

PERSPECTIVE: ASHBY, THE WONDER DOG
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I will never disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood (The Lotus Sutra, p. 267).

For the last several years, if you came to an SGI-USA discussion meeting at our house, you would park in a cul de sac surrounded by numerous tall leafy trees in suburban Virginia, outside of Washington, D.C. Trudging up our driveway in the humidity or the snow, you would approach a two-story colonial home. A note on the front door would tell you to enter, saying something like: “The most happy people in the world meet here. Come on in.” You would immediately be greeted by a very small tri-color sheltie. No ordinary animal, this would be Ashby Never Disparaging, the District Wonder Dog! Like Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, she treated everyone with the utmost respect.

We had Ashby for almost 10 years. Early in the evening last week, I guess her little body just got too tired and she passed away like we all will someday. We’re still feeling waves of sadness, wonder and appreciation for her presence in our lives.

In our busy society, it’s easy to take important things for granted until we need them or, like Ashby, they are no longer physically with us. This reminds me of how interconnected my life is to my surroundings and to the lives of others—even animals. While scooting around on four stubby legs, Ashby taught me some extremely valuable lessons about how to cherish each and every moment.

Next year I’ll turn 50. My wonderful wife, Trude, and I will also soon be celebrating 30 years of chanting and marriage. Losing Ashby reminded me not only how much she meant to me, but of the tremendous fortune I have gained in every area of my life by continuing this practice.

An act of kindness, no matter how small, is never wasted (Aesop).

Ashby was an equal opportunity pooch. She had a way of opening up her life to every single person she came in contact with. At our World Peace Prayer Meeting, several members reminisced how she would go from person to person during our meetings pushing up against them until they scratched her. I can’t count the times she caused us all to laugh as she rolled over onto her back during a particularly intense discussion.

Ashby had one lifetime enemy—the evil vacuum cleaner. Her weekly mission was to defeat this device by barking non-stop for two hours and spinning in circles until the cleaning was done. I think she actually believed her vigorous behavior caused that particular instrument to be exiled to the hall closet. The writer Goethe wrote, “It is better to do the smallest thing in the world than to hold half an hour to be too small a thing.” Ashby really put her whole life into whatever she was doing.

Life is filled with potholes. That’s just the way it is. I think we humans, having more complex minds than canines, are compelled to create more obstacles for ourselves. Earlier this year, Trude and I were trying to decide whether to move back to the milder California climate for her health or stay in Virginia. A very challenging and emotional change to consider—something we both would have to be happy with for it to work. A friend from Los Angeles pointed out that any decision we made would present us with continued challenges to overcome. And, that it wasn’t so much what we decided to do that mattered, as how we went about doing it.

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Then, an unexpected thing happened. While we prayed to be able to move at the right time and in the right way, and while we talked and changed our mind every five minutes, we began to realize how connected we were to our many friends in Virginia. We also took an objective look at the many stresses involved in re-establishing ourselves somewhere new and the negative effect that might have on Trude's health.

It's hard to describe the deep appreciation we felt when we decided to remain in Virginia. As a result of staying here, I left an executive marketing position that I no longer had any passion for and was able to successfully start my own consulting company. I've now replaced the perception of security at my old job with a deeper security—a confidence in my Buddhist practice and in my own capabilities. Dogs don't seem to worry about this stuff. They pretty much take each day as it comes. I suspect they have an easier mind to master.

“Unless we live fully right now, not sometime in the future, true fulfillment in life will forever elude us. Rather than putting things off till the future, we should find meaning in life, thinking and doing what is most important right now, right where we are—setting our hearts aflame and igniting our lives. Otherwise, we cannot lead an inspired existence” (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 42).

I don't think Ashby would mind me revealing that she wasn't the smartest creature in the animal kingdom. Even after 10 years, she still wasn't quite sure the dog door in our family room would let her outside. And when we called her name, she would often run in the wrong direction. But, I once read about two of Shakyamuni Buddha's disciples, Suri and Hendoku, who gained their enlightenment although (or maybe because) they were not very bright. However, they had incredibly sincere seeking minds. I think they had to remember a one-sentence phrase. It took them many years. So, maybe that explains why Ashby had such an enlightened effect on everyone.

I've learned through my Buddhist practice that I've been a Buddha all along and so I can choose my own reality. It is this realization that is enabling me more than ever to experience joy no matter what is happening around me. Even now when I'm experiencing a profound loss.

SGI President Ikeda once said, “To lead a life in which we are inspired and can inspire others, our hearts have to be alive; they have to be filled with passion and enthusiasm” (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 397). Ashby stopped breathing at exactly the same moment I sat down to chant for her suffering to end. When the doctor took X-rays, he called to say he had never seen such a large heart in an animal her size. I could have told him that.

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