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CHAN MAGAZINE

SPRING 2022



We love nature; walks in the countryside, sailing the coast or across the channel, climbing mountains, observing birds, mammals, insects, the excitement of spotting a fox slipping across a meadow – or these days even down a street. Yet, many of us, including some of our would-be leaders, do not always understand the need to respect it. Nature wields awesome powers before which we need to show some of the respect age-old shamans used to do before their gods of mountain snows, avalanches, springs and sunshine. In our practice of Zen, we have two approaches that encourage this re-orientation. The first is the law of dependent co-origination that tells us that all things are parts of a whole everchanging natural process. This insight of the Buddha was amazingly exact as modern science confirms. Then we have our meditative skills allowing us to sit silently in woods or moors appreciating the wonders that glow before us. This above all should show us how we need to respect nature if we are to remain human within a civilization we can respect. Let us all be ever mindful of these things and consider the appropriate actions we should take.



JOHN CROOK

(Jingdi Chuandeng)

“The Arriving Birds”

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COVER ART Artificial Intelligence • **MASTHEAD BACKGROUND** Bao Sabrina

FROM THE EDITOR

WHEN SELECTING MATERIAL FOR THIS magazine I try to keep in mind Chan Master Sheng Yen's primary criteria: "is it useful?" For many, our connections with non-human companions can be as integral as our connections with other humans. I wanted to explore those connections from a Chan perspective. At the risk that some readers might not find this particularly useful, I still hope you will enjoy these offerings on the theme "animal friends in the Dharma."

In my research I was surprised to learn that one of our teachers, Chan Master John Crook, began his career as an animal behaviorist before turning to human psychology. I had already known he was an avid bird-watcher, and that his early spiritual awakening involved wildlife, when as a young boy he was sent away to the forest for safety during the second world war:

Since I had no binoculars, I had to move very quietly among the trees and undergrowth. I learnt solitary field craft the hard way and an ability to still the mind in focused attention. One day I saw a squirrel pop out of a hole in a great beech tree. It looked at me from a few yards away and we gazed, motionless, at each other. Suddenly I was overcome by an extraordinary joy, all my concerns seemed to disappear and I found myself fallen to the ground uttering words of thanks to Jesus, tears falling from my face. That experience became a turning moment for my whole life: I had come across something that was altogether "other."¹

However, I had not known of John's remarkable academic career until I found this obituary from *The Guardian*:

John Crook [...] was a scientist whose studies of birds, primates and human society laid the foundations for the fields of behavioral ecology and evolutionary psychology. [...] He graduated from University College, Southampton, with a degree in zoology in 1953, and was admitted for doctoral studies to Jesus College, Cambridge [where] he studied with the animal behaviorists Robert Hinde and William Thorpe, adding an ecological perspective to ethology in his investigation of the social behavior of weaver birds. In 1962 he joined the psychology department at Bristol University, where he extended these principles to the study of primates, supervising doctoral projects and leading field research in Ethiopia and Morocco. In 1968, John was a fellow at the center for advanced study in the behavioral sciences at Stanford University, in California. He discovered humanistic psychology and encounter groups – intense experiences in which participants explore direct and undefended communication. His attention turned from primates to humans, and he took pioneering steps in what was to become evolutionary psychology.²

An extraordinary journey, no? In retrospect, a gorgeously ordered progression that left nothing behind and created the all-encompassing world view from which he taught us the Dharma.



Buffe Laffey and Victor Lapuszynski Photo by Donna Delmoora

There is a meditation method called “direct contemplation” which is often taught at Dharma Drum retreats, ideally in an outdoor setting. The practitioner is instructed to select an object, e.g., a tree or boulder, and rest the attention on said object without labeling or judging. When John Crook took us out to the woods to learn this method, he spoke first of the indigenous peoples, how when hunting they needed to remain perfectly still and aware of everything around them, for lengthy periods of time. (No doubt he was recalling the forests of his childhood, where he “*learnt solitary field craft the hard way and an ability to still the mind in focused attention.*”)

The Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) has a few hundred acres of land, mostly woods. You can see deer every day; they seem to know hunting is forbidden on the campus, so they congregate near the buildings, unafraid. There is a bald eagle living by the lake, and bears have been seen in the woods. Some years there are litters of fox kits playing under the gazebo. At night you can hear coyotes.

A nun who lives at DDRC takes a daily walk deep into the woods. She sometimes has special encounters there; seeing a bear cub playing with its mother,

finding a tall tree covered with purple glowing mushrooms. This nun took the photo we used for the cover of the Spring 2019 issue, that of the most magnificent white-tail buck anyone remembers seeing in the area. She wondered why she was the one blessed with seeing it, when so many of us also frequented those woods. I told her it was because *she* wanders the woods with no expectations, direct contemplation all the way.

John Crook respected not only animals, but the inter-connectedness of all things in an everchanging natural process. He believed that respect for nature was an integral part of a balanced civilization. I will add that it is an integral part of our personal Chan practice, as well. 🍄

by Buffe Maggie Laffey
Editor-in-Chief

1. Master Sheng Yen, John Hurrell Crook et al., “The Circling Birds: Openings to Insight on the Path of Chan,” in *Chan Comes West* (New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 2002).
2. Peter Reason, “John Crook Obituary: Scientist Who Studied Animal Behaviour and Buddhist Humanism,” *The Guardian* (August 23, 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/aug/23/john-crook-obituary>.

Freeing Captive Animals

BY

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN





Photo by Pete Linforth



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

In the early 1960s while on solitary retreat in Taiwan, Master Sheng Yen wrote *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*. In the Preface he said “my efforts were directed at explaining and clarifying what Buddhism really is.” Written in Q&A format, the book was published in Taiwan in 1965, and eventually became his most popular book in the Far East. In 2007 the English translation was published in the USA by Dharma Drum Publications and North Atlantic Books.

In 1988, Master Sheng Yen published in Taiwan, the book that he considered to be a sequel to *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, entitled *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*. (From his preface: “Many readers urged me to write a sequel in similar style, while exploring an even deeper and wider range of topics.”) Like *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, this book was written in question-and-answer format, and consists of seventy-five questions about Buddhist practice submitted by practitioners. This book was translated into English and published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation in 2017. The English translation is the product of collaboration between Ven. Guo Chan coordinator, Hue-ping Chin translator, Jerry Wang bilingual reviewer, Weitan Wu reviewer, and Ernest Heau, editor. This article is excerpted from that book.

QUESTION: Why and how should we practice freeing captive animals?

ANSWER: The practice of freeing captive animals, or “fangsheng” in Chinese, originated in the Mahayana sutras. It has been widely practiced in China as well as Tibet, and has spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The practice is based on compassion for all sentient beings as equals, and the belief in karmic retribution from rebirths through many lifetimes, known as samsara. There is a common saying, “take half pound, return eight ounces.” If one can stop killing animals, and furthermore, set captive animals free, then naturally, one’s charitable deeds, as well as their good retributions, will be manifold. Stories of such causes and their efficacious results have been recorded countless times throughout history.

One example was in 1974, when South Vietnam was taken over by the North Vietnamese Communist regime. When waves of refugees fled the country, they suffered different destinies. The less fortunate ones failed to cross the borders in time, and were captured and returned. Some drifted on the open seas and drowned. Some thought they had the good fortune to reach another country, but were sent back because no regime would accept them. However, according to the refugees who did escape, if one could not manage to flee Vietnam, they would buy and release captive birds or fishes, or ask overseas relatives to do it for them. It would take only one or two instances of this before successfully leaving the country became a reality.

