Review

Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination, by Reiko Ohnuma. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xix + 242 pp., \$36.95 (hb; also available as an e-book). ISBN-9780190637545.

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Reiko Ohnuma's *Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination* adds substantially to a small, but growing body of studies focused on animals in South Asia. Of course, as Ohnuma reminds us early in her study, 'human beings are animals' (p. xv). But this seemingly simple (and obvious) identification masks a deeper tension, as Ohnuma observes: 'there is a simultaneous kinship and otherness, identity and difference, and attraction and repulsion in humanity's relationship to the animal' (p. xv). This tension has not been ignored in earlier studies of animals in South Asia, but there has been a tendency to examine it either too narrowly or too broadly. Of the former there are a number of excellent studies of the relationship of human to animal in the Vedic sacrifice; in the latter group are studies that look to the ethical treatment of animals in Buddhist and Hindu thought, a concern which, in fact, was rarely if ever enunciated in the Indian context. Ohnuma does not ignore these elements in *Unfortunate Destiny*, but rather uses the tension between being human and being animal to follow a broader path through the world of early, or mainstream Buddhism, limiting her examination of animal and human only by textual epoch, of the Pāli Canon (and commentaries) and the Sanskrit texts associated with this strain of Buddhism. (In the following, 'Buddhist' / 'Buddhism' will refer only to the mainstream Buddhist tradition.)

Unfortunate Destiny is divided into three parts and seven chapters; each of the three parts contains a short introductory essay. Part I addresses the Buddhist notion of animals as possessed of an 'unfortunate destiny', which Ohnuma notes is commonly used in Buddhist texts to describe the miserable existence of three of the five types of beings that inhabit the Buddhist cosmos—namely, ghosts, animals, and denizens of hell (the other two states of existence, that of a human and that of a god, are the 'fortunate destinies') (pp. 5–7)—an existence from which escape (due to karma) in a future

rebirth is near impossible. Here, Ohnuma delves into the Buddhist textual representation of animals as fundamentally different from humans, characterized by a lack of wisdom, and a life devoid of even ‘a single notion of pleasure—no kinship, no communion, nothing but disgust and revulsion’ (p. 13). (Although left unsaid here, the Buddhist notion of a division between animal and human is reminiscent of the South Asian notion that human existence itself is divided into ontologically distinct classes [caste/jati].) Ohnuma follows this thread by looking to the many Buddhist stories in which animals gain some measure of good fortune through communion with the Buddha. Yet, as Ohnuma points out, the good fortune is invariably tied to some non-animal aspect of the animal being who gains it, such as the karma earned in a previous *human* life.

Having established the fundamental distinction between animal and human existence in the Buddhist cosmos, in Parts II and III, Ohnuma addresses the Buddhist notion that humans and animals are not entirely dissimilar, looking first to the representation of animals (and their ubiquitous presence) in the Pāli *jātaka* tales. As Ohnuma points out, scholars have tended to see the animals in the *jātaka* tales as allegorical humans (and they often exhibit human-like qualities—speech, compassion, etc.). Yet, merely to see them as allegorical humans, Ohnuma argues, fails to recognize that ‘The *animality* of these animals continues to matter; in fact, such tales rely for their effectiveness upon a constant tension—or, perhaps a constant alternation—between seeing the animal characters as stand-ins for human beings and seeing the animal characters as animals’ (p. 48). With this tension as foreground, Ohnuma engages a number of well-known *jātaka* themes, such as cleverness and wit, self-sacrifice, and crime and punishment.

In Part II, Ohnuma turns to an examination of the Buddhist representation of animals that are known for their utter devotion and closeness to the Buddha. As Ohnuma observes, these animals play a significant role in the life-story of the Buddha, and are presented with their own impressive back-stories. In ch. 5 and ch. 6, Ohnuma recounts the stories of the horse Kanthaka and the elephant Pārileyyaka, animals whose intimate contact with the Buddha would lead any human to immediate enlightenment. Although these great animals (both of which have deep symbolic associations with kingship in ancient India) are ‘humanized’ in various ways, they are denied enlightenment, and, seemingly aware of this show grief (and even weep copiously) upon the event of their deaths. Ohnuma’s treatment of these stories is bolstered by a web of associations that further emphasize the tension between being human and being animal, from linking Kanthaka to the sacrificial animal-victims used in the great Vedic rites, to a lesser-known side story that ties Pārileyyaka to a monkey who makes an offering to the Buddha.

Ohnuma writes with great clarity of thought and a light prose touch. Arguments are supported throughout with a wealth of passages from the Buddhist texts (which Ohnuma translates with admirable concision).

Although Ohnuma avoids highly technical discussions, there is much here for the specialist Buddologist. Yet, the book is not without broad appeal; in particular while secondary sources look to the ‘usual suspects’ of Indian studies (Doniger’s work in particular is cited to great effect), Ohnuma broadens her arguments by citing a wealth of contemporary non-Indic studies. These range from a delightful analysis of the contemporary film *Babe* to the late-nineteenth-century American fascination with elephant execution. With its broadly framed arguments and well-considered approach to the Buddhist representation of animals, this book would make a superb addition to undergraduate courses in the religious traditions of South Asia or in world religions—particularly those that seek to inspire significant discussion.