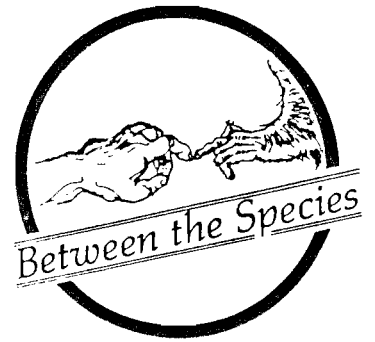


ON MINDFULNESS AND OUR RELATION TO ANIMALS

ROBERT EPSTEIN

Berkeley, California



"Mindfulness" is a gentle form of self-consciousness, a consciousness of self without judgments, condemnations. It is a benevolent, an enlightened form of self-awareness.

"Mindfulness" is a term applied to meditation. Indeed, meditation can be thought of as mindfulness; the reverse is also true: mindfulness is meditation. Then, in being mindful of animals, one is really entering into a meditation on and relationship with animals. This is important. The basis of "right action"--using Buddhist terms here--regarding animals is mindfulness. The basis of "right thinking" about animals and animal rights is mindfulness.

Mindfulness is subtle, though. It is not thinking; it does not originate in thought. Mindfulness is prereflective. Put somewhat awkwardly, mindfulness is thought that comes before thought. Mindfulness calls forth our original, prereflective relationship to animals. But how are we to know this relationship?

The answer is through a meditation on animals, through mindfulness of animals. We are to let our minds become full of animals. We invite animals into our minds, but compassionately. We follow our thought, our train of thoughts, about animals until the thoughts themselves fade, flicker, and yield to a darkness that begins to howl, bark, neigh, screech, hoot, moo, meow, chortle, cluck, and oink. And this is only the beginning.

The beginning of mindfulness has to do with noticing what happens to us as we recognize images and associations about animals that inhabit our minds. What emotions and sensations do we experience as past and present pets, cows behind roadside fences, fish dangling from hooks, and so forth pass before

our inner eye?

Turning our attention to these images and associations is only the first step, but a necessary step, in mindfulness. This can become a dwelling place, a Garden of Eden or a House of Horrors, depending on what one begins to recognize about the relationships we have created with animals. I say "created" because through mindfulness we begin to see patterns in the way we orient ourselves in relationship to animals, and this requires some active movement on our parts, however subtle. So, for example, a moment of mindfulness may reveal that I orient myself in relationship to dogs in a friendly, benign way because of the independence or courage that I admire in them, whereas with cats, the very same independence and courage in them is scorned by me as insolence. How am I to understand this discrepancy?

This discrepancy is to be understood in the respective relationships I have created with the dogs and cats that have inhabited my world. Has there ever been a dog--behold him or her in my mind's eye--that has captured my heart, made me its slave? Then, I call that dog, and maybe all dogs, independent.

Has there ever been a cat in my life--watch closely the hair standing on its back and heed its hissing--that has spurned my overtures of friendship? Then, I call that cat, and maybe all cats, insolent.



PSYCHOLOGY RELIGION

It is good to observe these thoughts and reactions--and then let them go. A preoccupation with these thoughts and reactions is not mindfulness. Mindfulness stirs in the spaces between these thoughts and reactions, however peculiar that may sound. What does "the spaces between" mean?

After I have observed my reaction to the courageous and independent dog I have paraded past my mind's eye, there may be a flicker of doubt or confusion or, more rarely still, silence. Turning one's attention quietly but quickly to this spark of doubt or confusion or silence, one may catch a glimpse of an expanse of openness that leaves one feeling a touch uneasy, vulnerable. If we are talking about a mindful study of our relationship to dogs, this openness, this vulnerability, has the faintest resemblance to--and this sound peculiar, indeed, but there is no other word for it--a bark. Yes, this uneasy sense of openness sounds like a barely audible bark. Is this not bizarre?

No! We discover through mindfulness a strange but strangely familiar affinity with the animals that inhabit our consciousness. A word of reassurance, though: by "affinity with animals," I am not suggesting that one ought to become an animal. Mindfulness does not lead to packs of human beings running into the streets barking and howling (although as protests to injustices perpetrated on humans and animals, such action would certainly call attention to the cause of human and animal liberation). The "bark" I refer to is a symbolic bark, but it is more than this. A bark is a miracle, but it takes the work of mindfulness to make it so. The bark that rises out of a mindful study of our relationship is, in Buddhist terms, the sound of the Original Self, that Being which unites all sentient creatures. We are animals, and we are not-animals. We are like animals and unlike animals. It is our task to find out what our true nature is as human beings, and this can only be done when we make a compassionate, mindful study of our true relationship to the animals with whom we share this world. And if we are truly open, then there will surely be some surprises in store for us--at least a bark or two.

I have artificially sped up the process from alienation to affinity, as one might do with the germination of a seed that blossoms into a full-bodied rose as it is captured on

film, but there it is, nonetheless. Mindfulness unfolds a flowering affinity for animals that grows out of the compost of alienation and abuse. This is so; you can observe it for yourself in your own life through mindfulness. Mindfulness is a self-study of our affinity toward animals set against a background of benevolent domination or horrid exploitation. But this should not be taken on faith; it should be experienced for oneself, through mindfulness.



Jim Barter, *Animals*: 1419
Copyright-Free Illustrations.
New York: Dover, 1979

BOOKS RECEIVED

Daniel A. Dombrowski
The Philosophy of Vegetarianism
Amherst: The University of
Massachusetts Press, 1984
139p, notes, bibliography,
index
\$20.00 (\$9.95 paper)

Richard H. Schwartz
Judaism and Vegetarianism
Smithtown, New York: Exposition
Press, 1982
138p, notes, bibliography
\$6.00 (paper)

George L. Eisman
The Most Noble Diet
Miami: Diet-Ethics, 1984
86p, index
\$4.95 (paper)

George L. Eisman
Eat...and Let Eat: The American
Consumer's Role in Helping
End World Hunger
Miami: The Campaign for an
Ethical American Diet, 1984
17p
\$1.25 (paper)