There is a story recorded in Volume 2 of the *Sutra of Miscellaneous Treasures* (Sanskrit *Samyuktaratnapitaka Sutra*; Chinese *Za Baozang Jing*): when a master observed that a novice’s life would end in seven days, without giving any explanation, he instructed the novice to go home and return in seven days. On his way home, the novice noticed a crack in the dike

of a pond, causing water to rush towards an anthill nearby. The ants were scurrying to find safety, but they were not as quick as the water. Seeing that a great number of ants would drown, the novice took off his outer robe and filled it with sand to plug the crack in the dike, thus saving many ants. After seven days, the novice returned to see the master. Upon seeing the novice, the master was amazed, and asked the novice what happened during the seven days. The novice felt nervous, and assumed the master suspected him of having violated his vows or committed some wrongdoing. So, he said that nothing had happened. The master was an arhat, and using his divine eye, he saw that the novice had done a small but good deed in saving those ants. Because of his good deed, this novice transformed a premature death to longevity, and was able to live a good, long life.

Origins of the Practice

The most familiar Buddhist stories about the origins of freeing captive animals are from two sutras. One is the *Brahma Net Sutra*, in which it says: “When compassionately freeing captive animals, Buddhists should see all the males as our fathers and all the females as our mothers, since they give us life in every rebirth. Therefore, all six types of sentient beings in the desire realm (hell, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, angry spirits, and devas) are our parents, and killing and eating them is like killing and eating our own parents, as well as our former selves. All water and earth are our former bodies, and all fire and wind are our present selves; so freeing captive animals frequently will enhance life in every rebirth. Whenever we see animals about to be killed, we should do our best to rescue, protect, and relieve their pain and suffering; we should often teach, advocate, and

explain the bodhisattva precepts to others and bring salvation to all sentient beings.”

The second sutra, the *Golden Light Sutra*, contains an account in Volume 4 of Shakyamuni Buddha in a past life when he practiced the bodhisattva precepts as a man named Elder Flowing Water. One day, he walked by a large pond during a drought. Someone, in order to catch fish, had blocked the water upstream from flowing over a cliff into the pond, causing the water level in the pond to drop rapidly. Elder Flowing Water saw that tens of thousands of fish, big and small, were on the verge of dying, yet was unable to break the dike to let the water flow over the cliff. In order to save the fishes, he pleaded with the king to dispatch twenty elephants to carry water in leather sacks to the pond, until the water level was up. He then fed and ultimately saved the fishes in the pond.

While the *Brahma Net Sutra* provides the theoretical basis for *fangsheng*, the *Golden Light Sutra* offers the base for creating *fangsheng* ponds. Other Mahayana sutras, such as the *Six Paramitas Sutra*,

Volume 3, contain stories of redeeming and releasing water animals. Tripitaka Master Xuanzang’s (602–664) *Record of the Western Countries in the Tang Dynasty*, Volume 9, also mentions a story of the goose pagoda. According to the legend, there was a small temple in Magadha where several bhikshus lived. They originally did not observe the precept against eating the three classes of “pure meat,” meaning meats that were not seen, heard of, or suspected to have been slaughtered specifically for one’s own consumption. One day, a bhikshu did not receive his share of meat from alms; just then, a flock of wild geese flew over him. The bhikshu pleaded loudly, “Today a bhikshu has not been provided for; shouldn’t you bodhisattvas know it’s about time to act?” Upon his plea, the flock of geese dropped to the ground and died.

These bhikshus initially did not have faith in Mahayana Buddhism, or believed that those geese were bodhisattvas; he was mocking the Mahayana faith with a joke. Unexpectedly, the flock was actually bodhisattvas manifested as geese, to effect a change in the bhikshu’s beliefs. The bhikshu felt ashamed and spread the words, “These geese are bodhisattvas! Who would dare to eat them? From now on, we will follow the Mahayana way and not consume the three classes of pure meat.” They then built a stupa to entomb the geese.

Precept Against Killing

It is evident that freeing captive animals originated from the precept against killing, and a natural progression from not killing



animals to freeing them. Not killing animals only prevents evil; it is a passive way of doing good deeds. Freeing captive animals, on the other hand, is an active way to practice good deeds by saving lives. If we only refrain from doing bad deeds, and not practicing doing good deeds, then it is not the essence of Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore in China, since the Southern Qi (479–502) and the Liang (502–557) dynasties, the governments advocated no-killing and encouraged meatless diets. The practice of freeing captive animals began to spread from the imperial courts to commoners, and from monastics to lay people, and vegetarianism became fashionable. To demonstrate benevolence, later dynasties designated days when animal slaughter was prohibited. From the central to the local governments, animal slaughter was prohibited and freeing captive animals was conducted for reasons such as praying for rain or avoiding calamities.

During the Liang Dynasty, Emperor Wu (464–549) issued an edict to prohibit animal sacrifice for ancestral worship. Master Huiji (492–538), who was famous for burning his arms, went from house to house to beg for money to buy back captive animals and set them free. In the Sui Dynasty (581–618), Master Zhiyi (539–598) of the Tiantai School initiated the building of a *fangsheng* pond; he recited the *Golden Light Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* for the fishes that were set free, and purchased a variety of feeds for the fishes and turtles. During the time of the Emperor Xuan in the Chen Dynasty (557–589), Xu Xiaoke (527–599), the chancellor of State Education, composed the “Inscription on Releasing Captive Animals by Master Zhiyi of the Xiuchan Monastery at Tiantai Mountain.” These were the earliest records in which the terms “*fangsheng* pond” and “*fangsheng* fair” were mentioned. Thereafter, the practice of freeing captive animals was very popular

from the Tang (618–907) to the Song (960–1279) and the Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. During the time of Emperor Su of the Tang Dynasty, provincial inspector Yan Zhenqing (709–784) composed “The Preface to and Inscription on Fangsheng Pond under the Heaven.” In the Song Dynasty, Masters Zunshi (964–1032) and Zhili (960–1028) also actively promoted freeing captive animals.

Vegetarianism

Among eminent monks who advocated freeing captive animals, Master Lianchi (1535–1615) of the late Ming Dynasty was most active. In his *Bamboo Window Journal*, there are several essays regarding *fangsheng*, such as “Tathagata Does Not Condone Killing,” “On Meat-Eating,” and “On Vegetarianism.” And in *Bamboo Window Journal II*, he wrote “On Wearing Silk and Eating Meat,” “Stop Killing to Prolong Life,” “Fangsheng Pond,” “Physicians Should Refrain from Taking Life,” and “Eating Meat for Health.” In his *Bamboo Window Journal III*, he included essays, such as “Killing Is the Worst Evil,” “Killing Is Not for Humans,” and “Humans Should Not Eat Flesh of Sentient Beings,” to encourage freeing captive animals and refraining from killing. In addition to essays on vegetarianism, he also wrote “Rites of Fangsheng” and “Guidance on No-Killing and Fangsheng” to serve as the basis for *fangsheng* rituals.

In modern times, there is the six-volume *Illustrations of Protecting Lives*, written by Master Hongyi (1880–1942) and illustrated by Feng Zikai (1898–1975). There was Cai Niansheng (1901–1992), also known as Lay Buddhist Yunchen, who devoted his life to promote non-killing and freeing animals; he compiled *Animals Are Also This Way* (Chn. *Wuyou Ruci*), a collection of stories of animals that exhibited spirituality and feelings.

