

# ***The Evolving Relationship Between Buddhist Figures and Animals in Buddhist Artifacts: An Historical Ecology Perspective on the Buddha and the Deer***

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the evolving relationship between Buddhist figures and animals, focusing on the story of the Buddha and the deer, from an historical ecology perspective. The study explores the historical context of Buddhist artifacts, emphasizing the depiction of animals within these cultural expressions and their significance in Buddhist teachings. By analyzing artifacts across different regions and eras, the research reveals variations in how the relationship between humans and animals is portrayed, reflecting broader ecological and philosophical shifts. Through case studies and reference studies of the Buddha and the deer, this paper analyzes how these depictions vary according to geological and temporal contexts, providing new perspectives on the integration of cultural narratives and ecological concepts. The findings also highlight the impact of geographical factors on religious beliefs, especially in China and India, indicating that ecological environment and religion shape each other. This study introduces an ecohistorical perspective as a method for evaluating artifacts, providing a broader and more complex framework for understanding human relics. However, the study mainly relies on artifacts and documents, lacking firsthand information, and it is recommended that future research adopt qualitative methods such as interviews to explore people's views on the environment and religion in different religious regions.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Historical ecology, Deer and Buddha, Human-animal Relationship

## **1. Introduction**

The interplay between religious narratives and ecological contexts has long intrigued scholars of cultural history. In the realm of Buddhism, the depiction of animals alongside spiritual figures in artifacts offers a unique window into understanding these dynamics [1]. In Buddhist thought, animals are perceived within the framework of karmic retribution and compassion, which are fundamental to the doctrine and the Six Realms of Reincarnation. The Six Realms of Reincarnation include the animal realm, often associated with suffering and ignorance due to past karma. However, Buddhist compassion emphasizes the care and protection of all sentient beings. This complex relationship is vividly reflected in Buddhist art and artifacts. Additionally, animals hold symbolic meanings, representing various spiritual concepts. Buddhist teachings suggest that one's experiences are shaped by mental formations and karmic actions. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness between humans and animals in Buddhist thought [2]. In this way, many animals like the lion, horse, elephant,

and tiger have their own meaning in the Buddhist context. A representative example in Buddhist folklore is the story of Buddha and the deer. In the Jataka Tales, Buddha once transformed into a deer king, showing the virtues of self-sacrifice and compassion [3]. This research primarily employs case study analysis and literature review, focusing on Buddhist artifacts that depict the Buddha and the deer to illustrate how artifacts reflect the changing relationship between deer and humans over time and how these changes differ in relation to geological and temporal aspects. This not only helps to deepen the understanding of the relationship between humans and animals in Buddhist philosophy but also provides a new perspective for exploring the integration of cultural narratives and ecological concepts.

## **2. An overview of the development and influence of religious thought in ecology**

Historical ecology is relatively a new history system that appeared in the 1960s. Lynn White Jr. in his seminal essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis (1967)," argued that Christianity's concept of human dominion over nature contributed to modern environmental degradation [4]. Although White was not the first to link religion with ecological concerns, his critique sparked widespread academic debate on the role of religious thought in shaping ecological attitudes. In 1990, a new theory emerged. John B. Cobb Jr. and Christopher Chapple started to advocate for a reinterpretation of religious teachings to address the ecological crisis. Cobb believes that the most urgent task for mankind is to protect the world on which it depends. The roots of this idea can be traced back to Alfred North Whitehead. He called this concept "world loyalty," emphasizing the deep connection between man and the world and his responsibility to the ecological environment. According to his concept, people should use the religion to help achieve environmental health [5]. The modern concept of sustainability, emphasizing that human beings should use resources in moderation and leave some resources for future generations, came into being. This idea has since been integrated into historical ecology. For example, Fikret Berkes' Sacred Ecology highlighted the role of traditional ecological knowledge and sacred beliefs in promoting environmental sustainability [6]. In addition, religious ecological perspectives have also influenced contemporary environmental policy and conservation movements. Many religious organizations promote sustainable practices within religious communities, integrating faith-based approaches with global ecological issues [7].

