and follows the position of the reformed churches but not the Anglican or Catholic ritual order. The theological, and canon legal, position in the Catholic church and the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, was that unbaptised infants, excommunicates, and suicides could not be buried in church graveyards. In Ireland, for example, there were specific kinds of place such as *cillin* where unbaptised infants and stillbirths were buried.³³ By contrast the Kirk in Scotland argued that baptism as a ritual did not actually change the status of an infant but rather confirmed their status which was derived from their parents and the nature of a universal church.³⁴ Hence the tremendous anxiety in English and Scottish law to insure that an infant, or even a stillborn, must have a ritual to assure civil status reflects quite closely a theological anxiety that was key to the formation of British civil society—but the presumption that all infants are entitled to equal status and status equal to adult persons is characteristic of the Enlightenment theory of persons. That the insistence on doctrinal equality for infants did not quite translate to equal treatment is shown by the custom in the Northeast of Scotland, reported up to the 1980s, that a coffin carrying the body of an unbaptised infant could not pass through the gate of the kirk; rather, their coffin had to be passed over the wall of the graveyard, a ritual described as both horrifying to watch and deeply shameful for the family of the child.

No further ritual beyond naming (whether through secular registration, or through baptism) is required to create a member of society in England or Scotland. In Himalayan societies, though, there are several successive rituals that are required to completely form a ritually competent person; and the death rituals for a child as they evolve look more and more like the rituals for an adult death. Yet the stakes may, in some cases, be much higher. For Newars, the most dangerous kind of death that can occur on the way to personhood is the death of a girl during the *barba* ritual. Boys and girls undergo

³³ Finlay (2000).

³⁴ Assembly et al. 1773.

distinct sequences of coming-of-age rituals; for girls, there are two pre-adult rituals which they undertake: first, fictive marriage to a *bel* fruit (the *ibi* ritual), and then seclusion ending with fictive marriage to the sun god (the *barba* ritual), ideally before the onset of menarche. The former is a day-long ritual, the latter a twelve-day seclusion; they have been thoroughly documented among certain communities in Bhaktapur.³⁵ *Barba*, in particular, is a fearsome ritual for girls on the edge of fertility, involving household spirits (*khyāḥ*) visiting the girls during their extended liminal seclusion.

For Kathmandu Newars, if a girl dies during this liminal ritual that sits perilously between nubility and fertility, her body becomes a terrifying presence that destroys the household. The corpse must be lowered directly to the earthen foundation of the house without touching the stairs—this involves cutting holes in the floorboards—and then buried under the house, which will thereafter be haunted. A schoolyard acquaintance, not a Newar, told us the story of how she had once made the mistake of renting a beautiful old Newar home at a bargain price without inquiring into its history. Night after night she found herself waking up in other rooms than the bedroom, and eventually having terrifying dreams in which something dragged her from the bed and into other rooms. When, after some days of careful conversation, she gained the trust of a local shopkeeper he finally told her that the house had been abandoned by its owners and put up for rent soon after a daughter had died during the *barba*. It was certainly the dead girl's ghost that was dragging our acquaintance from the room where she had died. She left the house that same day. There is no equivalent ritual for boys, nor is there any equivalent risk.

Patrice Ladwig has reported that, among Lao and possibly also Isan Tai, death during childbirth of the mother and neonate is comparably catastrophic.³⁶ The spirits produced by this kind of bad death are powerful and can wreak terrible damage, but can also be transformed into powerful protective spirits; the origin story for Vientiane includes the conversion of the spirit of a pregnant woman and her unborn child into protective deities for the city.

This rather dramatic case reflects a general feature of even the best deaths. Studies of both contemporary and historical sources show

³⁵ Gutschow & Michaels (2008).

