

HOW PETS IMPROVE OUR QUALITY OF LIFE

Dr. Lee Zasloff received her Ph.D. from Temple University in Psychological Studies in Education in January, 1992. From 1979 to 1991, she worked as a psychologist in the Philadelphia community mental health system. From 1988 to 1991, she was a lecturer while attending graduate school at Temple University. Since January, 1992, she has served as associate director for the Center for Animals in Society located in the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis. The mission of the Center is to study the contribution of companion animals to human health and well-being.

Our Conversation with Dr. Zasloff

Living Buddhism: Let's start with the really important issues: Are you a cat person or dog person?

Zasloff: I'm definitely a cat person right now because I have cats, but I love dogs too. I like all animals. Ollie is my older cat; he's 18. The younger one is Muffie—she's about 8.

LB: How many people keep pets in the United States?

Zasloff: In 1995, one study estimated that Americans had about 53 million dogs and about 60 million cats. About half of all households in this country have some kind of pet. But, of course, pets aren't limited to cats and dogs. People keep birds, hamsters, rabbits, horses and even snakes as their companions.

LB: Why are more Americans choosing to live with pets?

Zasloff: I think there are several reasons for this. Meaningful human relationships are hard to find these days. More people feel socially isolated and suffer from loneliness and depression, and at the same time they are becoming busier and experience more stress. There is more stress-related illness. People also have less and less contact with nature. Under these circumstances, pets give us comfort and peace of mind. Dogs and cats are not affected by your mood swings. They don't quarrel with you. They don't say, "I want to live with someone else, so I'm leaving." Pets are always there for us and love us unconditionally. They respond to our affection.

We anthropomorphize our pets—that is, we attribute to them feelings we experience as human beings. We feel as if they respond to our moods, we interact with them in much the same way that we interact with people.

Benefits we are discovering from having a pet include improved health and decreased feelings of loneliness and depression, so a certain amount of anthropomorphism is important for promoting this relationship. It's when we go overboard in ascribing human characteristics to their actions that there can be problems. When a pet exhibits some behavior problem—for example, a cat stops using the litter box or a dog becomes aggressive—from the animal's point of view, their behavior is perfectly logical. We just don't understand it. If we take it personally by thinking that the animal is spiting us, we will probably deal with

the situation in a completely inappropriate way and fail to solve the problem. When these things happen and we're not able to solve the problem ourselves, it's important to consult someone with specialized training such as an animal behaviorist or a veterinarian who can help us solve the problem.

LB: We hear all these amazing stories of animals saving their owners' lives. Is that really possible?

Zasloff: From a scientific point view, there's a lot of speculation about how valid those stories are. Certainly when a dog wakes a person up because the house is on fire, that's a lot clearer kind of situation than someone waking up from a coma because of a pet. We just don't know. It's not outside the realm of possibility but it's very difficult to do scientific studies on these things.

LB: What have you learned about the advantages for children who are raised with or without pets?

Zasloff: One of the pioneers in the field of human-animal interactions was a child psychologist named Boris Levinson. He discovered the importance of this relationship by accident. He had a dog, Jingles, whom he kept in another room when patients were there. One day a patient, a little boy, came early with his mother. Because he wasn't expecting them yet, the dog was still loose and ran to the door. The little boy spoke to the dog, which was quite remarkable since it was the first time in a year of therapy that the boy had spoken. After that, Levinson started using the dog in therapy situations. In fact, he wrote a book about pets and human development. He believed that children who grow up with pets develop differently from children who don't.

More and more studies are coming out now about the effect of human-animal relationships in child development. And we are seeing a positive response in everything from grades to attitudes when kids are taught to care for animals, whether they are house pets or in school zoos. A very hot topic right now is the link between animal abuse and child abuse, as well as between childhood animal abuse and future criminal behavior.

Pets have positive effects physiologically as well. In 1980, the University of Pennsylvania did a research project on people who had suffered heart attacks. The focus was not on pets, but one of the key results was that those with pets lived much longer than those without. In 1992, more specific research was conducted in Australia on some 6,000 people at high risk for heart attacks. The researchers reported that pet owners had lower blood pressure and a lower risk of heart disease. Put simply, pets are good for our mental and physical health. And it doesn't matter what kind of pet you have. What is most important is that we have a positive relationship with it. We like to say that a pet is not a pill—just because you have an animal living in your house doesn't mean you will automatically feel better or be happier. You have to develop a relationship with that pet. But having a positive relationship with animals makes you feel more relaxed and experience the benefits of interacting with nature.

