

Tweeting the Law:
Some Avian Humanoids in Buddhist Discourse

Mimi Yiengpruksawan
Yale University

One night many years ago when my husband and I were living in Meguro, next to the Ōtori Shrine in Tokyo, he shook me awake. “Can you hear the crow?!” The shrine was home to a large roost of crows, but they were mostly quiet at three in the morning. We listened for while—silence—and went back to sleep. After a while he woke me up again—“can you hear the crow?” Nothing. We went out on the balcony and looked around. Silence. The third time he woke me up he was laughing. “It’s you—you’re cawing in your sleep!” A domestic dispute ensued, as you can imagine. But for years afterward I could never quite shake the feeling that, inside this hominin resides an inner crow.

I would like to thank Jinhua and Phyllis for allowing me a precious opportunity to share with you some of my random thoughts on the human-animal interface in Buddhist discourse, specifically as conveyed through visual means, but also including textual ekphrasis, by which I mean how words are used to bring to life things that may not exist. I have become interested in the phenomenon of Buddhist cross-species interdependence from an evolutionary and environmental perspective—fantastical, to be sure, maybe a little fanatical, but meaningful nonetheless, or I think so, anyway. On the one hand this Buddhist cross-species interdependence takes the form of a genomics which presents us with biologically confounding speciation, as in this 8th-century lacquer statue of Garuḍa from Kōfukuji. On the other it encompasses what the paleoanthropologist Pat Shipman calls a covenant or pact among

species working to mutual advantage in an ecosystem.¹ Why a human soldier should have the head of a gamecock, or vice versa, as in this representation of Garuda, is not my overwhelming concern here. Nor do I take this avian humanoid to be entirely outside the laws of nature from the long view of evolutionary genomics. Rather I proceed on the premise that these kinds of being are reasonable on their own terms and, as such, they have truth value in the scheme of things, as living forms, and life itself, in the Anthropocene—the epoch of maximum human impact on the geology and ecosystems of our planet, which some say began with the Trinity nuclear test in New Mexico on July 16, 1945. I agree with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, writing about the *matsutake* mushroom, that “it has been left,” and I quote, “to the fabulists, including non-Western and non-civilizational storytellers, to remind us of the lively activities of all beings, human, and not human.”²

The last time I was here I talked about this painting, and I would like to do so today, too, but from a more radical and perhaps environmentally extreme perspective. You will recognize in this painting, commissioned by a group of nuns sometime in the early 14th century in Nara, the ubiquitous *parinirvāṇa* scene of Buddhist discourse. It is likely based on the description of the scene in the first chapter of each of the three principal Chinese recensions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*. Various monstrous creatures, and I include the bodhisattvas with their eerie white bodies, cluster around the lambent form of Buddha, itself a monstrosity, huge and silent in the process of going back to where it came from. We see various species of hominin,

¹ Pat Shipman, *The Invaders: How Humans and their Dogs Drove Neanderthals to Extinction* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 5.

² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. vii.

some with multiple arms, come from the many corners of the Buddhist cosmos to pay homage and mourn. It is like the attack of Māra in reverse, with the earth—a green expanse rising to meet the river rapids behind the Śāla trees—welcoming an unruly crowd of the holy and the unholy bound together with one voice, to call Buddha back.

My thematic focus today falls among the animals along the lower register of the painting. Some of you might be surprised to see so many animals in a parinirvāṇa scene. Most extant parinirvāṇa imagery does not include animals at all, so this may come as a surprise to those familiar with the visual tradition as it has developed on the continent. But according to the Chinese recensions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* there were indeed many animals in attendance: lions, elephants, buffalo, cows, sheep, bees, geese, ducks, peacocks, and so on.³ So was it the whim of a 14th-century Nara painter to add animals to a parinirvāṇa scene based on a local understanding of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*? Not exactly—the iconography was already evolving in Japan as early as the 11th century. Some commentators have even proposed that it represents a uniquely Japanese intervention in the history of parinirvāṇa representation.⁴ It is certainly true that, by the turn of the 14th century, parinirvāṇa paintings in Japan typically included a boisterous congregation of animals along the lower register of the picture plane—a physical space which we also occupy as viewers seated or processing before an altar. The

³ For example see *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* 大般泥洹經, T 376.12.855c17 (kings of cattle and sheep), 855c19 (bees), and so on through the first chapter; the other recensions also list animals.

