

Make Me One With Everything*

The Role of Humor in Buddhism

INTRODUCTION BY ELAINE SMOOKLER

Recently I went to a funeral home with my parents because they wanted to plan their funerals. I was not picturing a day of hilarity, but after we got there we couldn't stop laughing. And it wasn't merely from nervousness; it was partly because we felt like we were producing a show. We were offered a choice between a video or slide "retrospective" of my parents' life; we sized up coffins with an eye to what the "audience" might think; we even planned the catering, noting that the mall across the street offered an excellent price on cold cuts. Finally, when my father said, in all seriousness, that he'd like "Dancing Queen" by Abba played at his funeral, even the funeral director laughed. It was such a wonderfully uplifting, unselfconscious moment.

I've spent much of my adult life working as a comic actress, playwright, occasional stand-up comedienne, and as "Vendetta," a clown provocateur. One of the things I enjoy about working in comedy is that there are no sacred cows. In other words, nothing is exempt from examination. So, question your teachers? Hell, yes. But even better might be to slip on a banana peel just as you're about to pigeonhole someone with what you think is a really good question. Why? Because nothing is more ridiculous than our sense of self-importance, so why not welcome opportunities to see the buffoon in us all?

Early in my work and my Buddhist practice I saw how humor helped me take a gentle look at things I might not want to know about myself. The humorous view encourages a softening, which can help free us from our masks and puffery. And here's something you can try at home: invite your friends to tease you and be curious about that moment when you want to rip their heads off. By laying ourselves open to ridicule we can see exactly where we're trying to hide, or protect our precious egos. If we can allow it, humor helps remind us that when it comes down to it, there really isn't anyone "there" to be embarrassed, hurt, or humiliated—so let them laugh!

Some people view humor as a sign of disrespect. But this is the narrow view of a tight ego, trying to control and fabricate sacredness. The idea isn't to use humor as another way of hiding, or to be glib about a difficult situation; we are using humor from a place of bravery, to bring attention to the possibility that there's another way of seeing things. Sometimes the darkness of ignorance and too much time spent watching Fox News can cause paranoid imaginings of lurking danger. Employing a little lightness can bring some relief to that claustrophobic feeling. Then, once we're not feeling so tight, we might even be able to relax and try to work with what's present without experiencing it in such a heavy way.

There's a story about Milarepa that talks of inviting our fears, phobias, and confusions "in for tea." Increasingly, I see that the very things I'd prefer not to invite in are the sources of true comedy. In the world of clown, when things go awry on stage, it's considered a gift from the gods. Nothing could be better than things falling apart, because in that groundless place something fresh and surprising can occur—if you're open to it.

We all know that painful things happen, and that ultimately we're going to die. But we don't have to take it so personally. Being able to laugh about incontinence, heartbreak, and the many painful attachments we humans fall prey to is a great relief. It goes a long way to reduce suffering, particularly when we are reminded that things aren't happening to us, they're just happening. Bringing a sense of humor and curiosity to our fear and anxiety is liberation.

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* What did the Buddhist say to the hot-dog vendor?
"Make me one with everything."