While previous studies have explored the relationship between religion and the environmental health, this study seeks to complement existing research by focusing on the evolving human-animal relationship in Buddhist traditions. By analyzing the depiction of deer in Buddhist narratives and artifacts across different cultural and regional contexts, this research provides new insights into how religious thought has shaped ecological consciousness over time.

## **3. Differences between Buddhist artifacts**

### **3.1. The representation of animals in artifacts: symbolism and religious significance**

Animals play significant symbolic and doctrinal roles in Buddhism, which is reflected in the frequent depiction of animals in Buddhist artworks. For example, the deer in many Buddhist depictions represents the Buddha's first sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath, a pivotal event symbolizing the spread of the Dharma. In Southeast Asia, elephants are often regarded as the symbol of wisdom and patience in Buddhist principle, so they appeared frequently on the artworks in Southeast countries. Similarly, in Tibet Buddhist culture, the yak is often portrayed as a symbol of endurance and steadfastness, qualities valued in the Buddhist path toward enlightenment.

### 3.2. Regional variations in Buddhist artifacts

Buddhist artifacts vary across regions, reflecting how different cultures interpret the relationship between Buddhist figures and animals. These variations are not merely aesthetic but are deeply rooted in the cultural, ecological, and philosophical contexts in which Buddhism was practiced and adapted. By analyzing artifacts from India, China, and Japan, this article examines how local belief systems and environmental factors shaped the representation of animals in Buddhist art.

In India, the birthplace of Buddhism, early Buddhist artifacts often depict animals with symbolic significance derived from both the religious narratives and the local ecological landscape. For instance, in the Jataka tales, the Buddha, in his past lives, often appears as an animal to exemplify virtues such as compassion, wisdom, and self-sacrifice. This reflects the Indian philosophical tradition of seeing animals as integral to both the natural and spiritual world, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms. Sculptures and reliefs from ancient stupas, such as those at Sanchi and Bharhut (Figures 1&2), often illustrate these narratives, showcasing animals in roles that highlight their moral and spiritual significance. Elephants and lions are carved in both works, and the fine elements that emphasize anatomical accuracy include the meticulously rendered muscles, skin textures, facial lines, and body postures. The animals' eyes and facial expressions are highlighted in particular, implying their depth of psychology and symbolic significance.



Figure 1: Bharhut stupa relief sculptures by 100 BCE



Figure 2: The great stupa at Sanchi, Raisen district, MP

As Buddhism spread to China, the depiction of animals in Buddhist artifacts absorbed influences from Chinese philosophy and ecology. Chinese Buddhist art often emphasizes harmony and balance, reflecting Taoist ideals that regard nature as a source of spiritual wisdom. In depictions of the Buddha and the deer, the setting is often serene and pastoral, symbolizing peace and the harmonious

coexistence of all beings. This reflects the broader Chinese ecological worldview that values the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.

Additionally, Chinese interpretations infused Buddhist stories with Confucian moral values, reinforcing social and ethical lessons relevant to Chinese society. For example, Figure 3, a mural from the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, illustrates animals resting in the background as the Buddha imparts wisdom and animals, including deer, act as symbols of the peace that comes with the Dharma. Therefore, deer are often depicted in art as standing or resting quietly, reinforcing the core Buddhist concept that enlightenment comes from inner peace. This inner peace is reflected in the harmony of the images rather than the pursuit of complex details and also embodies the Taoist principle of nature and the concept of inaction.



Figure 3: Western paradise, cave-temple 172, Tang dynasty, Dunhuang, Gansu province [8]

In Japan, the introduction of Buddhism brought about unique artistic expressions that combined local Shinto beliefs with Buddhist teachings. Japanese Buddhist artifacts frequently depict animals as spiritual messengers or protectors, reflecting the Shinto reverence for nature and its inhabitants. The story of the Buddha and the animals is frequently told in a form that emphasizes themes of purity and enlightenment, with the animal representing the holiness of nature and its role in guiding beings to spiritual awakening. This interpretation aligns with the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi, which celebrates imperfection, simplicity, and the beauty of nature.

