

Saving the Cat

Stephen Nachmanovitch

*Already at birth
I was parted,
not just from my mother –
but body from mind,
mind from its source –
that's why I take up
this soft blade
of breath
to cut me back into one.*

– PETER LEVITT'

Shut your mouth, close your lips, and say something.

–PAI-CHANG

Creativity is the soul expressing itself, in speech, gesture, sound, color, movement, building, inventing. Before all else it is simply to be able to say something. That's one of the great mysteries in both art and everyday life: how something appears from nothing. After something is said, all kinds of tricks and techniques can be applied to make our work more artful. We can study Beethoven's crude, splotchy notebooks and see how he tested and turned his phrases, combined and split them apart, played all the combination and permutation games of art to make his statements more refined, eloquent, beautiful, energetic. Often the original ideas from which he developed his masterpieces of spiritual art were, in themselves, almost trivial or ridiculous. The im-

portant thing is to start someplace, anyplace. Then we can play with, refine, elaborate the original statement until it pleases us. Before the dance of inspiration and perspiration can begin, there must be some raw material, some spark of inciting energy.

In daily life, too, having the freedom and impulsiveness to *say something* is of the utmost value. How often has each of us kicked ourselves for not saying something at a certain moment, for being tongue-tied when faced with an unforeseen situation that offered the potential for conflict, love, danger, opportunity – tongue-tied because we could not formulate an appropriate statement, a single good word – only to realize later, too late, that it would have been far better to say anything rather than let the moment pass?

One evening many years ago in Washington, D.C., I was giving a little talk about this aspect of creativity. The conference was on the theme of “inner knowing” – among the participants were professionals in psychology, religion, anthropology, politics and the arts. There were about fifty or sixty of us; we had just cleared away a lovely potluck dinner, and I sat in a chair giving this talk. That evening, and still today, I could think of no better example to stimulate a real encounter with the issue of “saying something” than an old Zen koan. A koan is a “public case,” a story designed to put us in an excruciatingly uncomfortable position from which we may possibly jump to a deeper understanding of what it is to be human than can be expressed in ordinary words or thoughts. This koan concerns the master Nan-chuan (748-834) and his great student, Chao-chou, (778-897).²

Nan-chuan was head of a big monastery. One day, when Chao-chou happened to be gone on an errand, Nan-chuan walked into the main corridor and saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. He seized the cat, suddenly produced a big knife,

which he brandished over the cat, and told his monks, “If you can speak, you can save the cat.”

No one answered. So he cut the cat in two.

That evening Chao-chou returned to the monastery, and Nan-chuan told him about the cat. Chao-chou immediately took off his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked out.

Nan-chuan called after him, “If you had been there, you could have saved the cat.”

This story is perhaps slightly easier to take than Abraham’s being willing to kill Isaac, but it sounds pretty bad nonetheless. Our group became alarmed and agitated, and began trying to find ways of getting past Nan-chuan actually killing the cat – the crudity and cruelty of it. Some vague childish laughter and commotion wafted from the back of the room as we turned our attention to the spectacle of a Buddhist master blithely killing a living creature, and then to the feelings of his slack-jawed, mute spectators. In those monks we can see, as in a mirror, each of us who has had the experience of seeing something we really care about snatched away, wiped out irrevocably because we didn’t speak up in time. The crudity and cruelty are there, all right, right here today, whether a Zen master dedicated to attaining enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings including animals did or did not actually cut a cat in two.

Nan-chuan seized the cat; what he then told the monks comes out differently in different versions of the koan: “If any of you can speak, you can save the cat.” “If any of you can give an answer [question unspecified], you can save the cat.” “If any of you can say a good word, you can save the cat.” In Zen, a “good word,” a “turning word,” is not just any word but one that signals awakened awareness, a symptom of a mind that penetrates through to reality, free and clear. “If any of you

can express *dharma*, I will save the cat.” What kind of answer was he asking for: anything at all, or some creative breakthrough? Either way, there were no words to save the poor cat.

Perhaps the monks were arguing over who owned the cat, or perhaps they were using it as the butt of a philosophical disputation, such as whether or not a cat has the Buddha Nature. Perhaps the cat *is* mind, which Nan-chuan reveals as having been split even before the story began. In any case, the monks’ bickering, their dualistic either-or thinking, were no more useful to them than a dead cat.

Who were these monks, these full-time professionals who could not utter a word in a moment of emergency? It is possible to be smart, holy, virtuous, busy, altruistic, artistic, or however we choose to characterize ourselves, and yet be totally unable to see what is in front of us and act decisively. Then whatever activity we undertake rides us rather than being our vehicle; it is like being worn by our shoes instead of wearing them. Chao-chou’s response – to take that which is low and make it high, that which is beneath us and make it above us – demonstrates the totality of things, shows us that we can’t cut that totality in two.

