

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 Levitt¹

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

– PAI-CHANG

Creating is communicating, 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 (what seems to be) 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, joined them and split them apart, playing the combination and permutation games of art to make his statements more eloquent, beautiful, energetic. Often the original ideas from which he developed his masterpieces of spiritual art were, in themselves, almost trivial. The important 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 liveliness.

One evening many years ago in Washington, D.C., about fifty or sixty of us were gathered at a conference on the theme of inner knowing. Among the participants were professionals in psychology, religion, anthropology, politics,

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

and the arts. We were talking about the root of creativity in the split-second when something “comes to” us. We had just cleared away a potluck dinner, and I told 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, in a way that goes beyond ordinary words and thoughts. Most koans were dialogs – bits of improvisational theater – remembered and passed on. This koan concerns the master Nan-chuan (748-834) and his illustrious 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.”

At face value, this story sounds horrible. 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. The thought that it was “just a metaphor” did not help us very much.

Some high-pitched laughter and commotion wafted from the back of the room. *What was it?* I wondered, as the conversation continued.

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 the monastery hallway. In those monks we can see, as in a mirror, each of us who has had the experience of having something we really care about snatched away, wiped out irrevocably because we didn’t speak up in time. The rawness of the moment is vividly present, right here today, regardless of 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

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 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.

the cat.” “If any of you can give an answer, 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 had been arguing over who owned the cat, or perhaps they had been using it as the butt of a philosophical disputation, such as asking whether or not a cat has the Buddha Nature. Perhaps the cat *is* mind itself, 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.

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 romance or conflict, friendship, profit, opportunity or danger – 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?

To improvise is to act in the right-now with some clarity and if possible, with some wisdom. Perfect timing, perfect swing, perfect flow. How wonderful when that happens! But then there are the days when it doesn’t work, and the cat is dead. We don’t act right now, miss the moment, and that too is part of the flow of life. In French they speak of *l’esprit de l’escalier*, or in Yiddish, *Trepverter*, the words that come to us after we have left someone’s apartment or office, after we have hung up the phone. Now, stepping down the stairs, we think of what we could have, would have, should have said. But it is too late.

If only I had ... I could have ...

Again we heard giggling, the sounds of two children playing among the dinner debris. We ignored them and carried on our discussion.

Who were these monks, these full-time professionals in a school of advanced mental training, who could not utter a word in a moment of emergency? It is possible to be smart, holy, virtuous, busy, altruistic, artistic, 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. Perhaps 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. Shoes on the head – is it a gesture of mourning, as it sometimes was in ancient China? Cat already dead, monks already dead, Nan-chuan, you, me, already dead. Too late again! Mourning for the decision not taken fast enough.

The monks – two groups of young men, fighting over a living being who is not theirs to fight over. That is half of human history in a nutshell.

Chao-chou's reply is wordless, absurd, but Nan-chuan qualified it as a good word. Perhaps Chao-chou might declare, as Isadora Duncan did, "If I could say it I wouldn't have to dance it."

If any of us, hearing of Chao-chou, were to copy his action, that would not qualify as a good word at all, it would qualify as a robotic imitation, and a rather stupid one at that – not, to use today's word, "creative."

Saying anything and "saying a good word" are not all that different from each other. We return to the investigative power of 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. 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.

Improvising is mastery of the instinctive, unplanned response to the situation before our 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. That is why the answer to a koan can't be figured out; it must arise naturally. That answer arises, like the insights and ideas of small children, from an undivided mind.

I was sitting in a green easy chair as we continued to discuss the story, when the 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 to deliberating whether Nan-chuan really cut the cat or whether it was a symbolic gesture – a metaphor, a threat, an attention grabber, or a theatrical 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 hard for modern people to take? Was the whole thing a fiction devised to teach through the tonic of shock? What is a myth or metaphor? In European history, a century of war and persecution, 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.