LB: In one of the oldest Buddhist scriptures, there is a story about Shakyamuni. One day he saw a group of kids tormenting a fish. He said to them: "Are you afraid of pain? Do you dislike pain?" The kids replied, "Yes sir, we are afraid of pain, we dislike pain." Then

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Shakyamuni recited this bit of verse: “If [you] are afraid of pain, if pain is hateful to you, Do not an evil deed openly or in secret. If [you] shall do an evil deed or do one now, There’s no escape from pain, [though you] spring up and flee”.¹ From the very beginnings of Buddhism, Shakyamuni used our relationship with all living beings to teach us. Can you elaborate on the importance of creating this relationship with pets?

Zasloff: I think there are a lot of positive values that can be learned from caring for animals, and pets in particular, especially for children. We did a study in Los Angeles with inner-city kids, at-risk kids living in neighborhoods full of gangs and violence. The Los Angeles SPCA teaches them to train dogs as a violence prevention tool. After the kids go through this program, they talk about learning patience from learning to train the dog; they learned to change their attitude; they learned that dogs have feelings similar to people and so to be kind. From caring for and having a relationship with an animal, they learn to treat people with the same kindness, patience and consideration.

Another experiment was done at a school for severely disturbed children in Pennsylvania. One group of students in each of several grades was put in charge of the small animals at the school zoo, while another group did rock climbing and other activities that had nothing to do with animals. The group that cared for the animals displayed less aggression toward others and improved their grades more than the other group. Again, if children are raised this way, learning the importance of caring for living things, then they’ll carry these values with them throughout their lifetime.

Other studies have been done with adults in special circumstances. In one particular study, small pets like guinea pigs and birds were brought into a men’s prison for the inmates to care for. The prisoners were videotaped interacting with the animals. It was discovered that they smiled more, their speech was slower and they were calmer. Animals can have this effect, instilling care and respect for life.

LB: Can you tell us a little about your Buddhist practice?

Zasloff: I have been chanting since December 1971. I joined the SGI in Philadelphia. I was 22 at the time, just out of college, and in a masters program in psychology at Temple University. I was a correspondent for the World Tribune [SGI-USA’s newspaper] for many years.

LB: Did you always have pets during that time?

Zasloff: I didn’t. In fact, although I had pets growing up, I never had cats and I didn’t especially like them. Then, in 1981, I had a friend from Germany who visited me for a year. While she was here she wanted to adopt a kitten. It was the first time in my life I had a cat, and I fell in love with it. A year later, when she went back to Germany, I got my own cats.

LB: Did your Buddhist practice influence your career choices over the years?

Zasloff: That’s an interesting question, and not an easy one, because I was so unconscious for such a long time. I had a lot of personal problems, and my practice really held me together. Of course, over time, as I practiced, that began to change. Step by step, things really started to move in a direction that I could never, ever have imagined. I had worked in

mental health for about 14 years, and then in 1987 went back to school for a Ph.D. program in psychological studies in education. It was during this time that I became interested in two things: the field of human-animal interactions and research in general. At that time, a friend, also a member and a veterinary surgical resident at the University of Pennsylvania, told me about some people at Penn—two of the founding pioneers in this field who were doing these studies. I met with them and started pursuing my interest in this area.

In 1990, I went to a conference in Houston on human-animal interactions and met Lynette Hart, the Director of the Center for Animals in Society here at the vet school. At the time she had no jobs to offer and was working out of a tiny little office with very little money for the center. I spent a lot of time talking with her about my dissertation on people's relationships with pets. It was published under the title "Loneliness and Pet Ownership Among Single Women." In this study, I found that having pets had a similar psychological effect on single women to living with other people. I was finishing my dissertation in August 1991, sitting at home typing. I took a break for lunch and my phone rang. It was Lynette Hart, calling me out of the blue two years after I had met her, asking me if I wanted to work for her at the Center for Animals in Society. I finished everything, sold my stuff, packed my cats, and in January 1992 moved from Philadelphia to Davis, California. I absolutely feel that my practice was definitely helping me move in the right direction for my life.

LB: What is your practice doing for you today?

