

# LANGUAGE, REALITY, EMPTINESS AND LAUGHTER

**Soraj Hongladarom**

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University

## Abstract

This paper begins by exploring the place of laughter in the characterization of the human being and how it is related to reason. It then examines the attitudes towards laughter in Buddhism; from the prohibitions on laughter concerning monks, to the laughing Buddha.

Human beings are the only animals that laugh. Other animals are perhaps too serious to laugh, or they are too preoccupied with their living and finding enough to eat to laugh, or perhaps they do not have the physiological capability to laugh. Or perhaps the two go together, as the emotional sensitivity that would enable an animal to laugh and its physiological makeup go hand in hand. But that is in fact a matter for biology, of which I do not claim any expertise. That laughing is a uniquely human characteristic has been recognized since ancient times. The medieval West sometimes characterized human beings, as animals that can laugh. The quality of risibility is as unique to our species as does rationality. We human beings are both *rational* animals and *risible* animals.

That rationality and risibility are equally properties which characterize the human being gives rise to a thought. Perhaps it is the case that all rational beings are risible beings, and vice versa. But if this is indeed the case, then rationality and risibility may be closer to each other than previously thought. In any case, philosophical reflections on what uniquely identifies human beings have tended to focus almost exclusively on rationality and not much at all on its counterpart. Rationality is the foundation of logic, which underpins systematic communication and thought. It is filled with seriousness and accorded with respectability to such an extent that to claim that one is not rational would be to suggest that one is not a

human being. Risibility, on the other hand, has been consigned to the realm of the 'laughable', that is, the realm of frivolity, playfulness, lightness-in short anything that is opposite to the weighty seriousness that characterizes rationality. What is rather surprising is that when one says of a human being that she does not possess the quality of risibility, one does not appear to be claiming, *ceteris paribus*, that the person in question is not a human being. On the contrary, to say of someone that she lacks the quality of risibility would even seem to be an act of commending her for her seriousness and its associated qualities, such as dependability, earnestness, punctuality, and so on. As rationality and risibility are equally unique human characteristics, this disparity in the attitude toward the two must be pointing toward something that lies deeper in the collective psyche regarding the attitude toward frivolousness and playfulness.

It is therefore not surprising that philosophical reflection on, and academic study of laughter and laughing behavior are much neglected. Philosophers tend to be a serious type; one has the image of such personalities as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, or Hegel, none of whom is known for their playfulness and frivolity. Rationality underlies logic, but exactly what does risibility underlie? Is there some counterpart to logic, in the same way as rationality and risibility are counterparts, that serves as the systematic account of risibility in the same way as logic is the account of rationality? One might then talk of the 'logic' of risibility, the 'logic of laughter'. But then this phrase could itself provoke a lot of laughter, for, as the theorists of comedy were wont to say, laughter originate from an incongruous juxtaposition of things that normally do not go together; hence to put logic and laughter together would perform the same function as a successful comedy show. Nonetheless, a serious look at laughter and laughing would presumably shed light on our predicaments. I said a *serious* look because, for one thing, there is the academic constraint of an essay, which precludes my treatment of the topic as a full-scale comedy. And for another, perhaps the objective detachment which is the hallmark of a philosophical essay would ironically be an appropriate venue for treatment of laughing, in the same way the audience laugh at a comedy as they do not identify themselves with the characters in the play, when they feel that they are safely detached from the slapstick pyrotechnics that take place on stage (or in the film, or on

the television screen). Hence there is a reason to treat of laughter as an object of philosophical reflection. The question is to find out why this uniquely human characteristic fares so badly in philosophy and in the wider academic circles.

According to one of the few philosophical studies of laughter, John Morreall recounts a number of theories on the topic.<sup>1</sup> The first and oldest one is the “Superiority Theory”. According to the theory, laughter occurs as a result on one’s feeling superior to the other, who is the object of laughter. The typical English expression on this kind of laughter is to laugh at someone. For such philosophers as Plato, laughter often occurs when one feels superior to those who think themselves to be wise, good looking, or virtuous, while in fact they are not so. It is a kind of feeling of one’s knowing better than the one who is laughed at; however, Plato maintains that this is actually a kind of vice, a malice toward those who are the object of laughter. Furthermore, Aristotle, while acknowledges that laughter is part of the good life, nonetheless warns that laughter could get people carried away too far when they say jokes designed to evoke laughter, which for Aristotle is always targeted at somebody, and hence those laughing are being inconsiderate toward those who are being laughed at.

The other main theory of laughter is the Incongruity Theory. Laughter occurs as a result of a humorous incident in which incongruous things happen together, evoking the feeling of being *funny*. Suppose somebody is walking on the street, and steps on a banana peel and suddenly performs a somersault. We laugh because of the incongruous nature of the situation. This is not necessary a result of our feeling superior to the unfortunate who is doing the somersault, but the situation itself is a humorous one. There is the usual conceptual pattern which we normally associate with the act of walking, but sudden somersault is not part of it, hence the incongruity.

