

NARRATING KARMA
AND REBIRTH

Buddhist and Jain Multi-life Stories

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*For Helen Gaunt
May she be my mother again in many future lifetimes.*

Karma and the realms of rebirth

The operations of karma feature heavily in the narrative traditions of both Buddhism and Jainism. In some cases, such as the *Nārada-jātaka* discussed in the previous chapter, karma can be seen as the central topic, and it is addressed in some detail through both abstract teaching and concrete biographical examples. In many other stories its role is more subtle, forming an implicit link between multiple lives of an individual, or multiple events within a single lifetime. The doctrine of karma, of course, goes hand in hand with that of rebirth, since actions have fruits which may not ripen until future lifetimes. Both Buddhists and Jains take for granted that the movement of beings between different realms of rebirth is conditioned by their karmic load. It is this movement, and these realms of rebirth, that will form our focus in this chapter.

Jain and Buddhist texts contain many explanations of what sort of actions result in what sort of rebirths. In the Śvetāmbara Jain *Aupapātika Sūtra* Mahāvīra gives a sermon on this subject to King Kūṇika (son of Śreṇika Bimbisāra, known in Buddhist texts as Ajātasattu). He explains the four types of action that lead to each of the realms of rebirth: extreme violence, excessive covetousness or greed, killing five-sensed beings and eating meat lead to a hell birth; deception, lying, concealing and swindling lead to an animal birth; goodness, humility, compassion and an appreciation of others' virtues without jealousy lead to a human birth; and ascetic discipline without abandoning passion, householder's conduct, enduring pain out of helplessness and austerities performed in unrighteousness or ignorance lead to a heavenly birth.¹ In Buddhist texts we find the frequent statement that actions motivated by greed, hatred and delusion (the three roots of unwholesome action) lead to rebirth in lower realms, whereas actions motivated by their opposites lead to a heavenly or human rebirth. Some Buddhist authors have been even more specific: ignorant and overly

instinctive action is associated with animal rebirth, greed is said to lead to being a hungry ghost and violent actions lead to hell torments.² This is not dissimilar to the Jain position, especially in its association of violence with hell and delusion with the animal realm.

Doctrines such as these emphasise that the central rebirth state is that of humans. Humans are, after all, the only beings that are capable of achieving release from the realm of rebirth altogether, and *buddhas* and *jinas* are always humans teaching a primarily human audience. As moral beings capable of reason, humans can do good and bad actions – however these are defined – and earn rebirth in another realm. Good actions lead to the heavens, and bad actions to the animal or hell realms. The question is, once reborn in one of these realms, can a being do more karmically significant actions and thereby earn a better or worse rebirth?

Gananath Obeyesekere has argued that early rebirth eschatologies involved a simple movement out of the human realm and then back again. A human would die, and then go to another world (variously defined in different societies), and later return and take birth within the same lineage. Obeyesekere outlines two stages in the ethicisation of this system. Stage one is that the qualities of one's actions make a difference to one's experience in the otherworld. This leads to a multiplication of otherworlds to account for the different qualities of human actions. Stage two is that the qualities of one's actions also affect one's rebirth back in the human realm. At this stage rebirth within the same lineage is no longer guaranteed.³ Even after both stages of ethicisation, it is notable that actions in the otherworld(s) are not considered relevant to one's rebirth state. This idea seems to be retained in the shadows of both Buddhist and Jain rebirth theory. We see humans make karma, be reborn in an appropriate realm until the fruits of that karma are exhausted, and then bounce back to the human realm again. After all, how can hell-beings make good or bad karma when they are busy being tortured? And how can gods really find the motivation to pursue religious instruction when they are having such an overwhelmingly fabulous time? The very understanding that only humans can attain *mokṣa* would appear to be a reflection of these early stages in the development of rebirth eschatology.⁴

¹ This idea is found in the Tibetan text of Nāgārjuna's *Rebirths* and quoted by Gampopa in his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (Guenther 1971: 79). My thanks to Peter Harvey for providing this reference.

² Obeyesekere 2002: 80–1.

³ In his study of the doctrine of karma in early Buddhism, McDermott (1984: 8) puts forward some evidence that the view that non-human beings are capable of sin and good deeds is a late development within the *Majjhima Nikaḃāla*. He thus suggests that the earliest strand of the Pāli scriptures considered only humans capable of karmically significant deeds.

⁴ Summarised from Muni *et al.* 2003a: 196–9, with some adjustments to the translation.

However, despite the tendency in Buddhist and Jain multi-life stories for the human realm to be the default position, the other realms of rebirth function as more than simple good and bad destinies. Stories of the animal realm in particular suggest that rebirth as a non-human does not make karmically significant actions impossible. Similarly the heaven realms are good destinies for humans, but also places in which gods can act in ways that affect their futures. Spirit-deities also function as both rebirth destiny and, in some cases, subject of new karmic accrual, and it is only hell-beings that tend not to exhibit any agency in affecting their future rebirths. In Chapter 3 we will be examining the potential for human action and the possible destinies available to the human protagonists who largely occupy the narrative corpus. In this chapter, however, I would like to explore each of the rebirth realms in order to see what function these non-human beings fulfil in multi-life narratives about them. We will begin with the animal realm, including in the Jain case plants, and then move through the hells and heavens before returning – as so many of the narratives do – to the human realm once more.

The animal realm

According to both Buddhist and Jain doctrinal expositions, one of the main causes of rebirth in the animal realm is action associated with delusion: either being deluded or deceiving others. This association is doubtless due to the understanding that animals lack intelligence and act largely on instinct, without proper grasp of religious instruction or self-awareness, and the two positions thus represent two complementary varieties of poetic justice. In Jainism, where the animal realm includes plants and various single-sensed beings that inhabit earth, air, fire and so on, there is a large spectrum of animal capability, and animals are therefore divided according to their number of senses as well as their capacity for reason. The Jain animal realm can thus be categorised as follows: (1) one-sensed animals: these may be either so fine they cannot be perceived individually by our senses, or gross and perceivable. They have earth, water, fire, wind or plants as body, have only the sense of touch, and cannot bind heaven or hell karma. Fire and wind beings cannot bind human karma either. (2) Two-, three- and four-sensed animals: what we might call the lower animals, such as worms (two-sensed: touch and taste), ants (three-sensed: touch, taste, as well as smell) and bees (four-sensed: touch, taste, smell and sight). They cannot bind heaven or hell karma. (3) Five-sensed animals: these are either devoid of reason (*asamjñin*) or, if born from a womb, endowed with reason

(*samjñin*).⁵ With some exceptions, these animals can bind karma suitable for rebirth in any of the four realms.⁶

With the exception of five-sensed animals endowed with reason, it is difficult to see how these Jain categories of animal can be capable of acting in any way that might lead to a better or worse rebirth, or indeed in such a way that might constitute narrative interest. However, in Jain doctrinal works it is clearly stated that even single-sensed beings that inhabit the air, water, fire and earth are subject to passions and therefore bind karma as well as experiencing its fruits.⁷ Five-sensed animals with reason are able to attain *samyak-darśana* (right view) and observe the Jain lay vows. However, they are not capable of progressing any further towards *mokṣa*, an attainment that is exclusively limited to humans. The basic Jain position, therefore, is that all animals (including plants and single-sensed beings) perform karmically significant actions, but only the higher animals (those with five senses and reason) can make conscious progress towards overcoming the passions and halting the influx of karma.