⁴ For a discussion of Japanese parinirvāṇa representations in painting see Mimi Hall Yienpruksawan, “The Interstitial Buddha: Picturing the Death of Śākyamuni,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2007), pp. 60-61.

presence of the animals, indeed their fundamental necessity, is prelude to my specific topic for today, and I will return to them in conclusion.

Let me draw your attention to this biological hybrid—mammal and avian, that’s to say, human and bird—with a pink lotus in its outstretched hands, a gift for a Buddha. Here’s a closer view. We see a finely feathered creature with a bouffant of ultramarine hair, its pink lips pursed as if to whistle. This is clearly a kalaviṅka. We know it for its famously beautiful voice—a divine voice, the thunderous voice of the Tathāgatas⁵—and because it is so widely encountered in references to the pure land biome, as in this 10th-century representation of Amitābha’s paradise on the south wall of Cave 61 at the Mogao Grottoes. On the south wall of Cave 25 at the Yulin Grottoes we encounter several kalaviṅkas at Amitābha’s palace, here with a peacock, and here with a fat bodhisattva gyrating to music. (The expression on the face of the dwarfed kalaviṅka is priceless.)

The text on which these paintings are likely based, the *Amitābha Sūtra*, describes the kalaviṅka as a bird, with a thunderous and enchanting voice to be sure, but a bird.⁶ Thus it belongs to the same taxonomic rank as the peacock with which it is often paired, as we just saw. Indeed the kalaviṅka is not included among the famous zooanthropomorphs known as human-not-humans, a category of great antiquity in Buddhist discourse encompassing the *nāga*, *gandharva*, *asura*, *garuḍa*, *mahoraga*, and *kiṃnara*. It is possible that visual representations of the kalaviṅka take inspiration from the kiṃnara, since the female form of

⁵ For example see *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra* 大寶積經 T 310.11.173c-18 and *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* 大方廣菩薩藏文殊師利根本儀軌經 T 1191.20.870a14-15.

⁶ *Amitābha Sūtra* T 366.12.347a12-13.

the latter is a bird-woman, whereas the male form has a horse's head. But there is no getting around the fact that, at least in the Chinese canon, the kalaviṅka is a bird. So how the kalaviṅka ended up with the head of a female hominin seems a good question to ask, by way of considering an even larger question about its presence here among the animals, where we are also positioned as viewers.

Of course bird-women—benevolent and malevolent—are a staple of classical mythology and have a geographical distribution not limited to Buddhist lands. There is the Siren, who binds and entangles with its bewitching voice and musical prowess. This marble statue of a Siren, from the Kerameikos cemetery in Athens, once stood guard over the grave of a Greek soldier. There is the Harpy, a snatcher and a robber, guardian of the underworld, deliverer of souls to the Erinyes—Ovid's human vulture in the seventh book of *Metamorphosis*.⁷ A Fatimid potter put her on a lusterware bowl. Bird-women even have a grip on the modern imagination, in the work of the fabulist E. B. Hudspeth, for example, or that of the body painter Johannes Stoetter, who says it took him four weeks to design his parrot woman.⁸

On the face of it, then, there is every reason to see why, in its iconographical evolution, the kalaviṅka went from bird to avian humanoid. In so doing it became a musician, like the female form of the kiṃnara, typically playing a flute or lute. But there are aspects of this picture which suggest that there is more to the story. On the screen is a gilt-bronze altar decoration in

⁷ *Metamorphosis*, 7: 1-7.