However, even though the Incongruity Theory seems to do more justice to laughter, it does not necessarily entail that philosophers in general will accept laughter. Morreall lists three major objects against laughter in Western philosophy, which he names the Hostility, the Irrationality, and the Irresponsibility Objections. The first objection takes place when one who laughs is usually hostile toward one being laughed at. Hence

laughter according to the Superiority Theory is indicative of a hostile situation, one where people feel competitive to one another. When one falls down having stepped on a banana peel, one is being laughed at because other people feel that they are more fortunate in that it is not they who are falling. This feeling is an opposite of envy. One is envious toward another when one senses that the latter is better than oneself; however, when one feels that one is better than the other, one laughs. Furthermore, the Irrationality Objection holds that laughter is objectionable because it is irrational. For Plato, laughter is a kind of emotion, and as such it deserves at best a second tier among the hierarchy described in the Republic. Reason is to reign supreme and laughter has no place there because it is always making fun of reason. The third objection, the Irresponsibility Objection, holds that laughter is non-serious, and hence does not deserve a place either in Plato's Republic or anywhere else for that matter. That is why Aristotle said: "serious things are intrinsically better than humorous things or those connected with amusement, and the activity of the better of two things-whether two men or two parts or faculties of a man-is the more serious (quoted in Morreall, Rejection of Humor)".<sup>2</sup> Laughter is objectionable because it is an irresponsible act. One who laughs typically looks at things in a playful mode, and it is likely, according to the objection, that one who operates in this mode is not to be trusted with any important tasks. Morreall cites a situation where one's car is stuck in a muddy ditch, if, instead of seriously trying to get the car out of the mud, one laughs at the spinning wheels and the revving engine, then presumably one is not being serious in getting the car out of the undesirable situation.

These philosophical attitudes toward laughter, moreover, do not happen only in the West. It is also there in the philosophical traditions of the East, and the attitudes deserve no less attention than its Western counterpart. Buddhism has a very interesting attitude toward laughter, even though the topic is not treated fully in the canonical text. An image that one in the West recalls to mind when one hears the word 'Buddha' is that of a fat, kind and laughing monk. So there seems to be at least a connection between the Buddha and laughing, even though such a connection may be based on not much more than popular imagination based on certain types of Buddha images. Nonetheless, something must be there al-

ready as a source of the popular imagination. Perhaps there is a more intimate connection between laughter and the Buddha. The core teaching of Buddhism, the doctrine of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*), claims that nothing whatsoever is imbued with inherent existence. So the Buddhas and bodhisattvas laugh as part of the playfulness that regards all things as insubstantial and fleeting—the laugh of those who are utterly liberated from the bondage of the samsaric world.

## I

Buddhism is not always like this, however. The original canonical text of Buddhism, the Tipitaka, does not speak much of laughter, and when it does, it treats of laughter as something to be avoided by the monks. The Vinaya, the part of the *Tipitaka* that deals with the monastic code, has an injunction against laughing, especially if the laugh occurs in the neighborhood of a household. According to the *Vinaya*, the monk should not open up their robes, laugh loudly, rock himself to and fro near a household, because that would invite disrespect to the monks. Another injunction is against monks who tickle fellow monks.<sup>3</sup> Usually in the *Vinaya* whenever the Buddha declared a monastic rule, there was a story behind the declaration that led him to lay down the rule. One day a monk named Chabbaggiya played with a fellow monk by tickling the latter with his fingers. The fellow monk laughed so much that he hyperventilated and died. When the Buddha learned about the incident, he reproached Chabbaggiya and laid down the rule that monks were not to tickle their fellow monks with their fingers.

In the Sūtras, which were the main body of the Buddha's teaching, there are also a few places where laughter is mentioned. In the *Tālaputta Sutta*,<sup>4</sup> the Buddha was repeatedly asked by a dancer and a musician named Tālaputta about the consequences of dancing and music making and making other people laugh. He told the Buddha that he had heard his former teacher say to him that those who did something like this would be reborn in the company of the mirthful god Pahasa. Tālaputta would like to know from the Buddha whether what he had heard was true. At first the Buddha did not want to answer this question, but after

being asked by Tālaputta as many as three times, the Buddha said that it was wrong that such dancers and musicians who made others laugh through words which were sometimes true and sometimes false would be reborn in heaven with the god Pahāsa. Instead, the Buddha said, those dancers and musicians would be reborn either in hell or as animals. When Tālaputta heard the Buddha's words, he cried. The Buddha then said to him that he should not have asked him about the consequences of the action of such dancers and musicians. Tālaputta then told him that the reason why he was crying was not because he was sad that these dancers would actually have to go to hell or the animal realm, but because he was deceived by his fellow dancers and musicians as well as his former teachers that such dancers and musicians would be reborn in heaven. Tālaputta appreciated the Buddha's teaching so much that he compared the teaching with "turning over things which have been closed down, opening things that have been closed, telling the way to a blind person with the intention that those who have eyes would see the way". He then asked the Buddha to give him permission to become a monk and eventually become an *arhat*, or one who is liberated so that he will not be reborn.<sup>5</sup>