In the Buddhist animal realm, which does not include plants or other single-sensed beings, there is less clarity about the capabilities of animals, with little information to be found in the texts or scholarship. One primary source that is often cited is the *Milindapañha*, in which the Bactrian king Milinda asks a series of questions of a Buddhist monk named Nāgasena.⁸ The relevant passage is found in answer to the question of whether or not reason and wisdom are the same. The Buddhist teacher Nāgasena states: 'Wisdom (*paññā*) is different to reason (*manasikāra*). Of these, Great King, goats, sheep, oxen, buffaloes, bison and donkeys have reason, but they do not have wisdom.'⁹ The fact that domesticated working animals are specified here suggests that Nāgasena is relying upon visible examples of clever animals, who nonetheless are evidently missing a specific kind of intellectual capacity found in humans. However, since Nāgasena does not refer to the overall category of animals, nor does he mention their capacities except in passing, it would be inadvisable to rely upon this statement as evidence for a

⁵ In Jain terms being born from a womb includes birth from an egg or a membranous sack (see *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 3: Jains 1990: 73). I am grateful to Kristi Wiley for drawing my attention to this detail.

⁶ This summary relies upon Glasenapp 1991: 52–6, which is an account of the influential *Karmagranthā* books of the thirteenth-century Śvetāmbara monk Devendra Sīri.

⁷ Wiley 2002: 42.

⁸ The text is a literary construct, and should not be assumed to date from the time of the king who plays the role of interlocutor (King Menandros, second century BCE). See von Hinüber 1996: 82–6 for a discussion of the difficulties in dating the text.

⁹ My trans. from Trenchner 1986: 32.

considered Buddhist view. Indeed, the formal *Abhidharma* systems of both the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda schools suggest that animals *can* have wisdom.¹⁰

The question of animals' intellectual capabilities is related to the question of their ability to understand the dharma and perform the religious observances of a Buddhist. The *Mahāvagga* of the Theravāda *Vinaya* preserves the story of a *nāga* (snake deity) who, in disguise as a human male, managed to become ordained but was found out by another monk. The Buddha admonished him and pointed out that *nāgas* are not liable to growth in this doctrine and discipline' (*avirāḥidhammā imasmim dhammavinaye*). He therefore expelled the *nāga* from the monastic community and instructed him instead to go and observe the *uposatha* (holy day) and thereby gain a human rebirth. He then prohibited the ordination of animals (*tiracchānagato*), implying that his assessment of *nāga* capabilities in fact applies to the whole animal realm.¹¹ The lesson from this story appears to be that animals are not able to fully access the dharma, or follow the higher path of the ordained Buddhist, but they can observe the holy day. Since this observance, which is key to lay Buddhist life, usually includes the keeping of eight moral precepts, we are led to believe that animals can act morally and in a way that might improve their rebirth possibilities.¹²

An unclear and at times ambivalent attitude towards animal capabilities is only natural in a tradition that prioritises human experience and potential. Much has been said about Buddhist and Jain attitudes *towards* animals, about the extraordinary respect for non-human life shown by the traditions, and their abhorrence of animal sacrifice. The reason often cited for this compassionate attitude towards the animal realm is the possibility of humans being reborn as animals and vice versa. Despite this, little has been said about animals as subjects, as fellow travellers in the cycle of rebirth and redeath. Having briefly surveyed the doctrinal positions, we may now turn our attention to a rare source for our understanding of animals as moral agents: the narrative materials. Buddhist and Jain texts

¹⁰ I am grateful to I. S. Cousins and Rupert Gethin (personal communications 2012) for clarifying the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda views, and for providing supporting references. For the Theravāda position see *Abhidhammavārtana* V 206-7 (Buddhadatta 1915: 37), a manual attributed to Buddhадatta Mahāthera, thought to be a contemporary of Buddhaghosa. For the Sarvāstivāda view see Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakalābhāṣya* IV 83cd (Pruden 1991, vol. 2: 668).

¹¹ My summary and trans. from Oldenberg 1879-83, vol. 1: 86-8.

¹² These are the better-known five precepts that a layperson should constantly observe (refraining from taking life, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from lying and from drunkenness) supplemented by a further three that are observed for the day only: not eating after midday, avoiding worldly amusements and not using perfumes or ornaments.

preserve rich narratives about animals, which both complement and at times challenge doctrinal understandings about this realm of rebirth. There are three inter-related questions that deserve to be asked of the narrative materials: (1) what are the reasons for rebirth as an animal? (2) What capability do animals have to perform actions of religious or moral worth and thus earn a higher rebirth, or to perform bad actions that result in further descent, even to hell? (3) How do plants and single-sensed beings fit into this picture, given their inclusion in the Jain cosmology of sentient beings? Setting aside the third question for now, let us consider a few examples of animal stories and what they say about the transitions into and out of animal birth.

In and out of the animal realm

Buddhist and Jain narratives portray the animal realm as slightly better than the hell realms, but still a very bad rebirth full of suffering and with little opportunity for religious or moral action. Thus rebirth as an animal is one of the possible destinies for any bad action, and in Jain narratives it often alternates with hell birth in the lengthy endings to rebirth stories. For example, in the *Dubkha Vipāka* or 'Fruits of Suffering' section of the *Vipākāśūta*, which contains ten stories of people who do bad actions and meet suitable consequences, each of these people is said to alternate between animal and hell births for an extraordinarily long time before beginning the long climb back to human birth. Betraying a similar motivation to these formulaic endings, more detailed narratives about the reasons for animal rebirth also tend not to stop in the animal realm, but allow us to see how the animal manages to get back onto a better path. Thus stories of animal births may often be seen as stories of humans heading in the wrong direction but then righting themselves.

The Jain story of the monk Sukośāla, from Ravisena's *Padmapurāna*, explores both the reasons for animal birth and the capabilities an animal has to improve its situation. In this tale a king-become-ascetic returns to his former home for alms, and is thrown out by his former wife, Sahadevī, who is angry over his abandonment of family duties. His young son, Sukośāla, hears of this and goes to meet his father. He proceeds to become an ascetic himself, and the two wander together for many months. Meanwhile Sahadevī dies with angry thoughts and is reborn as a tigress. One day this tigress comes across the two monks, and is filled once again with hatred. As her former son stands calmly and attains omniscience, she attacks, kills and eats him up. She is, however, soon appeased by the words of her former

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husband, who also attains omniscience, and she renounces everything and eventually attains a heavenly rebirth.¹³

We learn several things from this story. Firstly, it is anger that leads to the queen being reborn as an animal, specifically an animal associated with violence. Secondly, this animal is then capable of deluded and violent action, namely devouring her own former son, but also of understanding Jain teaching, undertaking a form of renunciation and attaining heavenly rebirth. There is therefore a dual focus, on both the instinctive and deluded state of animal birth, and the possibility of rising above such limitations. This tension between instinct or delusion on the one hand, and reason or capacity for moral action on the other, is key to understanding the animal realm in both Jain and Buddhist stories. The story of Sukōśala is one of many Jain narratives in which an animal's instinctive actions are over-ruled by moral or ascetic discipline.

