

Why dogs chase cats

I was at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, standing in what served as the 'artifact laboratory' of a friend of mine. Since its founding in 1887, the museum has collected more than a million objects, many of which have come from field excavations and expeditions, while others have been obtained by collectors who scour the world for interesting historical and culturally significant items. My friend is an archaeologist, and he and his students have unearthed and collected many of the objects now stored in the museum. Once these ancient items are gathered, they're brought back to Philadelphia, where the hard work of analyzing and reconstructing what has been collected on the expeditions begins. This phase of the work often involves collaboration with paleontologists, historians, biologists, and other specialists.

Although the analysis of archaeological artifacts can often require some very complex scientific equipment, much of the important work involves just the use of the researcher's trained eyes and some fairly simple measuring devices, which means that an artifact lab might not always look

very laboratory-like. This particular room looked more like a warehouse than a laboratory, with rows of metal shelving containing white cardboard boxes. Most of the boxes were the size in which manila file folders and bank documents are commonly stored in, although other shelves contained brown cardboard boxes that looked like oversized versions of the boxes that pizzas are delivered in. All were neatly labelled with white, orange or pink tags.

In the middle of the room stood a long table, on which were magnifying glasses, rulers, calipers and measuring tapes, as well as an array of photographic equipment. Next to it was another long table, and it was the one that I was leaning against while my friend took one of those 'pizza boxes' from a shelf, checked its label, and then placed it down in front of me. Opening the box he extracted a large clay brick which he carefully placed on the table, and began explaining its significance to me.

"I thought that as a psychologist who studies dogs, this artifact would make you smile. It really is a record of behaviour, and it shows how constant and predictable certain behaviours can be."



Dogs, rice and sex

It was around two o'clock in the afternoon, and I was sitting in a modest, family-run Thai restaurant with a friend. Because it was a small operation with few employees other than the family, the restaurant opened for lunch between the hours of 11am and 1:30pm, and then closed for the afternoon; reopening at 5:30pm for dinner service. I had been coming to this restaurant for a number of years, and particularly liked to use it when I wanted a relaxed lunch and quiet place to talk to someone. The family knew me, and liked me because I had helped solve a house soiling problem they had with their dog. They never rushed me out in the afternoon if I stayed beyond the usual lunch hours, and also made sure that I had hot tea, and otherwise treated me as if I was visiting family.

Lawan, the restaurant owner's wife, came by and deposited a new pot of tea on the table, returning a few moments later carrying a bowl that contained mostly rice with a few vegetables. Sitting down at the table next to ours, she was followed by a small, white-and-black fluffy dog, which I guessed was most probably a Shih Tzu, although quite a bit larger

than the average size for that breed. I knew, from my previous experiences with the dog, that his name was Phueng, which was the Thai word for 'bee.' This label suited the dog well since Phueng tended to buzz around much like his namesake. I bent over to give him a pat, and he happily licked my fingers.

Lawan scooped a little rice from the bowl in front of her with a flat spoon, and offered it to Phueng. Looking up, she smiled, saying, "It is a tribute that one should offer to a dog if one is around when we eat rice."

Sensing that there was a story behind this, I tried to encourage her a little, asking, "So tell me the story behind this tribute."

Lawan hesitated for a moment, waving her hand in front of her, "Oh, it is just a kind of tradition that comes from a sort of folk tale. The story tells how it came to be that dogs are fed and can live in our houses, but don't have to do any work to earn their living."

I chuckled, "Then you must tell me so that I can also learn the secret of how to be fed and housed, and not have to do any work to earn my living!"

At this she laughed also, then paused to give the dog a few more grains of rice before responding. "There are really two parts to this story, one of which I've already told my children, but the other is . . . Well, I will wait until they are older before I tell them that part.

"Before they came here my grandparents were part of the Lisu people. They are hill people; part of a group of tribes who live in northern Thailand. Because of where they are located they hear many different stories: some are Hindu; some are Buddhist, and some are just handed down word of mouth through the generations. They all get mixed up, and although the names of the gods and demons stay the same, they often become stories which belong only to the Lisu people and nobody else.

"Like the Hindus, the Lisu believe that the world has been created and destroyed many times. Only it seems that in this current creation we have been much more clever, and have managed to survive much longer than any of the other worlds that were made before this one. It is the god Brahma who creates the worlds, but once they are made 'The Grandfather' doesn't pay very much attention to them. If the people in the world become old and weak, or if they fail to do good deeds, the god Shiva comes along and destroys the world. That wakes up Brahma again, and he goes about the task of re-creating the universe.

"One of the reasons that people became weak in earlier creations of the world was because they did not have enough food. Human beings had to survive on what they could scrounge, like berries, grasses, bark, and roots. They were not very good hunters (and animals were much smarter in that earlier time), so they very seldom had any meat.