The point of the story is that it is wrong for one to cause another to laugh. Chabbaggiya was rebuked by the Buddha for his playfulness and mischievousness. Many texts in the *Vinaya* were about Chabbaggiya laughing out loud so that others could see all his teeth, or causing a commotion in the village with his loud shouts, or rocking himself to and fro.<sup>6</sup> As a result of Chabbaggiya's acts, the Buddha banned all laughing in the vicinity of the lay householders altogether, except only in the case of illness, being unaware, only smiling not letting others to see the teeth, and losing one's mind. He also banned shouting out loud and rocking oneself to and fro. For the monks these actions are not conducive to a good behavior of a monk, which should always be focused toward realizing the goal of Enlightenment, and as Chabbaggiya's action shows, these actions do not seem to be so conducive. Moreover, monks who laugh out loud and shout very loudly in the presence of the lay householders might cause the latter to lose respect for the monks themselves.

In the *Tālaputta Sutta*, the message seems to be that dancers, musicians, actors and the like are quite likely to be reborn in the lower realms as a result of their action. Causing others to laugh through "false

or true words” quite clearly means to provide entertainment to others through imaginative and creative works such as story telling and play-acting. These are not encouraging words to the actors, dramatists and poets at all. One is reminded of Plato’s banishment of actors and poets out of the Republic. The reason given by the Buddha why the actors and playwrights will go to the lower realms was that the action of these dancers and actors caused the audience to have defilements that they did not have before. Before they watched the play, for example, they were not desirous, angry, or deluded (which are the three main defilements that prevent one from attaining Liberation), but only became so after watching it. They were “caused to laugh through true or untrue words”, and when they laughed they presumably lost their control over their minds and became enslaved by the defilements and the passions. Hence, the Buddha said that the dancers, musicians, and actors who caused others to have these defilements incurred bad karma through their action.

The attitude reflected in the Sutta toward laughter is quite clear. Laughter is just a step away from being born again in hell or the animal realm. Monks are not permitted to laugh out loud (smiles that do not expose the teeth were all right). This is because when one laughs, one seems to be mired in the net of the defilements. The pleasure of laughing, then, is part and parcel of sensual delight and desires, none of which is conducive to the realization of Liberation, or nirvāna.

It is thus rather perplexing how this negative attitude toward laughter could fit with the popular image of what is usually thought of as the laughing Buddha.<sup>7</sup> If laughing is indeed to be avoided, then why is the Buddha himself laughing? In a later text in the Mahayana tradition,<sup>8</sup> the *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* (Discourse on the Descent to Lanka), which is about the doctrines of Mind Only and Emptiness, there is the following passage. The Buddha was laughing very loudly after learning that Ravana, the Lord of Lanḍā, understood the profound meaning of the Teaching:

Then the Blessed One beholding again this great assembly with his wisdom-eye, which is not the human eye, laughed loudly and most vigorously like the lion-king. Emitting rays of light from the tuft of hair between the eyebrows, from the ribs, from the loins, from the Śrivatsa [*svastika*]

on the breast, and from every pore of the skin, –emitting rays of light which shone flaming like the fire taking place at the end of a kalpa, like a luminous rainbow, like the rising sun, blazing brilliantly, gloriously-which were observed from the sky by Sakra, Brahma, and the guardians of the world, the one who sat on the peak [of Lankā] vying with Mount Sumeru laughed the loudest laugh....<sup>9</sup>

Compare this with Chabbagiya’s laugh and there is a world of difference. Of course Chabbagiya is an ordinary monk and the Buddha is the Enlightened One. But what is important for us here is the attitude toward laughter shown in the two texts. In the Pāli *Vinaya* and in the *Tālaputta Sutta*, laughter is seen to be something that should be avoided. It opens the floodgate of emotions which could lead one astray toward surrendering oneself to the defilements. The Buddha, however, “laughs the loudest laugh” and “most vigorously like the lion-king”,<sup>10</sup> and emits “rays of light which shone flaming like the fire taking place at the end of a kalpa”. The difference could not be greater. The Buddha’s laughter, however, is not the kind that could lead him to the door of defilements. The Buddha is utterly pure and is utterly free from such lowly possibilities. His laugh is a resplendent, confident one, the laughter of one who has completely destroyed all possibilities of even the slightest and most subtle of the defilements. It is the expression of one who is full of compassion and love, a reflection of pure, transcendent happiness.<sup>11</sup>

But if this is so, then laughter in itself is not to blame. The emphasis of the early teaching found in the Pāli *Tipitaka* and the monastic code is on training of newly ordained monks. It makes sense to guard against monks laughing, rocking themselves to and fro and tickling fellow monks, because the purpose of monks is to study and to train oneself on the path laid down by the Buddha leading toward eventual Liberation. In the *Tālaputta Sutta*, the Buddha told the musician and dancer who asked him repeatedly that the lower realms awaited them because they were leading their audience away from the Path. Causing others to laugh through true and untrue words was censured because it prevents Liberation to them. Here laughter is accompanied with allowing oneself to be indulged in the sensual pleasures of the samsaric world, but as we have just seen in the

Buddha's own case, laughter does not have to be so accompanied, as the Buddha himself laughs.