A similar human-animal-deity trajectory is found in the Śvetāmbara Jain *Jñātādharmaśekhāḥ*, although the reasons for each rebirth are somewhat different. A man meets Mahāvira and becomes a lay follower. However, gradually he begins to forget his religious practices and focuses more and more attention on his aspiration to build a pool. He succeeds in building this pool, complete with garden and rest house, and everybody is very pleased and grateful. However, he is so attached to this pool that when he dies he is reborn as a frog within it. While swimming around he hears people seated near the pool praising his former self, and concentrating hard he recalls his past life. He is shocked by his descent to the position of frog, and takes on the lay vows once more. One day he hears that Mahāvira is giving a sermon nearby, and he tries his best to get to the place in which this is happening. However, on the way he is trampled by the king's horse. Lying on the side of the road with his entrails beside him, he pays homage to the omniscient ones and takes on the five great vows of an ascetic. As a result he attains a heavenly rebirth. Later Mahāvira affirms that he will eventually attain *mokṣa*.¹⁴

In this story it is attachment that leads to animal rebirth, as the layman meets a poetic end in the pool he loves so much. Initially the frog acts according to instinct, but after the shocking experience of recalling his past life (on which more will be said in Chapter 6) he is able to return to his Jain

¹³ Summarised from Granoff 1998: 49–56. The story is also found in Harisena's *Bṛhatkathakōśa*. As Granoff (1992: 40) notes, there may well be a connection between this story and a very popular *jātaka* in which the Bodhisarva sacrifices himself to feed a starving tigress found, among other places, as the opening story of the *Jātakamālā*.

¹⁴ Summarised from Murti *et al.* 1996–7, vol. 2: 84–109.

practice. He is capable, therefore, of reason (he can understand the doctrine and see the benefits of religious practice) and of specifically Jain practices including fasting and taking on both the lesser vows of a layperson and the five great vows of an ascetic. As a result of his great dedication he is suitably rewarded through rebirth as a god, and the chance to continue his Jain practices until he eventually achieves *mokṣa*.

Another story of a frog-become-god is preserved in the Buddhist tradition. In the *Vimānavatthu* a god visits the Buddha during a sermon. The Buddha asks him to explain his presence and his celestial appearance and retinue. The god explains:

I was formerly a frog, living in water.

But while I was listening to your teaching I was killed by a cow-herd.

From a moment's purity of mind, behold my psychic power and glory, behold my majesty, behold my beauty and my splendour.

Those who hear your teaching for a long time, Gotama, they attain the steadfast place where they who do not grieve.¹⁵

Thus we hear that as a result of the state of mind brought about by the Buddha's teaching, a lowly frog was able to be reborn as a magnificent god. In this context it is not ascetic practice but simply being in a fortunate proximity to the Buddha that results in the frog's happy ending. Although this story is clearly related to the Jain one, here we do not find out the reason for the frog's birth as a lowly animal to begin with, nor do we hear what happens to the god in future lives. Indeed the *Vimānavatthu* version is simple in its declaration that hearing the Buddha's teaching will lead to a heavenly reward, and this can be contrasted with the Jain version in which birth as a frog is a temporary glitch in the longer path of a human follower of Jainism.¹⁶

In both the Buddhist and the Jain case, a significant part of the frog's success in attaining a heavenly rebirth is the animal's state of mind at the moment of death. The importance of one's mental state at death in determining one's future rebirth is a motif common to Jain and Buddhist – and indeed Brahmanical Hindu – stories.¹⁷ The Jain frog keeps his mind on the qualities of the omniscient ones, while the Buddhist frog experiences what he calls 'a

¹⁵ *Vimānavatthu* 51 'Maṅḍikadevapuṭṭavimānaṃ'. My trans. from Hardy 1901: 218.

¹⁶ I deal with these stories in greater detail elsewhere (Appleton 201b and 2012b), so although they are rich in comparative detail, not to mention delightful stories in themselves, I will spare the reader any repetition of my earlier analyses.

¹⁷ For an interesting discussion of this motif in Indian texts see Edgerton 1927. Jain karma theory includes the idea that one's *āyus* karma, that which dictates the length of one's subsequent life, and therefore to a large extent one's realm of rebirth, is bound towards the end of one's life, often just before death. One's state of mind at death can therefore have a powerful effect on one's rebirth. Jaini 1980: 232–3; Wiley 2003. For further comment see Chapter 7.

converted by the Buddha, and in the story of the goose (*Avadānasātaka* 60), in which a flock of birds attain heavenly birth after hearing the Buddha speak.

In his exploration of the role of *prasāda* in another Buddhist story collection, the *Divyāvadāna*, Andy Rotman argues that *prasāda* is primarily initiated by a visual experience prompted by a *prasādika* (agent of *prasāda*), very often the Buddha himself. This experience of *prasāda* in turn tends to prompt a gift-giving, which often leads to a miraculous display of some sort. Although he acknowledges that discourses on *prasāda* will vary from text to text, Rotman's observations are helpful in illuminating the *Avadānasātaka* stories just recounted. In particular Rotman notes: 'In most instances involving the laity, the arising of *prasāda* requires no explicit effort on their part, no specific thought or deed other than simply catching sight of a *prasādika* object.'²³ Like our animals, and indeed like the story of a bull in the *Divyāvadāna* which Rotman himself considers, the experience of *prasāda* appears to be passive rather than active.²⁴ In addition, Rotman argues that those beings that are shown experiencing and benefiting from *prasāda* are the poor and disadvantaged, or those lacking in merit.²⁵ The animals in the *Avadānasātaka*, and the frog in the *Vimānavatthu*, might therefore be usefully viewed as on a par with meritless laypeople.

It is interesting to compare these four stories of animal rebirth with others earlier in the *Avadānasātaka*. In the story of the hare (*Avadānasātaka* 37) the Bodhisattva is born as a hare and, in a well-known story, jumps into a fire so that an ascetic may eat him. In the story of Subhadra (*Avadānasātaka* 40) the Bodhisattva is the head of a herd of deer and saves his herd from danger. Thus within the single text of the *Avadānasātaka* we see the two very different understandings of the capabilities of animals that seem to pervade Buddhist narratives more generally. When an animal is the Bodhisattva it is shown as capable of bravery, wisdom and self-sacrifice. When an animal is simply an animal – even one that was recently a layman or monk (as was the case for the animals in *Avadānasātaka* 56, 58 and 60) – all it can hope for is a positive mental state brought on by an encounter with, or an opportunity to serve, the Buddha. This calming of the mind or generation of faith allows the animal to attain a heavenly rebirth. Despite this dramatic improvement in rebirth condition there is no discernible progress on the Buddhist path, though the arising of faith can be seen as a precursor to further spiritual development.

