

"Why Such A Big Deal?":

The Didactic Function of Humor in Tibetan Buddhism

ABSTRACT:

Humor has had a checkered history with religion. To associate the comic closely with the sacred was to invite harsh criticism, ostracism—or worse. This 'anathema' is as much in evidence in Buddhism as with other religious traditions. After all, it was the Buddha himself who uttered: "How can anyone laugh who knows the truths of old age, sickness and death?" But could it be that it is actually the humor-impaired who truly lack faith? I sought to examine the scholastically marginalized phenomenon of humor in religion during a 4-week ethnographic study in Bodh Gaya, India, the birthplace of Buddhism, and Dharamsala, India, the de facto capital of Tibetan refugees. This paper surveys the results of the study, focusing on the extant pedagogical role of humor in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. I conclude that humor holds epistemological significance for the Tibetan Buddhist as a means of generating the paradoxical mindset of detached engagement.

If we try very hard to build something tremendous, really meaningful, powerful—‘I’m really searching for something, I’m really trying to find my faults,’ or ‘I’m really trying to be good,’—then it loses its seriousness, becomes a paper tiger; it is extremely ironic...If you do try to treat life as ‘serious business,’ if you try to impose solemnity upon life as though everything is a big deal, then it is funny. *Why such a big deal?*

-Chogyam Trungpa¹

During my stay in Bodhgaya, I began to notice a strange, if unexpected, phenomenon: Tibetan monks in fits of giggles, laughing at each other, joking and putting each other in headlocks. During every Tibetan class we held with the local lamas, I would sense a cheery-ness, a *joie de vivre*, that made being around them the most delightful thing possible. How could this at all be possible when, I thought, Buddhism was a humorless doctrine of detached austerity? Emptiness, no-self, the three poisons...a Buddhist has little to be happy about (especially Tibetans—all exiles without a home!). But why was Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche always cracking jokes during Dharma talks? And how on earth is a figure as obscene as Aku Tonpa, who in one story sells *penises* to a nunnery, so loved and revered by monks and laypeople alike?²

In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Chogyam Trungpa begins his inquiry into what a ‘sense of humor’ is by first examining what a sense of humor is *not*:

Lack of humor seems to come from the attitude of the ‘hard fact.’ Things are very hard and deadly honest, deadly serious, like, to use an analogy, a living corpse. He lives in pain, has a continual expression of pain on his face. He has experienced some kind of hard fact—‘reality’—he is deadly serious and has gone so far as to become a living corpse. The rigidity of this living corpse expresses the opposite of a sense of humor.

The ‘rigidity’ of this ‘living corpse’ is not unlike the traits identified by Vassilis Sarogolou in his research on religion and humor that characterize a ‘religious person’: “non-acceptance of nonsense in life”, “conservatism”, “respect for tradition and conformity”, “risk avoidance”, and

¹ Chogyam Trungpa. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 110-111.

² Rinjing Dorje, *Tales of Uncle Tompa: The Legendary Rascal of Tibet*. (San Rafael, CA: Dorje Ling, 1997), 37-43

“less openness to ideas”.³ It would appear that from a psychological, and especially from a personality perspective, religion negatively associates with personality traits, cognitive structures and social consequences typical to humor.⁴ Indeed, as many scholars have explored, humor has had a checkered history with religion.⁵ To laugh at religion was to invite harsh criticism, ostracism—or worse.⁶

This ‘anathema’ is as much in evidence in Buddhism as it is in other religious traditions.⁷ In framing his survey of comic traditions in India, Lee Siegel takes “startlingly simple yet utterly disturbing” rhetorical questions posed by the Buddha in the *Dhammapada* (“How can there be mirth or laughter when the world is on fire?”) as evidence that there is little, if any, humor in Buddhist traditions. Conrad Hyers identifies one of the early Buddhological debates concerned:

whether the Buddha laughed, and if so in what manner and with what meaning... There were those among the Buddhist scholastics who clearly would have preferred to believe that the Buddha never laughed at all, especially after his enlightenment experience at Bodhgaya. The Buddha's wisdom and the Buddha's mission seemed to require the ultimate in seriousness, gravity, and solemnity.... The difficulty is that some sutras seem to suggest, if not state outright, that on such and such an occasion the Buddha laughed.⁸

