

CATS AND DOGS, DOGS AND CATS

Two of the most memorable kung-ans in the Ch'an tradition have to do with dogs and cats. We all remember Case #1 in the *Wu Men Kuan* in which Master Chao-Chou answers "WU!" when asked if a dog has Buddha-Nature. And then there are Cases 63 and 64 in the *Pi Yen Lu* which have to do with a cat. In Case #63 a group of monks are arguing over a cat; the argument revolves around whether or not the cat has Buddha-Nature! Master Nan-Chuan tells the arguing monks to give him a true answer to this question, and when they can't, he cuts the cat in half. In Case #64 Nan-Chuan relates this story to Chao-Chou, who promptly puts his sandals on his head and walks away. Nan-Chuan remarks that if Chao-Chou had been around when the monks were arguing, the cat would have been spared.

An interesting thing to note is that in each instance there was an "either-or" applied to the animal in question. In the case of the dog, the implied question was, "Does a dog have Buddha-Nature or doesn't it?" This led to Chao-Chou's resounding "WU!" which could have been either the Chinese word for "no" or "not" or "not having," or simply the sound of a barking dog. In the case of the cat, the argument was more obvious. A group of monks was debating back and forth over whether a cat had Buddha-Nature, obviously trying to bring things like logic and reason into it.

In the case of the dog, Chao-Chou was being extremely kind. If Chao-Chou had been a 21st century master and someone would have asked him if an SUV has Buddha-Nature, I imagine his response would have been "BEEP-BEEP!" I wonder what our response to that would be? Most people today would probably look at the old man like he had a severe mental disorder, and this is the same way lots of Ch'an and Zen students still look at Chao-Chou's "WU!"

In one loud word Chao-Chou was saying to the questioner, "Forget what this animal 'has' or 'doesn't have' and simply SEE THE DOG!" But if Chao-Chou had used those words, the questioner would have fallen even further into his own fundamental confusion, so Chao-Chou just said "WU," trying to shake the questioner out of his attachment to logic and reason.

Since to our understanding the dog does have Buddha-Nature, how would it express this fact? ARF! ARF! ARF! That's how! Chao-Chou immediately became a spokesperson for the dog, in fact, he became the dog itself! This is a mark of the great masters, the ability to actually become the truth itself without hesitation.

That same “either-or” mentality also applies to the cat, only here this mentality is much more pronounced. You can just hear the monks arguing: “It does have Buddha-Nature because of such-and-such!” “It doesn’t have Buddha-Nature because of such-and-such!” And of course there are reasons and reasons and reasons why the cat does or does not have Buddha-Nature. Seeing that this argument went far beyond a simple inquiry regarding Buddha-Nature, Nan-Chuan’s method was a lot more drastic. As the story goes, he asked the monks for a true answer to the question, not an answer based on their arguing, logic and reason, after which he cut the cat in two.

The bottom line is that Nan-Chuan didn’t even ask, he just cut! I think it was more like, “Argue, argue, argue, argue, WHACK!” Cutting off delusion immediately, no second chances; the monks had already forfeited that option, so Nan-Chuan took decisive action right on the spot. Chao-Chou’s “WHACK!” was “WU!” Nan-Chuan’s “WU!” was “WHACK!” Can you see the understanding that these two shared?

Nan-Chuan may have been Chao-Chou’s teacher, but as far as their understanding was concerned there was no difference between the two. This is why Chao-Chou simply put his sandals on his head and walked away when Nan-Chuan told him the story of the cat. No arguments, not even a “Gee, that’s too bad,” just a monk with sandals on his head walking away. This was the true answer that Nan-Chuan was demanding. I suspect that at least a few of the debating monks were around to see Chao-Chou put his sandals on his head because had no one been present, not a word would have been spoken when Chao-Chou walked away. There wasn’t a need for it, given the depth of understanding between master and student.

I hope these 3 kung-ans help us to reexamine our own way of looking at things. Do we really see how many internal arguments we are having with ourselves every day? This is something we need to look into immediately. Are we seeing things like WU! or WHACK! or BEEP-BEEP! or are we constantly falling into the trap of reason and logic because it’s easier, more comfortable? It’s no wonder our minds are so divided; we spend so much time in “either-or” mind that it has fooled us into thinking that things are either one way or the other. As long as we spend so much time in “either-or” mind we are keeping ourselves anchored to a distorted view based on our egoistic craving.

Whether we are regarding a dog, a cat or an SUV, we must regard them as they are, no questions asked. Then we will know the true answer that Nan-Chuan demanded and that Chao-Chou gave.