Back to the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, when the Buddha laughs out loud, the great assembly of Bodhisattvas question why:

... At that time the assembly of the Bodhisattvas together with Sakra and Brahma, each thought within himself:

“For what reason, I wonder, from what cause does the Blessed One who is the master of all the world (sarva-dharma-vaśavartin), after smiling first, laugh the loudest laugh? Why does he emit rays of light from his own body? Why, emitting [rays of light], does he remain silent, with the realisation [of the Truth] in his inmost self, and absorbed deeply and showing no surprise in the bliss of Samādhi, and reviewing the [ten] quarters, looking around like the lion-king, and thinking only of the discipline, attainment, and performance of Rāvana?”

At that time, Mahāmati the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva who was previously requested by Rāvana [to ask the Buddha concerning his self-realisation], feeling pity on him, and knowing the minds and thoughts of the assembly of the Bodhisattvas, and observing that beings to be born in the future would be confused in their minds because of their delight in the verbal teaching (*deśanapañha*), because of their clinging to the letter as [fully in accordance with] the spirit (*artha*), because of their clinging to the disciplinary powers of the Śrāvakas, Pratyekabuddhas, and philosophers, –which might lead them to think how it were that the Tathagatas, the Blessed Ones, even in their transcendental state of consciousness should burst out into loudest laughter –Mahāmati the Bodhisattva asked the Buddha in order to put a

stop to their inquisitiveness the following question: “For what reason, for what cause did this laughter take place?”

Said the Blessed One: “Well done, well done, Mahāmati! Well done, indeed, for once more, Mahāmati! Viewing the world as it is in itself and wishing to enlighten the people in the world who are fallen into a wrong view of things in the past, present, and future, thou undertakest to ask me the question. Thus should it be with the wise men who want to ask questions for both themselves and others. Rāvana, Lord of Laṅkā, O Mahāmati, asked a twofold question of the Tathagatas of the past who are Arhats and perfect Buddhas; and he wishes now to ask me too a twofold question in order to have its distinction, attainment, and scope ascertained-this is what is never tasted by those who practise the meditation of the Śrāvakas, Pratyekabuddhas, and philosophers; and the same will be asked by the question-loving ten-headed one of the Buddhas to come”.<sup>12</sup>

The Buddha answered Mahamati that the reason he was laughing was because Rāvana asked him questions in order to understand the teaching further, which shows that he was on the correct path. In short the Buddha laughed out of his satisfaction and his being pleased that Rāvana, the King of Lanka, understood the heart of the teaching. These questions, said the Buddha, will be asked by those who will themselves become Buddhas in the eons to come. Hence he is immensely pleased, and those who are aware of the basic Mahāyana doctrine would know that, in order for one to become a Buddha, one has to undertake the vow of *bodhicitta*, which means one commits oneself to practice in order to become a Buddha so that one is fully empowered to help sentient beings out of the sufferings of the samsaric world. When one has *bodhicitta*, any action that one does, every movement, every breath one takes, will be for the sake of other sentient beings. Śāntideva said in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

that all the Buddhas in the past have taken the bodhicitta vow, and all future Buddhas will also do the same.<sup>13</sup> Seeing the King of Lanka committing himself to learning and understanding the Dharma, the Buddha is thus very happy because he sees in Rāvana an awakening of bodhicitta, which will eventually lead him to become himself a Buddha.

## II

What does it mean, then, to be a Buddha? It means one who completely sees reality as it is with no distortion whatsoever. Here is where the relation between language and reality comes in. In seeing things completely as they are without any distortion or fabrication, a Buddha realizes that language itself is a distorting medium, and that there is no way getting around it. The distortion is built into the inner mechanism of language itself. In *Mulamadhayamakārika*, a seminal text written by Nāgārjuna, the emphasis is precisely on this point. Nāgārjuna attempts to lay down in a systematic manner what it means for things to be “empty of their inherent nature”. In other words, Nāgārjuna in this work presents an exposition and a system of arguments for the Doctrine of Emptiness. Basically what the doctrine says is that things as they normally take them to be, i.e., as things with some kind of inner characteristics that identify them to be what it is, are what they are only by virtue of their being essentially dependent on their environment and on other things. Nothing stands alone and derives their being solely through itself.