To resolve the contradiction, this “laughter” of Buddha was considered to have been limited to the first (*sita*) of six types of laughter, using a classical scale derived from drama by Bharata, a faint smile, serene subtle and refined.⁹ While the Buddha may have smiled, laughter was

³ Vassilis Saroglou. “Religiousness, religious fundamentalism, and quest as predictors of humor creation.” *International Journal of Humor Research* (9.10 2002): 177-88. It should be noted that the participants of this study were 72 adults, all living on the campus of the Catholic University of Louvain in France, though this did not necessarily correlate to any religious affiliation. Religiousness was assessed by a self-report questionnaire, with questions that included “the importance of religion in personal life” and humor creation was assessed by such scales as the “coping humor” scale.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 177: Saroglou lists these as being: incongruity, ambiguity, possibility of nonsense, low dogmatism and low authoritarianism, playfulness, spontaneity, attraction to novelty and risk, lack of truthfulness and finality, affective and moral disengagement, loss of control and order as implied by emotionality and finally transgression, especially transgressions of prohibitions related to aggression/dominance and sexuality. *Ibid.* p. 177

⁵ See, for example, Umberto Eco, *The name of the Rose*; Jacques Le Goff, *A Cultural History of Humor: From antiquity to the Present Day*; and Conrad Hyers, *And God created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy*

⁶ Todd Leopold, “Is ‘religious humor’ an oxymoron?” *CNN.com* (19 Nov. 2002); Leopold cites a 17th century admonition that banned games, sports, plays and comedies ‘because they didn’t agree with Christian silence, gravity and sobriety’ and was met with an ‘unspecified penalty’.

⁷ Telephone Interview with Lee Siegel, 30 Nov. 2009; In an interview with Lee Siegel, I was encouraged to “consider the sacred and the comic anathema to each other and believe that the degree to which you are religious you have no sense of humor, and that to the degree that you have a sense of humor you can’t be religious”

⁸ Conrad Hyers, *The Ancient Zen Master as Clown-Figure and Comic Midwife. Philosophy East & West* (1970, 10) pp. 3-18

⁹ *Sita* is a common Pali word for ‘a smile’. The specific usage here as an almost imperceptible smile may have been restricted to

something to steer away from. Michael Clasquin notes that for a Buddhist monk in ancient India, “to laugh out loud was an offence, a matter requiring confession and expiation in front of the entire assembly of fellow monastics.”¹⁰ Loud, boisterous laughter, and anything humorous that might cause it, was for the worldling, the unenlightened, *the fool*.

Though he may have only faintly smiled, the Buddha was not an existentialist; though the 1st and 2nd noble truths articulate a ubiquity of suffering that approximates a Sartrean nausea, the 3rd and 4th noble truths speak of a *release* from suffering. Buddhists throughout the centuries and across cultures have found many ways to incorporate humor into their religious lives.¹¹ In the past few years, there has been growing theoretical interest into the role of Humor in Buddhism, especially in Zen.¹² At a recent workshop held in Berkeley, CA (“Does Humor Belong in Buddhism?”; February 9, 2007), papers were presented on topics ranging from the unexpectedly robust comedy of the rules for monks and nuns¹³ to the often-hilarious ‘trash talking’ that would infuse the rhetoric of Tibetan Debate.¹⁴ But little, if no, ethnographic studies have been done examining the extant role of ‘sense of humor’ as it manifests in practice. Thus, in my research, I sought to answer the following question: What purpose does humor serve in Tibetan Buddhism and what, if anything, is its social function or philosophical value, apart from giving pleasure?

As I will later contend, the ‘sense of humor’ running through the Tibetan tradition is not a culturally bound ‘thing’. It is a specific tone operating free from generic restraints. It is best summed up by Chogyam Trungpa, a practitioner of the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions, who is

Buddhist monastic circles. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “What’s so funny about the laughing Buddha?” Proc. of “Does Humor Belong in Buddhism?”, University of California, Berkeley (2007)

¹⁰ Michael Clasquin, “Real Buddhas Don’t Laugh”. In *Social Identities*.(Web), pp. 97-98.

¹¹ Personal Interview Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Director of Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, Tashi Jong, India, November 27, 2009.

¹² Conrad Hyers (*Zen and the Comic Spirit*, 1975) seems to be the pioneer on this front.

¹³ See G. Schopen “The learned monk as a comic figure: on reading a Buddhist Vinaya as Indian literature” and S. Clarke “Locating Humor in Indian Buddhist Monastic Law Codes: A Comparative Approach”.

