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## Language, Reality, Emptiness, Laughs

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# Language, Reality, Emptiness, Laughs

Soraj Hongladarom<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Laughter, especially in connection with philosophy, reality, or language, is not much discussed in the vast literature of Buddhism. In the few places where it is discussed, however, there are two strands. On the one hand, laughter is frowned upon when it is seen as an attraction that leads one astray from the path. This is evident in the *Tālapuṭa Sutta*, where the Buddha says that actors and comedians would find it very difficult to enter the Path. It is also found in the *Vinaya*, where the emphasis is on the proper behavior of monks. The Buddha often rebukes monks who laugh out loud in the villages where householders can see them. The other strand views laughter more positively. This strand is found more in the Mahāyāna literature, where the Buddha laughs when he realizes emptiness, that nothing is substantial. The attitude of Buddhism to-

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ward laughter is conditional. Laughter and playfulness have a soteriological role to play as a skillful means, and Buddhism is not always serious.

## I

According to Aristotle (*Parts of Animals* III.10), human beings are the only animals that laugh. Hence, human beings are both rational animals and laughing animals. The claim that *only* human beings laugh is being much disputed today by current biological research which shows that other animals laugh. However, the fact that both rationality and risibility have been recognized since ancient times in the West as the properties that uniquely identify human beings is curious. There is a tradition that assumes that all rational beings are risible beings, and vice versa. If this is indeed the case, then rationality and risibility may be closer to each other than previously thought. Even though current biological research appears to show that neither rationality nor risibility is the unique characteristic of human beings, the equation of the two properties in Aristotle and the medievals show that at least they should be given equal consideration.

Nevertheless, 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 such that to claim that one is not rational would mean the same as claiming 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 serious. Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, or Hegel are not 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 originates 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 more serious look at laughter and laughing, for example in the form of an academic essay such as this one, would perhaps shed more light on our predicaments. Objective detachment, the hallmark of a philosophical essay, would, ironically, be another more appropriate venue for treatment of laughing, in the same way the audience laughs at a comedy when they do not identify themselves with the char-

acters in the play, feeling that they are safely detached from the slapstick pyrotechnics or other comedy shows that take place on stage (or in the film, or on the television screen). Hence, there is a reason to treat 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 wider academic circles.

In one of the few philosophical studies of laughter, John Morreall recounts a number of theories on the topic (Morreall 1989). The first and oldest one is the Superiority Theory. According to this theory, laughter occurs as a result of one's feeling superior to another who is the object of laughter. The typical English expression of this kind of laughter is to laugh *at* someone. For Plato, however, 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 acknowledging that laughter is part of the good life, warns that jokes targeted at someone may be inconsiderate.

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. Suppose somebody is walking down the street, steps on a banana peel and suddenly performs a somersault. We laugh because of the incongruous nature of the situation. This is not necessarily a result of our feeling superior to the unfortunate who is doing the somersault, but just because the situation itself is humorous. The usual pattern we associate with the act of walking is upset by the sudden somersault; hence, the incongruity.

The Incongruity Theory seems to do more justice to laughter, but it too is the subject of objections from philosophers. Morreall finds three

major objections 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 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.

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 (Morreall 255)."<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 that he or she 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, presumably one is not being serious about getting the car out of the undesirable situation.

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<sup>2</sup>The original is from the *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6.

## II

The various philosophical views on laughter discussed above provide an insight to the role of laughter in Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> The original canonical text of Buddhism, the Tipiṭaka, does not often mention laughter, and when it does, it treats laughter as something to be avoided by monks. The *Vinaya*, the part of the Tipiṭaka 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*, monks should not open up their robes, laugh loudly, and rock themselves to and fro near a household, because that would invite disrespect (*MV* 509-510).

Another injunction is against tickling. 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 fingers.

In the Sūtras, the main body of the Buddha's teaching, there are a few places where laughter is mentioned. In the *Tālapuṭa Sutta* (*SN* 336-338), the Buddha was repeatedly asked by a dancer and a musician, Tālapuṭa, about the consequences of dance and music 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 gods of laughter called *Pahāsa*.<sup>4</sup> Tālapuṭa asked the Bud-

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<sup>3</sup> I am making a distinction in this paper between laughter and joy. The focus on the paper is on laughter, a physical activity that emits sounds and some contraction of the abdominal muscle. Laughter is usually connected with joy, as the latter is a likely cause of the former.

<sup>4</sup> *Pahāsa* is a common noun in Pāli meaning "mirth" or "laughter." It is used in two ways in the Sutta. The actors and comedians mistakenly believe that they would be reborn among the midst of the "gods of laughter" or "gods of *Pahāsa*," but the Buddha corrects them and



dha whether what he had heard was true. At first the Buddha did not want to answer this question, but after being asked by Tālapuṭa 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 Tālapuṭa 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. Tālapuṭa 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. Tālapuṭa 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 (SN 336-338).