³⁶ Formoso (1998).

clearly that elderly, dying, or dead people do not suddenly cease to be human persons at the moment of brain death. This is by no means unique to Buddhism and varies significantly from society to society, but it is perhaps worth noting that Buddhist ritual and knowledge of the processes of death and rebirth mean that in many societies where Buddhism is one of several interwoven traditions, a significant amount of patronage is directed towards Buddhist ritual specialists and institutions as part of managing death. As Williams and Ladwig observe, ‘Throughout Asia it has always been recognised that Buddhists are specialists in death. One of the things that attracted Chinese (and Tibetans, for that matter) to Buddhism was its clarity about what happens at death, the processes needed to ensure a successful death – the welfare of the dead person and his or her mourners – and its clarity about what happens after death and its links with the whole way someone has lived their life. ... It was a major factor in the successful transmission of Buddhism from its original Indian cultural context’.³⁷ I would argue that this is still an important factor in the success of Buddhism worldwide. It is not just that ancestors are part of Buddhist societies, but that in complex societies with many ritual and doctrinal traditions, Buddhist rituals and doctrines do a very good job of explaining and managing the dead and deaths of many sorts, from accidentally unhappy ghosts to venerable but disapproving great-grandparents. We will see below that the neatly bounded picture of the human rebirth is substantially complicated by the postmortem trajectory of those who have had significant meditative attainments during their human birth.

Before we turn to non-humans, however, it is important to address a particular boundary that affects humans—the possibility of significant cognitive or physical disability. Indo-Himalayan textual sources assert that the advantage of the human rebirth is the capacity to learn the Dharma—yet not all humans have or can exercise that innate capacity. Mipham’s *mKha’jug* outlines ‘four human unfree states’ that block one born into the human rebirth from being able to study the Dharma: ‘To belong to a primitive border tribe, to hold wrong views, to dwell in a realm where a buddha has not appeared, or to possess defective faculties or mental capacity, such as being imbecilic, inept or incapable of communicating’.³⁸ This makes it clear that, whatever

³⁷ Williams & Ladwig (2012: 1).

³⁸ Rimpoche & Kunsang (2013: 17).

suffering may accompany a human rebirth where the faculties are not complete, that person is nonetheless human and indeed no less human than a human with complete faculties who is simply handicapped by the ideology of the society where they happen to be. My observations among Newars bear out this textual claim; young people with physical disabilities or mild cognitive disabilities not only perform rituals fully, but may well grow up to become experts, and those with significant cognitive disabilities that impede their ability to undertake rituals, such as life cycle rituals, are assisted so that they can perform them.

We now turn to consider those beings who are not human, yet do receive teaching from the Buddhas and learn something of the Dharma. Lingering at the edges of the Buddhist *manuṣya* (human), there are a number of passages in early texts that show other-than-human persons learning from encounters with Buddhist teachers. The first section of the Pāli Saṃyuttanikāya has several chapters concerned with one or another kind of interlocutor: Brahmins, tree spirits, minor gods, and so forth. In each case the chapters contain, or refer to, considerations on the status of that particular community; so, for example, the section on Brahmins includes a fair amount of banter about caste privilege as opposed to deportment and self-discipline. In some cases the non-humans are *devatās* who, after a human rebirth in which they took refuge with the Buddha, have taken rebirth as minor deities; in other cases they are *yakṣas* who challenge the Buddha, warn renunciants to keep their discipline, or even berate villagers who show insufficient respect to a nun. What is clear from all the cases in the Saṃyuttanikāya is that these near-humans can never actually join the Saṅgha; they may well meet a Buddha, enjoy the Dharma and indeed even attain stream-enterer status through hearing it, but they cannot take monastic precepts.

A striking example from the Saṃyuttanikāya is the yakṣa Āḷavaka,³⁹ who challenges Śākyamuni with a series of riddles; the conversation ends with the yakṣa promising to travel from town to town, revering the completely enlightened one and the excellence of the Dharma—that is, two of the Three Jewels, leaving aside the assembly of the wise. On numerous occasions Śākyamuni converses with the gods of the thirty-three higher planes and teaches them; this seems especially common when a human dies and is born among the thirty-three, then returns (as a god) to seek Śākyamuni, but famously

³⁹ S I 10, 12.

he also goes to the realm of the thirty-three to teach his birth mother. This point is reiterated in the *Anāthapiṇḍakovada Sutta*,⁴⁰ in which the well-known lay Buddhist *Anāthapiṇḍika*, as he is dying in great pain, receives a profound teaching from Śāriputra that was not usually given to lay followers. The unexpected depth and clarity of this teaching cause him to weep with joy, and he begs Śāriputra to please give such profound teachings to lay Buddhists as well as nuns and monks. *Anāthapiṇḍika* dies, is reborn in Tuṣita heaven as a godling, and comes to the Jeta Grove that evening, to visit Śākyamuni and praise the Saṅgha that practices there.

