

Animals and their Spiritual Qualities

Pedro Oliveira

The Internet has made possible for us to have glimpses of the extraordinary intelligence and kindness which are inherent qualities in animals. While neuroscientists are still struggling to understand the nature of consciousness at the human level, considered by them as ‘the hard problem’, in relation to animals a commonly held view among them speaks about the ‘probability that many animals experience at least simple levels of consciousness.’ Not surprisingly, the prevailing scientific view about animal consciousness is a mechanistic one.

However, increasing evidence now available on the Internet shows that animals from different species and locations are not only interacting with other animals in a gentle and compassionate way, but also expressing a profound understanding of the different situations they are in. Let us see some examples.

Reuters reported that a giant tortoise and an orphaned baby hippo forged an unusual friendship after the 2004 tsunami in southeast Asia. Mzee, a 130-year-old Aldabran tortoise, became a surrogate parent and inseparable friend to hippo Owen who was washed out to sea off the coast of Kenya, rescued by villagers and taken to a wildlife park where the tortoise lived. They used to sleep and play together, but also created a language of their own, in the form sounds unique to hippo or to tortoise and used gentle nods and pushes to communicate with one another.

Hawkeye, a faithful Labrador retriever, was photographed lying down next to the casket of Navy SEAL Jon Tumilson, killed in Afghanistan, throughout his memorial service in Rockford, Iowa, on 19 August 2011. Is it possible to measure the depth of the link between a human being and his or her dog? What made that particular dog lie down next to his best mate during the whole duration of the memorial service?

Tom Satre told the Sitka Gazette in Alaska, that he was out with a charter group on his 62-foot fishing vessel when four juvenile black-tailed deer swam directly toward his boat. "Once the deer reached the boat, the four began to circle the boat, looking directly at us. We could tell right away that the young bucks were distressed. I opened up my back gate and we helped the typically skittish and absolutely wild animals onto the boat. In all my years fishing, I've never seen anything quite like it! Once onboard, they collapsed with exhaustion, shivering. Once we reached the dock, the first buck that we had been pulled from the water hopped onto the dock, looked back as if to say, 'thank you' and disappeared into the forest." How did the distressed deers know where to find help?

And the examples continue: a dog and an orangutan became very good friends in a zoo in California. A dolphin rescued beached whales in New Zealand by being next to them for some minutes, as a result of which they initiated movements to swim back into the open sea. A hippopotamus rescued an impala from been killed by leopards in Africa by allowing the impala to climb onto his back and swimming to the centre of the river. A dog refused to walk away from his mate who was run over and killed in a busy motorway. And so on, and so forth.

Let us consider some thoughts from well-known writers about what makes animals the special creatures they are.

Martin Buber, the celebrated author of *I and Thou*, said that ‘an animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language.’ Perhaps because they are free from the constant cerebration and fretting that characterizes us as humans, their eyes can express more poignantly states of attention, curiosity, fear and profound observation, as well as affection.

Albert Einstein wrote that ‘our task must be to free ourselves... by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.’ Untold cruelty and suffering have been perpetrated by humanity on countless species, quite a number of which have been made extinct by our callous action. Every creature, the tiniest as well as the largest, deserves our care, attention and kindness for in them the ineffable glory of the Uncreated Spirit is also being progressively manifest.

‘Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened’, wrote Anatole France. Millions of human lives are better and different by the love of their pet or pets. The trust displayed by pets to humans is almost beyond explanation. It is a relationship that heals, inspires and, sometimes, saves. Dedicated love and care for an animal can indeed awaken a deeper dimension of our souls for it initiates us, so to speak, into the mysteries of giving.

‘The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated’, declared Mohandas Gandhi. How many people would maintain their lifestyle if they were given a chance to visit a battery farm or an abattoir? Yet, the packaged ‘product’ in supermarkets seems more palatable to some. Stray dogs and cats in countries of the developing world face a dire existence. A recent denunciation in Brazil revealed that many stray animals were being rounded up in a truck and sold to a Korean vessel where they would become meals! By Gandhi's benchmark, our moral progress in such areas is indeed quite slow and, for the animals, terrifying.

Benjamin Hoff, author of *The Tao of Pooh*, once remarked that ‘lots of people talk to animals. Not very many listens, though. That's the problem.’ Animals have an extraordinary capacity for listening. When one really observes them, one can see that they listen with their whole body, not just with a part of themselves. One of the possible reasons for this is that for animals listening is an integral part of the process of survival. They have been trained by evolution to pay close attention to their environment. It was reported that minutes before the 2004 tsunami hit the beaches in Thailand some elephants, which were carrying tourists, stopped, became temporarily agitated and then ran for the nearby hills, thereby saving a number of lives. They were clearly aware that something of great proportion was about to happen and displayed extraordinary sensitivity.

Abraham Lincoln once stated: 'I am in favor of animal rights as well as human rights. That is the way of a whole human being.' His statement was not only prescient; it anticipated a debate that is here to stay: do animals have rights? Is it ethically sustainable to use animals, like rabbits and others, for testing cosmetic products in laboratories? Is the meat industry a real necessity or the byproduct of age-old callous and entrenched habits? Are battery farm chickens supposed to live in very small boxes and be treated as eggs-dispensing machines?

The European Union, in a bold and welcoming initiative, has recently banned animal testing for the production of cosmetics. But much, much more needs to be done in order to profoundly change the plight of animals in the world. In this connection, it is a very encouraging sign to see organized campaigns led by PETA – People for Ethical Treatment of Animals and other groups which have captured the imagination of thousands of people around the world. We have a solemn duty to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. As Ashley Montagu wrote, 'The indifference, callousness and contempt that so many people exhibit toward animals is evil first because it results in great suffering in animals, and second because it results in an incalculably great impoverishment of the human spirit.'

Below are a few animal-inspired statements by some well-known people. They are worthy of pondering on. Let us learn to see in every animal we meet a gift which comes from the heart of life and let us help each and every animal in their journey through life. In doing so we may discover that we have been the recipient of a great blessing.

Animal-inspired 'sutras' for meditation

Animals are reliable, many full of love, true in their affections, predictable in their actions, grateful and loyal. Difficult standards for people to live up to. (Alfred A. Montapert)

Any glimpse into the life of an animal quickens our own and makes it so much the larger and better in every way. (John Muir)

The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them. That's the essence of inhumanity. (George Bernard Shaw)

If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men. (St. Francis of Assisi)

The Animals of the planet are in desperate peril. Without free animal life I believe we will lose the spiritual equivalent of oxygen. (Alice Walker)

Each species is a masterpiece, a creation assembled with extreme care and genius. (Edward O. Wilson)

I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals.

(Winston Churchill)

There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats.
(Albert Schweitzer)

Horse sense is the thing a horse has which keeps it from betting on people.
(W. C. Fields)

Animals are my friends, and I don't eat my friends.
(George Bernard Shaw)

Time spent with cats is never wasted. (Sigmund Freud)

Life is as dear to a mute creature as it is to man. Just as one wants happiness and fears pain,
just as one wants to live and not die, so do other creatures.
(His Holiness The Dalai Lama)