

Why the Buddha is not laughing

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Mention Robin Williams, Ellen DeGeneres, Rodney Dangerfield, David Letterman, Jim Carrey, Conan O'Brien, Woody Allen, Hossan Leong, Gurmit Singh, and Mark Lee. We would smile and agree that they are all brilliantly funny people. But little do we know that the light of their humour often comes from a deep darkness that often drown them.

Notice how those who make us laugh hard, as a rule, find it harder for them to laugh at their own jokes. One reason is that they have suffered painful pitfalls of dark depression. For some like Robin William, the sounds of others' laughing suddenly becomes appalling, a pall that wraps them up finally.

Uplifting laughter

Robin Williams took his own life on 11 August 2014. We who love laughing, who love Robin (very few don't), will never know why exactly he has forever left the safety of the laughing stage, the joy of the comedy. We may perhaps suspect that he was simply unable to laugh at himself.

We who loved Robin and laugh-lords like him, feel the deep loss of one whose mind-blowing sense of humor and bluntly honest portrayal of humanity helped to lift us up when we felt stuck in the mud and mire of our own darkness.

Vicarious acts

We are naturally drawn to their spontaneous, razor-sharp, wildly funny and idiotically inappropriate acts. Perhaps, we see them vicariously saying and doing what we all would like to say and do but simply could not—we lacked their courage or creativity.

Those of us who are narcissistic (unawakened, who is not?), wish we can ourselves be witty cynics to hold some unwitting audience captive. Sadly, our performance often goes no further than some bad or bawdy jokes that would embarrass adolescent schoolboys.

Clowning narcissist

Notice how the more narcissistic we are, the more we are likely to clown ourselves before any audience. No, we don't really notice it—of course, we're not narcissistic, so we say! Yet we love an audience, whether of one or a roomful of the curious in faith or farce. Standing before a crowd, in the crowded eye, is empowering—especially when we feel powerless or deprived otherwise.

The most powerless and deprived are probably the wits and wisecracks who are the light of the party. But when we scratch their thin skin, only blinding darkness gushes forth, drowning us in anxiety and depression.

We may be full of life, ever ready with a quick quip, a ready rebuttal, all in perfect time—but we are so heartbroken within. For those such as us, I suppose, we are continuously battling

dark forces, and comedy seems to be our only relief. Why is there such a strong, sweeping sense of sadness in the comic? What gives us the desire and drive to make others laugh so ferociously, or at least, faithfully?

Comedy is true life

We see things as "funny" because they're **true**. Funny people often have the bent for pointing out life's slings and arrows. Loudly laughing at the world's bullshit and falseness with others is like life-giving fresh air, a chink in our stifling walls of reticence and propriety.

We laugh at the socially incongruent and humanly appropriate. We can only liberatingly react with relief, religiously shaking with laughter. The comedian throws open a window with a view of us with our pants down—Buddho, it's not us! But we laugh, what if it were?

A good comedian, then, sees what most of us can't see or, rather, dare not see. What we rarely realize is that the comedian is really revealing us most intimately in public. The truth of it all is so glaring that we cannot but laugh—at ourself. It's really funny because we don't really know it until we are older and wiser, when we would not survive hard laughter.

The power of being funny

No matter what trouble and trick we get use to pretend or protect ourself, the world will see through it, and cruelly laugh at us as portrayed by a comedian or parodied by a clown. To be able to command and raise such laughter gives the comedian and clown a sense of control over us.

It seems, then, safest to make fun of ourself, to be the clown: we seem in charge. We are no longer under the power of the school bullies or propriety to family and relatives. When we make others laugh, even in a religious talk, they are under our power; they see us as in charge. We, the talker, hear their laughter as the cue for the foolish and blind crowd glared by charisma, tamed by our wit: we are the lord of those whom we make laugh.

The power of pain

Humor, masterfully executed by a true comedian, is one of the most respected arts and most human of gestures. Its beauty lies in the super speed and wild wit of the comedian's mind—it is so fast that we awkwardly lose our senses in that moment of common madness. We are caught and carried away in the swirling currents of the comedian's relentless torrents of thoughts and feelings.

A good comedian can reshape our world in a moment. But at great cost. This mental revving of some many things at one time hopelessly exhausts and profoundly unsettles him. He sucks in all our negative energy and churns it out into pure and sparkling blasts of refreshing whammy that pierces our own walls of darkness and despair, just enough for us to crawl out laughing the moment.

Joking hides sadness

History reminds us that personal brilliance is often synonymous with mental illness. Many of our brightest minds are burdened by an empty heart of darkness. What makes them stand out and above those lesser is that they refuse to hide in that hollowness. They keep seeking the lighted space of novelty, fresh ideas, liberating ways of thinking and feeling.

Those who cannot find a way of turning their deadly darkness into a light-seeking mission become the most brilliant comedians. What better way for a quick fix out of our deep sadness than to purge an instant burst of wind that perks us up in a mutual high? It is a fast-acting drug; we feel instantly better; we remember it; we want more of it.

How the crowd heals

Sadness arises from our feeling alienated—from what we love, from whom we love, from how we love, from why we love, from truth, from our desire to have and to be. It is rooted in a profound sense of lack: the very first painful truth of life. Depression, at its worst, leaves us painfully alone in the depths and darkness of our despair. We seem to be the only non-person in our numbing non-existence. It is an unbearable self-knowledge.

A comedian knows that a way to fill or, at least, to hide, the black hole of depression is to connect with others. He talks about his pains and, by sharing it, pretends it is not his. He fearlessly airs his most embarrassing moments, shameful feelings, tragic realities—and we laugh with him. We breathe in the very air that a comedian breathes out; it turns into laughing gas.

We laugh because we can relate. Laughing together, we accept the truth, and are momentarily healed by a loud validation that many others are there, too.

The Buddha smiles

Perhaps, by now, we begin to understand why the Buddha does not laugh: he is no comedian, nor an entertainer, nor a tragic artist. The Buddha is none of the above, nor what is below, neither in between. He has neither self nor selfishness to laugh at. He has been through aeons of life's comedies and tragedies. He knows their every punchline but is no more knocked out by them. He fully knows what it is really like:

What is laughter? What is joy, when the world is ever aflame?
Shrouded in darkness, shouldn't we rather seek the light? (Dhammapada 146)

The Buddha has seen the light, the clear light of truth and joy. He is fully awakened in the spacious light of peace and wisdom. We don't laugh at such things; we **smile** at them. For this reason, the Buddha is the ever-smiling, and the arhats, too (*mhita,pubba; mihita,pubbaṅgama*).

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]
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