Something similar can be said for the Sanskrit tradition outwith Mahāyāna sources. The *Divyāvadāna* and the Gilgit Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya preserve any number of stories in which nāgas go to great lengths to hear the Buddhist teachings, and as Tatelman has pointed out⁴¹ the nāgas in these stories are both enthusiastic and somewhat comic. In one episode, where the notorious troublemaking ‘six monks’ squabble with an elderly monk who can only recite one section of the Vinaya as he tries to preach to a nāga, the nāga simply teleports their entire monastery into his ocean realms,⁴² In this case, the Buddha observes that the monks should not have irritated this emanation (*nirmita*)—that is, the magical transformation of the nāga—and then promulgates a rule against unsolicited teachings.

In short, what we see is that there is a path for non-humans, typically devas of one sort or another, that allows them to encounter the Dharma, to become Buddhist, and to proceed along the path without ever having to take a human birth. This runs sharply counter to a modernist reading of Buddhism but it is precisely that modernism—and its ethnocentric assumption of human exclusivism—that I am calling into question across this essay. In pursuit of a rather different argument, Peter Masfield nonetheless made the same point through a close reading of the early Pāli sources: that the important distinction is between those beings who have attended to the Dharma and set out on the path, rather than the distinction between humans and non-humans.⁴³ This makes ethnographic sense as well: much of the work of establishing the Buddhist teachings in a specific place is the

⁴⁰ M 143.

⁴¹ Tatelman (2000: 153–4).

⁴² *Divyāvadāna* 204.002-015; MSV Gilgit v3.4 p. 27-8.

⁴³ Masfield (1986: 18–21).

discovery of the deities of that place, whether they are *nāgas*, *yakṣas*, or some other sort. Once discovered they must be transformed from, for example, wrathful child-eaters (as in the case of Hārītī or Āḷavaka), to righteous protectors of the Dharma.⁴⁴ They become protectors (*dharmapāla*) through understanding⁴⁵ the teachings. From that point onwards they, too, will progress along the path, and there is no requirement that they take rebirth as a human for them to progress towards its conclusion.

What these beings cannot do, though, is become part of the renunciant Saṅgha. There is a fine dividing line here between those beings who can take up five or eight training precepts, and those beings who can actually take preliminary or higher ordination. The actual ordination ceremony includes a series of questions designed to eliminate unsuitable candidates. One of these is, ‘Are you a *nāga*?’ This is explained by a story contained in the Mahāvagga in which a *nāga* takes the shape of a person in order to be ordained, is found out and expelled. The details of the story reveal how keenly felt the divide between *nāgas* and humans might be; the *nāga*’s whole reason for taking ordination is disgust at his *nāga*-birth. When Śākyamuni expels him from the order (and no formal ritual of expulsion is performed), he is told that he may undertake the eight-vow uposatha fast and in that way cast off his *nāga*-birth, but that *nāgas* generally are not acceptable as ordinands because they are unable to grow in the Dharma and Vinaya—and the *nāga*, who already despised himself for being a *nāga*, is overwhelmed with grief at being told this.⁴⁶ The rule subsequently established by Śākyamuni is that no animal (though *nāgas* are not always classed as animals) can be ordained, and if any are discovered they should be expelled. This, together with the use of the term *nirmita* in the story above, may explain why, where the Pāli ritual order only asks if the postulant is a *nāga*, the Mūlasarvāstivāda text covers both aspects and asks, “Are you not an emanation? (*sprul pa* = Skt *nirmita*) Are you not an animal? (*dud ‘gro* = Skt. *tiryāṅc*)” (Derge Kanjur, ‘dul ba gzhi, Vol Ka 45b, TBRC fol. 108. Banerjee misunderstands *dud ‘gro* and, after *mā nāgaḥ* supplies *mā pāśuḥ*).⁴⁷ The Bhikṣuṇī-Karmavācānā simply asks the postulant if she is a magical

⁴⁴ see also Cohen (1998).

⁴⁵ Masefield makes a strong argument that ‘understanding’ here originally meant a profound act of *hearing* (1986, p. 45 ff.).