In short, Nāgārjuna argues that language never adequately represents reality. Western philosophers will immediately be familiar with this conclusion. For a typical Western mind, this is reminiscent of idealism, the idea that the mind never captures reality fully, and as a result the mind somehow constructs its own “reality”, which only approximates reality as it is in itself. However, Nāgārjuna presents a series of arguments showing that such is not the case. The Buddhist Doctrine of Emptiness is not guilty of being an idealistic position, if that is taken to be the position that the mind constructs its own reality. The reality for Nāgārjuna is no more or less than the empirical reality that we interact with everyday. Things are empty of their inherent nature when their being depend on others, and

their dependence on other beings also show that they are empty of their inherent nature.

Perhaps the key passage where Nāgārjuna discusses this empty nature of things is the following:

That which is dependent origination  
Is explained to be emptiness.  
That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle way.<sup>14</sup>

Things that are dependently originated are said to be empty. That is to say, they lack their inherent nature as to ascertain that they are the things they are and nothing else. This alone might not sound so surprising for Western philosophers. However, Nāgārjuna is actually saying that whatever we language users designate a certain thing to be what it is, perhaps when we designate this clump of matter as a glass, we are employing our conceptual apparatus which consists of words that serve to distinguish instances of the meaning of the words from everything else. Thus, when we say of something that it is a glass, we immediately block out some other things not to be a glass and when we say of another thing it is also a glass we presuppose some common characteristics that enable us to agree that this is also a glass. For Nāgārjuna, all this is conceptual fabrication. However, Nāgārjuna's position is not to be conflated with that of Immanuel Kant, who distinguishes between the known phenomenon and the unknowable noumenon. For Kant, the noumenon is there in objective reality, functioning as a foundation for objectivity. For Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, what is understood by Kant to be the noumenon itself is also "empty". There is nothing over and above conceptual fabrications; everything that we designate as such and such is in fact what it appears to the conceptualizing mind. There is nothing deeper than the appearances. One becomes liberated from sufferings when one realizes that there is nothing deeper, when one, that is, knows that things are what they are only in virtue of their dependence on others. And an important aspect of the dependence is that of the things as they are on conceptual designation. The difference with Kant is that for Nāgārjuna there is no bedrock reality which one conceptualizes and designates. The act of conceptualization

and designation itself is part of the empty nature of the total reality. Thus, dependent origination is but one way emptiness is characterized. Emptiness itself, then, is said to be “a dependent designation”, and is itself the “middle way”. It is a middle way between the two extremes of nihilism and essentialism. The former claims that there is nothing at all, and the other claims that things have their internal essences. The Buddha refutes both positions, and thereby releases language from being tied up with reality. This release does not mean that we are now floating in the air of non-substantiality and non-objectivity; on the contrary, things, being designated and understood as they always are, are already there, only that they are understood ultimately to depend on each other, and their being what they are is due only to designation.

This is the main difference between the aryas who have attained the understanding, and the non-aryas, who are yet so to understand. And when the Buddha laughs, he does so out of the complete understanding that all things are but appearances and insubstantial. The laugh arises out of the mind that pervades all corners of reality and is completely filled with great compassion. It is a laugh that is totally free from any trace of dualistic thinking. However, when he rebuked Chabbagiya when he came to the village laughing loudly and rocking himself to and fro, he did so out of his concern for the order of the monastic community. Prohibiting laughing out loud so that one bares one’s teeth is part of the training that monks have to undergo in order to rid them of their lay habits and so that they become more focused toward the task at hand, which is to practice the teaching in order to become liberated.

Thus, there are two kinds of laughs. Chabbagiya’s is the kind of laughing that should be restrained, for Chabbagiya has not liberated himself yet. It is a mundane laugh that is confined within the samsaric world. And when we come to Tālāputta’s story, this prohibition against laughing from within the viewpoint of *samsāra* is more pronounced. The Buddha told Tālāputta that those who dance, sing and act so as to cause others to laugh would go to the lower realms, but the story is limited only to the case where the musicians and actors did cause their audience to become desirous when they are not desirous before or to become angry when they are not angry before. It does not say anything of the opposite role of the performing arts in bringing about an eradication of these defilements

and engendering wisdom in the audience. What would the Buddha say about that?

### III

If laughing in itself is not to blame, as the Buddha himself also laughs, then acts such as acting in a play, singing, dancing, performing music and so forth are not to blame in themselves either. For their reproachable character is entirely due to the fact that they are used to induce people to turn away from the Teaching. However, in themselves it seems at least plausible that these performing arts could be used in the opposite way, that is to bring people to the Teaching. Nowadays in Thailand one finds many CD's coming out which are artistic expressions of the Buddhist Teaching. A popular CD in Thailand features a rendition of the *Jinapanjara*, a very popular protection chant in Pali. In the CD the text of the chant is set as lyric of a piece of modern music made through the modern studio production. The music sounds similar to the soft pop music one usually hears in department stores in Bangkok. Now, if all musicians who presumably cause their listeners to laugh (or by extension, cause them to have the pleasure of listening) will go straight to hell or preta realms after their demise, then these musicians who produced the *Jinapanjara* CD will also suffer the same fate. However, it is doubtful that they will ever suffer that fate; on the contrary, Buddhists believe that they will go to heaven and will collect their merit so that they will become liberated themselves in the future. This is a direct result of their very good karma in producing music that is inductive to people's turning to the Dharma. But if this is indeed so, then laughing is not such a bad thing in Buddhism after all.