⁸ See the article by Sophie Jane Evans in DailyMail.com, 13 March 2014, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2580260/Artist-paints-womans-entire-body-make-look-like-parrot.html>.

the shape of a floral wreath, bearing two kalaviṅkas similar to the one from the parinirvāṇa scene. They are holding in their hands what looks like a lotus bud in a bowl—and tweeting. This decoration is one of three that were suspended from the tie-beams on the front and sides of the main altar inside the Amitābha Hall—popularly known as Konjikidō, the Gold-Colored Hall—at Chūsonji in Hiraizumi. The hall contains two subsidiary altars, where similar decorations with kalaviṅkas were also hung from the tie-beams. So, altogether, there were at least nine pairs of kalaviṅkas, or eighteen individual kalaviṅkas, in the sanctuary space of this building.

There is much about the Amitābha Hall at Chūsonji which makes it unique, including the flock of kalaviṅkas, but perhaps nothing more so than the mummies inside the main and subsidiary altars respectively. There are three of them, each in its own casket inside its respective altar. They were exhumed in 1950 and again in 2017, and it was confirmed that they are the remains of the three warlords, known as the Hiraizumi Fujiwaras, who ruled the region in the 12th century.⁹ This region amounted to most of the northern end of the Japanese archipelago—a semi-autonomous zone under the jurisdiction of this local clan which I have proposed, controversially, must be seen as belonging to a North Asian and mostly Buddhist economic and cultural sphere encompassing northern Japan, what is now Hokkaidō, the northern Korean peninsula, North China, and the Russian Far East. As it turns out the kalaviṅka appears to have been assigned an important role in the funerary culture of this region.

Since its initial construction in 1124 the Amitābha Hall at Chūsonji has occupied its own precinct some distance uphill from the main part of the monastery in a grove of cryptomeria. It

⁹ Akio Tamura et al. “Radiological Assessment of the Skeletal Remains from Hiraizumi, Japan: Review of Results from the 1950 Investigation,” *Japanese Journal of Radiology*, Vol. 35 (2017), pp. 689-694.

is likely that this was a mortuary compound dedicated to the Hiraizumi Fujiwaras, the patrons of the monastery. In size the Amitābha Hall is very small, a little over 5 meters on a side, and 8 meters from foundation to roof finial. Stripped of its modern glass and concrete shells, it looked like this among the trees. As such it is reminiscent of the burial huts occasionally mentioned in contemporary writings such as the diary of Fujiwara no Sanesuke, who describes a miniature hall built for the remains of the monarch Ichijō in 1011.¹⁰ The only other structure in the Amitābha Hall compound is a Tripiṭaka Repository. On its octagonal altar is a statue of Mañjuśrī atop a lion, with a king, old man, monk, and boy in attendance—an obvious reference to Wutaishan. A gilt-bronze plaque carved with the figure of a kalaviṅka is seen on each face of the octagonal altar. All but one of the kalaviṅkas holds a lotus offering. In other words, at Chūsonji's mortuary compound, there were at least 26 depictions of kalaviṅkas.

Various types of kalaviṅka—most offering flowers or lotus buds—are encountered in the funerary culture of the Kitans of the Liao dynasty. Like the Hiraizumi Fujiwaras the Kitans mummified their chieftains and entombed them in burial huts such as this one, from eastern Inner Mongolia. Statues of kalaviṅkas and other avian hybrids—here we have a bird-human combined with a sea monster or makara—are among articles placed in and around the burial huts. Mirrors bearing kalaviṅkas were also placed in tombs. Kalaviṅkas are even painted on the walls of tombs, as here from Balin Right Banner, and inside coffins, as in this example from the Liaoning Provincial Museum. We even encounter a pair of kalaviṅkas on a gilt-bronze crown likely worn by a mummy. The kalaviṅkas appear to be tweeting.

¹⁰ *Shōyūki*, Kankō 8/7/20 (August 21, 1011), in *Dai Nihon kokiroku*, vol. 10, pt. 2, p. 184.