¹⁴ See G. Dreyfus, “We Will See Who Laughs Last: Dialectic and Rhetoric in Tibetan Debate and the Role of Humor”.

widely remembered for his ‘vibrant sense of humor’: “a sense of humor means seeing both poles of a situation as they are, from an aerial point of view”. A sense of humor “seems to come from all-pervading joy, joy which has room to expand into a completely open situation because it is not involved with the battle between ‘this’ and ‘that’.” It is not “merely a matter of trying to tell jokes or make puns, trying to be funny in a *deliberate fashion*. It involves seeing the basic irony of the juxtaposition of extremes, so that one is caught taking them seriously, so that one does not seriously play their game of hope and fear.”¹⁵

Understanding the Laughter: Methodology

Associate Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart is known to have said that he couldn’t describe pornography, but he “knew it when he saw it”... One might try to say about humor that we know it when we laugh at it.

-Tom Armstrong¹⁶

Perhaps the first question needing to be addressed is what ‘humor’ exactly refers to in my paper. When theorists have studied humor, they have sought to outline necessary and sufficient conditions that are constitutive of humor (e.g. laughter); offer typologies that identify different motives for humor, e.g. Hobbes, who emphasizes the use of humor to demonstrate our superiority over others; or point to its postmodern virtues of ‘indefinite-ness’ and transgression.¹⁷ Although such approaches are interesting, they are beyond the scope of this essay.

Rather than working with or attempting to adduce a ‘general theory of humor’, I chose to recognize humor as *inherently relational* and *context-dependent*—no event, person or thing is intrinsically humorous. As Lafollette and Shanks argue, “it depends upon the circumstances, the teller (if any), the current beliefs of the listeners (or viewers) and the relationship (if any)

¹⁵ Chogyam Trungpa. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 114-115.

¹⁶ Tom Armstrong, “Laughing Your Way To Enlightenment”. In *Hundred Mountain*. (Web), p. 2.

¹⁷ Such an ‘incongruity theory’ of humor is traced by Simon Critchley, following John MORreal’s lead, to Fancis Hutcheson’s *Reflections upon laughter* from 1750, through such influential thinkers as Kant, Schopenhaur, and Kierkegaard.

between the teller and the listener.”¹⁸ Humor tends to be audience specific, and is conditioned by cultural assumptions and commonplaces. The question of how or why things come to be funny is similarly defined by culture. “If you’re dealing with yaks all the time,” Wendell, a 5th year student at Sarah College remarked, “you’re gonna find ways to laugh at them.”¹⁹

That belief is essential for humor should not be surprising; even the dullest human can appreciate a ‘knock-knock’ joke more than the cleverest of donkeys. Humor is possible only for agents whose belief-system manifests “hierarchical cognitive richness”, for unless listeners have the ability to view a subject matter from multiple perspectives, then they cannot experience humor²⁰. Even though comedy seems to be suspending, inverting or abandoning cultural norms, such inversions are produced in relation to the cultural orthodoxies from which they emerge. It should therefore be possible to trace humorous events back to significations they have transformed: “humor can be thought of as a means of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives, as each concept cultural established as orthodox simultaneously presents itself for possibility of comic subversion.”²¹ Humor thus, needs to be thought of multilaterally as a term that can refer equally to a genre, a tone and a series of effects (often laughter) that manifest themselves in diverse environments.²² In other words, like the perfect root guru, humor is difficult to *locate*.

This attribute of nonlocatability confounded me in the early stages of my study in Dharamsala, as humor proved to be something eternally elsewhere. It was surely there, in all the

¹⁸ Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks, “Belief and the Basis of Humor”. In *American Philosophical Quarterly*. (1993), p. 332.

¹⁹ Personal Interview with Wendell Hartford, 5th year student at Sarah College, McLeod Ganj, November 26. 2009.

²⁰ Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks, “Belief and the Basis of Humor”. In *American Philosophical Quarterly*. (1993), p. 335.

²¹ Andrew Stott, *Comedy*. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 14.