²³ Rotman 2009: 70.

²⁴ Rotman 2009: 105.

²⁵ For example Rotman 2009: 89 and *passim*.

moment's purity of mind' (Pāli *mubbutam cittappasāda*). The term *pasāda* (Sanskrit *prasāda*) is difficult to translate here, for while its basic meaning is clarity, purity or serenity, it can also be used to mean faith. Its equivalence to *saddhā* (Pāli) or *śraddhā* (Sanskrit), which is commonly but not always appropriately translated as 'faith', is fairly widely attested in Buddhist discourse.¹⁸ That this quality arising in the minds of animals is key to their rebirth destiny is highlighted by four further stories in the *Avadānasātaka*.

In the story of the parrot (*Avadānasātaka* 56) the Buddha is making his way to visit king Bimbisāra when he encounters in a forest a parrot that has a human voice.¹⁹ The parrot offers the Buddha hospitality and then takes it upon himself to go to the king to announce the Buddha's arrival. During his service to the Buddha, however, he is killed by a falcon, but he then attains birth in the Heaven of the Thirty Three. When the monks ask the Buddha for an explanation of the parrot's karmic trajectory he explains that in the past, during the time of Buddha Kāśyapa, the parrot had been a Buddhist layman:

He was feeble in his studies, and by the fruit of that action he was reborn amongst parrots. When in my presence his mind was faithful, and therefore he was reborn amongst the gods.²⁰

Like the frog of the *Vimānavatthu*, who attained rebirth as a god 'for a moment's purity/faithfulness of mind' (*mubbutam cittappasāda*) the parrot also escapes the animal realm through his mind being calmed or made faithful (*cittam prasāditam*) by proximity to the Buddha. Similarly in the story of the buffalo (*Avadānasātaka* 58) the Buddha calms a ferocious buffalo and then tells it:

Good. Now make your mind faithful (*prasādyatām cittam*) towards me ... and quitting the world of animals you will go from here to heaven!²¹

The buffalo takes the Buddha's advice, and later, questioned by his monks, the Buddha uses the same phrase as he used to explain the parrot's good karma: 'When in my presence his mind was faithful (*cittam prasāditam*), and therefore he was reborn amongst the gods.'²² The phrase recurs again in the story of a snake (*Avadānasātaka* 51), in which a violent serpent is

¹⁸ For a discussion of translation issues and definitional questions see Rotman 2009: 66–7.

¹⁹ All references to the *Avadānasātaka* are to the story number (numbered 1–100) as found in the editions of Speyer 1938 and Vaidya 1958, as well as the French translation of Feer 1891.

²⁰ My trans. from Vaidya 1958: 144.

²¹ My trans. from Vaidya 1958: 148. In this story the translation 'faithful' is made easier by the explicit object of the faith: 'towards me [the Buddha]'.
²² My trans. from Vaidya 1958: 150.

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30 Many other stories of the Bodhisattva-animal's great abilities are preserved in *jātaka* collections such as the *Jātakamālā* and the *Jātakatthavannanā*. In these stories the Bodhisattva is born as an animal and nonetheless manages to do good, defying animal instinct presumably through his accumulated qualities and determination to achieve buddhahood. In many cases although the good action may appear somewhat mundane, it can also be interpreted as having soteriological import through association with one of the perfections required for buddhahood. Each one of these perfections can arguably be found demonstrated during an animal birth. For example, in illustration of the Southern Buddhist list of ten perfections, we hear of an elephant giving away his tusks (generosity), a hare observing the *uposatha* (good conduct), a parrot that lives off a single tree and river water and later – after Śakra withers his tree as a test – lives off dust (renunciation), a fish who knows not to trust an innocent-looking crane (wisdom), a monkey who helps his troop escape from a king by making his own body into a bridge to safety (energy), a buffalo serenely enduring the torments of a naughty monkey who repeatedly defecates on his back (forbearance), a quail who uses a statement of truth to hold back a forest fire (truth), a monkey repeatedly escaping a crocodile's attempts to kill him (determination), another monkey who offers himself to a hunter in substitution for his weak mother (loving kindness) and a quail who is truly contented with his lot (equanimity).³⁶

The Bodhisattva, of course, is not an ordinary being, even when born among animals. We might not therefore be surprised to see the Bodhisattva-as-animal perform acts that are not typical of the animal realm. As a spiritually advanced being, he is more likely to be able to rise above animal instinct and act according to Buddhist values. Some *other* animals in the *jātakas* also seem to be able to act in extraordinary ways, however, though their actions are often defined in relation to the Bodhisattva. Thus animals remain loyal to the Bodhisattva, such as when the Buddha's wife Yaśodharā is born as a doe who refuses to abandon her captured husband, or born as a tigress queen she refuses the advances of other animals and insists upon having the Bodhisattva lion as her king.³⁷ It is not only the Buddha's faithful wife whose affection for him crosses lifetimes; other stories tell of his attendant Ananda or chief disciples staying loyal to him, and sometimes

exhibiting their own wisdom or kindness. For example, Ānanda was once a jackal who rescued a lion (the Bodhisattva) and as a result the two became great friends.³⁸ Such examples may not exactly constitute moral action, but they do show animals acting in remarkable ways. The main emphasis seems to be the animal's attitude towards the Bodhisattva, which mirrors that character's later attitude towards the Buddha. As such, the behaviour of these animals probably has more to do with the history and purposes of the *jātaka* genre than with Buddhist ideas of animal capabilities.

As well as stories of animals loyal to the Bodhisattva, we meet others loyal to the Buddha. For example, there is the elephant who looked after the Buddha during his forest retreat, or the monkey who offered the Buddha a bowl of honey, or the Buddha's horse Kanthaka who died of a broken heart as a result of his master's renunciation; all three of these animals were reborn in heaven realms as a result of their service to the Buddha. It would appear that serving the Buddha has some sort of karmic potency, perhaps linked to the positive mental state brought about by proximity to such an advanced being. It may be significant that such service is presented as an instinctive act of virtue, and therefore possible for creatures that are largely dominated by delusion. These animals do not ponder about their predicament and make a carefully reasoned choice to take on the precepts or practice meditation; they simply experience the greatness of the Buddha's presence.

In contrast to the Buddhist situation, Jain animals tend not to obtain much benefit from association with religious people, unless they receive and comprehend teachings from them, something which they are explicitly able to do. Since animals can gain great benefit from hearing a teaching, it is an act of great compassion to take the time to help an animal in this way. In one story of the *Vasudevahindī* a man called Cārudatta is travelling with a caravan. Having ridden goats up a treacherous mountain path the caravan leader instructs everyone to slay their goat, eat the flesh and climb into the skin. Then the flesh-eating birds will mistake them for lumps of meat and carry them over the mountain ridge. Cārudatta is appalled, and begs for the life of his goat, who has carried him so far, to be spared. The other merchants move to kill the goat for him, and as the poor animal gazes at him Cārudatta tells him that he must be experiencing his bad karma and that he should keep his mind on the omniscient ones. And, in Jain's translation:

the goat stood silently with bowed head, shedding tears. I repeated the vows; he refused all food, and mentally recited, 'Salutation to *Arahantas*, to the

³⁶ All these examples are taken from the *Jātakatthavannanā*, though similar examples (and other versions of the same stories) are found in other *jātaka* collections. The ones cited are numbers 514, 316, 429, 216, 407, 278, 35, 37, 222, 394. All references to the *Jātakatthavannanā* are to the numbers as found in Fausboll's 1877–96 edition and the team translation edited by Cowell 1895–1907.

