

Nanchuan Kills a Cat

by Kokyo Henkel

One day at Nanchuan's temple in old China, the monks of the eastern and western halls were arguing over a cat. Maybe they were arguing about which residence the cat gets to live in. The eastern people wanted it with them, or the western people wanted it with them, or neither of them actually wanted it, since the cat demanded a lot of attention and during zazen it would curl up on their laps which disturbed their concentration. Or maybe they were just arguing about whether the cat had buddha nature or not, or debating what is a cat anyway? Zen monks can come up with an argument about anything! You'd think they would have better things to do in a Zen temple than argue over cats, but that's what they were doing on this particular occasion. And when Nanchuan, their teacher, saw this he held up the cat and said, "If you can express something, it won't be killed." The group had no reply so Nanchuan cut the cat in two.

The term for "the ability to speak, express, say something" in Japanese is "dotoku." In Zen it is not only important to understand Dharma, but to be able to express something. Dogen Zenji has a whole essay called "Expression" (Dotoku) in which he says, "All Buddhas and ancestors are expressing themselves; thus when buddhas and ancestors are looking for buddhas and ancestors, they always ask for an expression." One would think that those living in Nanchuan's community would be ready for this kind of question from their teacher. Nanchuan would often say things like "All buddhas of past, present and future, don't know IT; house cats and cows know it!" Nanchuan loved cats. They know reality more directly than the buddhas. We celebrate this in the Song of the Jewel Mirror Samadhi: resting in mirror-like awareness is kind of like the mind of a house cat or a cow, very simple and straightforward. Cats are also pretty good at immediately responding.

Nanchuan picked up this cat that knows it more clearly than the buddhas of the three times, held it before the arguing monks and asked them to just express something here and now. They were already talking a lot, but they are being asked to say something straightforward, to the point, beyond discriminating ideas, that will release this buddha-like cat. The argument is already killing the cat, but if something can be expressed right now, from our deepest heart, the true life of this precious cat will be saved. At that time the group could not speak. Isn't it amazing? Not one of them could say anything! They couldn't even say, "Don't do it!" or "What are you talking about teacher?" They couldn't say anything. Sometimes silence is the appropriate and ultimate response in Zen stories, but more often it is NOT! This is a case where silence won't do. At least Nanchuan did get the monks to stop arguing; that was pretty good. They were dumbfounded, shocked, afraid to speak. The stakes are high, because Nanchuan is a great Zen teacher and he's asking for an authentic expression, for some truth to be expressed here. What if one says it wrong? What if I give the wrong answer and I am the only one who speaks, and he kills the cat? Then the killing will be my fault. So if we all just silently do nothing together, then at least no individual can be blamed.

There is a cat being held up before us every moment. A perfectly healthy, non-discriminating cat, warm and full of life. This world is like that. This world holds up living cats every moment and asks for our response. There is no escape from this. Even just being silent, the cat is often killed, as we know. Or if we argue further, giving twenty justified reasons why the cat should not be killed, it will be too late; we don't have that kind of time in this world. Cats are being held up

and actually killed every moment. This practice is asking us to respond – immediately and authentically.

There are two sides of Zen practice: there is sitting silently, not reacting to anything, letting go of all of our ideas about everything, just being completely present, dropping off discriminating mind. We settle and relax in the midst of this world of painful situations; this is half of our practice. The other half of practice is to get up from our cushion and respond in myriad ways that we can't figure out beforehand. Who would have expected that the teacher would suddenly pick up an innocent cat and hold a knife to it? We cannot plan on how we will respond. These two sides of practice work together: by cultivating presence and relaxation even in very difficult situations, from this stable foundation we can immediately and spontaneously respond to help the world.

Later in the day, Nanchuan's great disciple Chaochou, who liked to talk about dogs, came back to the temple. Nanchuan brought up the incident and asked for his response. Chaochou immediately took off his sandals, put them on his head and left. Nanchuan said, "If you had been here you could have saved that cat." Chaochou brought forth a true expression and his teacher seems to have approved it.

There are some famous verses from Shantideva's "Way of the Bodhisattva", in the chapter on "Vigilant Introspection": "Harmful beings are everywhere, like space itself. Impossible it is that they should be suppressed. But let this angry mind alone be overthrown, and it's as though all foes have been subdued." This is not to say that we don't ever protest harmful beings, but from a practice perspective we must first and foremost take care of this one. We BE peace and offer that example. The verse that follows this goes (edited here from "leather" to "straw", since Nanchuan and the cat is a kind of "animal rights" story): "To cover all the earth with sheets of straw, where can such amounts of straw be found? But with the straw soles of just my own sandals, it is as though I cover all the earth!"

What a wonderful image; since padded straw will protect us from the thorny world of difficult people, let's pave the whole world with straw so we can walk barefoot on it. But, since this would be virtually impossible, we can try to cover just this tiny little area of our feet and then just take our padded feet wherever we go. This protects us from the thorny world of harmful beings, and it protects the world from us. We don't need so much straw to cover our feet.

The appropriate place for sandals is on one's feet; it is very grounding and soft to meet the world like that. Then naturally, without very much effort, sandals just stay on the feet like that and do this work without a lot of conceptual figuring about how to do it. It is as if these arguing monks are taking off their sandals that protect them from each other, putting them onto their head instead of on the ground where they do their work. Chaochou is demonstrating the distraction these monks have gotten into, showing that their argument and inability to respond compassionately is topsy-turvy; these simple beneficial sandals, so easy to take for granted, have been taken off their feet and put on their arguing heads, and all is lost.

Later a commentator on this story, celebrating Chaochou's response, added a verse: "Picking up whatever comes to hand, there's nothing that's not it." If he didn't have sandals on his feet at the time, he might have expressed himself with something else; using whatever arises in the situation with trust in the larger workings of the whole, we can express our true heart and save the life of the moment.