²² Laughter, though the most immediate meter of humor’s success or failure, does not invariably result from humor; people may laugh because they are uncomfortable, laugh derisively at someone, or may laugh out of insanity. These are *not* forms of humor, so they too are beyond the scope of this essay.

smiles of the lamas and laughter of the Momo Ama-las of McLeod Ganj—but it could not be found when I wanted it. A pattern that was to solidify during my stay began to emerge during my initial interviews with people at my hotel: if I asked whether humor belonged in Buddhism, I was told ‘Yes, 100%’; if I asked what was humorous, I was told there was a vital comic pulse to all of life. And nothing more. Yet in all the bookstores in Bodhgaya, Dharamsala, and Bir, I could find no humor section or humorous books. “There is no money in writing humor books,” one vendor informed me. “People are too busy. A man might read a joke book standing in the shop, but if he is going to spend good money on a book, money that he has worked hard to earn, it must be a book that helps you better yourself.”

All throughout McLeod Ganj, I began to be received by the eponym of the ‘boy looking for humor’—as if it provided a clue to my character—which prompted a smile in some, a quizzical, I-guess-you-can-study-anything-in-the-West look by most, and an ‘ahhhhh...yes’ by *tulkus*.²³ And it soon dawned upon me (as it surely dawned upon Lee Siegel), that a study of society’s humor, done by an outsider, is too meddlesome a project, too invasive, too threatening: “it may appear to be but a masked attempt to study the society’s pettiness and ignorance, its cruelties and indecencies.”²⁴ The study of humor simply demands a different approach. Siegel continues: “Part of the problem lies in difficulties of gathering humor data in other cultures by using traditional methodological techniques of participant observation used in fieldwork. Gathering of humor data requires a different skills and preparation.”²⁵

²³ I interviewed five recognized *tulkus* (reincarnated enlightened Buddhist masters): Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, Choegyul Rinpoche, Tai Situ Rinpoche, Karmapa, and Mingyur Rinpoche. All reacted to the revelation of the object of my study in the same unmistakable (and uncanny) way.

²⁴ Lee Siegel’s project of finding humor in India (as it manifested in the Classical Sanskrit Literature as well as the then-contemporary India) in the 1980’s formed the primary inspiration of this study. Lee Siegel, *Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 414.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 423

It is plainly unfair to ask someone to tell you a joke and give you an example of something that's funny, especially with the subject of dirty jokes. Tibetans are not a bawdy bunch.²⁶ They may have a few neurotic obsessions about sex, and seem to enjoy 'guy talk' as much as the next culture, but they also have a strong sense of shame.²⁷ Tibetan ladies would look askance at the 'liberated' western girl, and blush at the mere mention of a sex joke. The Shechen Monastery lamas (in Bodhgaya) were inordinately embarrassed by even the milder Drukpa Kunley jokes that involved consumption of 'chang' or the deflowering of a *dakini* with his 12-foot penis.²⁸ Dondhup conveyed that even laymen, enjoying the sexual humor hugely, have an acute sense of time and place for these jokes, much of which comes from being inside a 'circle of intimacy'. So I abandoned the 'collect joke, and classify according to motif' approach. That's not to say that I did not hear any jokes. One strategy I adopted that experienced limited success was to tell some jokes, hope that my own self-exposure might open the interviewee up and have it remind them of one they'd heard. [*For a list of jokes, see attached appendix*]

Furthermore, it is worth of note to acknowledge the waning life of a once-bubbling Tibetan humor. "Tibetan humor was something that was very strong," Choegyal Rinpoche reminisced, "but it is now dissipating."²⁹ When she first arrived at Tashi Jong in 1964, Tenzin Palmo was struck by the humor pulsing in the refugee camps: "Though they were extremely poor and traumatized, having lost everything, they was a lightness streaming through their eyes; they were

²⁶ Personal Interview with Samten Dondhup, The Assistant Director of Tibetan Opera at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (and Aku Tonpa actor), McLeod Ganj, November 25, 2009.

²⁷ Ramaswami Mahalingam categorizes Tibet as an 'honor culture', in which he identifies three psychological factors that characterize it: (a) low tolerance of insults; (b) high value on honor and shame; and (c) salience of chastity. "Culture, ecology, and beliefs about gender in son preference caste groups." *Evolution and Human Behavior* (28.5 (2007)), pp. 319-29

²⁸ Drukpa Kunley, also known as "The Divine Madman of the Dragon Lineage", was a great master of Mahamudra. He was well known for his crazy methods of enlightening other beings, mostly women, which earned him the title "The Saint of 5,000 Women". He taught his teachings in exchange for chang. See Keith Dowman, *The Divine Madman*.