³⁷ These are two of many stories in the *Mahāvastu* that reinforce the relationships between the Buddha and his family in past lives. See Jones 1949–56, vol. 2: 222–4, and 66–9.

³⁸ *Guna-jātaka* (*Jātakatthavannanā* 157).

liberated souls and to the monks.' Frightened of the world, he stood as motionless as a painting, and the merchants killed him.²⁹

Later in the story we meet a god who is the goat reborn. He thanks Cārudatta and explains his own past lives as a teacher of animal sacrifices and then five times as a goat who is killed in sacrifice.³⁰ Although the goat-god is a minor character in the story, he provides a neat insight into the possible benefits that can be gained by animals if given the right teaching. Once again the animal's state of mind at death is important, but it is the result of an active decision to turn one's attention to the qualities of the omniscient ones.

In line with Jain understandings of karmic operation, an animal must act in a way which alters its own karma, even if such an action is as simple as inclining the mind towards the omniscient ones. Thus, for example, in the story of Yaśodhara, two birds overhear an explanation by an ascetic of their own past lives as well as some general Jain teachings. Shortly thereafter they are killed, and are reborn as humans 'due to their meditation and to their enthusiastic devotion to the Jinas'.³¹ This rebirth is the result not of simple proximity to the teacher, but of comprehension of Jain teachings and a decision to pay honour to the Jain teachers. Other animals go even further, practising fasting or taking on the lay vows, as does the frog in the story recounted above. Some of these animals, like the frog, demonstrate that they do not even need human intervention in order to improve their lot; another example of this is found in the story of Megha in the opening chapter of the *Jñānādharmakathā*, in which an elephant recalls his past lives purely as a result of a traumatic experience of *dāḥi* *vi*, and then compassionately sacrifices his life to save that of another animal.³² That is not to say that animals cannot be aided by association with a spiritually advanced human teacher, but rather that loyalty or service to that teacher, or indeed a mind calmed or made faithful by their presence, is neither sufficient nor necessary for the attainment of a better rebirth in the Jain context. Perhaps the closest the Jain narratives come to the Buddhist position is in some mentions of dying animals being helped to a better rebirth by having the fivefold homage formula (*namaskāra mantra*) whispered in their ear.³³ Thus Jain animals are capable of making progress on the Jain path, and they can be greatly benefited by human intervention, but this is not necessary in all cases.

²⁹ Jain 1977: 295. ³⁰ Summarised from Jain 1977: 290-5 and 100-1. ³¹ Hardy 2008: 127. This story is discussed further in Chapter 5. ³² I discuss this story further in Chapter 6. ³³ For example see Johnson 1931-62, vol. 4: 337. The fivefold homage is to the five categories of beings worthy of honour: the enlightened teachers (*arhats*), liberated ones (*siddhas*), mendicant leaders (*ācāryas*), preceptors (*upādhyāyas*) and mendicants (*sādhis*).

It would appear from the examples explored thus far that Jain animals have a much greater capacity for significant action than Buddhist ones, with some exceptions including most notably the Bodhisattva-as-animal. This is no doubt linked to the different conceptions of karma. From the perspective of early Jainism, *all* actions bind karma, even actions such as breathing that are not consciously willed, or accidental actions done out of ignorance of the consequences. There is a strong contrast between this position and the Buddhist one, which states that karmically significant actions are determined by the mental state behind the action. As it is sometimes put, karma is intention. That is to say, actions that are willed are karmically significant, and whether the action is good or bad depends upon the motivation behind it. Thus we find *Vimaya* regulations excusing monks from the guilt of murder if there was no intention to kill. While having a good intention is also important in the Jain context, Jains consider ignorance to be in itself an expression of a bad intention, and ignorance of the consequences of one's actions cannot excuse those actions in which harm is perpetrated. One example of this distinction given in a Jain commentary is that if a person kills a baby thinking it is a gourd, Buddhists would not consider him guilty of killing, whereas Jains would consider him responsible for the ignorance as well as the action.³⁴ *animals killing animals = hell*

Consider this contrast in relation to animals. For Jains, all the actions of animals are karmically significant. If a lion kills other animals for food, even if it is simply acting according to instinct, it will go to hell. The animal's ignorance that killing is bad is no excuse, for even that is the result of its karma. Animals are thus likely to bind lots and lots of bad karma, and this is one of the reasons why animal birth is unfortunate. The possibility of animals overcoming their instinct and acting in ways that create merit is therefore necessary if we are to contemplate animals ever escaping the animal realm to higher rebirth states. The Buddhist case is not so clear. If an animal is acting according to instinct then is it acting wilfully, in other words is it creating karma? On one analysis it would appear not, for the animals are acting in ignorance, and so cannot really be said to be acting wilfully. Yet delusion, which dominates the animal realm, is considered to be a root of unwholesome action, and therefore a cause of bad karma and bad rebirth.

The idea that Buddhist animals make bad karma during their sojourn in the animal realm is found in the *Balapaṇḍita Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.³⁵ Here we are presented with the famous simile explaining the rarity of human

³⁴ Grantoff 1992: 33-4. ³⁵ *Majjhima Nikāya* 129; Nāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 1.016-28.

Wilder
Mantra
in ear of

birth: if there was a yoke floating on the ocean and a blind turtle that surfaced every hundred years:

the blind turtle would sooner put his neck into the single hole of that yoke . . . than a fool that has gone to a place of suffering (*vinipāta*) would take to gain the human state. What is the reason for that? Because, monks, there is no righteous living (*dharmacariyā*) there, no living in spiritual calm (*samacariyā*), no skilful conduct (*kusakiriyyā*), no meritorious action (*puññakiriyyā*). There they eat one another and kill the weak.³⁶

We are left in no doubt that the realms of suffering – which include animal birth – are places in which beings do bad rather than good, and that this makes the potential for a higher rebirth very low. Similarly the *Mahāvastu* states that the animal realm is a place of bad action, for animals have no care for their relatives, but simply kill and eat one another, and drink one another's blood: "They go from state of woe (*apāya*) to state of woe, from bad destiny (*durgati*) to bad destiny, from place of suffering (*vinipāta*) to place of suffering."³⁷ Given that the narrative materials suggest the opportunities for animals to improve their lot are largely limited to encounters with the Buddha, which are rare to say the least, animals truly are to be pitied. Even taking into account the possibility that some earlier past-life good karma will ripen and lead to a better rebirth, there is still a likelihood that one's animal existence will have resulted in a lot of bad karma that will inevitably bring one back to the lower realms once more.