Zasloff: I've had so many big breakthroughs recently. I feel like after 27 years I'm finally getting it! It's very exciting. I think the most important benefit is caring more about other people.

LB: You sound as excited as a brand-new member seeing her first benefit from her Buddhist practice.

Zasloff: It kind of feels that way, and it really speaks to how great the Gohonzon is and how great the practice is. No matter how long we practice, the benefits we get and the depths of understanding deepen and expand and grow. My two most recent benefits have to do with FNCC [SGI-USA's Florida Nature and Culture Center]. I participated in the Study of the Lotus Sutra conference in April, and then, although I hadn't planned on it, I ended up going to the Culture Department meeting in July. I feel like I've finally established a foundation of self-identity, which I never had.

LB: That's surprising for someone who has a doctorate. Most people would be impressed with your credentials alone.

Zasloff: It's been very hard, because people see me as having a lot of confidence and capability, but I've always struggled with a basic lack of confidence and self-identity. In my work I've always suffered from impostor's syndrome. One day my boss said to me, "You know, the only one who doesn't think you have anything to say is you." Over time, I've learned that I don't have to be good at everything. I don't have to be the ultimate scientist. I don't have to know it all. I've discovered what I'm really good at, I've carved out a niche for

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myself, and people know and respect what I've done. It never fails to amaze me that I've had the opportunity to do this.

LB: Back to our topic, how do pets influence human society as a whole?

Zasloff: Animals have always been part of human society for utilitarian purposes such as food, fiber and labor. The thing that distinguishes pets from other animals is that pets are kept solely for the relationship we have with them. So why have pets become so popular in our society? For one thing, as I mentioned earlier, we have less contact with nature. Most of us live in cities surrounded by concrete. Our environment is polluted by smoke, chemicals and noise. Pets give us a connection with the natural world.

Also, connections with people aren't as strong as they used to be. We no longer live in extended families. Many people marry later or remain single, so more people are living alone. Social contacts diminish as we age, but we are living longer. Pets provide many of the psychological and emotional needs that we usually seek from other people but that may not be available. They give us comfort, companionship, a feeling of being needed, they make us laugh and play and give us something to care for.

Pets are also good social facilitators, especially for older or more solitary people. Let's say you take a walk by yourself through the park. Probably nobody's going to stop and talk to you. But with a dog, it's very likely that someone will talk to you, or at the very least smile. Animals are good ice-breakers. This is an important aspect of animal-assisted therapy. Animals are a good focus of conversation; they help people interact. An older person, especially in a nursing home or hospital, may not have a lot of social contacts, but with a pet other people will talk to them. This is also true for the disabled. We did a study a number of years ago with people in wheelchairs; if that person has a dog, people will interact with them more—they'll talk with them, look at them, smile at them. And this is true for disabled children, too. They will have more social interactions if they have a service dog.

LB: So what does it take to be a good, responsible pet owner? Spay and neuter?

Zasloff: It begins before that. When people are first thinking about getting a pet, they need to research what kind of animal would best fit their lifestyle. We have a tendency to select animals by their appearance. For example, puppies are cute and cuddly, but not for long. Puppies can be a lot of trouble if we don't have the time required to care for and train them properly. And we need to know the characteristics of a particular breed. Or say a person has always had a dog but suddenly is living in an apartment and can't have one, so they get a cat. Well, cats aren't dogs. Cats don't behave like dogs.

In the same vein, we have a double-edged view of cats. We want them sitting in our laps or sleeping in our beds, responding to us and interacting with us, but we also view them as little wild animals and open the door to let them roam outside. Most of them don't have collars, and if they get lost and end up in a shelter there's no way to return them to their owners. Nationwide, only two percent of lost cats that end up in shelters are returned to their owners. Two percent! Pets have become so popular, and yet, as much as we love our pets, the animal shelters are filled to capacity with unwanted animals. As a society we have this mentality that pets are expendable.

It's extremely important to take getting a pet seriously, to find out what we might be in for. This is a lifetime responsibility. Pets are part of the family. We should care for them the

way we care for other members of our family. A lot of people in animal protection prefer to call themselves guardian or caretaker or steward, terms other than owner. We're dealing with a life that can suffer and experience pain, that depends on humans for its well-being. I think we need to appreciate the many contributions animals make to the quality of our lives. Those of us who have pets are especially aware of this because of the many ways that they contribute to our physical and emotional health and well-being. But we also need to be aware of, and appreciate, the less obvious contributions, such as providing us with food, clothing, and the many life-saving and life-sustaining advances in medical science.

