

Be Here...  
*Meow!*

*a cat-lover's guide to meditation*

*E. S. Durkan*

*(intentionally blank)*

# Table of Contents

~

*Foreword: By the Author*

*Introduction: Catching the Cat*

## **PART I: Meow or Never**

### *Preparation*

1. **Impurr-fect Masters**
2. **The Cat's Balancing Act**
3. **Wrong *Purr*-ception**
4. **Cats & Dogmas**
5. **Meow or Never**
6. **"WHO OWNS THIS CAT?!"**

## **PART II: The Practical Cat**

### *Practices*

7. **Relaxed, Upright...Breathing**
8. **Embodied Cat, *Purr*-ceiving Heart**
9. **Cultivating Kittenmind**
10. **The Master's Soft Paws**
11. **The Watchcat**
12. **The CAT Scan**

## **PART III: The Belly of the Beast**

### *Philosophy*

13. Cat Atop a Cart
14. The Noble Eightfold Cats!
15. The Belly of the Beast
16. Sur-*meow*-ning Obstacles (on the Path)
17. Seven Cat-Factors & Nine Kitty Lives
18. Vice and Virtue

## **PART IV: The Kitten's Tale**

### *Stories*

19. Master Empty-Paw
20. The Kitten's Tale
21. Whiskers for the Inner World
22. Claws & Effect
23. The *Purr*-pose of Practice
24. Chiyono's Cat

“  
*Out from the darkness,  
Back into the darkness  
affairs of the cat*  
”

- Kobayashi Issa, 1763-1827<sup>i</sup>

“  
*There's nothing,  
He doesn't know  
the cat on the stove*  
”

- Tomiyasu Fusei, 1885-1979<sup>ii</sup>

# *Introduction*



## *Catching the Cat*

**H**ave you ever heard the expression, “It’s like herding cats!”? If not, you can readily imagine what it would entail, and how well it might work. Meditation is something like that...at the beginning, at least. The trick is to stop trying. Or perhaps more exactly, to stop clinging— to loosen the grip.

Tricky, perhaps, when the cats of the mind are clawing up the upholstery of the sofa arm or doing their business on the coats in the closet. So, the obvious question emerges, “Am I just supposed to sit there?! What am supposed to *do* about it?” This is the tricky part.

Meditation, or rather cultivating the space of awareness in the mind, is less about doing— less about chasing, or even catching the cat— than about

stepping back momentarily, taking a breather (literally) and beginning to sense what is actually occurring. But this is only the starting place, the beginning. If you are to continue, you must then call your mildly irritated felines to you (with your most authentic *meow*) and find a way to soothe them. Eventually, held in this way, their claws retract, *et voilà!* You've done it. The sofa has been saved.

From this kind of space, however fleeting, we may begin to understand, to glean the reason the cats were so riled up in the first place. In Buddhism, this might be called *vipassana*, often translated as *insight*, but more literally can mean *seeing in a special way*.<sup>iii</sup> The Zen masters and Daoist/Chan sages of 4<sup>th</sup> century China might have called it *hsien* (閒) or *idleness*.<sup>iv</sup> And cats— when they're not busy tearing the sofa to shreds— are masters of this.

Think about it. Cats are Zen masters...well, kind of. While they are not perfectly enlightened, as any mouse in the yard or unfortunate songbird could vouch for, they do display some of the

qualities integral to Zen<sup>iv</sup> training. As Zen master Suzuki Roshi put it, “We just do what we should do, like eating supper and going to bed...”<sup>vi</sup> In other words, Zen means just doing what needs to be done. Awareness practice, then (broadly speaking) means just *being*— embodied, kindhearted, and receptive. Or as one of the Buddha’s first enlightened nuns, Sangha, said upon awakening, “Just sitting still...All your old thoughts, like snow falling on warm ground. Just sit back and watch.”<sup>vii</sup> And cats are great at that. Just enough. Not more...and, of course, taking lots of naps.

So, if catching the cat is not the game, what is? Answering this question is what we, rather playfully, pursue in this pithy text. So, come along, and *Be Here...Meow!*

*E.S. Durkan*

*Albion, CA, 2021*

---

<sup>1</sup> DISCLAIMER: It should perhaps be noted here that *Zen*, when used in this text, is meant to be synonymous with *meditation*, as indeed was its original meaning from *Dhyāna* in Sanskrit, to *Ch’an* in early Chinese and finally *Zen*, when it reached Japan.