This idea that animals make bad karma even through their instinctive and deluded actions is not really supported by the Buddhist narrative materials, however. We do of course see animals acting in immoral ways. In *jātaka* stories the bad animal is usually Devadatta (the Buddha's murderous and schismatic cousin) in a past life, trying to attack or kill the Bodhisattva, or being an ineffective leader who endangers his herd. However, in these stories we do not see the specific fruits of these actions in future lifetimes. For example in three inter-related stories that tell of Devadatta as a crocodile attempting to kill the Bodhisattva as a monkey (*Jātakathauvannā* 57, 208, 342), once the Bodhisattva has successfully escaped all we hear of the crocodile's fate is that he was frustrated and disappointed by his failure. In another story (*Jātakathauvannā* 128) Devadatta is a jackal who impersonates an ascetic and manages to eat some of the Bodhisattva-rat's companions. In this story the bad animal at

least meets a sorry end, being killed and eaten up by the rats, but still we hear nothing of his rebirth destiny. (And the Bodhisattva-rat, who kills the jackal, apparently experiences no bad karmic fruit for this act even though it is contrary to Buddhist ethics.) Although we are sure that Devadatta must have suffered some punishment in future lives as well, all we are explicitly told is that he eventually becomes the Buddha's cousin and a schismatic Buddhist monk. And outside of the *jātakas* we fare no better in our search for stories of animals going to hell. It seems as though the Buddhist storytellers were reluctant to speak of this, presumably because such a rebirth requires actions that are *intentionally* rather than *instinctively* bad. Given that animal instincts are considered to be naturally bad, good actions performed by animals might have more karmic potency than bad actions, and so stories of animals achieving human or divine birth are more permissible. Better, then, to tell stories of bad animals saved from an unhappy destiny by a lucky encounter with the Buddha.

Jain redactors appear to have had no such qualms, and Jain narratives show animals doing deeds bad enough to result in hellish birth, and the bad fruits are inevitable regardless of whether the action was instinctive or not. In one particularly fascinating story found in the tenth-century *Bṛhatkathakośa* of Hariṣeṇa and recounted in P. S. Jaini's article on the spiritual capabilities of animals, a giant whale swims along with its jaws wide open eating any creatures that do not escape its teeth. A tiny little fish sees how many creatures *do* escape and tells itself that were it such a whale, it would ~~certainly~~ not let so many creatures get away. Both fish are reborn in the seventh hell, the lowest of the hells in Jain cosmology.³⁸ As Jaini points out, the story was probably intended as much to warn human beings about the serious consequences of one's thoughts as to detail the possible destinies of animals.³⁹ However, it is interesting to note that this hellish destination is permitted for fish alone by the formal Jain cosmology, which states that different animals have different capabilities for evil. This birds can only be born as low as the third hell, quadrupeds not below the fourth and snakes no lower than the fifth. Only aquatic animals and human males are capable of actions bad enough to lead to the seventh hell. (Women can only reach the sixth.) Jaini does not go so far as to suggest that the story of the fish may have influenced this doctrine (perhaps because the extant source appears to be fairly late), but this seems to be a strong possibility. After all, there is no obvious reason why fish should be deemed more capable of doing heinous

³⁶ My trans. from Trenchner and Chalmers 1888–1902, vol. 3: 169. For an alternative translation see

Nijamoli and Bodhi 2009: 1.021.

³⁷ My trans. from Senart (ed.) 1882–97, vol. 1: 27.

³⁸ Jaini 2000a: 260. ³⁹ Jaini 2000a: 261.

deeds than, say, lions, eagles or human women.⁴⁰ Once again we see the carefully intertwined nature of clear-cut doctrinal exposition and stories.

To summarise, in both traditions we find that birth as an animal can result from a variety of bad actions, and is most definitely a realm of suffering. Once born as an animal, the opportunities for spiritual progress are limited, because instinct is the guiding principle, and many animals are bad instinctively. However, in Jain narratives, animals are able to overcome their instinct and undertake Jain religious practices such as fasting, and even attain right view. This overpowering of instinct is more likely to happen if the animal has recently been a human, for then they may recall their past life or simply retain some recollection of past Jain practice; this recollection may also be aided by a Jain teacher, even Mahāvīra himself, but the presence of a teacher is not necessary for an animal's self-improvement. In the Buddhist context animal instinct is harder to escape unless you are as spiritually advanced as the Bodhisattva. For ordinary animals, even those who have recently been Buddhist monks or laypeople, attaining a moment of mental calm or faith is the key focus, perhaps because this can negate the natural deluded and impassioned state of animals. This moment of mental peace is made possible by the proximity of the Buddha or hearing a few words of his teaching, and it results in a divine rebirth. It is not clear in the Buddhist case whether or not the instinctive actions of animals lead to karmic fruit; quite possibly their animal existence is viewed more as a state in which previous bad karma comes to fruition, allowing the animal to bounce back to a human birth once more once the fruits are exhausted. In the Jain case it is clear that instinctive actions bind karma, and so because animals are instinctively bad, Jain animals can – and very often do – go to hell.

Thus Jain animals have more opportunities, but with that comes more responsibility. Teachers may help an animal realise what is needed to escape its lowly position, but ultimately the animal must itself act according to Jain ideals. In contrast, Buddhist animals would appear to have little or no capability to improve their lot, unless they happen to be in the vicinity of the Buddha, or indeed to be a Bodhisattva themselves. One can only hope that they will, nonetheless, eventually bounce back to a more favourable rebirth condition.

⁴⁰ As Nick Allen pointed out to me when I shared this fascinating doctrine with him (personal conversation, March 2010), the restrictions as to which animal can reach which hell reflects the earthly cosmology, in which birds are higher than land animals, which are in turn higher than subterranean snakes and underwater fish. It is possible that this parallel hierarchy in some way influenced the doctrine, although this would not explain the relative positioning of human men and women.

As an afterword it is worth noting that when a Buddhist animal does manage to attain a human birth, however rare we might believe this to be, they often seem to preserve animal traits. For example, a *Vinaya* rule explains how a certain monk was reported to the Buddha for ruminating, because his fellow monks felt that this violated the rule against eating after midday. The Buddha responded that the monk was merely retaining a habit from his past life as a cow.⁴¹ Similarly a story in the *Dharmapada-atthakathā* tells of five laymen who retain habits from previous lives, three of which were as animals. These men were unable to concentrate during a sermon: one fell asleep, as a remnant of many past lives as a snake who slept with his head in his coils; another poked at the earth, as he had been a worm; and the third shook a tree, as he had been a monkey.⁴² Perhaps the most delightful example of the idea that humans can retain animal habits is a story recounted by the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang: an overweight monk is chastised for his greed, and in his defence he states that he was previously an elephant, and that his appetite is retained from this previous existence. As an elephant he carried scriptures across India, leading to his rebirth as a learned monk, but the elephantine appetite was retained!⁴³

The retention of karmic habits is frequent also across multiple human births, at least in the Buddhist narrative corpus.⁴⁴ That it extends to animals should therefore be no surprise, and through this continuity the boundaries between animal and human birth are further eroded. This, of course, is a key message for the human audiences of the stories, who may need to be reminded of the sentience of animals in order to encourage appropriate behaviour towards them. Indeed, all stories of the animal realm – Buddhist and Jain – speak to their human audience about how to treat non-human beings as much as they comment on the capabilities of the animals themselves. In the Jain case this even extends to the treatment of plants, as we are about to see.