Across these three regions, the artistic representations of animals in Buddhist artifacts reflect distinct cultural adaptations of Buddhist teachings. Indian Buddhist art emphasizes narrative and moral symbolism, Chinese Buddhist art highlights harmony and philosophical integration, while Japanese Buddhist art incorporates Shinto influences and minimalist aesthetics.

### 3.3. Temporal variations in Buddhist artifacts

The evolution of Buddhist artifacts over time provides a fascinating perspective on the changing relationships between Buddhist figures and animals. This evolution reflects broader cultural, philosophical, and ecological changes, as well as Buddhism's adaptability to different epochal contexts. Such temporal variations are different under different cultural backgrounds. The biggest change is the current Buddhist artworks are more related to current global issues: the environmental degradation and climate change. It can be clearly seen from Figure 4 that the animals are not given any symbolic meaning; they represent the animals themselves. The interpretation of this work is that the animals symbolize the Buddha's desire to help and protect their homeland. These artworks convey the message that humans should protect the environment and pursue sustainable development. At the same time, this also well demonstrates the Buddhist artistic views of contemporary artists.

Contemporary artists emphasize the relationship between humans and animals and use the story of Buddha and deer to show ecological awareness and responsibility.



Figure 4: Buddha surrounded by spirits of animals

#### 4. Case study: Buddha and deer

##### 4.1. The symbolism of deer in Buddhist narratives

In order to understand the symbolic meaning of deer in Buddhist scriptures, this article will analyze the classic story of "Nine-Colored Deer." The story takes place in ancient India and tells the story of a beautiful nine-colored deer by the Ganges River. Its fur is composed of nine colors, and its body is graceful. One day, the nine-colored deer rescued a drowning man and asked him to keep a secret in return. Although the drowning man agreed and expressed gratitude, he eventually betrayed the nine-colored deer and revealed the secret of the deer to the king. The king wanted to hunt the nine-colored deer, but the deer explained the whole incident to the king through words. In the end, the king was moved and ordered to protect the nine-colored deer, and the drowning man who broke his promise suffered retribution.

The deer is the reincarnation of the Sakyamuni, and the beautiful story of the nine-color deer became widely known across South and East Asia and was depicted in many artworks like the cave painting in the Dunhuang Mogao cave (Figure 5). The story praises the bravery of the deer and criticizes the people's greed and dishonesty. In Buddhism, the "Five Hinderances" include greed, anger, ignorance, laziness, and doubt. The informer shows the characteristic of greed.



Figure 5: "Deer King Bunsen Map" Dunhuang fresco, mid-5th century AD

This story not only shows the virtues of compassion and self-sacrifice in Buddhist teachings but also explores the ethical issues of trust and betrayal. The image of the deer in the story symbolizes selfless compassion and the protection of life in nature. It also reflects the importance of Buddhism to the relationship between humans and animals, especially through the tragedy of the deer to reflect on human responsibility for the ecological environment and life [9].

#### 4.2. The depiction of Buddha and deer in artifacts

The depiction of Buddha and deer in artifacts often appears in artifacts from some Asian countries ranging from India and China to Japan and Thailand. However, by analyzing artifacts from different countries and different eras, it can be found that people from different cultures and eras have different views on deer and their role in their daily lives. These differences reflect the unique understanding of the symbolic meaning, religious beliefs, and ecological role of deer in different cultures, revealing the multiple meanings of deer in different social and historical contexts.

Figure 6 illustrates the transmission line of Buddhism from India to China, Japan, and finally Southeast Asia. In different countries, the depiction of deer has different aims and represents various cultural elements.

