

Of Monkeys (and Men)

By Ewen Arnold

Someone recently posted this on my Facebook page.

If a monkey hoarded more bananas than it could eat, while most of the other monkeys starved, scientists would study that monkey to find out what the heck was wrong with it. When humans do it we put them on the cover of Forbes.

This got me to thinking about the monkeys that live in amongst us here in Kandy. Where I live we have a troop of monkeys which visits us almost every day. The same troop has been coming for many years. They can be very destructive, but, over the years, we have made our house and garden more and more monkey-proof. When they come, I try to remember that they were here before humans were on this hillside in Kandy and that they (*toque macaques*) are an endangered species, unlike humans.

Many years ago, My wife and I noticed that a young adolescent male had a hand missing. The most likely reason for this is that he got his hand caught in a snare. People who live in our area set these in the forest to catch porcupines or pigs for eating. They are indiscriminate, and I have twice seen dogs caught in such traps. An animal that is trapped will sometimes chew its leg off in order to escape. Maybe he had to chew his own hand off.

Over the years, I have seen this monkey and this troop regularly. I often put a chair in my garden and my late dog, Bobby, and I sat very still, and the monkeys would come closer and closer. That gave me a good opportunity to observe what was happening. I also walk a lot in the area, so I see the troop moving around. It is clear that two things were happening. First, the troop and/or members of the troop often waited for the monkey with one hand to catch up with them. Second, I have personally observed other monkeys feeding the one with one hand, which is unusual because, when monkeys have food, they often tend to eat it themselves as quickly as they can.

I hadn't seen this monkey for quite a long time, but, just the other day, he reappeared. He is no longer an adolescent. Usually male monkeys are forced out of the troop when they become adults, but this male is still being looked after by the troop, and he, obviously, gets enough to eat (and maybe even sneaky mating privileges!). When I saw him, my heart opened, and my eyes filled with tears.

At that moment, my mind could easily have gone to comparisons between monkeys and men, as in the Facebook post above, and asked questions like "Why don't we humans do that?" "Why do we allow a few people to accumulate massive amounts of resources?" Instead, standing there in the street and looking up at the monkeys on the telephone wires and in the trees around me, something completely different and unexpected happened. I felt so grateful for having witnessed such a thing. I remembered that Gwan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, has no fixed shape and form, and I felt that she had surely made her wonderful presence known (again!).