²⁹ Personal Interview with Choegyal Rinpoche, Tashi Jong, India, November 28, 2009.

just so jolly, not bitter, and laughing all the time.”³⁰ But now, with the onslaught of globalization, the new generation seems to have lost this ‘sparkle’: “This generation has changed a lot. They are adapting to a modern world, and as such they have become confused: they can’t go back, it’s hard to go forward, and where they’re standing, there’s no meaning.”³¹ Moreover, the living lineage that used to characterize the oral transmission of folktales and jokes has begun to fade with the rise of information technology: “it used to be teacher to student...now it’s man to computer, computer to man.”³²

Not knowing where to find humor (which apparently was in its deathbed), I also could not speak its language. Going into this study, I had basic conversational knowledge of colloquial Tibetan, but not nearly enough of a command of the language to understand the Humor. Humor, as Jake Dalton notes, is probably the least translatable feature of any language: “As anyone who has studied a new language knows, the subtleties of humor are often impossible to grasp and the last to be learned. Humor is so deeply contextual that it frequently requires a native fluency even to be perceived, let alone appreciated.”³³ Thomas Doctor, the translator for Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, also commented on the oddity of Tibetan jokes in particular: “Many Tibetan jokes are rather peculiar...if you translate them, oftentimes nobody laughs.”³⁴ But my question, I believe, still did not necessitate the content; rather, it was about finding the existential and epistemological significance behind it. *Why be funny in a world full of everything is ‘empty of intrinsic nature’?*

³⁰ Personal Interview Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Director of Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, Tashi Jong, India, November 27, 2009.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Personal Interview with Choegyal Rinpoche, Tashi Jong, India, November 28, 2009.

³³ Jake Dalton, “The Limits of Demonic Laughter: Translating Humor in the Buddhist Tantras”. Proc. of "Does Humor Belong in Buddhism?", University of California, Berkeley (2007).

³⁴ Personal Interview with Thomas Doctor, Translator of Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, October 27, 2009.

All things considered, I still made an attempt to find out *what* was funny to Tibetan Buddhists—high or low, monk or lay, man or woman.³⁵ For illustrative purposes I will quote the translation of instances of humor, both literary and experiential, examined in this study; but I concede that knowledge of Tibetan would have certainly made this study more enriched and thematically-guided.³⁶ These instances are not to be taken as an exhaustive account of sites of humor, nor are they to provide the basis for some ‘general theory’ of humor; such an attempt is fruitless, and arguably impossible.³⁷ Many sites regarded for their humor, most notably Tibetan proverbs and folk tales, went largely unexplored.

So after a few days of ‘anthropological litmus-testing’, I began to accept my shortfall, that I would not be able to get as holistic view of humor that I wanted, and instead opted to examine the didactic function (if there was one) of humor as it manifested in four teachers (all Tibetan Buddhist): one literary, the patron-saint of ‘humor’ for Tibetans and beloved trickster Aku Tonpa³⁸; and three from whom I received teachings (Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche, and H.H. the Dalai Lama). In addition to surveying their teaching styles and supplying an in-depth phenomenological analysis (at least of the latter three), I will also pool perspectives from Tibetans and non-Tibetans in Bodh Gaya, Dharamsala, and Bir who have been taught or studied with these teachers. Thus, the study will be both *descriptive*, in its survey of the literary genres and forms which have lent themselves to the manifestation of the comic sentiment, as well as *functional*, inasmuch as I give consideration of the potential teleological, social and

³⁵ Not all participants were surveyed for their level of ‘faith’ or ‘practice’ in the Tibetan Buddhism, nor were they asked to claim a certain lineage (e.g. Kagyu, Nyingma, Sakya or Gelug).

³⁶ That is, understanding the series of persistent themes where the notion of humor is at work

³⁷ Kalsang Khedup writes: “It is said that Aku Tonpa is an incarnation of Lord Avalokiteshvara, who came to Tibet to make the Tibetans witty and clever.” *Tales of Aku Tonpa* (Dharamsala: Tibetan Library of Published Works, 2008), p. 1. Noteworthy here, however, is the subsequent admission of a lack of textual substantiation as to the ‘incarnation-status’ of Aku Tonpa.

