

Religion Experts Column

This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the *Sunday Ottawa Citizen*. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.

Sunday, May 22, 2011

Q : Are our family pets "spiritual beings?"

A : There are countless references in Buddhism to human insight gained from the wisdom of animals. There is a whole book which recounts the prior animal lives of the Buddha. Our and other faiths frequently hold "blessing of the animals" services. I, for one, can affirm that my own pet has inspired my spirituality with his own on many occasions. In *The Spirituality of Pets*, James Taylor offers: "I have learned a lot about (my tradition's scripture) from my pets...the same would be true of any other religion's scriptures, if people could break free from the mindset that they can only learn from texts and teachers. "

Buddhist wisdom has concluded there is no permanent self in any being, or in Western terms, no soul. From the beginning, however, all beings, from the top to the bottom of the chain of Life, are expressions of the Way. Therefore, those two scruffy rag-bags who chastise me for an empty food-bowl each morning are no less "spiritual" than the squawking jays at the feeder or the hyperactive squirrels running along our stone fence or the person at this keyboard.

The great Zen teacher, Joshu (also the name of one scruffy rag-bag), was once

approached by a student hoping to pin the master down to some black/white answer. He asked, "Does a dog have a Buddha-nature?", a question similar to ours here. Not to be caught in some doctrinal trap, for Buddhism eschews ideology, Joshu is said to have barked back - "mu!". In Japanese Buddhism, "Mu" means many things. On the one hand, it is a negative prefix, so he may have meant dogs are not spiritual. "Mu" can also mean "without permanence", so he may have been affirming that dogs have no more permanent spiritual essence than any creature. The fact that he expressed it in a barking voice might be affirming that dog-ness is as spiritual as human-ness or tree-ness or cloud-ness. Those darn Zen masters, can't give anyone a straight answer! Perhaps poet, Judith Wright, puts it best - "For each is born with such a throat as thanks his God with every note".

*Rev. Innen Parchelo, doshu,
Red Maple Sangha*