From opposite sides of the room, 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. An animal rights activist began fuming at our insensitivity. Pretty soon our group of sixty was spiritedly arguing over the cat with the same vehemence as the monks 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 koans feature nose pulling, name calling, smacking and slapping, teachers and students whacking one another upside

³ *Kings* 1, 3:16.

the head, and other babyish behavior. The whole approach strikes many people as just plain silly. Mind games.

When mind takes on the constraints 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.

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 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 but irritating. 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’ violent talk (think comic books or Greek myths), 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. This is the state Blake called *reorganized innocence*. Perhaps the Zen koans are childish in the same manner.

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 boys were balancing the cups on top of their heads like tottering hats and laughing their heads off. 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 discussion and trying to shush the kids. My friend Abdul Aziz, with 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!

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

If we can *see* the cat in every moment, so that we're always ready to save it, we are free. The two boys were helping us overturn this split mind by demonstrating the improvisational 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*.

Intent, concentrated, and sincere, we were trying to interpret an old 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. And the story we couldn't quite get through to was about Chao-chou putting his shoes on top of his head and striding out of the room.

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."

Everyone is cut in two. We can philosophize forever about the dualistic splits. Mind-body, inside-outside, nature-culture. Jews-Muslims-Christians-Hindus, natives-foreigners, mine-yours. Prolific-devouring, producer-consumer, winner-loser. The two little boys weren't philosophizing; in their deep play they were not split. But to transpose their serious-playful wholeness to the conflicted world of adult life is not easy, and even those who engage in the practice and discipline needed to do that transposition will leave some dead cats in their wake.

After his apprenticeship with Nan-chuan, Chao-chou went on, during his long life of 120 years, to become one of the most revered Zen masters in history. For a thousand years, Zen commentators on the story of the cat have perhaps been a bit hypnotized by Chao-chou's exalted reputation. They comment on his crazy wisdom or his instinctive spontaneity. The joyful liveliness of being able to speak, act, and answer without inhibition. But actually, he was too late; he did not save the cat. He was out doing errands that day. Nan-chuan said "If you had been here, you could have saved the cat." A subjunctive sentence, not usual in Zen.

If only I had ... I could have ...

Understanding may take time to coalesce, there is often a gap before we realize what we needed to say. Not saving the cat. Forgiveness and self-forgiveness. Perhaps *this* is the knife that cuts us back into one.

Improvising – a blissful state of fluid motion in which we say and play the right thing at the right time, in tune with ourselves and our companions, in tune with our whole environment, a state of complete spontaneity as the old Taoists called it. So beautiful when it happens. And it does happen sometimes.

You have the natural freedom and single-mindedness of small children playing amid the dinner debris. The music flows effortlessly, you meet your true love and speak up and marry. You speak of the dream and the words flow. But like life itself, these moments are impermanent. Yet their impermanence does not diminish their value – these are the moments for which we live.

Chao-chou and Nan-chuan – what was so creative about their absurd, childish acts that their seeming pranks have kept people meditating on them for centuries? After Bertrand Russell gave a talk about the then-new science of quantum mechanics, Alfred North Whitehead, rose “to thank Professor Russell for leaving the vast darkness of the subject unobscured.” 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 Sometimes from this comfort one is able, in a flash of intuitive certainty, to take decisive action and say a good word.

Childhood’s joy and spontaneity are not the same as enlightenment. They are not the same as skilled, sensitive improvisation. A good word is not the same as any word. 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 cuts off the myriad streams of thought, like a buddha’s silence when asked certain questions, silence that wakes 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. Creative action 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 well-done perspective painting? Suddenly someone comes along and changes the terms of the discussion. Decisively, 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.

How can we save that cat right now?



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.”

© 1999, 2021 by Stephen Nachmanovitch, all rights reserved.

This article was first published in *The Soul of Creativity: Insights into the Creative Process*, edited by Tona Pearce Myers, New World Library, 1999.

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 his epigram with which we began:

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