Ecological Balance

Today, with advanced technology, dense populations, and shrinking habitats, it is difficult to have absolutely safe and reliable places to set up *fangsheng* ponds or sanctuaries. Besides the prevalence of fishing and hunting through netting, trapping, shooting, and trawling, there are natural constraints in the environment itself. In Taiwan and the United States, there are only preserves or sanctuaries for wild animals. In addition, there are people who, out of compassion or to protect the environment, call on the public not to hunt or kill animals randomly and excessively, to preserve the interdependent ecological balance, as well as to rescue endangered species from extinction. Although differing in approach, these actions resonate with *fangsheng*.

If we simply release captive animals to sanctuaries without limitation, they will soon reach saturation, and then there will be actions by some to regulate growth through methods such as controlled breeding and quota killing. So, where should we go to release animals? Released fish could be caught or netted again, and released birds could be shot or trapped. Moreover, fishes and birds sold at pet stores are seldom feral, and tend to be commercially bred in hatcheries, aviaries, and kennels. Many of these animals lack the skills to survive in the wild, and being released actually can be harmful to them. Released small fish would be taken by big ones; big fish would be caught and taken to a restaurant's kitchen. Furthermore, birds and especially fishes have their own habitats; certain fishes exist where water quality, depth, and current of the water are critical. It would be problematic to release fresh water fish to the sea, and ocean fish to fresh water.

Birds bred in aviaries have never lived in the wild and have not acquired the skills of finding food

on their own; for example, they may not be aware of which fruits and berries in the woods could be edible. Therefore, if we release them into nature, they could starve or be preyed on by other animals. Under these circumstances, do we still need to practice freeing animals? This is certainly an unfortunate reality. The constraints of the natural environment make freeing captive animals more difficult today. Yet, the essence of the practice lies in the spirit of wishing to prolong the lives of the released animals. As to the question of how long their lives could be extended, we should do our best through research, deliberation and stewardship when releasing them.

For instance, when releasing birds, we should first consider their species as well as where and when to release them for the safest and most effective results. To release fish, turtle and other water creatures, we should first study and observe their origin, traits and way of life, then select the best time, and release them to the safest place we can find. If we cannot do this with 100 percent certainty, 50 percent is still not bad. Even if they get caught the next day, we tried our best to do it right. The goal is to inspire and increase our compassion and to relieve the suffering of all beings. As for the released beings, they have their own karmic causes and effects, but we certainly should free animals without intending that they be recaptured and slaughtered. Furthermore, we can offer Dharma talks to the released animals, and explain taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and pledging their wills to their own salvation. We can wish that they will leave their animal forms and be reborn as human beings, eventually reach the heavenly realm, live in the Pure Land, cultivate bodhi-mind, deliver innumerable sentient beings, and achieve buddhahood. All we can ask of ourselves is to always do our best, with all our hearts and minds.

QUESTION: Is it true that if a monastic cannot accomplish the path in this life, he or she would have to pay back by being reborn with “fur and horns,” meaning as a beast?

ANSWER: This is a specious question. What exactly is the path that needs to be accomplished? Why should one be reborn as a beast with fur and horns? As far as “paths” are concerned, in the higher planes of existence there are the human path, the heavenly path, the *śrāvaka* path [of the arhat], as well as the bodhisattva path and the buddha path. In the lower planes of existence there is the path of hell, the path of hungry ghosts, and the path of animals. There being these higher and lower paths, one cannot just broadly speak of “accomplishing the path.” Of course, accomplishing the path usually means departing from birth and death, and transcending the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness. These paths of liberation can be divided into the easy path and the difficult path.

Practicing the easy path, anyone can transcend the three realms directly by vowing to be reborn into Amitabha Buddha’s Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Practicing the difficult path takes three *asaṃkhyeya kalpas*, each being incalculably long. This is the path of bodhisattva on which one must take on the difficult, let go of the cherished, and bear the unbearable. Only then can one attain buddhahood. On this path, only upon completing the first *asaṃkhyeya kalpa* would one be able to transcend the three realms. That is the usual path for bodhisattvas to become buddhas. Despite the path being difficult, we have not seen any record in the scripture of bodhisattvas who have just generated bodhi-mind by doubting the practice on the path. As long as we have strong faith and the right vows, and we hold to our ultimate goal, there is no need to worry about failing, let alone to worry about birth and death, or being reborn as a beast of fur and horns.



During their cultivation, buddhas and bodhisattvas can manifest in various identities and forms to accommodate the needs of sentient beings. For example, in the *Stories of the Buddha’s Previous Lives* (Skt. *Jataka*), the future Buddha sometimes took the form of animals to help sentient beings in the animal realm. It is also recorded that Chan Master Puyuan (748–835) of Nanquan told his followers that he would be reborn as a water buffalo in a hillside village. Therefore, a true practitioner should just focus on practicing diligently at the present moment. As to whether one would transcend the three realms, it would be best to have the attitude of “just till the land; don’t worry about the harvest.” 🌿



Blessing a Deceased Pet

— BY —
VENERABLE GUO QI

Venerable Guo Qi ordained as a monk in 1992. With a great respect for nature, he often walks barefoot in the mountainside to be close to the earth. He has served as the head of the meditation hall at Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM), head of Youth Development, deputy director of DDM, he's been in charge of the kitchen at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, NY. This item is from the question and answer section of his book *Waking Up from the Dream*. Chinese editing by Pei-Shan Huang, translation by John Gill.

QUESTION: My pet passed away. How can I bless it?

ANSWER: First you can chant the three refuges:

Taking refuge in the Buddha, I will not fall into the hell realm.

Taking refuge in the Dharma, I will not fall into the hungry ghost realm.

Taking refuge in the Sangha, I will not fall into the animal realm.

You can then chant the *Heart Sutra* once and the “Pure Land Rebirth Dhāraṇī” three times.

Sanskrit:

*Namo amitābhāya tathāgatāya
tadyathā
amṛtodbhave
amṛta-siddhaṃ bhava
amṛta-vikrānte
amṛta-vikrānta
gāmine gagana
kīrta-kare svāhā*

English:

We take refuge in the Tathagata Amitdhha.

Be it thus:

that Immortality has become,

that Immortality has perfectly become,

that Immortality has progressed,

that Immortality is progressing,

going forward

*in the glorious Transcendental Way. Svāhā!**

Finally, chant this verse to transfer the merit:

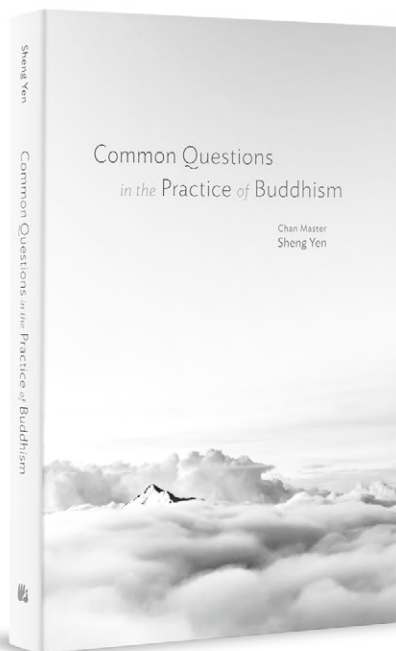
Wishing to be reborn in the Western Pure Land,

With the ninth grade of lotus blossom as my parents,

Unborn, blossoming to see the Buddha’s awakening,

With bodhisattvas forever as my companions. 🌸

* English translation of “Pure Land Rebirth Dhāraṇī” by Bhikkhu Āryadeva,
in *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*, author Lu K’uan Yü (Charles Luk) (London: Rider, 1964), 85.



Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism Chan Master Sheng Yen

*If someone believes in and practices Buddhism,
should they also take refuge in the Three Jewels?*

*Is special knowledge and advanced learning required to
practice Buddhism?*

Are there any taboos concerning practicing Buddhism at home?

In *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*, Chan Master Sheng Yen addresses these and many other spiritual and worldly problems in a simple question-and-answer format. He clarifies common areas of confusion about Buddhist beliefs and practices and gives practical advice on leading a life that is “full of wisdom, kindness, radiance, comfort, freshness, and coolness” in the contemporary world.

Sheng Yen Education Foundation · ISBN 978-986-6443-92-3

Sentient Beings

— BY —

VICTOR LAPUSZYNSKI

Victor Lapuszynski is a New Englander who in 1968 became a Chicago cab driver and met Soto Master Dr. Rev. Matsuoka (with whom he studied Zen meditation). He more recently practiced with James I. Ford, Roshi, at the Henry Thoreau Sangha in Newton, MA, in the early 2000s. Victor managed the physical facilities of Dharma Drum Retreat Center from 2008 to 2011. After formally retiring, he helped at many retreats at DDRC until settling in Vermont permanently in 2022.



FROM THE OUTSET, THE BUDDHA'S QUEST was to discover the cause and cure of suffering. Suffering is only owned by beings that have a mind to feel that suffering, since suffering is a condition of mind. Thus the basic study in Buddhism is about reality as it is experienced, which is a study of mind, of consciousness.

The Buddha called beings with mind "sentient beings." A not-too-rare opinion in Buddhist philosophy is that all beings are "sentient beings," and that only because our perception is limited do we think that rocks, electrons, oceans, and stars are not conscious. If the presumably non-conscious material elements of our bodies are not aware, where does our consciousness come from?

Non-Human Beings

We presume, though we don't really know, that all other humans are basically just like us – a lonely consciousness in a physical body, isolated and private but for the clumsy and imprecise interactions between us. We can share to some extent all the varieties of experience that human consciousness embodies through language and other forms of communication. To learn about our common heritage of mind, we find it most useful to listen to people who are very different from us, to assess the variety of forms that awareness can take. That being so, it would be even more valuable to observe the minds of nonhuman beings.

Buddhism traditionally talks about many kinds of beings – *yakshas*, *nagas*, and *kinnaras* are some – who are described as spirits and creatures equal or superior to humans in the strength and complexity of their awareness. It would be nice to know to what levels of awareness human beings can aspire by comparison with such beings, but while such

beings may be sensorily capable of observing humans, they are usually imperceptible to us. We are so far from perceiving them, they are no more to us than characters in literature. We don't even know if they exist aside from our imagination. Pity. I would like to observe and interact with beings whose foods are music and incense smoke. Yet there are beings much closer – our fellow travelers in the biological kingdom of animalia, the animals – who share this physical plane with us.

Many humans are accustomed to think of animal consciousness as incomplete or otherwise inferior to our own, ignoring that every species has had exactly the same amount of time (more than 3.7 billion years) to evolve their awareness from whatever common beginnings we have had. It may be that all living things have what we call mind, if we could only learn to recognize it through appropriate communication or subtle observation. While this may be extremely difficult with living things like plants and fungi and microbes because of the difference in the scale of size or speed, many species of animal can respond to humans in ways that reveal their inner states.

Animals and Dharma

Can animals recognize Dharma? We know they can suffer. We can see them flinch, make cries of distress, and attempt to escape tormentors. But can they recognize wisdom and compassion?

The orthodox Buddhist answer is that, since all sentient beings have Buddha-nature, animals are capable of realizing Buddhahood. However, this is in tension with the doctrine that, of the six realms of conditioned existence [god (*deva*), demi-god (*asura*), human (*mānuṣa*), animal (*tiryak*), hungry ghost (*preta*) and hell being (*naraka*)] only humans have the adequate mix of clear-minded understanding

and suffering to make liberation possible. But if Gautama Buddha nearly despaired of sharing Dharma with his fellow humans¹, how much more difficult would it be for an animal Buddha to preach the Dharma to animals lacking a sophisticated language? Yet we know that in many respects animals surpass humans in their sensory faculties, and perhaps have subtler perceptions. Because they do not communicate with us by human language, we are limited in assessing the nature of animal minds. Because we have typical human arrogance, we think we are far beyond any animal's intellectual and spiritual abilities. We probably underrate them.

Cats and Yoga

I have partnered with three dogs and many cats in my life, and I was, and am still, constantly surprised by them. All the cats I've had returned affection for affection. And cats frequently enter a state externally resembling samadhi, from which we might presume the notion arose that cats taught yoga to humans. Here is a tale from the old *Cat Catalog*:

"Oh, cat," said the prince. "Why is it that you can meditate so peacefully?"

The cat opened her eyes, blinked, and yawned at the prince. Then she jumped down from the tree stump and landed on the path in front of the boy. She stretched her paws out in front of herself and wiggled each individual toe, while balancing



on her haunches. Then she moved her weight forward onto her front shoulders and smoothly shifted the movement to her back, which she arched more than seemed possible. Just at the top of the arch she yawned again, long and loud, and started the process of slowly reversing each and every movement she had just performed. At the end of the complete cycle, she laid down, turned over on her back, stretched her paws, neck, and tail in all directions, and turned back over.

She got up to face the prince. "That, my friend, is how I meditate," she replied to his earlier question. "I have learned to prepare myself for meditation by practicing relaxing exercises. I tense and release my muscles and all parts of my body, both inside and out. Then, when my body is completely satisfied, I can meditate without distraction."²

On the other hand, cats have egos – when a cat fails to make a graceful jump to a dresser and falls scrambling to the floor, their sullen humiliation is obvious. One might say that domesticated animals

– cats, dogs, horses, and so forth – have acquired a deeper consciousness through their association with humans, but this sounds like human hauteur. We share much more mind than most people grant to beasts, overvaluing our own levels of understanding by depreciating that of our fellow creatures.

Sensing the Dharma

As for animals sensing Dharma, here is an account from ancient Buddhist scriptures:

Thus it is told in the *Avadānasūtra*: The Buddha was in the Jetavana; towards evening, he started out with Śāriputra walking behind him. At that moment a hawk was chasing a pigeon; the pigeon fell in front of the Buddha; when the Buddha, continuing his walk, came abreast of it and his shadow covered the pigeon, the bird became calm, its fears disappeared and it stopped crying. Later, when Śāriputra's shadow covered the pigeon, it began to cry and tremble again.

Śāriputra asked the Buddha:

“The Buddha and myself are both free of the three poisons. Why does the pigeon stop its fear and crying when the Buddha's shadow covers it and begin to tremble and cry when my shadow covers it?”

The Buddha said:

“In you the impregnations of the threefold poison are not yet destroyed; that is why, when your shadow covers it, the pigeon's fears do not disappear.³”

This bird was spiritually able to sense in the being of the highly enlightened disciple Śāriputra that, even though he had overcome the three poisons of craving, aversion, and delusion, their impressions yet remained upon his being. Pretty subtle for a bird!