Chao-chou, the resourceful, the perceptive – why? Chao-chou’s reply is wordless, absurd, but Nan-chuan qualified it as a good word. Perhaps Chao-chou might declare, with Isadora Duncan, “If I could say it I wouldn’t have to dance it.”

Needless to say, if any of us, hearing of Chao-chou, were to imitate his gesture, that would not qualify as a good word at all, it would qualify as a robotic imitation – not, to use today’s word, “creative.”

If we borrow a straw sandal or two from psychoanalysis, we can see how saying something and saying a good word are not all that different from each other. One of Freud’s greatest discoveries was free association, a simple and childish game: not looking for repressed memories,



not looking deliberately for patterns or answers to life's conundrums, but allowing the spontaneous answers to take us someplace meaningful, as they inevitably will. For in the mind, as in the universe, there is nothing random. Free association means free of conscious purpose. No association is free from context and meaning, but it may reveal deep truth if it is free from conscious control. That is exactly what the Zen masters were looking for in a "good word" – not an answer calculated to be right in the listeners' ears or to produce an effect.

Nan-chuan and Chao-chou were masters of the instinctive, unpremeditated response to the situation before their eyes, like the Israelite woman who solved the same koan with such perfect clarity and even more profoundly than our Zen friends. Two women were arguing over possession of a baby, and King Solomon proposed to cut the baby in two. Solomon, like Nan-chuan, was ready to graphically play out the dispute to the point of cruel absurdity. In this case one of the disputants was the real mother, who shrieked that the king should give the baby to the other woman, anything so that it may live.³

The truth does not ride on a clever response, but on something immediate, irrational, torn directly from the soul. That's why the answer to a koan can't be figured out, but must arise from the soul like an instinctual cry of love or rage or whoopee. That answer is the soul of creativity. It arises, like the insights and ideas of small children, from an undivided mind.

Apropos whoopee, I was sitting in a nice green easy chair telling this story when two four year old boys emerged from the dinner debris with a pile of styrofoam cups. They began galumphing into the space between the audience and me, having quickly zeroed in on the fact that this would be the quickest and easiest way to capture everyone's attention. They were having the most marvelous time!

Our group of gentle-spirited grownups, still a bit shocked and dismayed by the cruel image of cutting the cat in two, returned again to deliberating whether Nan-chuan really cut the cat or whether it was a symbolic gesture – a metaphor, a threat, an attention grabber, or just a pretense. Just as the discussion was beginning to take this painful turn, we had a harder and harder time hearing one another over the whooping and yelping of the boys. Do we make allowances for how in ancient and mediaeval times people played fast and loose with life and death in a way that would be very hard for modern people to take? Was the whole thing a fiction devised to teach through the tonic of shock? Someone pointed out that in European history the Thirty Years' War, with all its horrors, was fought over the question of whether, when Christians take Communion, they are actually eating the body and blood of Jesus Christ or whether it is "only" a metaphor. An animal rights activist began fuming and bubbling at the ears. A priest and a psychologist were tossing around ways of comparing the cat to Christ, to the Buddha Mind, to unsullied instinctive consciousness caught in the gins and traps of civilization. Pretty soon our group of sixty souls was spiritedly arguing over the cat with perhaps the same vehemence as the monks of the eastern and western halls in Nan-chuan's monastery. And through it all came cutting, ever more knifelike, the wild whoops and shrieks of the two little boys.

Several people felt angry at Nan-chuan, Chao-chou, and the whole Zen tradition of teaching through these gnomic, absurd tales in which two masters engage in mental duels, called *mondos*, in which they show how clever they are at spitting out poetic images. Many of these koans feature nose pulling, name calling, smacking and slapping, teachers and students whacking one another upside the head, and other totally childish behavior. The whole approach strikes many people as just plain silly. Mind games.

In their *mondos* those old Zen boys were indeed playing mind games, because as soon as mind takes on the form of serious, rigid, adult thought, we are stuck in a place from which creativity is not likely to come. The mind games are a form of volleying – an intensely social form of play in which people quest and probe one other in the hope of bringing out some insight, much as our little group was now doing. This practice relates to the old shamanic poetry/song contests of many tribal cultures and to its origins in child’s play, where mind is kept ever fresh. In the *mondo* the play is not to win or lose, but to keep the ball going. If we could find a companion with whom we could keep the ball going for only three bounces, we would be blessed.

The theme that now had to come up in the discussion was how Chao-chou’s behavior, as well as that of the author of the koan whose shocking story has by now managed to thoroughly wake us up, points us towards the trickster and the childlike elements of creativity. Creativity arises from the taproot of child’s play.⁴ Creative solutions to insoluble problems often arise from spontaneous playfulness, from absurdity – and from conflict.