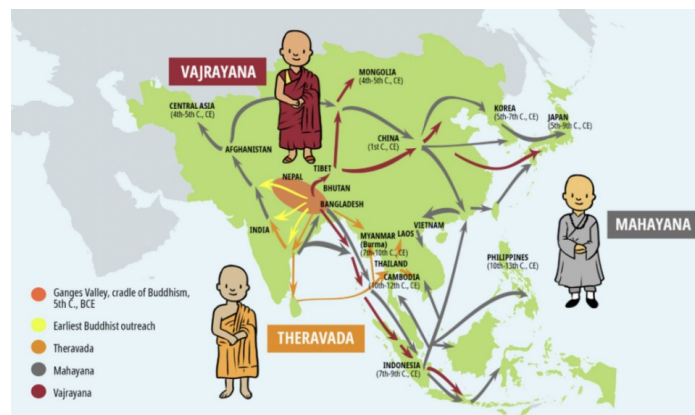


Figure 6: The transmission line of Buddhism



Figure 7: Pair of deer symbolism

The Dharma wheel is very interesting for its patterns. From Figure 7, there are eight spokes in the inner part of the wheel. To be more specific, the interior eight spokes represent the moral conduct of discipline from among the Three Trainings (discipline, meditation, and wisdom). Although the pattern is not very clear, it can be seen that there are eight spokes on the outside of the wheel, which symbolizes samadhi, or the concentration of meditation. Overall, the deer are depicted as two

listeners and learners, symbolizing the process of teaching and learning. Such representation is due to Hindu tradition: deer are connected to Sage Vasishta, who is said to have had a sacred deer, and also to the goddess Saraswati, who is often shown with a swan or a deer by her side. Both of these associations tie the deer to qualities like wisdom, learning, and grace, making it a symbol of intellectual pursuit and knowledge.

The "Hundred Deer" vase (Figure 8) from the Ming Dynasty (Wanli period) features a flared mouth, short neck, sloping shoulders, and a broad belly. Its design includes alternating flower and peach patterns on the neck, cloud motifs on the shoulders, and a herd of 89 deer in wucai enamel across the body. The base has vibrant red and green patterns, symbolizing the earth, with a blue-and-white inscription marking it as made during the Wanli reign.



Figure 8: Vase with “Hundred Deer” motif wucai enamel (1573- 1620)

This period saw a surge in porcelain production, with wucai becoming popular. Deer, symbolizing prosperity and longevity, were commonly used in motifs, reflecting Buddhist and Taoist themes of auspiciousness. In general, the "Hundred Deer" design is a symbolic expression of wealth and immortality, and deers on the vase give people a sense of immortality and inner peace instead of teaching. The pursuit of nature is the primary and most representative feature of Daoist aesthetic thought. In Daoist philosophy, the importance of nature is just as significant as the concept of the "Dao" itself. While Daoism emphasizes the pursuit of the "Dao," it also acknowledges the vital role nature plays in the manifestation of the "Dao." For example, in Chapter 25 of the Tao Te Ching, it clearly states the principle of "Dao follows nature," suggesting that the "Dao" gives rise to all things, yet it exists within nature. Without nature, the "Dao" would have no place to reside, and its static and dynamic beauty would lack the fundamental conditions for expression. The transformation of the deer's role in the pattern is rooted in Chinese indigenous beliefs, particularly Daoism, which advocates for maintaining inner peace and adapting to the changing dynamics of good and evil in life. Thus, the deer is depicted as a symbol of inner tranquility and a sense of harmony with nature.

## 5. The interconnectedness of nature and spirituality in Buddhist art and culture

### 5.1. Understanding the symbolism of deer across cultures from an historical ecology perspective

Historical ecology explores the relationship between man and nature. In Buddhist relics, representations of deer offer valuable insights into ancient attitudes towards nature. For instance, in Figure 8, two deer are depicted listening to Buddhist teachings, symbolizing animals' abilities to listen and learn. This portrayal reflects ancient Indian perspectives on animals, suggesting that

humans share commonalities with animals and thus should develop a deep understanding of and respect for the natural world.

In Buddhist art, the image of two deer flanking the Dharma Wheel signifies the deer in the park listening to the Buddha's teachings. This motif underscores the harmonious relationship between humans and animals in Buddhist philosophy. The Jataka Tales, which are fantastical parables attributed to the Buddha and deal with his previous incarnations—both human and animal—highlight the interconnectedness of all living beings. These tales emphasize the importance of compassion and understanding toward all creatures. Additionally, the concept of ahimsa (non-violence), central to ancient Indian thought, advocates for ethical treatment of animals and a deep reverence for nature. Calvin Martin, who studied the historical ecology of India by focusing on studying fur traders, found that Indian cosmology requires careful and reverential use of natural resources, which means people should esteem nature and all natural elements ranging from plants to animals [10].