The Buddha seems to say causing another to laugh is wrong. 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 (BV 185-187). As a result of Chabbaggiya's acts, the Buddha banned all laughing in the vicinity of the lay householders altogether, with exceptions only for illness, being unaware, smiling without letting others see one's

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tells them that they would be reborn in the "hell of *Pahāsa*" ("hell of laughter") instead. See SN 336-338 for the Thai version and "Talaputa Sutta: To Talaputa the Actor" for the English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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. Moreover, monks who laugh out loud and shout very loudly in the presence of lay householders might cause the latter to lose respect for monks.

In the *Tālapuṭa 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 storytelling 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. Watching the play caused them to become desirous, angry, or deluded (which are the three main defilements that prevent one from attaining liberation). 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 dancers, musicians, actors, and so on who caused others to have defilements incurred a lot of bad karma.

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 (only smiles that do not expose the teeth were permitted). 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 *nirvāṇa*.

If laughing is to be avoided, why is the Buddha laughing?<sup>5</sup> Answers may lie in a later text in the Mahāyāna tradition,<sup>6</sup> the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Discourse on the Descent to Lanka), which is about the doctrines of mind-only and emptiness. The Buddha was laughing very loudly after learning that Rāvaṇa, the Lord of Laṅkā, 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 Śrīvatsa [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 Laṅkā] vying

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<sup>5</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>6</sup> It will be apparent in the course of this article that the Buddha in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts are much different. The Buddha appears in the Theravāda tradition as a historical person who organized a group of followers and established the *Vinaya* rules. However, in many Mahāyāna texts he appears as someone who is utterly beyond the human form. This is a skillful means showing that the Buddha in the Mahāyāna 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., Eckel.

with Mount Sumeru laughed the loudest laugh. . . .  
 (*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*)<sup>7</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 is the attitude toward laughter shown in the two texts. In the Pāli *Vinaya* and in the *Tālapuṭa 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," 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>8</sup>

But if this is so, then laughter in itself is not to blame. The emphasis of the early teaching found in the Pāli Tipiṭaka 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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>8</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 (Morreall 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 Hyers 1989.

on the path laid down by the Buddha leading toward eventual Liberation. In the *Tālapuṭa 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 *saṃsāric* 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.

According to the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, when the Buddha laughs out loud, the great assembly of Bodhisattvas and others thought why such was the case:

. . . At that time, the assembly of the Bodhisattvas together with Śakra 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 *Rāvaṇa*?”

At that time, Mahāmati, the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva who was previously requested by *Rāvaṇa* [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 (*deśanāpāṭha*), 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 Tathāgatas, 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. Rāvaṇa, Lord of Laṅkā, O Mahāmati, asked a twofold question of the Tathāgatas 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.” (*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, Chapter 1)

The Buddha told Mahāmati that he was laughing because Rāvaṇa asked him questions in order to understand the teaching better, showing that he was on the correct path. In short, the Buddha laughed from being pleased that Rāvaṇa, the King of Laṅkā, 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 through the vow of *bodhicitta* whereby any action that one does, every movement, every breath one takes, will be for the sake of other sentient beings, including acts of laughter. Seeing the King of Laṅkā committing himself to learning and understanding the Dharma, the Buddha is thus very happy because he sees in Rāvaṇa an awakening of *bodhicitta*, which will eventually lead him to become himself a Buddha. In that case the Buddha can actually laugh in which case laughing would be an indication of the Buddha's complete freedom from mundane concerns.

### III

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. 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. When the Buddha “laughs the loudest laugh” and “most vigorously like the lion-king,” his laughter is a reflection of his complete freedom, his total release from *saṃsāra*, which is only possible if he is able to perceive reality as it is really is without any distortion. Thus, looking closely at language helps us see why a Buddha laughs in this context—he laughs because realizing the distorting nature of language gives him an inner release, an attainment of total freedom, which is expressed outwardly as a pure laughter. The distortion seen by a Buddha is built into the inner mechanism of language itself, as I shall show below.

In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), 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.” Things as we normally take them to be, i.e., as things with some kind of inner characteristics that identify them to be what they are, do not exist that way; they are what they are only by virtue of their being essentially dependent on their environment and on other things. Nothing stands alone and derives its being solely through itself.

In short, Nāgārjuna argues that language never adequately represents reality. This does not mean that the doctrine of emptiness is idealistic. Reality for Nāgārjuna is no more or less than the empirical reality with which we interact every day. Things are empty of their inherent nature when their being depends on others, and their dependence on other beings also show that they are empty of having an inherent nature.