What we’re aiming at in Zen, as in art, is to freshen the mind. Children have the freshest minds, but of course they also can be irritating, and some koans have the same qualities of being fresh and irritating

and childish. It's almost as though those old Zen masters are little boys who will start wrestling in the mud any second; and perhaps, in the context of little boys, cutting the cat in two takes on a different flavor. I'm reminded of how Picasso's art looks a great deal like children's art, except that it's not children's art. It's the art of someone who's profoundly trained and mature and yet has preserved the childlike part of himself, and was able to reach back into that part from the vantage point of someone who had learned a great deal. Perhaps the Zen koans are childish in the same manner.

So there we were, twelve centuries after the fact, and still Nan-chuan was reciting to Chao-chou what had happened to the cat and Chao-chou put his slippers on top of his head and left. Nan-chuan said, "If you had been there, the cat would have been saved."

We were all sitting together working through the ins and outs of this story, but we couldn't quite hear each other because by now the two little boys were balancing the cups on top of their heads like tottering hats. Each boy was trying to knock the cup off the other's head. They were having an uproarious time! Our minds became divided between tracking the depths of the discussion and trying to shush the kids. My friend Abdul Aziz, with a thousand years of the subtlest Sufi mental training under his belt, was helplessly waving his hands and saying wise, fatherly things to them, like "Boys, you have had your chance to play, now give the grownups a chance to play." But of course the boys didn't give a damn!

What sets Chao-chou and Nan-chuan apart from the rest? What was so creative about their absurd, childish acts that their seeming pranks have kept people meditating on them for centuries? A famous early Buddhist text tells us that a mark of enlightenment is to "attain the intuitive tolerance of the ultimate incomprehensibility of all

things.”⁵ Through such tolerance, we become comfortable with the mysteries of life – mysteries being those truths that are immediately accessible through direct experience, but which cannot be known through hearsay, theory or rules of conduct.⁶ From this comfort one is able, in a flash of intuitive certainty, to take decisive action at any moment.

If we can *see* the cat in every moment, so that we’re always ready to save it, we are free. The story is not about how to free the cat, it is about how to free our minds. We began to recognize in this story the pondering, wondering, indecisive mind, sliced in half by dualism and possessive attachment before the story even began. The two boys were helping us overturn this split mind by demonstrating the directness of life itself, of our immaculate, whole, undivided mind ... the two boys Chao-chou and Nan-chuan, and the two boys in front of our eyes whom we were trying in vain to ignore so we could continue to ponder and wonder some more.

Intent, concentrated, and sincere, we were trying to listen to some funny old Zen story from the ten centuries ago – but smack in the middle of the circle were two 4-year-old boys giggling and trying to knock cups off each other’s heads. Unstoppable by the combined might of Moses, Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad. And the story we couldn’t quite get through to was about Chao-chou putting his shoes on top of his head and heading out of the room.

Childhood’s joy and spontaneity are not the same as enlightenment. What *was* Chao-chou’s answer? Something unforeseeable and spontaneous, from the same evolutionary root as the kids with the cups on their heads, but also far beyond them. A good word is not the same as any word. Chao-chou’s answer was the answer that cuts off the myriad streams of thought, like the Buddha’s silence when asked certain ques-

tions, silence that woke people up. Such silence knows that to give pat answers is to limit mind while inflating the mind into thinking it comprehends something it cannot possibly comprehend. Just as child's play is not the same as enlightenment, entertainment is not the same as art. The soul of creativity raises something from nothing; it comes decisively and clearly from left field and forces us to re-envision the whole mind-field. That, for example, is what the Impressionists did: why did anyone need one more really well-done perspective painting? All of a sudden someone comes along and changes the terms of the discussion. Decisively and clearly, Chao-chou puts those shoes on his head and strides out of the room to bring us closer to that intuitive tolerance of the ultimate incomprehensibility of all things. The soul of creativity.

How can we save that cat right now?



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The illustration is by Sengai (1750-1837), “The Master and the Cat,” ink on paper, 125.6 x 52.5 cm. Sengai’s poem reads:

*Cut one, cut all, the cat is not the only object.
Let them all be included,
The head monks of the two dormitories,
And even Wang [Nan-chuan] the old Master.*

Peter Levitt provides the following variant of the epigram:

*Zen this, Zen that,
Nan-chuan killed the kitty cat.
Chao-chou heard
and said “That’s that!”
Turned his shoe
into a hat.*

Notes:

¹ Peter Levitt, *One Hundred Butterflies*, Seattle: Broken Moon Press, 1992.

² This is one of the most discussed *koans* in the history of Zen, and is retold in varying forms in all three of the most important *koan* collections: #14 in the *The Gateless Gate*, #63 and 64 in the *Blue Cliff Record*, and #9 in the *Book of Serenity*, all assembled in China in the 10th through the 13th Centuries.

³ *Kings* 1, 3:16.

⁴ Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, Tarcher 1990; and Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element In Culture*. 1938. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

⁵ Robert A.F. Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* (1st Century) translated by Penn State, 1976.

⁶ After Bertrand Russell gave the first talk about the Theory of Relativity at Cambridge, Alfred North Whitehead, rose “to thank Professor Russell for leaving the vast darkness of the subject unobscured.”