LB: In Nichiren Daishonin's writing, "Repaying Debts of Gratitude," he states: "The old fox never forgets the hillock where he was born, the white turtle repaid the kindness he had received from Mao Pao. If even the lowly creatures know enough to do this, then how much more should human beings!" (MW-4, 171). The story of Mao Pao is that one day he was walking along the Yangtze River and saw a fisherman catch a turtle and prepare to kill it. Moved to pity, he gave the fisherman his clothes in exchange for the turtle and thus saved its life. Mao Pao raised this turtle, and when it became big he released it back into the Yangtze River. Years later, as a general of the Chin Dynasty, he was retreating across the river. Many soldiers were drowning because of their heavy armor, but the white turtle he had saved appeared and carried Mao Pao on his back to safety on the opposite shore. The Daishonin is teaching respect for all life by citing the relationship between a person and an animal. What can we gain from creating relationships with pets?

Zasloff: I think one of the problems in our society today is that we lack empathy for others. In fact, research has shown that one of the important factors in aggressive behavior among both children and adults is a lack of empathy—the ability to sense another's feelings. One of the basic objectives of humane educational programs for children is to help them develop empathy so they learn to care for living things. Many adults who have engaged in violent crimes abused animals as children. I think that learning to care for and appreciate animals is important for gaining appreciation and respect for all living things.

As far as what we can learn from our pets, one of the reasons they are so important to us is that they give us unconditional love. Pets are always there, they always love us and we depend on this constancy of their affection. We might get some aspect of this from the few people closest to us, but not all the time. That's one of the things we can learn, the importance of unconditional love especially for children and attributes like loyalty, things that never change in our animals. I think this is something we can learn from animals and to appreciate about them. As human beings it's really hard to have that kind of unwavering love and loyalty for other people. It's something we need to develop.

LB: Why does it seem that many animals gather near the altar when their owners are chanting to the Gohonzon?

Zasloff: I think it's because of the sound. That would be an interesting study, to survey members to find out what their animals do when they're chanting. It seems that it may have a soothing effect.

LB: Is there a danger of becoming overly attached to pets to the exclusion of human contact?

Zasloff: This was a question that came up when I was in Japan this past February. I think that there are some human mental health problems that may appear with regard to animals. Many of us have seen stories or heard about people called “animal collectors” or “animal hoarders.” These are typically older females who keep large numbers of animals in their homes. In extreme cases, they are living in filthy conditions, and the animals are not well cared for. But this problem isn’t caused by the animals. Unfortunately, while it usually gets dealt with in the legal system, it’s really a human problem that requires professional intervention. Of course, there are also people who live with just one pet and don’t interact with anyone else. I don’t think that people decide not to have contact with other people. Rather, I think that these may be people who are isolated anyway, or who have lost contact for any number of reasons.

LB: How can we translate what we learn from our interaction with pets into our relationships with humans?

Zasloff: I think that living with animals can help us learn to have a bigger, more compassionate heart by taking care of another living creature who depends completely on us and brings so much joy and pleasure to our life. But people who don’t have pets can also learn to appreciate animals, through such activities as observing wildlife, going to the zoo, or even watching special programs about animals on television.

There’s a great quote from Albert Schweitzer that says, “Until he extends his circle of compassion to include all living things, man will not himself find peace.” Schweitzer believed that we should never thoughtlessly harm another living being, whether human or animal. Recently, *Living Buddhism* published what Yoichi Kawada wrote about the Earth Charter from the perspective of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Essentially, he said that to protect the ecosystem, we have to act with mercy and non-violence in relation to all living beings in our environment and that, even though it might be necessary to kill animals at times, we shouldn’t do so without good reason. In a recent issue of *Living Buddhism* there was a wonderful article by David Chappell about the importance of the Lotus Sutra in the 21st century and what it teaches about our relationship to nature. He mentioned that when a group of American Indians visited the U.N. to see how different countries were represented, they wanted to know who would represent the animals and the birds. I was so moved by this. If we can learn to have that kind of spirit to care for all life, I think that we will be really living the Buddhist ideal of compassion for all life. □

1. *Udana: Verses of Uplift and Itiviltaka: As It Was Said*. Translated by F.L. Woodward. London: Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 61.