Plants and other single-sensed beings

It is a well-known difference between Buddhist and Jain interpretations of the realms of rebirth that the former does not include plants whereas the latter explicitly does. Stories of plants being reborn are thus limited to the Jain narrative corpus, and even there it is rare to see plants or other

⁴¹ *Chullavagga* 5.55; Oldenberg 1879–83, vol. 2: 132.

⁴² *Dharmapada-atthakathā* 18.9; Norman 1906–15, vol. 3: 355–7.

⁴³ Li 1996: 109.

⁴⁴ For a discussion see Appleton 2011b: 234–7.

single-sensed beings as agents in a story. Sometimes we discover that a person has been a plant in a past life, such as in the case of Mrgāputra as told in the *Uttarādhyaṇa*. Mrgāputra is a prince who wishes to renounce, so he asks his parents for permission. They refuse, and so he recounts to them his past lives in various hell realms, as an animal, as a tree, and even as iron. Eventually, convinced by the prince's recollection of past suffering, his parents allow him to become a Jain monk.⁴⁵ On another occasion, in the *Bhāgavati Sūtra*, Mahāvīra predicts the future rebirths and final liberation of a Śāli tree, a branch of a Śāli tree and a branch of an Umbara tree.⁴⁶ Such stories and predictions are of course impossible in a Buddhist context, in which trees are not sentient.

Although the established Buddhist view is clear on the matter of plant life, Lambert Schmithausen has argued that in fact early Buddhists may have believed that plants were sentient and therefore that harming them was a reprehensible act.⁴⁷ However, Schmithausen's evidence for this rests largely on the fact that in several Buddhist texts it is recorded that harm to plants and seeds should be avoided because *some people* believe that plants are single-sensed beings. As Schmithausen repeatedly acknowledges, there is no implication that the Buddhists themselves, monastic or lay, believed plants to be sentient, only that they acknowledged the views of others (including their competitors the Jains) and therefore refrained from unnecessarily harming plants as a matter of ascetic decorum. As Schmithausen insists, since the textual evidence is not from the time of the earliest community, we cannot be sure that the early Buddhists *did not* believe plants to be sentient, as this appears to have been a strong view among other Indian religious groups. However, there is also no positive evidence to suggest that they *did*.

We may not have evidence that early Buddhists ever considered plants to be sentient, and we certainly do have evidence that they quickly came to deny such sentience. However, as Schmithausen argues, it is possible that plants were considered by the Buddhists to be a borderline case between animals and inanimate objects including, for example, water.⁴⁸ The eventual explicit statement that plants are not sentient may be related to the exclusion of plants from the realms of rebirth, or as Schmithausen puts it, 'the rejection of plants as sentient beings may be connected . . . with the attempt to establish as co-extensive the range of sentient beings on the one hand and the range of possible forms of rebirth on the other'.⁴⁹ In other words, it may have been the case that plants were considered sentient

⁴⁵ Jacobi 1895: 88–99.

⁴⁶ *Bhāgavati Sūtra* XIV, 8; Deleu 1970: 211.

⁴⁷ Schmithausen 1991: 53–4.

⁴⁸ Schmithausen 1991.

objects, not to be harmed by beings who were concerned about their karma, without being considered moral subjects that participated in the cycle of rebirth themselves. Since our concern is not with plant sentience as such, but rather with the ability of plants to be reborn (or of other beings to be reborn as plants) we may safely ignore the subtleties and declare Buddhism and Jainism to be opposed on this matter. Plants, for Jains, have souls and are subject to rebirth. For Buddhists, they have no consciousness and therefore are not able to act karmically or be reborn. Such opposing views are supported by the narrative literature.

There is one interesting narrative exception to this clear-cut distinction, however, and that is the body of stories concerning tree deities and deities inhabiting other plants. In several *jātaka* stories, for example, we discover that the Bodhisattva was a tree-deity who watched certain events unfold and commented upon them. This identification often functions as a neat way of incorporating the Bodhisattva into a story in which he otherwise does not feature, thus affirming the story's identity as a *jātaka*. In other cases the tree-deity may feature more fully in the story, for example in the *Rukkhadharmajātaka* (*Jātakaṭṭhapanṇāṇī* 74) the Bodhisattva is a tree-deity who advises the other tree-deities to choose abodes that are close together and close to him. Some ignore his advice, and out of greed for offerings from humans they choose abodes in lone trees near villages. A storm destroys these trees, forcing the disobedient deities back to the forest. As the verse summarises:

It is good for kinsfolk to stick together, like trees in the forest, for the wind carries the solitary, while forest trees remain strong.⁵⁰

As we can see from the verse, and also from the frame narrative which states that the Buddha told this story to quarrelling kinsmen, the trees are really being used as a simile. That the story is expanded to concern disobedient tree-deities and their Bodhisattva leader is somewhat unnecessary to the overall worth of the aphorism, but without it there would be no *jātaka* story.

We learn two interesting things from this story. Firstly, the trees themselves are clearly not sentient, and the deities are able to move from one to another easily, suggesting the relationship between tree and deity is easily dissolved. This is in contrast to some other stories in which deity and tree seem inextricably linked, such that destroying the tree would kill the deity.⁵¹

⁵⁰ My trans. from Fausboll 1877–96, vol. 1: 429.

⁵¹ For example in the *Bhaddadāra-jātaka* (*Jātakaṭṭhapanṇāṇī* 465) the deity of a magnificent tree is told to move elsewhere as the tree is needed for the construction of a new palace, but he declares that his life is dependent on the tree, and so persuades the king to rethink. Although this story implies that there is a close link between deity and tree, there is still no implication that the tree itself is sentient.

plants
trees

Buddhism
plants not sentient
over/borderline beings

f. A. A. 1. 1. 1. 1.

Secondly, the reason some deities were disobedient is that they desired offerings from the villagers. It is not clear whether such offerings would be forthcoming because of the proximity of the deity to the villagers, or whether in fact the offerings would be made to the trees with or without the deity's presence. Regardless, it seems that trees were the recipients of gifts and devotion, indicating a belief in either their sentience or their worth as abodes of deities.

The worship of trees plays a role in other narratives too. In the *Palāsa-jātaka* (*Jātakathavannanā* 307) the Bodhisattva is a tree-deity whose tree is given offerings by a brahmin. One day he asks the brahmin why, knowing the tree to be 'insentient, unhearing and unaware' (*acetanam, assunantam, ajānantam*), he continues to make offerings and requests. Clearly the Bodhisattva has no time for the belief in the sentience of plants, yet in fact upon hearing the brahmin's response that he is honouring the deities that inhabit the tree, the Bodhisattva makes him rich.