In fact the use of art in Buddhism is not a recent phenomenon at all. Almost from the time of the Buddha himself artists have expressed their reverence to the Buddha through their arts. Sculptors made likeness images of the Buddha only a few centuries after the Master's death, and there were countless paintings depicting aspects of his lives and those of the disciples. Poets have written praises of the Master's teachings and activities. In Thailand, monks chant the story of Vessantara, the present

Buddha's last human rebirth before becoming the Buddha, story which was very beautifully written and contained all kinds of artistic expressions one can find. Sometimes the monks also gave teachings in the form of dialogs between two monks, and the content could become rather rowdy and hilarious, much to the delight, and laughter, of the lay audience. Phra Phayom Kalyano, a well known abbot in Nonthaburi, Thailand, is well known for his comic sermons, which are highly sought after items published in CD's and cassette tapes known to every Thai Buddhist. The sermons amply show witticisms and jokes that most people love. If the Buddha's words to Tālaputta are taken too seriously, then, Phra Phayom himself risks having his next rebirth in the lower realms.

Here is an example of Phra Phayom's talk:

### **An Ungrateful Person**

One morning I went on an alms round to Grandma Chuen's house and saw her own dog attacking her. So I asked, "Whose dog is this?" Grandma Chuen said, "He's my dog". "Then why is he biting you?" "This is the mating season and this dog is being attached to a female dog. Perhaps he thinks I am taking away the bitch from him", Grandma said. Now let us look at how powerful lust is. It is so powerful that even a dog become disloyal to its owner. We human beings are no different. Let's think about it. When they become teenagers and begin to have girlfriends [or boyfriends]. They take their [boyfriends or] girlfriends home. The mother looks at the friend and thinks that the girlfriend [or boyfriend] might not be a good one and will cause troubles to her child. So she tells her child not to take this one as [boyfriend or] girlfriend. "I don't like [him or] her", says the mother. Only that, and the children just drive the mother away! "You don't interfere with my life!" "It is my business!" Do you see? When they are in heat they are biting their owners!<sup>15</sup>

Phra Phayom is a very popular monk who has the rare ability to mix the Buddha's serious message with humor. One might say that the

humor has an auxiliary role in aiding the transmission of the message to an average Thai teenager, who is always open to a good joke but not often a Dharma teaching. But perhaps the humor and the laughter it evokes is not a mere auxiliary; it seems to be an integral part of the message itself. This does not mean that the message itself, that of the dangers of sexual desire, incorporates humor and laughter into itself, but the Buddhist message is how to find ways to bring people to understand it such that they eventually find a way toward ridding themselves of the defilements. Here, then, the humor functions more than a mere mask over the message. As humor is designed to get a message across to certain types of audience which would not be receptive otherwise, humor then functions as a “skillful means” (*upāya*), which is indispensable from the message itself. In short, the *upāya* itself is the message. As laughter and humor are the *upāyas* that draw the teenage Thais’ attention to Buddhist teachings, the teachings themselves are also *upāyas* purporting to plant a seed in the minds of Phra Phayom’s listeners so that one day they would eventually become enlightened.

The Buddha’s warnings against humor and laughter find analogies with Morreall’s taxonomy of objections against laughter in Western philosophy. The Buddha warned Chabbagiya against laughing out loud in the vicinity of the lay household because he did not want the lay people to feel disrespectful toward the monks. Having established the sangha for only a short time, the Buddha felt that he needed the lay householder’s support. Here laughing is an act which could bring disrepute to the entire Sangha community, which sounds like an instance of the Irresponsible Objection. The Buddha told Talaputta that those who sing and dance will go to the lower realms because they cause their audience to laugh, so laughing here means that one loses oneself and opens the mind’s door to the negative influences of the defilements. Laughing is in this case a way toward the lower realms and away from Liberation. In any case, the attitude toward laughter looks similar.

Nonetheless, when one comes to the Buddha himself in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, the attitude toward laughter changes dramatically, as we have seen. Phra Phayom’s dharma teachings show that it is possible to mix humor with serious teaching, and that humor itself functions as a skillful means. If this is indeed the case, then it is not conceivable that

Phra Phayom himself will be reborn in a lower realm, since he is accomplishing precisely what the Buddha himself would like his disciples to do, namely to practice the teaching and to spread it across. However, it seems that Phra Phayom is performing an act designed to provoke laughter, which according to the *Talaputta Sutta* is objectionable. Here the solution can be found in the motivation behind the act. When the Buddha tells Tālaputta that singers and dancers will be reborn in a lower realm, the context is that these singers and dancers arouse the feelings of defilements (greed, anger, delusion) in the audience. When the Sutta itself is looked at as a skillful means, then one sees that it is only because one's action leads others to cherish the defilements that it will lead him or her to a lower realm. If it is the intention of those singers and dancers to lead them toward the defilements, then they will certainly face the consequences. And even if they perform their act out of professional duty to cause others to laugh, but with no intention to use the laughter as a ladder toward eventual Liberation, then they would quite possibly face the same consequences. However, Phra Phayom's motivation in his joking teachings is to pave the way toward the Goal for his audience; since this lies outside the context of *Tālaputta Sutta*, then he is not guilty of leading people astray and will not go to a lower realm as a result.