⁴⁶ Mahāvagga I.63.1-5, PTS Vinaya vol. V p 86-8, tr. Rhys Davids and Oldenberg (1881).

⁴⁷ Banerjee (1977: 63).

emanation (*nirmittikā*).⁴⁸

Outwith the early sources, across the wide range of Buddhist narratives there are many stories in which non-human s pose as humans in order to learn the Dharma. One of the most famous is contained within the koan of Hyakujo and the fox. Hyakujo teaches at a mountain monastery, and every day there is an old man who comes to listen to his talks along with the monks. He finally explains to Hyakujo that he had been a monk who studied with the past Buddha Kāśyapa and had become the Zen master who taught on that same mountain. One day, in answering his own students' questions, he gave a poor answer to the question of whether karma affects fully enlightened Buddhas and was thus trapped in the form of a shape-shifting *kitsune* (fox spirit) for hundreds of lifetimes. He had used his powers to manifest as a human hoping to learn the proper doctrine from Zen master Hyakujo. When Hyakujo and he engage in a successful question-and-answer session, he is freed from his rebirths as a fox spirit and asks Hyakujo to give his fox's body the death rituals befitting a monk, which Hyakujo duly does. While the point of this particular koan is not to encourage speculation about the boundary between humans and non-humans, it does nonetheless combine magical transformation, karma and rebirth, and the rituals that make a monk so as to show quite clearly that rituals are used to protect the boundaries of the Saṅgha from non-humans and, as in this case, to restore appropriate monastic status to a monk who had been forced to use emanations to restore his relationship to the Three Jewels.

What emerges from our second comparison is, quite simply, that the hard work of marking boundaries happens in different places. Our examples from English and Scottish law and Christian ritual show that simply being born as human is the key to human status. Granted, that birth (even if it is a stillbirth) requires legitimation through inscription of a name in government records (and possibly also in church), and that ritual of inscription in turn may even require strangers to adopt the burden of kinship; but there is no sense in which a stillbirth, an infant, a toddler, and an adolescent can be ranked as 'increasingly human', or that non-humans credited with human-like agency such as a chimpanzee, 'the stock market,' or 'Google' might covertly manifest as humans in the hope of getting a legal identity

⁴⁸ Schmidt (1993: 253).

or being baptised. So far as I have been able to determine, rituals of baptism in the Christian churches do not check the infant (or their parents) to be sure they are human, nor do driving license examiners or university admissions officers check their respective petitioners. Nor, so far as I can determine, do rituals for turning ordinary humans of various sorts (orphans, petitioners, priests) into monks ever enquire as to whether they are actually human.

By contrast, our ethnographic and textual evidence suggests that for Buddhists in the Himalayas or Southeast Asia, the boundaries of the human are fuzzy. Becoming human is not just a question of being born; it requires a significant ritual effort to become properly human, and there may well be any number of people who look human but aren't. However, the boundary around becoming a renunciant member of the Saṅgha is very tightly guarded; there are rituals in place to keep non-humans out, and a wealth of stories that show what the risks are.

What is at stake? In the post-Enlightenment world, what all humans do—or should—get is human rights. The history of civil society is measured by the successful inclusion of once-marginalised communities: slaves, women, homosexuals, the mentally or physically disabled, transgenders and so on. In the modern academy these categories surface both as domains of engaged practice—agitating for immigrant rights, for example—as well as the legal requirement to structure our didactic and administrative practices according to an expanding legal framework that protects the civil rights of potentially disenfranchised individuals. At the same time, any impetus to extend human rights to, for example, intelligent animals such as chimpanzees is strenuously resisted.

This ubiquitous, uninterrogable, and theological human exclusivism presents some interesting challenges for Buddhist activists and intellectuals who have enough distance from post-Enlightenment norms to see that they are not actually discovered universals but enforced norms. Lauren Leve has documented a particular moment in Nepalese history, the People's Movement of the early 1990s, when the Theravāda Buddhist Saṅgha, in an attempt to force the Nepalese government to relinquish its exclusively Hindu identity, appealed to the discourse of international human rights, the obligations of the Nepalese state as a participant in international legal accords, and in particular the right to freedom of religion. Leve points out that

these Nepalese Buddhists had to ‘live the contradictions’ between ‘the nature of the “human” as assumed by liberal law’ and ‘the nature of the “human” as revealed in Buddhist experience’⁴⁹ That this appeal to the liberal state failed is not surprising once we recognise that Nepal is not a liberal state. Nepalese citizenship rituals and regulations do not guarantee universal access to the human state or human rights, nor are they intended to; rather, they are designed to prevent many humans from being Nepalese. A Nepalese national ID card is only available to a child with a Nepalese father who also possesses Nepalese citizenship.⁵⁰