<sup>2</sup> This is a beautiful poetic interpretation, not a direct translation of the *Theirgatha*, (Verses of the Elder Nuns) which appears in the text *The First Free Women* by the translator Mattie Wiengast.



## 5. *Meow or Never*



Cats are, by nature, aloof. Humans on the other hand (for better or for worse) are innately social creatures. So, we differ from cats at quite a fundamental level...basically, what I mean to say is that cats make better meditators.

Yet, there is still hope for us hominids (after all, if there was no hope, then the Buddha would likely never have taught at all). The Buddha himself was—as far as we know—human, which is to say a member of *Homo Sapiens* and not of *Felis Catus*.

So, take heart!

Even though cats are more innately fitted to the task of meditation, we can still find our way to the light...but we had better start *meow! Meow or never*.

So, let's begin. The so-called *present-moment awareness* that allows meditation (or any awareness

practice) to occur is called *sati*, another word which we'll leave untranslated for the present.

*Sati* holds a special place in the Buddhist world. It appears frequently and is praised highly in most of the early texts (a craze which has lingered, right on through to modern times). *Sati* reminds us, as the Buddha himself reminded us, “Do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future. The past no longer is. The future has not yet come. Looking deeply at life as it is, in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells in stability and freedom.”<sup>viii</sup>

This *present-moment awareness* brings us close up to our felt-experience of the present moment, allowing us to open to what is actually occurring.

But where to start?

As many ancient and modern teachers have noted, the way one approaches awareness practice is of utmost importance.

Consider this. You can conceive of the mind as a stray cat. Say, a raggedy, spotted calico. For one reason or another, you have taken a liking to her, and hope she will warm up to you. Unfortunately, she is

suspicious of you. She is, in fact, fairly certain you are trouble. Still, you have a fistful of kibbles. This is good news for the stray (and certainly for you, as well!). She takes interest. You sit out there with your fistful of kibbles day after day. Indeed, many months may pass before she will come anywhere near you. But you are not disheartened. You have come up with a plan.

At first you leave a little pile of kibble and walk away. Then you leave the kibble but remain nearby. After that, you sit quietly by the kibble. And gradually, gradually, *gradually* the stray warms up to you. Perhaps a whole year has swung by, but (at last!) there she is perched on your lap, purring away contentedly (by this time she has also discovered what it means to be rubbed behind the ears...ah, the bliss).

What is primary here is that we understand the importance of our descent into practice. Awareness practice begins (in our individual sits and on the broader path) with gentleness, with a sense that it is,

as Jon Kabat-Zinn often says, a time “given” to you, so in this sense it is literally a present!

Yet even this may not be *sati*.

“So, what on earth is *sati*, and why is it so special?!” you say, shaking the book like an old Batman villain.

Well, hold on to your horses, here we go!

As the acclaimed Buddhist scholar-monk Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it, “What brings the field of experience into focus...is *sati*, usually translated as mindfulness.”

Well, I didn’t want to do it, but there you have it! He continues, “Mindfulness is presence of mind...but with the practice of mindful awareness, [it] is applied at a special pitch...In the practice of Right Mindfulness, the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet and alert, contemplating the present event.”<sup>ix</sup>

So, as you might guess, this *sati* requires cultivation. If only we were cats...but alas! We must take our lot in life, do our best, and remember it really is *meow or never!*

## 9. *Cultivating Kittenmind*



If you have ever been the glad recipient of a fresh little kitten, still full of sleepiness (which won't last) then you know that unquenchable upwelling, the warmth that kindles in the chest at the mere sight of the little thing. This, truly, is *mettā*: unbounded, unrestrained love or warmheartedness.

It is, above all, natural. So, we're in luck! That's because we all have this innate quality, this capacity for a true human (and indeed feline) warmth.

So, since there's nothing stopping me from doing so, I will call it *kittenmind*. Although it is an inborn quality, it does take some practice and perhaps some getting used to (and is, not surprisingly, easiest to do when the little master is near.) But here again we're in luck, for the practice is by nature unbounded. The Buddha himself

presented us with a way to cultivate this beautiful state...even in the master's absence.

So, let's jump in!

If you love kittens (as I hope to goodness you do), conjure up in your mind's eye one of these dear little felines— and notice, just notice, the feeling that floats in. If it is a memory, all the better!

