

## Nansen's Cat

There is a very good commentary on this koan by Norman Fischer at: [http://www.everydayzen.org/index.php?Itemid=27&option=com\\_teaching&topic=Zen+Koans&sort=title&studyguide=true&task=viewTeaching&i](http://www.everydayzen.org/index.php?Itemid=27&option=com_teaching&topic=Zen+Koans&sort=title&studyguide=true&task=viewTeaching&i)

First, there is some dispute as to whether Nansen actually did cut the cat in two or just go through the motions. It seems to me that the koan wouldn't have had the same impact in the latter case. This may seem cruel, but think of the thousands of cats that die as roadkills every day. Was the sacrifice of the cat justified? Fischer talks about "three levels of precept practice- the literal, the compassionate, and the ultimate." The literal is where we apply rules legalistically and blindly. 'Compassionate' is making lively and free use of them – using them as guidelines, but adjusting for each particular situation. Ultimately, however, there are no rules.

The koan speaks about duality. There were two sets of monks with two different opinions about an issue regarding the cat. Cutting the cat in two could seem like a way of bringing about oneness.

"We are all cut in two of course. That's living in this world of discrimination and difference. I am me- therefore I am not you. But we are also cut in one, only we don't know it. Being cut in one is "I am me and all is included in that, you and everything else." Fischer

We practice zazen to remember that we are cut in one, as well as two. When we are dead we'll all be cut in one and only one" says Fischer.

The monks were dumbfounded -- they just couldn't think of anything to say. Why was that? Someone only had to shout 'No!' and grab Nansen's sword. Perhaps, like most of us, they were too worried about saying the 'right' thing, or saying something that would please the master, so they finished up saying nothing. Perhaps that is why Nansen praised Joshu for his action of putting sandals on his head. At least he performed an action and did it immediately.

This reminds me of how so easily we can become mere role players in life. Often we allow others to put us in a 'box' – they categorise us by job, marital status etc. I find so often, even in SL, that if I tell people I worked as an engineer, they immediately expect me to think and act in certain ways. We have to allow ourselves and others to develop and grow, to leave the 'safe' notions we have of ourselves and step into the unknown.