³⁸ For example, William Congreve remarked that, “Men are to be laughed out of their vices in comedy....the business of comedy is to delight as well as to instruct.”

psychological functions of the experience of humor. From this, I hope to examine the underlying nature of their humor, a phenomenon historically and scholastically marginalized, and see if it bears a close relationship to authentic spiritual understanding.³⁹

Tibet's Little Rascal: Aku Tonpa

You will not find a Tibetan who does not grin luminously when you simply mention the name 'Agu Tonpa'

-Rinjing Dorje⁴⁰

Trickster figures seem to express contradictions in the societies from which they spring, their meddling, nonsensical or outrageous behavior, the result of competing cultural demands intersecting in the figure.⁴¹ In some cultures, the trickster has religious significance which manifests a didactic form.⁴² William Hynes sees the trickster as a necessary by-product of the social order: "Systems normally busy generating firm adherence to their beliefs also maintain within those belief systems, somewhat contradictorily, a raft of tricksters who perpetually invert and profane those same beliefs. In myth and ritual, tricksters seem to be officially sanctioned exception clauses by which belief systems regularly satirize themselves."⁴³ Tricksters, then, provide an integral check on beliefs to prevent them from becoming too secure in themselves. There is no order too rooted, no taboo too sacred, no god too high, no profanity too scatological that it cannot be broached or inverted by a Trickster. For Tibet, the most popular trickster of this variety is Aku Tonpa.⁴⁴ Not only is Aku Tonpa a trickster who came to make Tibetans clever—

³⁹ From Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's perspective, the stages of spiritual development represent a deep refining of the capacity for humor: "I've always thought sense of humor should be the 7th Paramita". The Paramitas, traditionally six in Mahayana Buddhism (generosity, conduct, diligence, honesty, concentration, and wisdom), are cultivated as a way of purification and helping the aspirant to live an unobstructed life on the way to enlightenment. ³⁹ Personal Interview Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Director of Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, Tashi Jong, India, November 27, 2009.

⁴⁰Rinjing Dorje, *Tales of Uncle Tompa: The Legendary Rascal of Tibet*. (San Rafael, CA: Dorje Ling, 1997), p. ix.

⁴¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*. (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 114.

⁴² Andrew Stott, *Comedy*. (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 55.

⁴³ William J. Hynes, *Mythical trickster figures contours, contexts, and criticisms*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1993), p. 163.

⁴⁴ Of all the tricksters surveyed by Kevin Stuart, Aku Tonpa was the only one unanimously recognized. Dge legs, kun mchog,

he is considered to be the earthly manifestation of Lord Avalokiteshvara (the same status, that is, as H.H. the Dalai Lama).⁴⁵

Anybody who believes that Tibetans have nothing but their religion, that they are a somber and inscrutable meditating bunch, obviously has not heard of Aku Tonpa. Rinjing Dorje's above statement holds true in McLeod Ganj: the mere mention of 'Aku Tonpa' brought laughter and smiles of recognition to everyone, whether high lama or yak herder. Whether this may have been due to the welcome surprise of hearing an 'outsider' have awareness of one's own cultural icon is a moot point. Tibetans cherish "this wily character that easily pokes fun at the rich, the miserly, and the gullible."⁴⁶ 'Aku', a Tibetan avuncular term of endearment, reflects how close he is to the hearts of those who know, tell, and hear his stories.⁴⁷ His ribald tales add a humorous folkloric dimension to a richly entertaining storytelling tradition.

Storytelling is a hugely important aspect of traditional Tibetan oral culture.⁴⁸ Up until recent times in Tibet, Rinjing Dorje writes, "there were professional storytellers who traveled from village to village to tell stories and recite epics."⁴⁹ However, ever since the invasion of Tibet by the People's Republic of China, and the subsequent diaspora of the Tibetan people to far flung places across the globe, the old oral traditions have begun to slowly disappear.⁵⁰ Assimilation into new cultures has forced exiles to adapt accordingly: "Since they're in India now, and

dpal ldan bkra shis, and Kevin Stuart, "Tibetan Tricksters." In *Asian Folklore Studies* (58.1 (1999)), p. 6.

⁴⁵ Curiously, Choegyal Rinpoche disputed Aku Tonpa's *tulku* status, claiming that a teacher and textual legitimacy would be necessary for such a claim to be made. ⁴⁵ Personal Interview with Choegyal Rinpoche, Tashi Jong, India, November 28, 2009.