Monks and Tigers

The story of the cat who invented yoga is obviously fiction, and stories about Buddha and Śāriputra are ancient legends, but there are reports from forest-dwelling monks about tigers and other wild animals that show respect for Dharma. Dharma practitioners, engaged in cultivating awareness in locations with few people but many wild animals, would become familiar with such neighbors. Here is one account from an actual memoir that purports to be factual:

One night while walking in meditation, Ācariya Sitha was visited by a huge Bengal tiger. The tiger crept in and quietly crouched forward to about six feet from his meditation track, right in between the lighted candles at each end of the track that allowed him to see as he paced back and forth in the dark. Facing the meditation track while remaining motionless, it sat there calmly like a house pet watching Ācariya Sitha intently as he paced back and forth. Reaching that place on the track opposite which the tiger was crouched, Ācariya Sitha sensed something out of place. At once he became suspicious, for normally nothing was at the side of his track. Glancing over he saw the huge Bengal tiger crouched there, staring back at him – since when he couldn't tell. Still, he felt no fear. He merely watched the tiger as it sat motionless, looking back at him like an enormous stuffed animal. After a moment he continued pacing back and forth, passing each time in front of the tiger – but thoughts of fear never crossed his mind. He noticed, though, that it remained crouched there for an unusually long time. Feeling sorry for it, he directed this train of thought at the tiger: “Why not go off and find something to eat? Why just sit there watching me?” No sooner had this thought

arisen, than the tiger let out a deafening roar that resounded through the whole forest. The sound of its roar left Ācariya Sitha in no doubt that it intended to stay, so he quickly changed tack, thinking: “I thought that only because I felt sorry for you – I was afraid you might get hungry sitting there so long. After all, you have a mouth and a stomach to fill, just like all other creatures. But if you don’t feel hungry and want to sit there watching over me, that’s fine, I don’t mind.”

The tiger showed no reaction to Ācariya Sitha’s change of heart – it just crouched by the path and continued to watch him. He then resumed his meditation, taking no further interest in it. Some time later he left the meditation track and walked to a small bamboo platform situated close by to take a rest. He chanted suttas there for a while then sat peacefully in meditation until time to go to sleep, which he did lying on the bamboo platform. During that entire time the tiger remained crouched in its original position, not far away. But

when he awoke at 3:00 AM to resume his walking meditation, he saw no sign of the tiger anywhere – he had no idea where it had gone. As it happened, he saw it only that once; from then on until he left that place, it never appeared again.

This incident intrigued Ācariya Sitha, so when he met with Ācariya Mun he described to him how the tiger had crouched there watching him. He told Ācariya Mun the tiger had roared at the precise moment the thought arose wishing it to go away. He recounted how, although he wasn’t conscious of any fear, his hair stood on end and his scalp went numb, as if he were wearing a cap.⁴

How about Elephants?

There are many, many accounts of forest monks cohabiting with tigers. Elephants live in these same forests; here is an account which seems to indicate awareness and compassion on the part of the great beast:



Wild elephants also occupy a conspicuous place in the forest monks' recollections. The inexperienced monk learned from his *thudong*⁵ teacher how to handle encounters with these formidable animals. Aware of the elephant's intelligence, a thudong monk would first try to reason with it. During the 1930s, for example, Ajahn Man and two disciples Khaw and Maha Thaungsuk were wandering in the north. One day, while approaching a narrow pass in the mountains, they came upon a bull elephant, its tusks about two meters long. The elephant was eating bamboo; it was facing away from the monks and completely blocking the path. There was no way around it. The monks stopped five meters from the animal and consulted with one another.

Man asked Khaw, who had some affinity with elephants, to handle the situation. Realizing it was

they who were trespassing in the elephant's territory, Khaw addressed the animal with respect and humility: "Big brother! I'd like to talk to you." The elephant immediately stopped eating and turned around to face the three monks. Though standing still, its ears were spread in full alert for any danger. Khaw spoke again. "Great, powerful brother! I'd like to talk to you. We monks are powerless and so are afraid of you. We'd be grateful if you'd let us pass. As long as you stand there like this, we can't possibly go forward."

Upon hearing Khaw's voice the elephant moved into the bamboo clump and buried its long tusks in the thicket. Then the monks mindfully walked past it in single file, Khaw ahead, Man in the middle, and Thaungsuk in the rear. Only half a meter separated them from the huge animal. Thaungsuk's



Photo by Sasin Tipchai

fear may have distracted him. As he approached the elephant, the hook on his *klot*⁶ got caught in the tangled bamboo branches. Man and Khaw turned back and watched. Thauungsuk, untangling the hook, was in a sweat. Uneasy and apprehensive, he kept glancing at the beast. As soon as he freed his *klot*, they continued. Khaw turned around to thank the elephant. “My big brother, we have already passed. Now you are free to go on with your eating.” The elephant, breathing heavily, withdrew its huge tusks from the bamboo clump.⁷

Master Xu Yun

Prominent Master Xu Yun, a famous monastic honored as an ancestor in the Dharma Drum lineage, died in 1959, making him contemporary with people still living. In his autobiography, he told several stories of animals behaving, not just intelligently, but spiritually. The following anecdotes are taken from his autobiography⁸, respectfully paraphrased for clarity and brevity:

A lay disciple of the master brought him a pair of geese to be set free, and asked him to recite the three refuges to them. The birds lowered their heads until Xu Yun was done, and seemed happy thereafter. For three years, they stayed with the monks, following them in ceremonies. Finally the female entered the door of the main hall and stood still. After a while, she turned three times, raised her head toward the statues, and died. The male mourned ceaselessly. He ceased to swim and feed, but after a few days came to the hall, spread his wings, and died looking at the same statues. As the monks were fond of this pair, they put them in a box and ceremonially buried them together in an appropriate place.

Thirteen years later, another layman sent a flock of geese to be similarly liberated. The master noted

a gander for its large size. When the monastery’s wooden fish was sounded, the bird would spread his wings and stretch his neck. In the main hall, he liked to gaze on the Buddha statue all day. (Apparently geese were privileged for entry into monastery halls in those days.) About a month after the gander arrived, he died standing before the Buddha statue, but did not fall to the ground. When the layman who had sent the geese heard of this, he requested a formal Buddhist cremation for the bird, and it was granted.

A similar event involved a rooster. He had been freed at a temple, but was aggressive and wounded other birds. When he heard of this, Master Xu Yun came and preached the refuges and precepts to the rooster, and also taught him to recite the Buddha’s name [“Fo, Fo, Fo!” in Chinese]. The rooster gave up his aggression and mostly remained in one spot on the branch of a tree. He abandoned eating insects and only ate grain offered to him. When the bell and the sounding stone rang to announce the times for ceremonies, the fowl followed the monks, and returned to his spot in the tree afterwards. One day, after a couple of years, he stood up in the hall, fanned his wings three times, and died. The master composed a poem:

Gazing at the golden yellow statues
How easily it crowed the Buddha’s name!
After turning thrice, suddenly it passed away,
Where did this being differ from the Buddha?