Now, settle on the mental image. Perhaps there are sounds the kitten makes or specific attributes you love: the little pink nose and paws, the minuscule *meows* she emits, the general fluffiness (if you have a fluffy one in mind). Perhaps now, the feeling grows or even glows.

This kindling of warmth is *mettā*. Bringing up something you care for, especially such an uncomplicated love as this, is one technique to coax the *mind/heart* or *citta* toward the development of this boundless quality of mind. After even a little practice, it comes as little wonder that the Buddha

called it a *heavenly abode*<sup>3</sup> or *brahma vihara* (and indeed is one of four such abodes).<sup>4</sup>

If you're graced to have an adult cat that is dearly-loved, this will certainly suffice as an alternative object for your *mettā* practice.

If you enjoy the feeling, the sense of holding what you love and thereby being held by what you love, then by all means continue! You can imagine a thousand kittens, a whole coliseum stuffed to the rafters with furry friends, if it helps! Half-joking. (Although, if it helps, then why not?) At any rate, once the feeling emerges and is sustained (by whatever means necessary), then it can be directed.

See if this works.

Allow the mind to wander (don't tell anyone I recommended this!<sup>5</sup>) from the feline realm, into the realm of humans. Let the mind conjure up, as it did with the kitty, a dear friend or as Wordsworth said, "a friend then passionately loved."<sup>x</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Heavenly* being the translation of *brahma*, which has no real equivalent, since the god of gods, Brahma, does not exist in Western ideology. Suffice it to say that it is a beautiful dwelling, or heavenly abode.

<sup>4</sup> The other three, which we'll not get into at present, are: *karuna* or *compassion*, *mudita* or *empathetic joy*, and *upekkhā* or *equanimity*.

<sup>5</sup> ...and please don't take this out of context.

See if someone dear to you arises in the currents of thought, ideally someone who has given you that sense of being held or cared for. Someone whom you know, on a core level, cares deeply about your wellbeing. As the image floats up or takes form, let that person come into the room with you, as though this dearly-loved friend, mentor, or teacher was right there with you, right by your side.

Feel that. How is it?

It may be subtle (more subtle at least than the passionate welling of *mettā* for little whiskers). Still, this subtlety signifies a deepening of this warmhearted attention.

Dwell there, letting this friend offer you their sincere presence and care, their unbounded warmth, asking nothing in return...Again, check in, how is it in there? How does it feel in the body? Where does it seem to emanate from?

This warm presence can be gently directed toward yourself, someone neutral, or even someone with whom you have conflict. It, however, need not be sequential or confined to the strictures of a



particular progression. You start where it is easiest. Maybe you spend a whole year just reveling in the upwelling of *mettā* you have for your kitty or dear friend. No problem. *Purr-fect* (you might say).

And here's the good news— that alone is enough! The rest will emerge organically. (And really, how could it not, with such fertile soil in which to take root?)

So that's it! That's *mettā*. That's *kittenmind*. Dip in anytime you like, and for as long as you like, for it is (said to be), “boundless, exalted, immeasurable” and according to the Buddha's own words, “Anyone who practices boundless love will certainly transcend birth and death.”<sup>xi</sup>

Not bad.

And it's all thanks to little whiskers!

## Selected Bibliography

---

- <sup>i</sup> Stephen Addiss, *Haiku: An Anthology of Japanese Poems* P.16
- <sup>ii</sup> Stephen Addiss, *Haiku: An Anthology of Japanese Poems* P. 84
- <sup>iii</sup> Gunaratana, Bhante, and Henepola Gunaratana. *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Simon and
- <sup>iv</sup> Hinton, David. *Classical Chinese Poetry*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014, p. 450.
- <sup>v</sup> Hinton, David. *China Root*. Shambhala Publications, 2020, p. 23.
- <sup>vi</sup> Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind--Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*. 2017, p. 76.
- <sup>vii</sup> Weingast, Matty. *The First Free Women*. 1st ed., Shambhala Publications, 2020, pp. 21–22.
- <sup>viii</sup> (Thích), Nhất Hạnh. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. Harmony, 1999, p. 225.
- <sup>ix</sup> Bodhi, Bhikkhu. *The Noble Eightfold Path*. Buddhist Publication Society, 2010, p. 104.
- <sup>x</sup> Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth: The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, the Two-Part Prelude*. Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 71.
- <sup>xi</sup> (Thích), Nhất Hạnh. *Chanting from the Heart*. Parallax Press, 2002, p. 264.