

Mark Unno

*Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism*

Week Three: “Does a Cat Have Buddha Nature?”

February 17, 2022



Welcome to the third in our series of Dharma Talks, “Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism.” In this Dharma Talk entitled “Does a Cat Have Buddha Nature?” we will explore the relationship between human beings and the nonhuman animal world, including the question of whether it is only human teachers who can convey the dharma teaching of great compassion and whether or not other animals, including perhaps cats, can also be teachers for us on the path of great compassion.

This story comes from my own experience with cats. I was originally not very much of a cat person. I was much more of a dog person. It’s really my wife, Megumi, who converted me to the cat religion. We had neighbors and friends with cats for many years, but we didn’t have our own cats because I was in graduate school or we were moving around. But finally, when we moved to Eugene, Oregon, my wife said to me one day, “Mark, there are some really cute cats at Greenhill Humane Society here in Eugene, Oregon.” And I knew that there was no escape.

So we went to the Humane Society, and we ended up adopting two cats, both boys, both black. They ended up being the closest of brothers, even though they were not biologically related. One cat was named Onyx, and the other was Tata. They really were our boys for the 13 years we had them before they passed. They were our family, especially because we do not have human children. The four of us together, we were really family. And it was quite an amazing experience.

This story is about the little one, Tata. They’re only six months apart. But of course when they’re very young, that’s a larger percentage of their lives. Their personalities and even appearances were quite different. Onyx had a big, round face and a long, slender body and long legs. Tata had a more petite face and shorter legs. He was very rambunctious. He was very affectionate. In some ways it was a little bit unusual for a cat how loyal and affectionate he was, a little bit more like a dog in that sense, perhaps.

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These were our two boys, Onyx and Tata. For most of their 13 years with us, they were quite healthy and constantly playing. They were more humorous, more hilarious than many, many comedy shows on TV, so oftentimes, we were entertained greatly by our two boys. But Tata had an illness from the time that he came to us. He had a bowel disease, which, with the help of our amazing veterinarian, we were able to manage for most of his life. But towards the end, it started to take a toll on his body. His intestines could no longer absorb nutrients. Even if he ate his food, he started to lose weight. He was a small cat to begin with, a little bit over eight pounds, and he lost perhaps half his weight, so he was only about four pounds towards the end.

He started getting sicker, so we took him to the veterinarian, Dr. Fricke, and I still remember the conversation. Dr. Fricke said, “Well, you might not have that much longer with Tata. And sometimes pets have a hard time letting go because they don’t want to disappoint their owners. So you can talk to Tata and let him know it’s OK.” When I heard that, I thought this time it’s really serious. This is not going to be a matter of months. It might not even be a matter of weeks.

So we went home with Tata, and I was ready, and I actually talked to him. Of course, he can’t understand English, but I think the tone of voice and the attitude, the animal definitely has a response to that.

He seemed quite weak. But one day I was sitting on the floor. We do a lot of our living on the floor because we use a low Japanese-style table called a *kotatsu*, and so I’m often sitting on the floor. He came to me, and it was very interesting because he put his paw on my thigh, and he looked up at me. He was asking permission to sit on my lap. He didn’t need permission, but he was asking for it. So I picked him up because he was very weak by this point. I picked him up and I put him on my lap, and immediately he started to purr. I think because he had lost so much weight, he was having a hard time keeping his body heat, so my warm lap helped him. Also, because of my many years of Buddhist practice, there’s the power of the psychophysical energy

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that in Chinese we call *qi* or Japanese *ki*, and so when I put my hands on him, I could feel his body drawing the *ki* energy out of me.

Usually, this will go on for about 20 minutes, and either cat, they'll purr, and they'll enjoy it. But this time, I felt like I just needed to let Tata sit there and absorb the warmth from my hands and the energy coming off my body. But it felt as though he was drawing energy from my body quicker than I could replenish it because in this view, our bodies are conduits to the psychophysical energy, this *qi* or *ki* that fills the universe. But we're not perfect conductors. So he was drawing more energy out of me than I could replenish. And so I started to get very sleepy, and I actually leaned back and fell asleep.