The master was relaxing in a monastery and talking with an army officer. Suddenly a cow burst into the hall and knelt, tears streaming from her eyes. She was followed by her owner, a butcher. Xu Yun said to the cow, “If you want to save your life, you should take refuge in the triple gem.” When the cow nodded, the master recited the three refuges to her

and she became completely calm. He helped her to rise and offered money to her owner for her freedom, but the butcher was so moved by what he witnessed that he refused the money and asked to convert to Buddhism. Perhaps the conversion of the butcher is more noteworthy than the cow taking refuge.

Then there was the raven, yet another bird given to the monks of a monastery to be freed. Master Xu Yun said the raven was rather tame and stayed around the monastery despite his freedom. An excellent mimic, he was taught first the three refuges and then the “Amitābha Buddha Mantra.” He had been raised on bits of meat, but after learning the sacred formulas, he refused all flesh. (The monastery was not very far from Tibet, so we can presume that his handler was Tibetan, thus not vegetarian.) All day long, he continuously called out the names of Amitābha Buddha and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. One day, unfortunately, an eagle raked him up in his talons. As the raven was taken into the sky, he clearly recited Buddha’s name until he was heard no more.

The master reflected, “Though he was a bird, he did not cease to think of the Buddha in time of danger. How then can we human beings allow ourselves to be inferior to a bird?”

Be Open to the Possibility

Although such stories depend upon the credibility of the tellers, we tend to believe that scripture teaches deep truths and monks speak honestly of their experiences. Nothing is unambiguously conclusive and established by the examples above. Yet I would suggest that, next time you have an encounter with a non-human animal, being open to the possibility that you can have a deeper exchange than you might have supposed can yield a surprising experience of fellowship. Assuming non-human creatures are too dumb to share anything of spirit will help prevent any such occurrence, keeping the experience of sangha smaller than it could be, and losing you the opportunity to recognize the teachings of the non-human. 🌿

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1. Paul Carus, “The Brahma’s Request,” in *Buddha, The Gospel* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1894), <<https://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/btg/btg15.htm>>. “Nirvana remains incomprehensible and mysterious to the vulgar whose minds are beclouded with worldly interests. Should I preach the doctrine and mankind not comprehend it, it would bring me only fatigue and trouble.”
 2. Sally Ellyson, “The Story of the Cat Who Invented Yoga,” in *Cat Catalog: The Ultimate Cat Book*, ed. Judy Fireman (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1976), 42.
 3. Nāgārjuna, “Part 7 – Why Does Śāriputra Question?,” in *Mahā Prajñāpāramitā Śāstra*, trans. Gelongma Karma Migme Chödrön, <https://www.wisdomlib.org/buddhism/book/maha-prajnaparamita-sastra/d/doc225222.html>.
 4. Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñānasampanno, *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera: A Spiritual Biography*, trans. Bhikkhu Dick Silaratano (Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2003), http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/acariya-mun.pdf, 48.
 5. *Thudong* (Thai; Pali *dhutaṅga*, “renunciation”): a group of thirteen austerities or ascetic practices most commonly observed by the practitioners of the Thai Forest Tradition of Theravada Buddhism. While the Buddha did not require these practices, they were recommended for those wanting to practice greater asceticism.
 6. *Klot* (Thai): In Thailand, wandering monks carried a *klot* or modest tent-like cloth and mosquito netting, which could be set up in the open air, a cave, at the foot of a tree, or in a cemetery.
 7. Kamala Tiyanich, “Love in a Wild Climate,” in *Dharma Life Magazine* #16 (Summer 2001). Excerpted from *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997). <http://www.dharmalife.org/issue16/facingfear.html>.
 8. Master Xu Yun, *Empty Cloud: The Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master*, trans. Charles Luk, ed. Richard Hunn (London: Element Books, 1988).



Accept and Continue

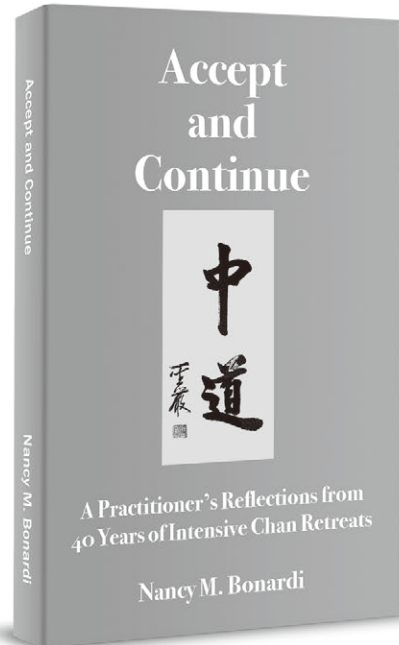
*A Practitioner's Reflections from
40 Years of Intensive Chan Retreats*

Nancy M. Bonardi

Nancy Bonardi's intimate account of her path of learning the Buddhadharmā from Chan Master Sheng Yen and his disciples gives these teachings new life. Her articulation of her own experience expounds how the wisdom of the Buddha can deeply impact and transform us, as long as we make the commitment to practicing it wholeheartedly.

—David Listen, LMHC, and Buddhist teacher

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Pets and Practice

BY

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MANY OF THE AMERICAN ZEN CENTERS I've visited have a resident cat, or dog, sometimes both. But I don't recall any pets at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx, where I first studied with our Shifu, Chan Master Sheng Yen. That was in the mid nineteen-seventies. Back then one of my cats had been injured, and when I told Shifu that the veterinarian bill was a few hundred dollars he raised his eyebrows in surprise. Turning aside to another monk, he remarked "America is truly the Pure Land for animals."

From the nineties I recall a litter of kittens at the Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Queens, playing outside the back door while we sat in retreat. But these weren't kept pets of the center; only temporary guests, compassionately allowed to remain where their mother had decided to birth them.

Cutting the Grass with Scissors

Although there were no pets at our city Chan centers in the United States, I do know of one cat who lived at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture in Taiwan, which was founded by Venerable Master Dongchu, Master Sheng Yen's teacher in the Caodong lineage. Venerable Master Guo Ru spoke of this cat in one of his Dharma talks at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in 2009:

I remember when I was a young boy novice studying under Master Dongchu (Shifu's teacher, my grandmaster) at the Chung Hwa Institute outside Taipei City. At that time I didn't know he was a Chan master, a lineage holder of the Caodong line. He never said a single word about Dharma or Chan. He never even taught meditation. But the daily training that I received from him was the best Chan training. One time he asked me to cut the grass. Of course we did

not have a lawnmower or large shears. He gave me a pair of scissors, the type you use to cut your nails. He said "Here, you go use this to cut the grass." It would have been nice if the blades were sharp but they were completely dull and even chipped and dented. In the blazing sun after an entire morning I was only able to cut a small area. By the end of it I had blisters on my fingers. Master Dongchu came out and took a look and said "Little novice, you call that cutting the grass? Even a dog chewing it would do better than the way you cut it. So uneven!" Or he would come by with his cane in his hand. There I was concentrating on using scissors to cut the grass, and he would tap twice on the pavement with his cane, so I'd look up. He would say "Little novice, I am with you in spirit in your hard work. You know that, right?"