"Fortunately, the great god Vishnu liked the people in our particular creation, and felt he would like this world to continue for a long time. He knew that people must stay healthy, otherwise they would attract the attention of Shiva, the destroyer of worlds. Vishnu also knew that to stay healthy the people must have proper food. So the god came to earth dressed in white and riding a great bird, and told the people that, behind the great mountains, was the land of the

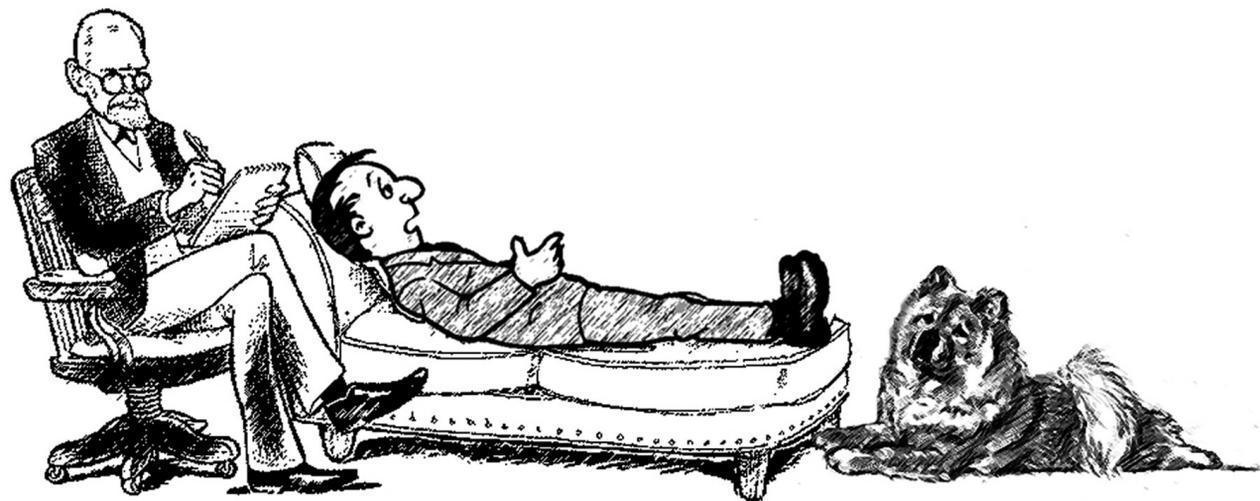
Daityas, who were great and dangerous giants, led by the brothers Hiranyaksha and Kumbhakarna. What was important for the people to know was that the Daityas were growing rice. The god Vishnu assured the people that if they could obtain some rice seeds and plant them, they could grow enough food to be healthy and to live long lives.

"Getting the rice was not going to be easy, however. The problem was that the land of the Daityas was completely surrounded by mountains which were much too high and too dangerous for humans to climb. The only other way into and out of the land of the giants was through the back of a certain cave: if you looked hard enough you could find the entrance to a narrow tunnel, which was much too small for any human to go through. But Vishnu had an idea.

"Brahma had given the people dogs of many sizes to help them with tasks. Some were guard dogs; some were noisy little dogs that were supposed to sound the alarm if strangers came near the village. Some dogs had to wear packs and saddlebags to carry tools and other possessions; some were trained to find roots and berries to help feed the people, and others had jobs to do with hunting rats and vermin, and so on. The dogs worked hard, but lived mostly on scraps left over by the people, or bits of food that they might forage for themselves. In addition, they were forced to stay outside in the cold and wet, since it was considered improper to have a dog inside the home. Vishnu suggested that it might be possible for one of the smaller dogs to make it through the tunnel, and get some rice seeds for the people.

"So, this tribe of the people that Vishnu favoured chose a small, fluffy, black-and-white dog named Dao, which means 'star,' to help them in their quest, as Dao seemed to be a very bright and clever dog. They led him to the mouth of the cave which Vishnu had pointed out, and asked Dao to go through and bring them back some rice seeds.

The dog eventually made his way through the tunnel and reached the land of the giants. Once there, Dao carefully and cautiously explored the land around him, and managed to find his way to the place where the Daityas dried their rice, next to a great open shelter where the giants kept all kinds of foodstuff,



The dog who breached the gap

Animal Assisted Therapy is a technique used in clinical psychology, whereby companion animals – usually dogs – are used to help bridge emotional gaps in a person’s personality, and thus help soothe individuals who are suffering from various psychological problems. It is a well respected and useful technique that might never have seen the light of day had it not been for an accidental encounter ... and a folk tale.