For Buddhists, the stakes are very different. The teachings and meditative disciplines that nuns and monks had access to were, in general, more profound and demanding than those available to lay Buddhists. However they were sometimes taught to lay Buddhists, and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries this has become far more widespread. Similarly, while nuns and monks (at least in the early literature) are far more likely to achieve advanced states such as stream-entry that guarantee higher rebirths, this is also possible, though much less likely, outwith the ordained Saṅgha. What is different about nuns and monks is that they become fields of merit (*punyaḥkṣetra*). By taking the novice and higher disciplinary vows, they change the entire economic, causal and moral economy within which they endure rebirth and re-death. As ordinary people, they receive and return gifts like all other such people, but once they undergo the rituals that make them members of the Saṅgha, they are able to receive material gifts without any obligation of material return.⁵¹ Rather, the act of giving to a field of merit generates a magical reward that can be redirected across all the possible ways of rebirth—but that extraordinary capacity is only possible because the field of merit is bound by far more stringent codes of moral behaviour than ordinary folk, and the consequences if they transgress are more serious. Nāgas and other non-humans are not wholly reliable partners in ordinary human exchange relations (as indeed are many kinds of human!), but it is unimaginable that they could become fields of merit. This does not mean, however, that they are not fully social. In fact it is precisely because nonhumans do enter into social relationships and exchanges with humans that the boundary around the creation of fields of merit

⁴⁹ (Leve 2007: 80).

⁵⁰ Rajbhandary (2015).

⁵¹ Strenski (1983); Falk (2007: 6).

has to be sharply marked.

As I indicated above, both contemporary and historical evidence suggests that it is not only nuns and monks who become fields of merit; but the rituals of ordination are the exemplary ritual through which this transformation is achieved. It seems, therefore, that the careful policing of the boundary that sets nuns and monks apart from ordinary folk is motivated in part by the need to reserve more challenging teachings and practices, but largely in order to prevent non-humans from becoming fields of merit. Were they to do so, then systems of exchange that allow not-yet-enlightened humans to gain at least some control over the wheel of rebirth would become available to beings in other rebirths. In this sense, then, although the Buddhist theory of persons does not make a sharp distinction in terms of cognitive capacity, affect, sociability or intention between humans and non-humans, it is the case that carefully guarding access to the rituals that make nuns and monks does prevent non-humans from joining a specifically human system of exchange.

Buddhism, taken as a broad taxonomy of intellectual histories, locates agency in a much wider field of living things than does the European Enlightenment with its inheritors such as liberal political theory and sociocultural anthropology. So long as Buddhism is historicized, colonized, and relegated by its own interpreters to nothing more than a religion, then there is no encounter between the two notions of agency; within the theory of liberal democracy, the category of religion is a device for circumscribing and demoting alternative accounts of personhood and agency. The long Buddhist intellectual tradition, expressed in such different fields as medicine, jurisprudence and political theory, is—from the Euro-American position—founded on mere religious belief, and according to liberal political theory beliefs are no more than a private preoccupation of properly secular humans (and only humans). Thereby, any real challenge to the Eurocentric assumptions of anthropology or ethics can be cut off before it has a chance to start. The circularity, let alone the ethnocentrism, of this argument is rarely challenged; but if we are to decolonize Buddhist studies a solid first move would be to acknowledge that the human exclusivism that informs international law, economics, and the study of religion is founded on an unquestioned and unjustified doctrine that is itself, properly, religious: human exclusivism is an Abrahamic

inheritance. The incongruity of this position has long been apparent within Europe; Anatole France's 1908 satirical novel *Penguin Island* begins with a nearsighted bishop who baptizes a colony of auks, thus creating a dilemma for the Christian god, as they could not have been baptized if they were animals who by definition lack souls. For the curious: the Christian god, in France's novel, resolves the dilemma by granting the auks souls and thus making them human.