"I'm with you in spirit." While he said this he was holding and petting his yellow cat in his arms. He was taking different snacks out of his pocket, like nori. Now at that time Japanese seaweed such as nori was very expensive. But he used it to feed the cat! It was not something that we novices ate. We ate scraps of food, vegetables that we grew ourselves in our little garden. We rarely ever had a taste of tofu. But he would speak very sweetly to the cat saying "Here kitty, enjoy this nori" right in front of me! After a whole long day of work, looking at that piece of nori I really wanted to eat it. I thought to myself, look at the treatment I receive, I am not even worthy of having a piece of nori. Yet the cat does nothing all day and eats nori all the time. Master Dongchu used to go to the market and spend a few dollars to buy chicken liver. Yes, meat. Duck liver and intestines and so forth. He was not ashamed to buy meat, he would just carry it in public and bring it back to feed the cat. He showed more love to the cat than to anyone. He



Art by Darko Vidačković

was always petting the cat in front of me. I felt at that time such misery and humiliation.

That is how we were trained in those days, without any consideration or sensitivity to feelings. Only now do I appreciate his strategy. Thinking back, all of my sense of self-worth, arrogance, value judgments, opinions, one by one he would grind those away. In the midst of daily life he was not teaching Chan by talking about it. He just did it. Growing up in that environment, enduring that kind of treatment, you learn to see clearly the many discriminations that you have when you look at a situation; you see all of them as stemming from self. Any strategy that you had hoped would protect the “I” is immediately slashed down.

Dogs At DDRC

In the early days of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, in the mountains of the Hudson Valley, one of

the resident lay managers was allowed to keep her dog on campus. He was a mischievous little floppy-eared fellow she'd brought back from Taiwan. I came to know him during the forty-nine-day retreat in the Summer of 2000. He was a very intelligent dog and his owner did not have full control of him. He'd run into the Chan Hall when we were sitting and race around the rows of cushions. When you tried to make him leave, he'd drop down into a cute submissive pose and open his eyes

adorably wide, then dash off again before you could grab his collar. Once he killed a chipmunk in front of us. I asked the monks what to do, and they told me to bury the chipmunk and recite the three jewels, so it might have a better situation in its next life.

This dog's owner tried to keep him cooped up to avoid distracting us retreatants. But the dog would not come when she called him. So an elaborate ruse evolved where she would start her car and slowly drive away from the house where she lived at the center. Not wanting to be left behind, the dog would always run to the car and hop in when she opened the door. The she'd drive back to her driveway and bodily carry the dog into the house. Every day after lunch, retreatants relaxing on the porch could be entertained by this spectacle, when we should have been elsewhere, concentrating on our method. That darling dog was an excellent example of why it may not be a good idea to have a pet at a retreat center. He was not there long.

A few years later, around 2005, Shifu gave me permission to have my own dog on campus. I had started working at the center but had not yet found a place to live in town. I was travelling up from New Jersey and staying at the center three nights a week. I had a large dog named Guy and, for those days when I stayed at the center, I paid to board my dog at a kennel in New Jersey. Boarding was expensive, so I asked permission to bring Guy with me to Pine Bush. I could not ask Shifu in person, since he was no longer travelling in those days. But the request went through channels and, to the surprise of some folks, the answer came back yes.

Guy was a big Chesapeake Bay retriever, over-bred and nervous, and not good with strangers. Again, not the best sort of dog to have at a retreat center. I installed a chain-link kennel outside the center's garage. When Guy was in his kennel I kept it padlocked. When Guy was out of his kennel he was never off-leash, and I didn't take him out unless there was no-one around for him to nervously bark at. Fortunately after a few months I found a house in town and Guy's kennel was moved to our own yard.

Temple Cats

My dog Guy was not an appropriate pet for a meditation retreat center. What kind of pets might be appropriate? I've met dogs at American Zen Centers who were quite suitable; mellow and relaxed around people, full of calm affection, well-trained and obedient. Why have a dog at a retreat center? Dogs are useful for warning of visitors, and for protection. But I suspect that, for the most part, dogs are at meditation centers because they are the companion of someone who lives there.

People can become quite attached to their animal friends. There is a classic gong'an about a monastery

where the monks actually fought over which side of the monastery, east or west, a particular cat belonged to. Their arguing was so intense that their teacher, Nánquán Pūyuàn (749–835), settled the matter by killing the cat¹. Why keep a cat if it's going to cause so much trouble? A common reason is that cats are very good mousers; it's why they became domesticated thousands of years ago. But there's another classic story about monastic cats where the reason gets lost to time: Two cats living at a Buddhist monastery liked to play together and disturb the monks during their chanting and meditation service. So it became a daily ritual for the head monk to tie the cats to a tree in front of the Chan hall before the service. This went on for years. When the head monk passed away, the new head monk continued tying up the cats before services. Then, the cats passed away, and the head monk would not hold a service until two new cats could be found to tie up. He was obviously unaware of why the cats had been tied in the first place; not the best endorsement of a Chan training center, but a fine fable about the dangers of following traditions without question.²

Chang Miaou Pusa

In spring 2010 a young black cat showed up at DDRRC, meowing loudly outside the Chan hall while Venerable Master Chi Chern was giving a Dharma talk. Monastics and staff alike were delighted by this newcomer, who had a lively personality and loved to interact with people. It was obvious he'd been someone's pet. Attempts were made to find his owner, to no avail. The cat was fussed over and given food and shelter, though not allowed inside the buildings. Many names were suggested for the animal but it was resident Djordje Cvijic who came up with the winning "Chang Miaou Pusa," following Dharma Drum's

naming conventions (púsa is Chinese for bodhisattva; all lay sangha members are addressed as such).

For that spring and summer and into the fall, Chang Miaou was a beloved fixture. He entertained us by running up and down the narrow iron stair-rails like they were a tightrope. He earned his keep by catching mice. When everyone was in the dining hall for meals, Chang Miaou hung off the window screen, yowling to be let in (spritzes from a water spray bottle eventually corrected this behavior). It was not practical to let him inside the buildings; there was no way to keep him off the counters and tea tables, or away from staff or guests who might be allergic. There were opinions against keeping the cat; the fact that he killed small animals and birds, or the perception that donors might not like to see their donations going to feed an animal. When the cold weather came it was decided he had to leave the center. I took him home and he lives with me still.



Vexatious Attachments

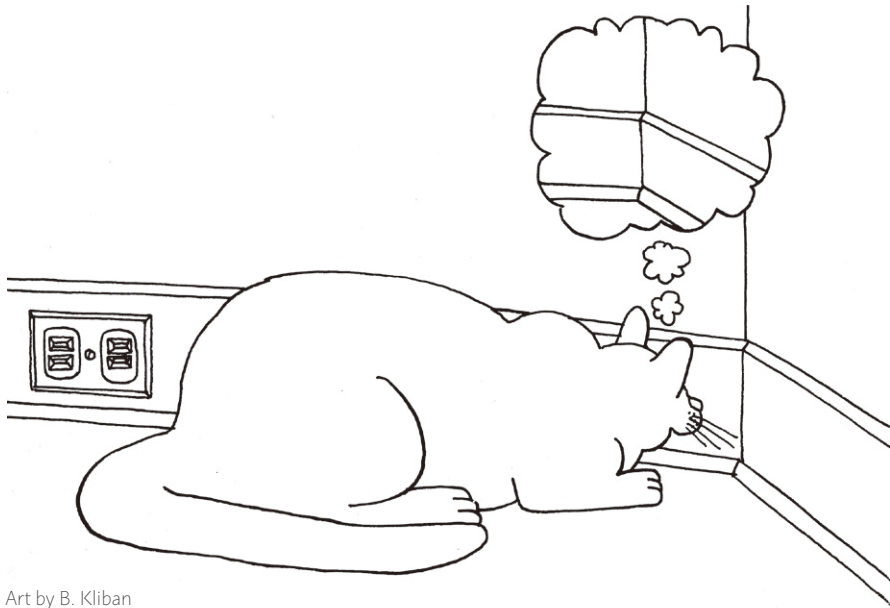
A few years after I took Chang Miaou Pusa home, my dog Guy became ill with cancer and died. I lived alone and liked having a dog for protection. But when I spoke about looking for a new dog, one of the monastic Dharma teachers suggested that a new dog would be a source of vexations, and that it might be better for my meditation practice if I didn't replace my pets once they passed.