A visit to the 12th-century Xi Xia royal tombs near Yinchuan in Ningxia confirms that the Tanguts, too, utilized kalaviñka imagery in their funerary culture. In fact an enormous modern statue of a kalaviñka welcomes visitors to the site. Here is an example of a ceramic kalaviñka on display in the Xi Xia Museum, one of many found at the site. Diane Zhang-Goldberg has drawn attention to the abundant kalaviñka imagery excavated from the third royal tomb.¹¹ There are even kalaviñkas in all local shops—here’s one that I purchased to the embarrassment of my more scholarly colleagues.

I think it is intriguing that the kalaviñka played such a prominent role in the funerary imagery of the Japanese, Kitans, and Tanguts. This funerary kalaviñka, as it were, typically did not play a musical instrument but instead proffered lotus buds or prayed. As such it differs markedly from the cheerful kalaviñkas we encountered earlier at Mogao and Yulin, or here on an 8th-century lute and an 11th-century sutra box. It is perhaps no surprise that the more sober kalaviñka, with its offering of lotus buds, sometimes appears where a Buddha relic is implied. That seems to be the case here, on the funerary crown we saw a moment ago. Even more pertinent are the four pairs of kalaviñkas on the ordinal faces of the White Pagoda at Qingzhou, in Balin Right Banner, which was sponsored in 1047 by the Liao dowager empress Qin’ ai and stood just 10 kilometers from the mausoleum of her husband, Liao Shengzong. Here is another kalaviñka from a pagoda at the Liao capital of Shangjing in Balin Left Banner.

All things considered this is a small detail in the grand scheme of things. What difference could it possibly make that a minor Buddhist zooanthropomorph became associated with relics

¹¹ Diane Zhang-Goldberg, “Singularités architecturales du cimetière impérial des Xixia: le monument funéraire,” *Arts Asiatiques*, Vol. 67 (2012), p. 60.

and the commemoration of the dead half a millennium ago among North Asians? This takes me back to the beginning of my talk—to the kalaviṅka and the animals at the bottom of this painting, and why they might matter beyond the temporal and geographical limits of their local context in history. We already know we are looking at a death scene. The kalaviṅka's sober demeanor, we have just noted, is appropriate to a funerary context, on the one hand, and to the worship of a Buddha relic on the other. In other words the kalaviṅka signals what lies ahead after Buddha expires. As such it recalls the bird-women and bird-priests who have tended to the dead in many parts of the world since time immemorial. Indeed the Siren and the Harpy are exemplars in this regard. It is true that the Buddhist sources mentioning the kalaviṅka do not do so with reference to the dead or the afterlife, other than Amitābha's pure land but that's not quite the same thing, and they describe the kalaviṅka as a bird. However in the visual record we find another story and another morphology, to which I will now turn by way of conclusion.¹²

Since the stolen American election of 2016, and the systematic dismantling of environmental protections in its wake, I find myself increasingly attentive to what multispecies ethnographers and biogeographers have to say. Viewed from the broader perspective of life on our planet, modern humans are an invasive species. As apex predators we threaten the environment, its biodiversity, and ourselves. The extent of this existential threat is broad, but there is a way out, if only we recognize that humans need to think *with* animals, to paraphrase

¹² Pénélope Riboud has proposed that the kalaviṅka and kiṃnara were incorporated into funerary practice as part of an emphasis on birds and bird-priests in praying for the dead in early Zoroastrian and Chinese tombs; see Pénélope Riboud, "Bird-Priests in Central Asian Tombs of Sixth-Century China and their Significance in the Funerary Realm," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, New Series, Vol. 21 (2017), pp. 7-14.

Daniel W. Gade writing about crows, rather than *about* them.¹³ A painting of the parinirvāṇa, and its kalaviṅka, convey a message in this regard, in keeping with what Lambert Schmithausen has called its “zoo-centric” ecological ethics deeply embedded the noble truths and the precepts.¹⁴

But first we must recognize that we are looking at the depiction of a catastrophe. Buddha will soon be gone, turned to ash and relics as foretold in the approach of the kalaviṅka, and the world will begin its descent toward the ruination of the Final Dharma. How will it be possible to survive in those ruins, to borrow a metaphor from Katherine Tsing, if not through mutually interdependent and beneficial partnerships with our fellow animals, here on the green ground of the world? This is Shipman’s covenant among humans and animals—not merely in terms of synanthropy (where wild animals gain evolutionary advantage through proximity to humans) or domestication, but more importantly in terms of an inescapable bond in which we are part of animals’ design for survival, and vice versa. Every animal we see in this painting is part of this evolutionary story, of life on earth.

