

## Chapter 5

### PEDAGOGY OF BUDDHISM



What does it mean when our cats bring small, wounded animals into the house? Most people interpret these deposits as offerings or gifts, however inaptly chosen, meant to please or propitiate us, the cats' humans. But according to the anthropologist Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, "Cats may be assuming the role of educator when they bring prey indoors to their human owners. . . . A mother cat starts teaching her kittens from the moment they start following her. . . . Later she gives them hands-on practice by flipping victims in their direction, exactly as a cat does in play. Mother cats even bring [wounded] prey back to their nests or dens so that their homebound kittens can practice, especially if the prey is of manageable size. So perhaps cats who release living prey in our houses are trying to give us some practice, to hone our hunting skills" (105).

For persons involved with cats or pedagogy, Thomas's supposition here may be unsettling in several ways. First there is the narcissistic wound. Where we had thought to be powerful or admired, quasi-parental figures to our cats, we are cast instead in the role of clumsy newborns requiring special education. Worse, we have not even learned from this education. With all the cat's careful stage management, we seem especially stupid in having failed to so much as recognize the scene as one of pedagogy. Is it true that we can learn only when we are aware we are being taught? How have

we so confused the illocutionary acts of gift giving and teaching? A further speech act problem here involves imitation: the cat assumed (but how could we know?) that its own movements were templates for our mimicry, rather than meant to be made room for or graciously accepted by us. A gesture intended to evoke a symmetrical response has instead evoked a complementary one.

Then again, even if we had recognized the cat's project as pedagogical, it's possible we would not have responded appropriately by "honing our hunting skills" on the broken, twitching prey. Possibly we do not want to learn the lesson our cat is teaching. Here, in an affective register, is another mistake about mimesis: the cat's assumption that we identify with it strongly enough to want to act more like it (e.g., eat live rodents). For a human educator, the cat's unsuccessful pedagogy resonates with plenty of everyday nightmares. There are students who view their teachers' hard work as a servile offering in their honor—a distasteful one to boot. There are other students who accept the proffered formulations gratefully, as a gift, but without thinking to mimic the process of their production. No doubt this describes a common impasse faced by psychoanalysts and psychotherapists as well. Teaching privileged undergraduates, I sometimes had a chilling intimation that while I relied on their wish to mirror me and my skills and knowledge, they were motivated instead by seeing me as a cautionary figure: what might become of them if they weren't cool enough, sleek enough, adaptable enough to escape from the thicket of academia into the corporate world.

And beside the frustrations of the feline pedagogue are the more sobering ones of the stupid human owner. It's so often too late when we finally recognize the "resistance" (mouse flipping) of a student/patient as a form of pedagogy aimed at us and inviting our mimesis. We may wonder afterwards whether and how we could have managed to turn into the particular teacher/therapist needed by each one. Perhaps their implication has been: Try it my way—if you're going to teach me. Or even: I have something more important to teach you than you have to teach me.

✍ Among the relations of near-miss pedagogy I discuss in this chapter, obviously the foundational one transpires between Asia and Euro-America on the subject of Buddhism itself. Over the past two decades, even as the