Before we get to that folk tale it’s important to know that therapeutic use of animals has a long history. In ancient Egypt, the city of Hardai became known as Cynopolis (City of Dogs) because dogs were used as offerings in its many temples dedicated to the god Anubis (the dog-headed guide of the dead). However, dogs were also used in healing practices there: it was believed that being licked by a dog could help to heal injuries, or cure diseases, for example. This practice was picked up by the Greeks, and temples dedicated to Asclepius (the Greek god of medicine and healing), often contained dogs trained to approach suffering individuals, and lick their wounds.

Perhaps the most famous story of a dog

healing a person is the tale of Saint Roche. He was born at Montpellier around 1295, and had a bright red mark across his chest in the shape of a cross, and many people believed this indicated he would be a holy man, destined to do great deeds. When he was about twenty years old, his parents died, and he wondered whether their early and tragic deaths may have been a judgement visited on him because he had failed to follow a life in the church, as ordained by his birthmark. Instead of joining the clergy, he had taken the easy path to a career in government, which was available to him because of his father’s position as governor of the city. Eventually, however, Roche reconsidered his life choices, and decided to distribute his fortune among the poor, and hand over all of his government responsibilities to his uncle. The only thing that he kept as a reminder of his past life was the family dog. Then he dressed himself simply, and set out on a pilgrimage to Rome.

On the way he stopped at Aquapendente, which was suffering from the Plague of the Black Death. He tried to offer assistance to plague victims in the usual ways of that time, and noted that his

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dog had no hesitation about approaching the sick, and licked at the abscessed spots on their skin. The patients allowed the dog to do this since being licked by a dog was believed to have the power to cure. There is even a French saying, “Langue de chien, langue de médecin” which translates to “A dog’s tongue is a doctor’s tongue.” To Roche, however, this ministrations by his dog seemed to him a sign that what was needed was his touch, so he carefully traced the sign of the cross on the sick individual’s body while praying for deliverance. The effect was miraculous: sores began to heal, and people began to recover from their illness.

He next visited Cesena and some of its neighbouring cities, finally making his way to Rome. Everywhere the story was the same. Roche and his dog visited the places where the sick had gathered, and the touch of the man and his dog, along with his prayers and sign of the cross, seemed to drive away the sickness. Roche now felt he knew what his calling was in life, and he and his dog continued to go from city to city on his healing mission.

Unfortunately, at Piacenza, Roche himself was stricken with the plague. He considered going into the city, but felt weak, and did not want to impose his own suffering on others, so, instead, he found a small hut: the kind of rude shelter used by foresters as a temporary shelter when the weather is very bad, or sometimes by woodcutters in which to store cut wood until it is dry and ready for sale. He crawled inside, covered himself, and went to sleep.

Some time later he awoke. There was a rain barrel nearby, so he had water, but he was now too weak to get up to forage for food. His dog licked at his open sores and seemed to want to comfort him.

As the sun dropped lower in the sky, Roche’s dog got up and left his feverish master, wandering down the road, not more than a mile, to where a castle stood, owned by a minor aristocrat named Gothard. The dog entered the main gate and walked into the building. People were gathering in the dining hall for dinner, and, as they watched in amazement, the dog placed his paws on the edge of the table, and helped himself to a loaf of bread. Without stopping to eat it, he trotted back out of the open door.

Gothard was amused, but his amusement turned to astonishment when this theft was repeated several days in a row. The aristocrat went to the window to watch the dog leave, and was amazed to see that the animal took not a single bite out of the bread, but proceeded down the road and disappeared along a path into the woods. On the fourth or fifth night that this occurred, out of curiosity, the nobleman followed the dog. The faithful animal went directly back to the shelter where his master lay, and Gothard witnessed the dog drop the bread by Roche, and then proceed to tenderly lick his plague sores.

Gothard was so moved by the care shown by the dog, that he set about having Roche’s needs met. To the amazement of everyone, Roche recovered, and did not even show any of the scars that the abscesses caused by the plague usually left. Gothard was so profoundly affected by this situation that he eventually entered the service of the church himself.

However, as I said when we began this discussion, animal assisted therapy as it is practiced today usually involves using pets to assist in the healing of human psychological and emotional rather than physical problems, and in this case there are also historical instances. In the late sixteen hundreds, John Locke (who introduced psychology to the concept of association in learning), suggested that small pet animals aided in the social development of children, including the development of empathy. In the nineteenth century, Florence Nightingale (the mother of nursing) suggested that pet dogs seemed to relieve depression in patients, especially for those with chronic conditions, such as those we associate with post traumatic stress disorders today.

Despite this, there was little data, and no widespread acceptance of the fact that the presence of animals could, and did, improve psychological functioning, although much anecdotal information suggested that this might be the case.

For example, during World War II, Corporal William Wynne was recovering from wounds in an army hospital in the Philippines, and, to cheer him up, members of his company brought his Yorkshire Terrier, Smoky, to the hospital. The effect was remarkable: not only did Corporal Wynne’s mood improve, but there