Extract from blog by David Michie author of The Dalai Lama's Cat books. 17 Apr 2022

The characters in the conversation are HHC (His Holiness's Cat) regulars. They are in a restaurant owned by Franc.

"The idea we generally have of ourselves is quite unfortunate," Rinpoche had an inclusive way of speaking, as if he was like everyone else, rather than a highly-realised yogi. "We have this notion of a being who is the size of a human with a mind the size of a brain. An idea that's fixed and very small. Limited. But in reality, no permanent thing can ever be found. Not about us, not about any phenomenon in existence. *Everything* is in a state of constant change."

"Everything?!"

He nodded.

"What, like-" she was glancing about the restaurant until her gaze settled on the table in front of her and the tin she had brought in for me. "Like … cat food?" she challenged, as though the idea was obviously crazy.

Yogi Tarchin followed her eyes, his shoulders beginning to quiver the way they always did when he chuckled. "Cat food?" he mused. "This is a *very* good example."

Franc and Serena exchanged a look of anticipation. It seemed that they had both heard Rinpoche extemporise on this subject before and were looking forward to a repeat performance.

For their part, Heidi and Ricardo were studying the yogi closely, trying to take in this new and extraordinary notion.



Head resting on the banquette, Sam was doing his best to stay awake.

"Is this the cat food you mean?" Rinpoche asked, gesturing towards the rose in the stem vase.

Confused by his deliberate doltishness, Heidi reached for the tin beside it. "This," she handed it to him.

For a moment, Yogi Tarchin studied the label. "Cat food is just a label, yes? Just a convention we all agree on. What's in this tin," he shook it in a way I would have found quite entrancing had I not only recently had lunch. "Is not cat food from *its* side."

Heidi and Ricardo were puzzled.

"If Kusali was to take this to the kitchen and empty it into a bowl, the chef would probably say it was-" he read the can. "'Succulent tuna.' He might even use it."

"Avocado Ritz!" laughed Serena.

"Not if I have anything to do with it," Franc was droll.

“It is part of a tuna, maybe the not-so-nice parts-”

“Sorry HHC,” interjected Serena.

“ – that has been put into a tin,” continued Rinpoche. “And we label it, ‘cat food.’”

Heidi and Ricardo seemed underwhelmed by this observation.

“Two months ago, perhaps, this was part of a big, beautiful fish, swimming in the ocean, when it was caught by fishermen. Did the tuna think it was cat food? Did the fisherman call out, ‘Look at that shoal of cat food!’”

Focusing intently, Heidi shook her head.

“They are looking for tuna,” confirmed Rinpoche. “Again, ‘tuna’ is just an agreed label for this kind of fish. So they catch the tuna, and part of the tuna ends up in a tin. And one day it’s put in a bowl for HHC – cat food, right?”

She was nodding.

“HHC eats it, and it’s in her tummy. Is it still cat food?”

After a pause he continued, “What about the next day when she goes into the garden and-” with his right hand he imitated a cat’s paw scratching a hole in the soil. “She goes to the toilet. What about that? Is it still cat food? Is it tuna, perhaps suitable for Avocado Ritz?”

About the table, faces were being pulled, before Ricardo ventured, “Cat poo?”

“Yes. Another label. “We think it’s disgusting. Horrible to look at. Putrid smell. But for the soil, very enriching. A few weeks go by and there is rain. The poo has disintegrated. It’s part of the soil. The root of a bush is growing there and takes in the nutrients. Uses them to create,” he pointed to the stem vase, “the most beautiful rose.”

Around the table, his listeners turned as one to look at the graceful, cardinal-red petals of the bloom.

“Beautiful to look at. Perhaps the smell ..?”

Serena lifted the bloom to her nostrils and inhaled. “Gorgeous!” she declared, before holding the vase for Rinpoche himself to enjoy.

Rinpoche glanced back at Heidi. “At this moment, a beautiful rose. But in its past life - you could say - cat poo. And before that, tuna. And before that, whatever tuna eat – small fish? Plankton?” He fixed her with a reassuring gaze. “Nothing comes from nothing. *Everything* is in constant change.”

Heidi and Ricardo were nodding, following his explanation.

Rinpoche leaned towards them. “Same with us,” he said. “‘The continuity of discontinuity’ Chogyam Trungpa used to call it. This is why we don’t talk about the essence of a person. Of some permanent being. Even within one human life - which is very short - the little girl Heidi aged six is different from 16, or 46 or the elderly lady at 86. We use the same label, our whole life, for something that’s always changing. But in our mind we believe it is more than just a label – we think there is something else there. Something we make up and believe to be true, because that’s what everyone else is doing.” He paused, looking over at Serena.

“‘Selfing,’” she nodded. “Concretising something that’s just an idea. Trying to make it seem permanent.”