

Three Videos from the
Canine Monk series (2007)

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One Black/One White (2001)

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While walking my dog through Central Square, Cambridge recently, I noticed a homeless woman keeping up a lively chatter with herself. I wasn't paying attention to her words when she clearly wanted to get my attention, gesturing toward my dog. "They are a path to God, you know." I looked puzzled, and she reiterated her revelation as if speaking to a slow child: "Dogs are a path to God." What could I say but "thanks for the reminder"?

Like a modern Aesop, the Taiwanese artist Hung-Chih Peng invites us to consider our human behaviors and spiritual aspirations through four recent works featuring dogs. In *One Black/One White* (2001) dogs act out the human foible of envy to their own detriment. In the *Canine Monk series* (2007) they write beautiful Zen Buddhist, Daoist meditations and protective charms with their tongues. As they perform the role of human surrogates in these works they remain dogs, relating to each other, the world and spiritual realities as dogs do, so that we may learn from them in strictly canine terms.

The bond between humans and dogs is a nearly universal relationship that exists among cultures. It goes back to the earliest periods of human history, the Upper Paleolithic Age 14,000 to 17,000 years ago. Not surprisingly as early man created his first gods and religions, dogs played a role in the conceptualizations of a spiritual world. As many of the concepts that might positively or negatively affect spiritual progress are conspicuously present in dogs, such as purity, presentness, and uncontrolled desire, they might serve as paradigms—both good and bad—for human behavior.

Although dogs in Islam are considered unclean, some versions of the life of the Prophet Mohammed reveal he had a companion Saluki. The Egyptians revered their dogs—although less dearly than their cats—and their canine companions were often mummified to accompany them in the afterlife. Homer wrote that upon returning to Ithaca in disguise, Odysseus is recognized first by his now elderly dog, Argus, who serves as an icon of loyalty over time. Early Christian iconography shows St. Christopher with the head of a dog. Since 1966 the greatest

dog trainers in the west are the Monks of New Skete, who live closely with their German Shepherds as a spiritual discipline.

Yet it is in Buddhist Dharma study that Hung-Chih Peng has found inspiration for his recent work. In a famous Zen Koan given to initiates trying to understand the complex irrationality of Zen thought, the master Joshu is approached by a student who asks, "Do dogs have Buddha nature?" He shouts "Mu" which translates as "No thing". This is meditated on by those seeking to understand emptiness. In Mumon's commentary on this Koan to say either "yes" or "no" would result in a loss of one's own Buddha nature. Hung-Chih Peng's works also offer little commentary on how we should understand his *Canine Monks*; he just asks that we contemplate them.

One Black/One White (2001)

Single Channel DVD

2 min. 44 sec.

In the earliest work on view, *One Black/One White*, two dogs barely manage to eat their own bowls of food, as they are too busy coveting each other's dish. As black and white dogs from the same litter their visible difference, while marked, is essentially inconsequential. Dogs are free of envy and do not compare their lot to others, except when what they want is visible, or close at hand. In the transparent shamelessness of their quest for more food they may still have a leg up on humans, who will act out in seemingly incomprehensible ways when feeling short-changed.

Excerpts from the *Canine Monk series* (2007)

In three works from his ongoing *Canine Monk series*, Hung-Chih Peng employs a simple, yet effective strategy of writing texts on white walls in a paste of dog food, and showing the footage of his dogs licking it off backwards. This creates the appearance that the dogs are writing the texts with their tongue. He also changes the speed of the playback to create rhythmic and formal effects. He does little to disguise his obvious manipulations—they lick the hardest where the writing is densest—as the resonance of the works is not based on our believing the dogs are in fact authors or sources of these wise texts. Their passionate gourmandizing reveals that they have not freed themselves from the endless cycle of desire that prevents enlightenment in humans. Like fables, these fictions mirror our all too human attempts to consume spirituality.

Qingjing Jing (2004)

Single Channel DVD

19 min. 38 sec.

This text, the *Qingjing Jing* is the classic foundational meditation and devotional chant of Taoism, referred to as the Scripture of Purity and Transformation. It is intended to focus the mind on the balances of nature while serving as an aid to overcoming desire. It was believed to have been written by the priest, credited with founding Taoism, Lao-Tzu in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and was formulated as a liturgy in the Song Dynasty (960-1260).

The Heart Sutra (2005)

Single Channel DVD

14 min. 20 sec.

The Heart Sutra is the simplest and most common Sutra for Buddhist Dharma study, part of the Perfection of Wisdom literature of Mahayana Buddhism. As it is much more compact than many Sutras, it is often chanted. It is used to attempt to comprehend the fundamental emptiness of existence. The Sutra is somewhat unusual in that the Buddha did not speak it. The text appears in Sanskrit, the language in which the *Heart Sutra* was first written.

Excerpts from the *Taoist Protective Talismans* (2006)

Five Channel HD video (formatted as a single channel projection for The Media Test Wall)

6 min. 49 sec.

Hung-Chih Peng's most recent work, *Excerpts from the Taoist Protective Talismans*, is a multi-frame simultaneous image of the artist's dog writing protective talismans. These are a form of magic—one is a "Spell of Prevention for Dog Barks and Bites" and another expels the mischievous spirits of deceased dogs and cats. The artist has left them untranslated so that we might better enjoy the rhythm of the simultaneous motion of his dog's head swaying as she "writes" and eats.

Stanley Coren, *The Intelligence of Dogs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 56-57.

Katherine M. Rogers. *First Friend: A History of Dogs and Humans*. (New York: St. Martins Press, 2005), 31.

The Monks of New Skete, *How to Be your Dog's Best Friend*, (London, Little Brown and Co. 2002), 6.

Ibid. *How to Be Your Dog's Best Friend*, 10-12.

Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki eds. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Texts*, (Boston; Rutland, VT; Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1998), 115-116.

Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 12.