I thought long and hard about this. By that time I had clearly seen how pets could cause problems at a retreat center, where the managers are responsible for the health and well-being of transient guests. Many people are allergic to animals; some people are afraid of them. A retreat center should provide the perfect environment for meditative practice. Unnecessary disruptions and distractions are to be avoided.

I could also understand that someone on the monastic path, who is supposed to give up all attachments and belongings, probably should not have a pet. A community of practitioners attempting to live simply and frugally, perhaps should not use community resources to support something frivolous like a cuddly animal. But I came to the conclusion that, for a layperson like myself, living in their own home, keeping a pet need not be more vexatious than any other circumstance in a layperson's life. It depends on having the right attitude and conditions for pet ownership.

Do No Harm

As Chan practitioners, striving to follow the precepts and the eightfold noble path, what is the correct attitude we should have towards keeping a pet? The



Art by B. Kliban

first precept is to cause no harm to other living things. That seems straightforward enough; if we take on a pet we keep it safe from harm. But there are many ways this can go wrong. One example is pet hoarding. Some people like animals so much that they collect too many of them. In such situations, living conditions become unhealthy for both human and animal and no one can be properly cared for.

In some cases the hoarded animals are not only domestic dogs or cats, but exotic animals. In Thailand there was an infamous Tiger Temple³, where monks cared for hundreds of tigers. It was originally set up as a sanctuary for rescued big cats. The temple needed to produce income from the tigers in order to have the means to care for them, so they charged people a fee to take selfie photos cuddling baby tigers. Cubs outgrow their cuteness, so a constant supply of new cubs was needed. They began to breed the tigers illegally. Other corrupt practices developed, such as the selling of tiger body parts for medicinal and magical purposes. What started as a sanctuary

where a few needy tigers could live out their lives, became instead a place that *created* needy animals for no good purpose and crowded them together in suffering. Insanity. When the temple was closed in 2016, authorities found sixty dead tiger cubs. This is clearly the opposite of “do no harm” (not to mention the many visitors who were injured by the big cats).

Unfortunately, the selling of exotic animals has become a major industry around the world. In my opinion, no one should be keeping exotics as pets. No matter how caring the pet owner, they will never be able to create living conditions that are better for the animal than its own natural environment. Luckily, popular opinion is changing in these matters and laws are being passed that make it harder to obtain exotics, or to collect animals into hoarding situations.

Responsibility and Commitment

The precept to “do no harm” also means to “cultivate well-being.” Obviously the first consideration

in whether to adopt a pet should be, do we have the means to keep them healthy? Pet ownership is a major responsibility. Quality food and regular veterinary care can be costly. Pets should be spayed or neutered to avoid producing new litters, since there are already so many unwanted pets in shelters and in the streets.

Do we have the time to devote to a pet? A puppy or kitten doesn't come to your home already knowing how to behave there. It takes patience and commitment to train them, and training *must* be done, or both you and the animal will suffer. When I was a young woman I observed several puppies come and go over the course of a single year at my neighbor's house. He had two young boys, and he brought home a cute baby dog. At first everyone was happy, almost fighting over who could spend time with the animal. A few weeks later things had changed: the puppy yipped and climbed frantically over the boys, desperate for attention, while they pushed it away in annoyance and kept watching television. Around the house I saw furniture chewed and papers shredded by puppy teeth. The boy's mother called for one of them to take the dog out for a walk, but neither boy wanted to do it. A few weeks later I learned that the pup had gotten out of the house, was hit by a car and killed.

I thought my neighbor was unlucky and had picked an unruly pup. In a few weeks he replaced that first dog with a new puppy, sweet and gentle and eager to learn. But I watched the same scenario play out again – the pup was neglected and became a frantic, annoying pest who eventually got loose and disappeared. And yet a *third* pup was brought to the house, with the same results. I don't recall that family getting another dog after that. For myself, I've never forgotten the clear lesson of how the environment shapes the animal.

Benefits of Keeping Pets

We are taught that a practitioner cannot have a stable Dharma practice without first having a stable homelife. Caring for our pets can help stabilize our home routines. A dog or cat will still require daily attention even after it matures and has been trained. For optimum mental stability, a dog should be walked twice a day. That doesn't mean letting the dog out in the backyard to relieve itself and then letting it back in. It means taking hikes away from the house so the pet can be stimulated by new sights and smells. As a pet owner we may feel lazy and wish we didn't have to do that, but there is no denying that we ourselves will benefit from the exercise.

Both cats and dogs can learn to understand limited vocabularies but for the most part communication occurs on a wordless level. One needs to be deeply mindful and patient in observing our pets in order to understand their needs. Spending time in silence with our pets, learning to be aware in the non-verbal, can be a practice in itself. Beyond words, our pets can sense our mental states. To keep them calm, we need the ability to calm ourselves. Thus, interacting with our pets becomes a mutually beneficial activity. 🌿

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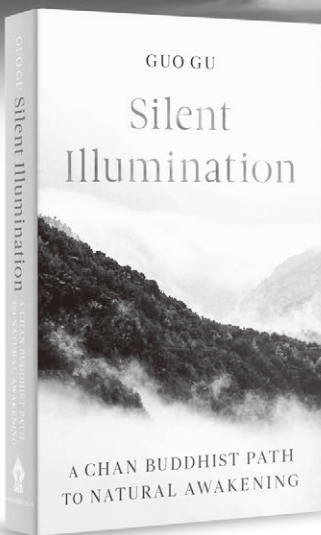
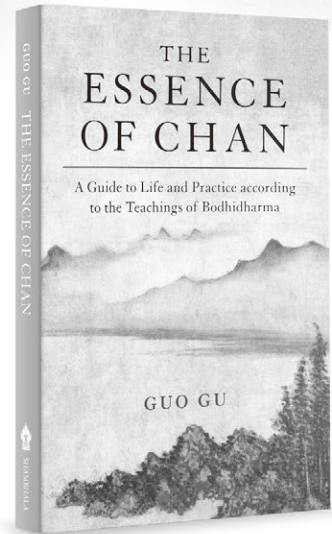
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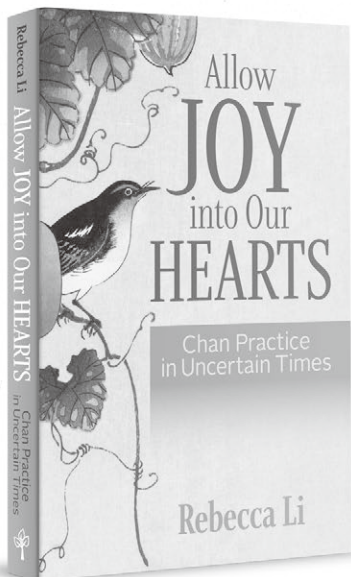
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