If this is indeed the case, then laughter and humor themselves are not to blame. If one laughs and as a result of that one gains Enlightenment, then by all means laugh. This is supported by the fact that the Buddha himself also laughs. Now let us go back to the text from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*:

Then the Blessed One beholding again this great assembly with his wisdom-eye, which is not the human eye, laughed loudly and most vigorously like the lion-king. Emitting rays of light from the tuft of hair between the eyebrows, from the ribs, from the loins, from the Srivatsa [*svastika*] on the breast, and from every pore of the skin, —emitting rays of light which shone flaming like the fire taking place at the end of a kalpa, like a luminous rainbow, like the rising sun, blazing brilliantly, gloriously—which were observed from the sky by Śakra, Brahma, and the guardians

of the world, the one who sat on the peak [of Lankā] vying with Mount Sumeru laughed the loudest laugh.

The Buddha is looking at the assembly of his followers through his wisdom eyes, meaning that what he sees is beyond the normal visual perception, but only through profound understanding of reality. He laughs loudly like the lion-king. Lion is the king of the jungle; he has no fear whatsoever and can do anything he pleases, being completely untainted by guilt or limitations. Laughing the loudest laugh, the Buddha emits light rays from all the pores of his body, causing the cosmos to shine as bright as the all consuming fire that engulfs and burns everything at the end of a cosmic eon. Seeing the world through his wisdom-eye, the Buddha laughs and emits this blazing rays that outshine everything in the universe.

The laugh and the rays go together. The laugh sends out sounds throughout all corners of the universe, and the rays do likewise for light. Usually when the Buddha sends out rays, it is for the sake of helping sentient beings to realize the truth, as the rays of light dispels the darkness of ignorance. Seeing that the Rāvana is desirous to learn the Dharma, the Buddha is very pleased and laughs out loud. It is the pleasure of those who are always intent on helping sentient beings get across the ocean of *sam̐sāra* where they have been pointlessly born and died many, many times. Laughter, then, is an expression of the pleasure obtained from seeing someone realizing the Dharma. The laughter is that of infinite wisdom, which also expresses itself as the rays of light. Likewise, those who listen to Phra Phayom's talks, laugh, and enter the stream toward Liberation are laughing not at a particular being, but their laughter is a pure one of one who is about to get on the shore of Liberation.

Furthermore, it is inconceivable that Phra Phayom himself would have to go to the lower realms, as seems to be implied in the *Tālaputta Sutta*. Causing others to laugh in this sense is a far cry from the followers of the god *Pahāsa* who, causing the audience to laugh and to have a good time, do have to go to the lower realms because they have caused others to neglect the way toward Liberation and to increase their defilements as a result. On the contrary, Phra Phayom is not using humor as an end in itself. He is not a comedian, but he is a monk who is very skillful at telling

jokes in order to get the audience's attention so that they being to understand the Dharma. It is indeed true that some of the audience might not be able to catch the real message, but that is to be expected. Listening to Phra Phayom's teaching is still better than being engaged in mere play and entertainment simply because the teaching is there, which in his talk it is quite difficult to separate from the *upāya* of humor and the resultant laughter. Motivation is everything in the Buddhist thought.

#### IV

Of course there is a world of difference between the laugh of the Buddha, and that of an ordinary sentient being after hearing Phra Phayom's dharma antic. What they share in common, however, is that attitude toward laughing and humor, which is opposite to that found in Plato, Aristotle, or Hobbes. The Buddha's injunction against laughing in public places and his admonition to Tālaputta not to ask him the question that eventually saddens himself arises out of his compassionate mind, seeing that for those who are just beginning the practice, some restraint against laughter is sometimes necessary. Everything is an *upāya*. The Buddha is not saying that things are thus and so, period. Everything he says is aimed at helping his listener realize the Path. When he teaches that things are always changing, it is with the intention to bring the audience to renounce the world, which is a necessary first step toward Liberation. When he teaches that things are dependent on one another, it is also with the same intention. The reason why the Buddha never states anything categorically is that if he were to do so, that would run counter to his own teaching of impermanence and emptiness. Things are empty of their inherent nature. Consequently, to say of things as if they had fixed characteristics would run counter to this teaching. If things are empty of their inherent nature, it would not be possible for words and sentences to fix them. After all, words and sentences do not have their inherent nature either.

