The Wisdom of Humor

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There’s a story of an explorer who was going to go across the Northwest Territories back in the nineteenth century. He needed some escorts. He was British, and none of his fellow officers wanted to go along. So he found a band of Dene Indians. Apparently, it was the first time a British explorer went with nothing but a band of Indians. One of the things he noticed was that on the days when they didn’t have much food, they’d tighten their belts and joke a lot. Humor was one way of getting them over the hump, getting them past their hunger. It was a way of strengthening them on the path. And as we meditate, it’s good to keep that in mind. This is one of the issues that’s pointed out in the instructions on breath meditation. When you get a sense of your mind, you realize when it needs to be gladdened, when it needs to be steadied or settled down, when it needs to be released. And having a good sense of humor about the whole thing not only gladdens the mind but also helps to release it. Learning to step back. And look at what’s amusing in your situation, what’s ironic. Now, you’d want this to be a nasty sense of humor that saps your strength. You’re trying to give yourself energy. And just look at things in a good-natured way. Because that’s one of the two features of humor. It gives you a sense of distance, and there’s a sense of perspective that can come with that. Now, sometimes distance is harsh and inhuman. When we think about the kind of humor that makes fun of groups of people, or where one person is setting himself off as better than other people, that kind of humor can be harsh. That’s not the kind of distance we’re looking for. The distance here is a distance of perspective. Because sometimes you can get so involved in something that you totally lose perspective. Little things loom way too large. And even though we talk about paying attention to little things, sometimes the little things are the wrong little things. There was a monk years back who was off in a cave in Thailand. He got totally obsessed with one of the rules in the Vinaya and wrote me a thirteen-page letter on that particular rule. I think it was Sir Max Birbaum who said that anyone who writes letters of more than four pages is not definitely proof that the person has gone insane or is mad, but the symptoms have to be watched. I think he was referring to George Bernard Shaw. He would get a bee in his bonnet about certain things and just rant and rave. And the thirteen pages were all about little tiny, tiny details that it turned out, for the most part, were totally irrelevant, totally beside the point. That’s precisely the kind of obsession that you want to get away from, when you can pull back and say, “This is ridiculous.” You save yourself a lot of trouble and you save yourself a lot of grief. By getting a sense of perspective and a good sense of humor helps with that. So you figure out which are the little things that require attention, which are the little things that are just extraneous details. The other function of humor is the surprise, the connection that comes with that surprise. That’s been buried underneath your consciousness. And part of you knows it, but the surface level doesn’t admit it. That sudden switch in a frame of reference is what a lot of humor is all about. It’s like modulation in music. You’re running along, you seem to be in one key, and all of a sudden, whoops, you realize you’ve been in another key for a while, and the composure pulls you out. That’s humor in music. For the mind, it’s basically pulling you out of one state of becoming and hopefully putting you into a more skillful one, where things have a different perspective. That’s especially important when you’re trying to keep the mind with a breath and suddenly find that you’re off in some other place. How can you modulate back into the breath as quickly as possible? And sometimes realizing how ridiculous it was that you got involved in that particular distraction to begin with, that helps you drop it really fast. Then that’s a pattern for a lot of our defilements. We get totally obsessed with something, lose perspective. Like lust. You spend all your time thinking about all the beautiful parts of somebody else’s body, forgetting that a good 99% of the body is really not all that attractive. And yet the tenacity of the mind is that it wants to hold on to just those few little things that make the body attractive. When you pull away from it, you begin to realize how ridiculous it was. The same with anger. A little tiny thing can set you off. And some little things are important, and other things are not. But if you have a sense of humor about it, you begin to realize that certain things were just not worth it. And if you don’t watch out, you’re going to cause yourself a lot of grief. So this ability to step back and gain some perspective, gain a new perspective, and put things in their proper list of priorities helps to release the mind from a lot of its burdens, a lot of its cares. That’s how a good sense of humor, as you practice, is strengthening. One of the things I notice about the stories Ajahn Fuen would tell about Ajahn Mun is that we’d focus on Ajahn Mun’s sense of humor. You read the biographies, and it seems to be the last person you’d think had a sense of humor, very serious, very earnest. Well, earnestness does not mean that you don’t have a sense of humor. A sense of humor is a sign of wisdom, because wisdom, of course, is that ability to see things in perspective. And one of the things you’re going to need to undercut your defilements is that element of surprise. This is why, as Ajahn Fuen said, your ingenuity is an important aspect of the path. As you try to figure out new ways of approaching a particular problem, it’s good to be able to toss off some totally ridiculous ideas. Because there may be one that at the beginning seems ridiculous, but it turns out it’s actually going to be the solution to the problem. Ajahn Fuen was telling me that when he was staying with Ajahn Mun, there was a nun’s community down the road. And then there was one of the young nuns there who seemed to get interested in him. She’d fix special food to put in his bowl, and she’d crochet little things for the fork in his spoon. And Ajahn Mun noticed that Ajahn Fuen wasn’t interested in the nun. So he turned his attention to the nun one time. The nun’s community came to him for some instruction. So he asked them how their eight precepts were going. And then he talked about a story with Lady Vesaka, who noticed a group of different groups of people were observing the eight precepts. Young people, old people, men, women, children. So she went around to the different groups and asked them why they were observing the eight precepts. She talked to some old people, and they said they were observing for the sake of heaven. They wanted to go to heaven after they passed away. She went to a group of young women and asked them why they were observing the eight precepts. They said they wanted something better than heaven. They wanted a husband. And that was the last of the special food and the little crocheted things for his spoon and his fork. She got the message. So being earnest in the practice doesn’t preclude a sense of humor. In fact, that sense of humor is an important part to keep your earnestness alive and to keep it from just getting dry and dreary and all tied up in knots. So when you do feel like you’re running up against a dead end, see if you can step back and look for the humor in the situation, because it does help with gladdening the mind and releasing the mind. And learning that you can surprise yourself, that’s a sign that you can also find other new things in the path. Bill Watterson, the cartoonist who did Calvin and Hobbes, commented one time in one of the books I was reading that he noticed that if he couldn’t surprise himself with a particular cartoon, he was wondering if he was ever going to surprise anybody else. Back when I was writing fiction, I was younger, I noticed that if my character surprised me, I knew that I had a character that was really alive. You know, those novels where everything seems so planned out, and it’s obvious that the author has a particular idea, a particular agenda that he or she wants to advance, those are the most boring novels of all. You put them aside because you know where it’s going, because you realize the author couldn’t surprise him or herself. It’s the ones where there is that element of surprise, and you have the sense that even the author was surprised by the characters. It lets the characters have their own life. Those are the novels that live. And it’s the same with your practice. Allow yourself to have an element of surprise. Think of new ideas, new ways of approaching a problem, new ways of solving a problem. Because a lot of the pleasure and the mastery of a skill comes in that element of surprise—things you didn’t anticipate. So be on the lookout for that. Because that’s what gives strength to the practice, and allows you to make it through the dry patches and around some obstacles that, when you think about a problem in your normal, rational, neatly reasoned-out way, don’t seem to have any solutions at all. That’s a sign that you’ve got to think outside the box. And being serious about true happiness doesn’t mean you have to be grim. (bells chiming)

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