

Toilet training

A famous monk once related how a local journalist called and asked him “What would you do [he named himself] if someone took a Buddhist Holy Book and flushed it down the toilet?” Without hesitation, he said that he answered, “Sir, if someone took a Buddhist Holy Book and flushed it down the toilet, the first thing I would do is call a plumber!”

Some of us might just laugh mostly because we are a fan of that monk. We would probably just laugh anyway, especially in a crowd, because others were laughing. This is the spirit of Buddhist fellowship.

Here’s another scenario. A local journalist called us once and asked us a similar question: “What would you do if someone flushed your sutta translation down the toilet?” Without hesitation, we would reply: “It’s all right, we have more copies! Oh yes, we need to call the plumber, too, because the toilet is clogged!”

When the journalist finished laughing, continued the story-telling monk, the journalist confided in him that that was the most sensible answer he had heard.

Then, the wise monk explained that someone might blow up Buddha statues, burn down Buddhist temples or kill Buddhist monks and nuns: they may destroy all of this “but I will never allow them to destroy Buddhism.” Some informed Buddhists (even some uninformed ones) might see it as being more appropriate if he had used “we” rather than the misleading “I.” Anyway, those who laugh at this obviously do not see it that way. Just think about this.

Then, the good monk said something really spirited: “You may flush a Holy Book down a toilet, but you will never flush forgiveness, peace and compassion down a toilet.” This is clearly good and understandable. They are not only words, but refer to actions we should show one another; clearly, not to toilets, or toilets alone. Oh yes, we need toilets, too: imagine a world without toilets, or to take the world as a toilet! We often like to joke at the expense of what underlies our lives.

The book is not the religion, he continued, nor the statue, nor the building, nor the monks or nuns. Books, statues, buildings and monastics are only “containers.” What do the holy books teach us? What do the statues represent? What qualities are the monastics supposed to embody? It is the “content.”

When we recognize the difference between the container and the contents, then we will preserve the contents even when the container is being destroyed or has been destroyed.

We can print more books, build more temples and statues, even train more monks and nuns, and lay Dharma teachers, but when we lose our love and respect for others and ourselves, and replace it with violence, then the whole religion has gone down the toilet. This is the part that we often forget, mainly because we remember only the laughing.

Stories like this are clearly impressive: they leave a deep impression upon us, and some don’t even know what hit them. They only marvel at this great impression upon them; they are only laughing at it, and then tell it to others so that they too laugh at this impression.

My point is that there is a lot more to learn from all this. The true greatness of a teacher lies in what is left unspoken when all the rest has been spoken or laughed at. If a wise teacher actually does what he says, he is even greater: he is compassionate.

And a great student is one who is able to properly tease out what is really left unspoken, the silence in between the letters and words, the spaces between our breaths. Then, green comes from blue, as the Chinese saying goes: the student will outshine the teacher. (It's troubling to imagine otherwise, where a pupil should be less wise than the teacher, which would set rolling the wheel of diminishing returns!)¹

Let us begin by asking what are we laughing at here? Is it because we are reminded of the stories of the Sufi funny man, Nasrudin, who is reputed to tell such stories and have them retold, rehashed, lifted by others? I don't really have the answers why we laugh at such stories or jokes. Perhaps, some day, we might ourselves know: this is part of our learning process.

However, not all of us would laugh at such stories. (Perhaps we have heard them before.) We do not laugh perhaps because it makes us think. Why did he tell this story? Was he relating actual events that happened to him or is he just pulling our legs? What is he really trying to say? What does it say of the story-teller? Does he practise what he preaches? More importantly, how really true and good are all this? Most importantly, how do we put the good here into practice?

I have no answers for these questions. The answers are in the questions themselves. Ask the right questions, we will find the right answers.² Then, we should act, or not, wisely.

The wisdom of such stories is more than the sum of their words (which we tend to laugh at). If laughing is all we do here, we definitely have missed the point of the story. If we habitually do this, and only this, then we are likely to be reborn in a Laughing Hell, where we will be caught in a fit of laughing, like Sisyphus forever pushing his rock up the hill and running after it downhill, only to repeat his labour, which he thinks is actually enjoyable -- laughing as he labours!³ Laughing Sisyphus!

It does not matter whether we believe in such a hell or not: either way it exists for us. Only when we are willing, are we able to stop thinking, and to truly start feeling in a joyful way. Then, we might understand how we create our own hells (or our own heavens, for that matter).

The point of all this is that if religion and religious teachers are of any use, other than seeking our devotion and donations, is that they inspire us to think for ourselves, in fact, to think ourselves out. A remarkable benefit of good thinking is that we stop thinking at some point.

Thinking is triggered by one of our senses or other: when we see, hear, smell, taste or touch something, or we think about something. When we realize that this is not reflecting reality, we

¹ The point here is that if a pupil is necessarily less wise than his teacher (other than the Buddha), then each successive pupil would be less wise. There will come a point when a pupil who becomes the teacher would necessarily be truly stupid! The question is: Is this happening in Buddhism?

² See Reflection "[Asking the right questions](#)" (R232) 2012; also "[Who, What, Why, How?](#)" (R277) 2013.

³ See **Yodh'ājīva Sutta** (S 42.3), [SD 23.3](#).

are likely to laugh at it. It is a nervous reaction to something real (it's happening) but seems stupid, or what is unreal we have mistaken to be real.

We might even say that jokes set the wise apart from the fools: fools tend to laugh at them, or we are fooled into laughing. This is good actually: remember how we played the fool to make our loved ones laugh or smile?

Wisdom laughs, too, or rather smiles, at itself. It's better to laugh at ourselves than to fool others. Others may not forgive us, but we must always forgive others. Whether it's right or good to fool others into doing good is not an easy question to answer; at best, we might say, we will know what to do when the situation arises.

Even then, never mind if we realize that we have been fooled or that we have been foolish: we are wise to that extent, and this is the beginning of wisdom. No fooling here.⁴

R416 Simple Joys 280

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2015

⁴ Further see "[It's a joke!](#)" Reflection R141 (in [Simple Joys 2 no 30](#)).