The key passage can be found in Nāgārjuna’s discussion of the empty nature of things in the following passage (MMK XXIV, 18):

That which is dependent origination  
Is explained to be emptiness.  
That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle way. (Tsong Khapa 503)

Things that are dependently originated are said to be empty; i.e., dependently originated things lack their inherent nature to ascertain that they are the things they are and nothing else. This alone might not sound so surprising for Western philosophers. Nāgārjuna, however, is actually saying that whatever language users designate a certain thing to be, it is that thing. Identifying a specific clump of matter as a “glass,” employs conceptual apparatus consisting of words that serve to distin-



guish instances of the meaning of the words from everything else. Thus, when something is a “glass,” other things cannot be a “glass.” When another thing is also a “glass,” some common characteristics that enables agreement that this thing is also a “glass.”

For Nāgārjuna, all this is conceptual fabrication. Moreover, Nāgārjuna's position does not draw the distinction between the known phenomenon and the unknowable noumenon, like Immanuel Kant. The noumenon is in objective reality, functioning as a foundation for objectivity. For Nāgārjuna, Kant's noumenon itself is also “empty.” Nothing over and above conceptual fabrications exists; everything designated as such and such is in fact as it appears to the conceptualizing mind. The Buddha, on the other hand, refutes both essentialism and nihilism, and in effect releases language from being tied up with reality. This release does equate with 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.

Thus, there are two kinds of laughs. Chabbagiya's is the kind of laughing that should be restrained, for Chabbagiya himself has not yet liberated himself. It is a mundane laugh that is confined within the *saṃsāric* world. And when we come to Tālapuṭa's story, this prohibition against laughing from within the viewpoint of *saṃsāra* is more pronounced. The Buddha told Tālapuṭa 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? As we shall see in the next section,

everything depends on the motivation behind the laughing and inducing others to laugh.

#### IV

If laughing in itself is not to blame, as the Buddha himself also laughs, then acting in a play, singing, dancing, performing music, and so forth are not to blame in themselves either. Their reproachable character is entirely due to the fact that they are used to induce people to turn away from the Teaching.

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 CDs 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 Pāli. In the CD the text of the chant is set as lyric to a piece of modern music made through modern studio production. The music sounds similar to the soft pop music one usually hears in department stores in Bangkok. If 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 the musicians who produced the *Jinapanjara* CD will also suffer. However, Thai 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 conducive to people's turning to the Dharma. If this indeed so, laughing is not such a bad thing in Buddhism after all.

In fact, the use of art, including the comic arts, 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 CDs and cassette tapes known to every Thai Buddhist. The sermons amply show witticisms and jokes that most people love to listen to. If the Buddha's words to Tālapuṭa are taken too seriously, 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 it. 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! (Phra Phayom)

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—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. 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.

In contrast, 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. Laughter, therefore, becomes an act which could bring disrepute to the entire Sangha community, which sounds like an instance of the Irresponsible Objection. The Buddha told Tālapuṭa that those who sing and dance will go to the lower realms because they cause their audience to laugh, merely enjoying the pleasure, 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 *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, the attitude toward laughter changes dramatically, as discussed previously. 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 *Tālapuṭa Sutta* is objectionable. Perhaps the solution can be found in the motivation behind the act. When the Buddha tells Tālapuṭa 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 humorous teachings is to pave the way toward the Goal for his audience; since this lies outside the context of *Tālapuṭa 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, nor are they in themselves obstacles to enlightenment. 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, as we have seen in the previous section. 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 *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 Śakra, Brahma, and the guardians of the world, the one who sat on the peak [of Laṅkā] 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 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 Rāvaṇa 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 *saṃsāra* 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 laugh, and enter the stream toward liberation, laughing not at a particular being, but laughing purely, as 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 *Tālapuṭa 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, must 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 begin to understand the Dharma. Some of the audience might not be able to com-

prehend the real message. Listening to Phra Phayom's teaching is still better than being engaged in mere play and entertainment in response to the teaching, which in his talk it is quite difficult to separate from the *upāya* of humor and the resultant laughter.

## V

A world of difference exists between the laugh of the Buddha and that of an ordinary sentient being after hearing Phra Phayom's dharma antic. What they share, however, is that attitude toward laughing and humor, which is opposite to that found in Plato, Aristotle, or Kant. The Buddha's injunction against laughing in public places and his admonition to Tālapuṭa 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. All of his teachings aim at helping his listener realize the Path. When he teaches that things are always changing, he intends to bring the audience to renounce the world, 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. As a consequence, when the Buddha gives an injunction to someone against laughing, he does so out of his realization that the person would be de-



tracted from the Path if he continues laughing. On the contrary, those who have actually attained the Goal can laugh, a pure laughter that is a reflection of their complete realization.

Laughing can, then, be a serious matter. There is little wonder, then, that in Umberto Eco's famous novel, *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1998), 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 kindways 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 the idea 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.

### Abbreviations

BV *Bhaddagavatara*

MMK *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Tsong Khapa)

SN *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

MV *Mahāvibhaṅga*

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