

garudarising

Working with parrots, according to VEN. KONCHOG NORBU, is a training ground for equanimity and love. He tells the story of GARUDA AVIARY, a sanctuary in Sedona, Arizona (named after a mythical bird in Hindu and Buddhist culture), where nearly 40 of these long-lived, idiosyncratic creatures absorb the loving attention of a team of monks, nuns, and the lay community.



Photo courtesy of Garuda Aviary of Sedona.

Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo with Dudtsi, an Umbrella Cockatoo

As long ago as the second century C.E., the Buddhist master Nagarjuna offered this advice to a king of his day:

*"Always care compassionately
For the sick, the unprotected, those stricken
With suffering, the lowly, and the poor
And take special care to nourish them."*

It is in this spirit that the contemporary Buddhist teacher Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, spiritual director of Kunzang Palyul Choling (KPC), founded Garuda Aviary to provide a lifelong sanctuary for abused and neglected companion birds. Situated on her property in northern Arizona, Garuda Aviary is now home to nearly 40 birds ranging from a tiny Sun Conures to a Hyacinth Macaw, the largest parrot in the world.

Housed in a custom-converted garage with a large flight cage built off the back, the Aviary is now an official non-profit organization run by KPC's monks and nuns, with volunteer help provided by the Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities.

The first bird Jetsunma acquired was Tashi, a female Mollucan Cockatoo belonging to her chiropractor in Maryland. He wanted to give the bird up because he was tired of her doing what Mollucans do: developing intense emotional bonds, constantly seeking attention and screaming if it's denied (or screaming because it's fun – Mollucans are astoundingly loud), exercising its natural curiosity with the tool it explores

with: the beak, which can quickly turn that antique dining room chair into kindling, hurling food around as it sorts for what it likes, pooping prodigiously and wherever. Sound like some two- or three-year-old humans you know?

And therein lie thousands of heartbreaking tales in this country. Who has the inner strength and patience to sustain the supervision, positive structured discipline, steady love, and focused play a three-year-old requires, day after day for the length of a parrot's life, which can be up to 80 years? Such a scenario most often leads to neglect of the bird, but sometimes it can turn ugly, as in the case of Tara, another Mollucan Cockatoo.

Tara was poached in the Australian wild, which means his life started with severe trauma, as wild-caught birds are babies who see their parents slaughtered, nests destroyed, and are stuffed into PVC tubing to be smuggled illegally for sale elsewhere. When Ani Alana found him (most parrots are notoriously hard to sex, short of DNA testing, so Tara's a boy, but hey, it's a Vajrayana aviary!) He was kept at a ranch near a stable (he still whinnies!) on a single perch with no toys and a meager, inappropriate diet. Alana feared there was physical abuse because of how panicky Tara became when his owner reached his hands toward the bird, and how phobic he can still be around men. These two conditions, boredom and fear, are tragic for birds and they will often develop aggressive biting and/or self-destructive behavior like feather mutilation. Tara had them all.

So Jetsunma took Tara in, and learning of the pervasiveness of such indifference and maltreatment of companion birds, vowed that she would create a sanctuary where these

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birds would never again experience such suffering for the rest of their lives, and in fact receive abundant food, toys, love and care. For the first year and a half Jetsunma and her eldest son Rigdzin provided all the care for about 20 birds. As the demand became too great to handle, she invited her students to participate (increased numbers of birds now require over 70 hours of work per week spread among 18 volunteers).

*J*etsunma is a great believer in the direct, real-world application of bodhisattva practice.

Working with a flock of parrots is a fantastic vehicle for this. Parrots are expensive to keep properly and much time is involved in seeing to their daily needs, so ongoing generosity is needed. The Aviary is run solely by volunteers and the donations of concerned individuals. The volunteers have found that the only effective way to work with so many birds is to recognize that time spent there is totally about the birds and their needs. One has to give up one's concepts and think like a bird. For example, parrots can bite, hard. Thinking the bird is mean and is biting out of spite, and reacting to it with anger, is a guaranteed way to reinforce that biting behavior. Birds most often bite out of a perceived threat. To react angrily is to confirm for the bird you are to be feared and bitten again. Birds sometimes bite to see what you'll do. A dramatic response is great fun – they'll bite again just to see it. But to respond with patience and understanding, calm energy and sensitivity to the bird's mood produces trust and the basis for loving interaction, which is all the bird really wants.

Tara's story bears this out. He is still a solitary bird and is often perched at the back of the cage. But if he's at the front of the cage, and you go slow, even men can scratch the back of his neck (the spot they love most, which they can't reach with their beaks), smooth his feathers and whisper sweet nothings. And if he climbs out of the cage, with some gentle coaxing, he'll step up to a hand to be carried to the outside flight cage. Any of these situations would have caused abject panic before. And once outside, with nothing to defend, he climbs and chews and yells and squabbles in play with the others, just like any normal bird.

*T*he Garuda was chosen as the symbol for the Aviary because it is a bird that has triumphed over all obstacles (represented by the naga in its talons) to

display the natural splendor of its innate magnificence and dignity. This is the aspiration the monastic and lay sangha, who are running the Aviary, hold for the birds, both in the temporary and ultimate sense. The Buddhist volunteers often chant mantras to the birds, and they are frequently the subjects of special prayers during KPC's ongoing 24-hour prayer vigil.

But mostly Garuda Aviary is a training ground for equanimity and love. Some of the birds are healthy and well socialized and were acquired because Jetsunma felt a particularly strong connection with them. But most are recovering from various neuroses brought on by carelessness and abuse. And some have physical damage, like Beauty, a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, whose head was crushed by another bird and has some brain damage or Crow, who fell out of his nest in winter and lost both feet and part of one wing to frostbite. So they each require highly individualized attention and Jetsunma has made a point of training the Aviary volunteers

Photo Wib Middleton



Garuda Aviary Managing Board, from left: Vens. Konchog Norbu, Jampal Rowe, and Alana Elgin, with Howard, Hakan, Damara and Dutsi!

herself, telling each bird's story and detailing their particular set of requirements. And for her students, there are always reminders to recognize and respect the seed of buddhahood present in each of the birds (the Buddha himself was a parrot in one of the Jataka Tales), see the sufferings they have gone through, do one's best to eliminate their temporary manifestations, and pray for their swift liberation.

Ven. Konchog Norbu serves as the contact for the Aviary and can be reached at (1) (928) 203-0709 or tknorbu@earthlink.net. Please let him know of any situations of abuse or neglect of companion birds. Though the Aviary has little extra room until it relocates, he may be able to help find another sanctuary or other resources. Donations too are always welcome and go totally toward the direct care of the flock. They may be sent to P.O. Box 4254, Sedona, AZ 86340.