Shipman has made a case that the Neanderthals went extinct because they could not compete with a hunting partnership formed by modern humans and wolf-dogs—a mutually beneficial partnership which forever bonded two apex predators. Indeed she speculates that this partnership brought about mutation to the human eye which caused the part of the eyeball surrounding the iris to become white—a feature unique to humans among primates, and which

¹³ Daniel W. Gade, “Shifting Synanthropy of the Crow in Eastern North America,” *Geographical Review*, vol. 100, no. 2 (April 2010), p. 170.

¹⁴ Lambert Schmithausen, “Buddhism and the Ethics of Nature—Some Remarks,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, New Series, vol. 32, no. 2 (2000), p. 75.

is shared to some degree by wolves and canines. This feature enhanced both human and canine ability to communicate by way of the gaze, as in silent hunting. “How fitting,” she writes, “that both dogs and humans show an adaptation to improve visual communication of the direction of the gaze!”¹⁵

Cooperation and adaptation may help us understand the presence of the kalaviṅka in this painting and its association with the dead and the dying. The charnel ground has never lacked avian visitors, which along with dogs have often been the most reliable means for disposing of the dead in a variety of ancient civilizations and ecosystems. How obvious and rational a relationship this is—and no matter how strange the morphology of the kalaviṅka, and how impossible, it nonetheless speaks to a primordial partnership of hominins and birds. On a more pleasant note (forgive the pun) there is the beautiful song of the kalaviṅka. According to Frank Edgerton the word kalaviṅka derives from Pāli and Buddhist Sanskrit terms designating the Indian cuckoo, “proverbial for its sweet voice.”¹⁶ Here that sweet voice, tweeting the Dharma in a booming voice, is superior to the human voice, and we have borrowed it, to sing on our behalf.

The hybrid morphology of this avian humanoid signifies much more than the human-not-human kiṃnara, for neither logical category applies. We have here the inklings of a new life form—a living organism in its own right—in which the genetic material of hominin and avian alike is present. Stepping forward with its offering of a lotus and birdsong, the kalaviṅka gives

¹⁵ Shipman, *Invaders*, p. 218.

¹⁶ Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), vol. 2, p. 169.

form to the bond shared by the humans and animals who stand at the threshold of catastrophe as Buddha withdraws from the world. Yes, the kalaviṅka is a freak of nature, and perhaps this explains why, in the language of the sutras, the kalaviṅka remains a bird, but in visual form it takes on a life of its own beyond the constraints of textual ekphrasis—a form that is equally mutation and harbinger, and belongs, at least for now, in the realm of the hallucinatory.

Nature and life have their own logic. What if, in the end, the laws of survival in the Anthropocene amount exactly to this, a hybrid? The message embedded in this painting, with its kalaviṅka and the animals, may be that life will make do but not necessarily on hominin terms alone. I think the message of the Dharma is something like that. Today it is increasingly apparent that anthropogenic intervention has had a devastating impact on the world's biodiversity. Insight into a desperately needed "melding of the biotic and anthropic," as Daniel Gade notes, will not come by way of the a priori assumptions of mainstream science,¹⁷ where we have Man, and then we have the rest of the biosphere. It is surely true that, in this moment, what was once the province of myth and fantasy may offer important truths in the interplay of life. Tsing points out that the multispecies life form now receives "serious discussion among biologists and ecologists." Am I saying that the form of the kalaviṅka is our future? Not exactly. But by thinking about it, in this painting, now, perhaps we can imagine a time when our species is able to look into the mirror of life without averting its eyes.

¹⁷ Gade, "Shifting Synanthropy," p. 170.