It was almost two hours later when I woke up, and I was so exhausted that I could barely sit up. But when I did that, it seemed as though Tata had been energized, and he was able to almost take a small jump off my lap, which we hadn't seen for a long time, and I thought, “Oh, good, he feels better.” But then eventually, he started declining again. Sometimes he would go up to my wife, and she would just be standing, and she would be sad that perhaps we didn't have that much time left with Tata. When he sensed that, he would put his paw on her foot, and he would look up, and he would say, “It's OK, Mom, I'm still here. I'm still here.”

When I saw that, I realized my previous understanding of what he had done when he came in my lap was completely mistaken. Rather than him wanting to be better, we both realized he realized we were not yet ready to lose him, so he did whatever he could to hang on a little bit more so that we would be more ready to let go when the time came. It was only a little while later that he began to decline very quickly. He was having a very hard time even drinking water because what had been perfectly fine before felt too cold to his tongue and his mouth. My wife, who's very sensitive and aware, realized this, and so we gave him lukewarm water. Sure enough, he had a much easier time drinking the lukewarm water as compared to the cold water.

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But finally, he started eating less and less, drinking less and less, until one day he was sitting on my wife’s lap, and we were sitting next to a sliding glass door. It was a beautiful, beautiful day. The sun was out, and all the greenery outside the window was just shimmering. We were just relaxing together. But there came a moment where suddenly it felt like the sliding glass door completely opened even though it remained closed, and that shimmering light outside seemed to come into the very room that we were in, filling the room with light. And then suddenly, I saw the expression on little Tata’s face completely relax. I just had this feeling, and I said to my wife, “It’s time. He’s getting ready to go.”

Sure enough, that evening, he lay down on his little cat bed, and he started to lose consciousness. This was some time after dinner. Even his body started to get a little stiff from rigor mortis. But even then, my wife said, “Look, look, he’s moving his paws.” By this time, he could no longer even sleep sitting up, so he was on his side, and he was moving his paws. My wife said, “Look, look. Tata’s running. He’s running to rejoin his brothers and sisters that he had been separated from when he went into the Humane Society.” And then he calmed down.

And then a little bit later, he started to move his limbs again, but this time, it wasn’t a running motion. It was a jerky motion as if he was having seizures, so we got very worried. Our amazing vet, Dr. Fricke, said, “If you need to call me, I’ll be on call.” So we called his service. They paged him, and he called us. By the time he called us, Tata had calmed down. But Dr. Fricke said, “If you need me, I’m right here,” meaning if we needed to take Tata in and put him to sleep because he was suffering, he would help us. But Tata had calmed down.

It was late at night. I think it was around 11:30, and again, my wife said, “Look, look. Tata’s moving his paw again.” And Tata was moving his paw like this [waves]. Just one paw. My wife has an amazing ability to understand cat language, and she said, “He’s saying goodbye. He’s

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saying goodbye.” So we went right up to Tata. I put my palm on his abdomen, and I could feel his breathing become shallower and shallower until finally it stopped.

To me this was just an amazing experience because even though Tata was emaciated and he must have been in great discomfort and pain, he had no thought for himself. His only concern was for the two of us, his mom and dad, to make sure we were ready to let him go, even up until the very last moment to wave goodbye and thank you. My amazing partner and wife Megumi understood what Tata needed and understood what he was communicating.

We human beings often like to think of ourselves as being the most intelligent, the most capable, the wisest, the smartest, above all other animals. That may be true in some sense. But that may blind us to the profound wisdom and love and compassion that arises spontaneously, naturally from the nonhuman world, from all other creatures, from even a small little cat like Tata. And I can tell you that after that experience, it changed my whole awareness of the nonhuman world. Not just other animals—insects, flowers, trees. The world is filled with great compassion flowing from the source of the heart, the universe itself, the deep flow of the oneness of reality, and the unfolding of great compassion. So I think you can see why I entitled this talk “Does a Cat Have Buddha Nature?” Thank you very much.