We Buddhist scholars perpetuate our own irrelevance when we discuss questions such as whether or not trees are properly sentient beings solely on the basis of ancient textual traditions. This is not to dismiss the meticulous efforts of Schmidhausen (who is well aware that he is discussing the historical precedents to a very modern question) It is as though Buddhism were even more text-bound and fundamentalist than the most literalist schools of Protestant Christianity or Islam. The debate, in real terms, has long since moved on: biologists, ecologists and doctors in academic institutions where Buddhist cultural values inform their worldview, such as Japan or Thailand, conduct research across the whole range of life: viruses that may or may not be fully alive; the history of symbiosis preserved within the organelles of eukaryote life; the rich microbiome that lives inside higher animals (including us humans) without which we would be unable to digest food or react to infection; zoonotic diseases that leap between species; complex mechanisms of horizontal gene transfer; or the Archaea, a wholly new kingdom of life discovered only in the 20th century among whom are organisms that metabolize methane or sulfur and live deep underground, in volcanic hot springs, in sub-glacial lakes, and human navels among other sites. We are aware now that plants have multiple sense faculties and interact across whole woodlands through mycorrhizal networks involving plant and fungal communities. Our understanding of the complexity, diversity, and interdependence of living beings far outstrips simplistic debates about whether plants are one-faculty beings; and in the same way that Buddhist scholars long ago abandoned antiquated cosmologies, debates about the domain of sentient beings should take place in full cognizance of recent developments in biology.

In fact, the contribution of Buddhist cultural values to biological research has been remarked already. Kenji Imanishii, the founder of Japanese primatology, approached his field with a set of

assumptions: that monkeys thought, that they had families, that their extraordinary capacity to learn new behaviours could not be explained through individual competition—and even that it made sense to hold religious services for the monkeys that had died each year. This ran so counter to the Euro-American norms of the mid 20th century that his work was castigated by Beverly Halstead in the journal *Nature* as ‘Japanese in its unreality’;⁵² yet Imanishii and his students made fundamental discoveries that transformed Western primatology as well. The outstanding primatologist Renee van der Waal later asked how Halstead, and *Nature*, could be ‘so rude’ and went on to observe that this was ‘one culture perceiving another’s biases more acutely than its own’.⁵³ Asquith has studied Imanishii’s worldview and intellectual heritage at length. Although Halstead and his fellow critics accused Imanishii of rejecting Darwin (which, to some extent, he did), Asquith points out that Darwin’s theory at its introduction was ‘offensive’ to the Western hierarchical conception of God above man, and man above animals. By contrast, in Japan, where Buddhist doctrine made it clear that the relationship between humans and other living things was more equal and, through reincarnation, exchangeable, Darwin’s theory of variation, selection and descent ‘was subject to none of the moral implications Westerners attributed to it’.⁵⁴ Where Westerners saw monkeys as non-human animals, the Japanese primatologists saw them as sociocultural beings. Where Westerners performed experiments, the Japanese undertook long-term studies that looked closely and quietly, rather than trying to ‘squeeze the information out of nature’.⁵⁵ The result, as van der Waal argues, is that the Japanese achieved results far beyond what their Western colleagues could and, utterly without acknowledgement, the Japanese methods were adopted by Western researchers as well.

What, then, have we learned from this brief exercise in diffraction? On the one hand, a comparison with Buddhism throws a sharp light on the theological anthropology that hides inside human exclusivism as it is received by social anthropology from the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the broader field of agents in Buddhism is shown to rely on the assumption of biologically unitary

⁵² Halstead (1985).

⁵³ de Waal (2003).

⁵⁴ Asquith (1986: 64).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

organisms, a premodern ignorance of microbes, and an unjustified prejudice against plants. If we are to undertake a properly Buddhist social anthropology, then, we must be brave enough both to liberate Buddhist theory from the 'jail of religion' and also to subject Buddhist theory to rigorous critique and improvement in the light of scientific enquiry. Our social anthropology is an anthropology of and for all sentient beings, including those that early Buddhist texts did not know or rejected. At the same time we must sharpen the doctrines of interdependence and emptiness to acknowledge the inherent plurality, partibility, interdependence and sociability of all beings both in their psychology and their biology, and to take this as the ground from which any Buddhist social anthropology must begin.

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