As well as the Bodhisattva taking birth as a tree deity, we also see him interacting with such deities, and again the propriety of making offerings to trees is a focus. In the *Dummedha-jātaka* (*Jātakathavannanā* 50) the Bodhisattva is a prince who makes a show of worshipping a tree-deity. When he is crowned king, he declares that he must now show his gratitude to the tree by making a large sacrifice of all the people in the kingdom who indulge in animal sacrifice. This ruse of course results in the people immediately giving up their sacrificial activities, saving a large number of animals. Notably the welfare of animals is clearly a focus of this story, whereas the tree-deity itself has no role in the unfolding events, although the people's belief in the deity is necessary to the success of the prince's plan. Thus whether or not tree-deities really exist, and really expect offerings, the simple belief that they do can have powerful effects. Stories such as this one play on the widespread belief in tree-deities (or in the sentience of trees) and, without explicitly denying this belief, show the superiority of the Buddhist perspective.

As Schmithausen points out, acknowledging that trees are the homes of minor deities is one easy way of justifying treating trees with compassion even while denying the sentience of plants. Thus in commentaries on the *vinaya* regulation against harming plants stories are related of a monk who felled a tree and thereby injured the tree-deity or destroyed its home.⁵⁴ These explanations are found alongside the statement that harming trees is to be avoided because 'people' regard trees as living beings with one sense.⁵⁵

Jain Marudevi (P) is the animal realm. Nigoda!
41. Svetimbara trad

The two explanations are two different ways of justifying a compassionate attitude to trees without accepting the prevailing view that trees (and other plants) are sentient. Thus the body of stories about tree-deities seem to support Schmithausen's contention that in early Buddhism trees were considered a borderline case: an object of compassion even if not a subject of rebirth.

If trees are a borderline case in Buddhism, it is nonetheless clear that there is no room in the Buddhist cosmology for single-sensed beings such as those that Jains believe to inhabit the air, water, fire and earth. Even in Jain narratives, such beings do not often feature as anything other than an unpleasant destiny for doers of bad deeds. With a tiny life-span and often a body so small that it is imperceptible to humans, these creatures have little narrative value. There is one significant exception, however, which is the story of the mother of the first *jina* of this time-cycle, explored in an article by P. S. Jaini.⁵⁴ This woman, called Maṇḍevī, is believed in the Svetāmbara tradition to have been the first entrant to the *siddhaloka*, gaining this status before her son Rṣabha had even begun to teach.⁵⁵ Before her life as a human woman, however, Maṇḍevī was a *nigoda*, a plant-bodied single-sensed being at the very bottom of the Jain cosmology. Indeed, she was a *nitya-nigoda*, or a *nigoda* that had always been a *nigoda*, and had never taken rebirth outside that realm. Spontaneously she was reborn as a human woman, the mother of the first *jina*, the grandmother of the first *cakravartin* and the great-grandmother of the man who much later on would become the *jina* Mahāvīra. There is no apparent karmic reason for her sudden elevation in status, though once again this narrative is dependent upon specific karmic rules, namely the ability of a *nigoda* to take rebirth as a human and in the same life attain *mokṣa*. This ability is affirmed for all plant-, water- and earth-bodied beings by Mahāvīra in the *Bhagavati Sūtra*. This is the case even though wind- and fire-bodied beings cannot even bind human karma, never mind achieve *mokṣa* in that lifetime. In addition, two-, three- and four-sensed beings (the lower animals) can bind human karma but cannot then attain *mokṣa* in that lifetime. The affirmation is so strange that the *Bhagavati Sūtra* records that at first when a monk who had heard

⁵⁴ Jaini 2003.

⁵⁵ She is therefore in the category of *airiṣa-siddha*, or people who attain *mokṣa* at a time when there is no *tīrṭha* (Jain community). This category can be compared to *pratyakabuddhas*, who attain awakening during times without a Buddhist *śāṅka*, 'teaching' or 'dispensation'. The concept of *pratyakabuddhi* is also found in Jainism, where it refers to those who become awakened independently of a teacher, though there is no implication that this is because there are no teachers present in the world or available at the time.

most of their opportunities. Even if this was the true motivation behind the story, it remains a striking example of the lowest single-sensed beings participating fully in the complex network of multi-life stories.

Karma and the realms of rebirth

42 this teaching shared it with others, they did not believe him and went to Mahāvira to check.⁵⁶

Like the doctrine itself, the story of Marudevī has raised eyebrows among commentators and authors. In particular, her ability to attain *mokṣa* without renouncing the household life appears to go against Jain understandings of the actions necessary for spiritual progress. Jaini notes that the eleventh-century commentator Abhayadeva Sūri explains her swift attainment of *mokṣa* as being because she had not acquired much karma in her previous existence as a *nigoda*.⁵⁷ This does make some sense, though it sidesteps the issue of her household status, and begs the question of how she had earned rebirth in such fortuitous circumstances in the first place.⁵⁸ Perhaps because of these problems with the story, it is not known outside the Śvetāmbara tradition. However, Jaini records that stories of *nitya-nigodas* achieving human birth and *mokṣa* are also found in a Yāpaniya text, where the characters are the sons of the *cakravartin* Bharata.⁵⁹ In contrast to the story of Marudevī, however, this story indicates that in order to attain *mokṣa* humans must renounce the household life. Although, unlike Digambaras, Yāpaniyas accepted the ability of women to attain *mokṣa*, the story of Marudevī appears not to be known to (or accepted by) them. Digambara karmic rules do not allow that a *nigoda* may achieve *mokṣa* in the next life, nor that a woman can attain *mokṣa*, and thus both stories are absent from that tradition.⁶⁰

The story of Marudevī can be read as a story of the sensational success of a single-sensed being. However, given the problems it raises for understandings of the Jain path, it is perhaps wiser to view it as an affirmation, to a human audience, that *mokṣa* can be attained suddenly and unpredictably. There is a strong fatalist thread running through Jain karmic theory, which often manifests as an understanding that beings must gradually progress through each of the realms of rebirth in turn before eventually attaining *mokṣa* as a human.⁶¹ Marudevī's multi-life story might be seen as a deliberate attempt to undermine that view, and to challenge people to make the

⁵⁶ Jaini 2003: 3, referring to *Bhagavati* XV/11, 3 (see also Deleu 1970: 236–8). ⁵⁷ Jaini 2003: 5.

⁵⁸ I discuss this question, and the interesting contrast with the multi-life story of Mahāprajāpati Gaurāmi, the step-mother of the Buddha, in Appleton 2012b.

⁵⁹ Jaini 2003: 18ff. Yāpaniya Jains were a mendicant group who might be seen as bridging Śvetāmbara and Digāmbara ideas and practices. They accepted key Śvetāmbara doctrines such as the ability of women to achieve *mokṣa* but appear to have followed the Digāmbara practice of naked mendicancy, perhaps modified by the use of a small cloth in public places. Wiley 2004: 238–9.

⁶⁰ Jaini 2003: 22.

⁶¹ I discuss this more fully in Appleton 2012b. See also Jaini 1980. As Jaini points out (1980: 227), the story only challenges the idea of gradual evolution, not of evolution more generally.

evolution