Beyond India, as Buddhism spread to China, the integration of Buddhism with indigenous beliefs, particularly Taoism, has profoundly influenced artistic expressions, including the depiction of deer in Buddhist artifacts. This fusion reflects a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. For example, in figure 8, the deer pattern on the vase symbolizes peace and harmony, where elements like deer, mountains, and trees blend naturally, with deer freely interacting with the environment. Taoism, indigenous to China, emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao, or the natural way of the universe. This philosophy has significantly influenced Chinese Buddhist art, leading to a style that celebrates natural beauty and the interconnectedness of all life. The serene and balanced compositions in Chinese Buddhist art often reflect Taoist aesthetics, highlighting the unity between humans and nature. Beyond Buddhist contexts, deer hold auspicious meanings in Chinese culture. They are symbols of longevity and good fortune, often featured in art and literature to convey wishes for a long and prosperous life. This cultural symbolism enhances the significance of deer motifs in Buddhist artifacts, reinforcing themes of harmony and well-being. The depiction of deer in Chinese Buddhist artifacts exemplifies the seamless integration of Buddhist teachings with indigenous Taoist philosophies. These artworks not only reflect religious narratives but also embody a cultural ethos that values the harmonious coexistence of all elements within the natural world. Moreover, Taoism also proposes that people find their inner peace in nature and follow the common natural rules; in this way, the depiction of deer and other natural elements also displays a kind of inner peace.

## **5.2. The mutual influence of ecological environment and religious beliefs**

The climate characteristics of different countries has influenced the evolution of religious beliefs, which also better reflects the mutual influence between religion and environment. Taking China and India as examples, China experiences a more diverse range of climate phenomena, varying precipitation levels, and diverse geological features, ranging from high-altitude areas like the Himalayas to below-sea-level regions like the Taklimakan Desert. These varied geological phenomena make China a complex and multifaceted country. To face natural disasters, local residents in different regions of China must employ different strategies. Furthermore, lifestyles in China are diverse due to the local climates. These complex factors combine and ultimately give rise to the Chinese traditional religion, Taoism. This is because Taoism proposes that people should follow nature, which helps them face natural disasters and pursue inner peace by adapting to and blending with various natural and cultural elements, ultimately aligning with the rulers' demands for unity.

Compared with China, India has a more flat and unified geological pattern. However, the climate of India is a tropical monsoon climate, which means the agricultural activities in many parts of India have to depend on seasonal rainfall; because of such reliance on nature, the Buddhism in India shows more esteem for natural elements.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper explores the relationship between ecological environment and religious belief and conducts an in-depth analysis through deer as the starting point. This paper finds that the depiction of deer in Buddhist artifacts changes with time and geological factors, which provides a new perspective for analyzing Buddhist artifacts. In addition, by deeply evaluating the religious and cultural elements of different countries, especially China and India, the author finds that religious culture is also affected by geological factors. In other words, religion and the ecological environment are influencing each other. This paper also demonstrates an ecohistorical perspective for analyzing artifacts. Rather than simply identifying traditional historical information, this approach encourages researchers to study artifacts in a broader environmental, social, and cultural context. By considering how artifacts interact with ecosystems, human activities, and natural resources over time, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of their significance. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive and dynamic interpretation of human remains, revealing their role in historical processes such as resource management, technological adaptation, and human-environment interaction.

This paper mainly conducts case analysis from historical documents and artifacts. However, this paper lacks first-hand empirical data and empirical research. Future research can enrich this research by combining qualitative methods such as interviews, ethnographic field surveys, and surveys. Scholars can contact individuals in different religious regions will provide deeper insights into how people today view the relationship between religion and the environment. This approach will help to connect historical interpretations with modern beliefs, thereby gaining a more nuanced understanding of the evolving interaction between religious traditions and ecological awareness.

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