

## It's a joke

As far as I know, only humans joke. It can be taken as a form of acceptable lying, as we often know that a joke is about something untrue. That's why we often retort with "It's a joke, right?" For example, if I said that Sisyphus enjoys what he's doing: the gods have condemned him to keep rolling a huge round rock up a high hill, and which rolls downhill once it touches the summit, and he then runs after it, to push it up all over again and again – that he is actually enjoying it. You might react, "This is a joke, right!"

Pushing a huge rock uphill that keeps rolling downhill for eternity is really no joke. True. But this is an allegory about what it's like when we are caught up in doing something troublesome, and which is also useless. Or worse, like hurting those whom we love, or even those whom we hate. Such an act is not only useless, but is in fact harmful for both sides. Yet, we seem to enjoy doing it. Otherwise, we are not likely to joke.

Joking is often used by those who want to dominate others, or to show that they are in charge. For example, if someone asks his boss for a raise, and the boss retorts, "You must be joking!" It's obvious who is in charge here.

In one of my university classes, a tutor once quipped that if we do not know the answer, we can either honestly say "I will get back to you," or we could joke about it. The second way is of course dishonest, unless we follow up with "I'll get back to you," or honestly admit, "I don't know." But, there is a third way: ask if anyone else in the class knows the answer.

Answering a serious question with merely a joke can be a put-down, even an insult, to the questioner (who, after all, could be a future Leonardo, Einstein, or Buddha). Once, at a Buddhism and Science forum I attended, a young student earnestly asked, "According to Buddhism, when does life begin?" The panel of speakers -- a scientist monk, a scientist and an engineer -- took it as a hot potato, one passing the question to the other. After an awkward unscientific spell of silly laughing, the engineer quipped, "Life begins at 60!" Sadly, then, many of us who have read this, have no life.

What does the engineer's joke here signify? Why did the other two not answer the legitimate question? Either they know and do not want to answer (then, why have the forum?), or they do not know the answer (then, why have the forum?)

A few monastics have good reason to pepper, even flood, their talks with jokes. One monk was even honest enough to tell his audience why he liked telling jokes to his audience. He found them regularly unsmiling and depressive, which won't do for a Buddhist audience.

The joking monk took great pains to prescribe that his pathological audience smile at themselves in the toilet mirror the first thing in the morning (oops, morning). And if that does not work, they should push up their cheeks with their finger-tips. We can learn to smile; it's no joke. I think this is compassionately insightful of that monk, that is, to heal the local pathological crowd.

*It's a Joke* by Piya Tan

On the other hand, for another dark reason, joking speakers, whether monastic or otherwise, generally attract large crowds, but such occasions often make me blush. (However, I do attend such talks occasionally perhaps because others would think that I still have some youthful flush despite my advancing decay.) But I joke. Now, why are joking speakers popular with large crowds?

Remember I mention earlier that joking is a way of subtly showing others that we are in charge? Here, it's clearly about power. Local audiences love a high-wattage speaker who is in charge, who is "powerful." Such speakers are like a blazing fire drawing the audience like moths to them.

However, the moment a member of the audience truly understands what the Dharma speaker is trying to say, he metamorphoses into a beautiful butterfly flitting around a sweet flower. Jokes, like toys, must be left behind in the childhood of our minds. Jokes, like spices, must be properly and sparingly used if they are to enrich the Dharma dish.

There is another positive side to joking: there IS something healing about jokes, that is, if we joke about ourselves. When we are right in the midst of a problem, we are usually apprehensive, even devastated, over it. But the law of impermanence does not allow even suffering to sustain itself in the same form for long. So our suffering passes.

We truly begin to let go of our sufferings and take charge of our lives when we are able to joke about ourselves, that is, laugh at our short-comings and problems. When we are able to look back at a problem, no matter how serious, talk about it in a matter-of-fact way, and laugh at ourselves. Of course, this is only healthy if we do not bore others with this. For, then, it's no joke!

The more we laugh at ourselves, the more others laugh with us. When we laugh at others, we will soon enough laugh alone. When others laugh at us, smile in return.

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