Those who object to laughter typically think that laughter is subversive. When one has constructed some point of view meant to be taken seriously and accepted as a doctrine, a good laugh at such a construction destroys its serious intent and its underlying motivation that the point of

view should be accepted as a general principle. There is little wonder, then, that in Umberto Eco's famous novel, *The Name of the Rose*,<sup>16</sup> Aristotle's lost treatise on comedy would eventually have to be destroyed. For those who want things to be fixed so that it functions as a fulcrum point for fixed essence and stable meanings would not be able to tolerate laughing and humorous jokes since these will peel away the serious façade of the purportedly stable and fixed essences upon which they would like to build up a cathedral of secure knowledge. But this is precisely those things that the Buddha is laughing at. The laugh is not of a kind mentioned by Plato, where laughter is always directed at somebody at the latter's expense. What the Buddha is laughing at is the folly of believing and taking seriously those that cannot be taken seriously at all, namely that language could represent reality in a fixed manner. For the laughing Buddha, every word is a skillful means. Nothing is meant to convey the meaning that things are forever thus and so. Things are only 'thus and so' if such being 'thus and so' succeeds in leading the listener to realize the Path. One laughs at the humorous incongruity of language and reality, as an integral part, an expression, of Emptiness itself.<sup>17</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>John Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought", *Philosophy East and West* 39.3(1989): 243-265.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in John Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought", p.255. The original is from the *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6.

<sup>3</sup>The *Vinaya Pitaka*, Vol. 2, Māhavibhanga Part II (Bangkok: Department of Religious Affairs, B. E. 2530 [1987 C.E.]), pp.509-510 [in Thai].

<sup>4</sup>The *Suttanta Pitaka*, Vol. 18, Samyutta Nikāya, Salayatana Vagga (Bangkok: Department of Religious Affairs, B. E. 2530 [1987 C.E.]), pp.336-338 [in Thai].

<sup>5</sup>The *Suttanta Pitaka*, Vol. 18, Samyutta Nikāya, Salayatana Vagga, pp.336-338.

<sup>6</sup>Bhaddagavatara, in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, Vol. 7, Culla Vagga Part II (Bangkok: Department of Religious Affairs, B. E. 2530 [1987 C.E.]), pp.185-187 [in Thai].

<sup>7</sup>In fact the familiar statues of the 'laughing Buddha' that adorns many Chinese temples are those of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, who is due to become the next Buddha in the future.

<sup>8</sup>It will be apparent in the course of this paper that the Buddha in the Theravāda and Māhāyana texts are much different. The Buddha appears in the

Theravada tradition as a historical person who organized a group of followers and established the Vinaya rules. However, in many Mahayana texts he appears as someone who is utterly beyond the human form. This is a skillful means showing that the Buddha in the Mahāyana tradition is not to be understood literally as someone who actually possess these characteristics in concrete reality, but more as an embodiment of certain transcendent qualities. See, e.g., Malcolm David Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, available at [http://lirs.ru/do/lanka\\_eng/lanka-chapter-1.htm#chap1](http://lirs.ru/do/lanka_eng/lanka-chapter-1.htm#chap1), accessed 29 January 2008. Somparn Promta remarked that the Thai translation of 'laugh' in the Sūtra did not use the word in Thai for 'laugh' but 'perform the lion's roar'; hence there is a point whether the Buddha's 'lion's roar' is in fact laughter or not.

<sup>10</sup>Here, as in note 7, Somparn Promta noted that the Buddha's 'laugh' which appears in the text of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, is usually translated as 'a lion's roar' in Thai. The Buddha's lion's roar could well indeed be a laugh; this is a point that merits further study.

<sup>11</sup>One might want to compare the Buddha's laugh here and its implications and presuppositions with Morreall's treatment of Zen Buddhism as an example of a positive attitude toward humor and laughter in his article ("The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought", p.255 and following). What is similar is that laughter could be used as a means toward Liberation. Another article dealing with humor in Zen is Conrad Hyers, "Humor in Zen: Comic Midwifery", *Philosophy East and West* 39.3(1989): 267-277.

<sup>12</sup>*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, available at [http://lirs.ru/do/lanka\\_eng/lanka-chapter-1.htm#chap1](http://lirs.ru/do/lanka_eng/lanka-chapter-1.htm#chap1), accessed 29 January 2008.

<sup>13</sup>Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace transl. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), pp. 35-36. The cited text is from Chapter III, Verses 22 and 23.

<sup>14</sup>Je Tsong Khapa, *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary of Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield transl. (Oxford University Press, 2006), p.503. The verse is from Chapter XXIV, Verse 18 of the root text.)

<sup>15</sup>Available at <http://www.saranair.com/article.php?sid=1525>, accessed February 4, 2008.

<sup>16</sup>Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, William Weaver transl. (London: Vintage, 1998).

<sup>17</sup>Research for this paper has been partially supported by a grant from the National Research University Project, Project no. AS569A and HS1025A, as well as the Thailand Research Fund, grant no. BRG5380009.