⁴⁶ Rinjing Dorje, *Tales of Uncle Tompa: The Legendary Rascal of Tibet*. (San Rafael, CA: Dorje Ling, 1997), p. 4.

⁴⁷ Marilyn Stabelein in Rinjing Dorje, *Tales of Uncle Tompa: The Legendary Rascal of Tibet*. (San Rafael, CA: Dorje Ling, 1997), p. 3

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. x

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xi

they're forced to learn three languages just to get around, they just start to forget the old proverbs and use Indian ones.”⁵¹

While some collections of Tibetan tales have been recovered in both the West and China, “many story cycles remain uncollected” and some have been “forever lost”.⁵² But through all of this upheaval and aural erasure, the ribald tales of Aku Tonpa endure for posterity. This due largely in part to the efforts of Rinjing Dorje, whose *Tales of Aku Tonpa* stands as the first English edition of Aku Tonpa's tales; and more recently Kalsang Khedup, whose three books (*Aku Tonpa Goes to a Nunnery*; *Aku Tonpa and the Golden Seed*; *Tales of Aku Tonpa*) on Aku Tonpa, all bilingual (English and Tibetan) renderings, were written to promote language skills among younger generations: “If you want to excite people about reading, you want to do it with humorous stories...and every Tibetan loves Aku Tonpa.”⁵³

These efforts to preserve the trickster stories from both inside and outside of Tibet also speak to the appeal of the Tibetan trickster, independent of culture. Wendy Doniger, for example, has reflected:

What charms me most about these stories is the way in which *they flicker back and forth between the uniquely Tibetan and the universal*. One such scene is when Aku Tonpa “says he is named ‘Vagina,’ anticipating the moment when his victim will want to call for help and will be misinterpreted and hence ignored (‘Vagina is hurting me’)” akin to the scene in Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus says he is named ‘Nobody,’ anticipating, in the same way, the moment when Cyclops would call for help and be misinterpreted and hence ignored (‘Nobody is attacking me’). [...] I suspect that what we're dealing with here are some very basic human themes that cannot entirely be explained by historical contacts, even though they may have been enhanced by such contacts.⁵⁴

But how well do these stories travel? I decided to see test Doniger's claim during ‘Open Mic Night’ (November 23rd, 2009) at Khanna Nirvana restaurant in McLeod Ganj (and, at the same

⁵¹Personal Interview with Wendell Hartford, 5th year student at Sarah College, McLeod Ganj, November 26, 2009.

⁵²Personal Interview with Kalsang Khedup, author of children's Aku Tonpa books, McLeod Ganj, November 24, 2009.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Wendy Doniger in the “Preface” of Rinjing Dorje, *Tales of Uncle Tompa: The Legendary Rascal of Tibet*. (San Rafael, CA: Dorje Ling, 1997), p. 6.

time, bring the oral tradition back). Obviously, something was being communicated that bore repeating. I chose one of the racier stories, “Aku Tonpa sells penises to a nunnery” (taken from Rinjing Dorje’s *Tales of Aku Tonpa*), and read it (in English) to an audience that included Tibetans, as well as Americans, Swedes, Russians, and Chinese people, mostly visiting for the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (which began the following day). Briefly, the story consists of Aku Tonpa finding a farmer despairing because his cursed field did not produce its normal crop—but rather a thousand penises! Aku Tonpa turns the situation into a highly profitable one by arranging to sell the penises to a Tibetan nunnery. Although it is forbidden for a nun to sleep with a man, nowhere is it written that she may not sleep with a penis.⁵⁵

Having registered for my talent as ‘Aku Tonpa’, the MC (who was from New York) seemed somewhat baffled in his introduction (“I don’t know what this is, but I love your stage name (‘Mannyfesto’)) and it was clear that the Western members of the audience weren’t sure what to expect. The Tibetans were already in-the-know; as with my previous experiences and informal interviews, just mentioning that I was going to read ‘Aku Tonpa’ produced a warm set of smiles and giddy giggles from the Tibetans in the crowd. When I announced the title, a shockwave rippled through the crowd—some grimaced into silence, some laughed, and some struggled to maintain their repose at the obscenity. There were, of course, nunneries not too far from the restaurant (though, I hope, not an earshot away!). So I began to read, and with every mention of the word ‘penis’, two Americans (likely in their mid-20’s) erupted into uproarious

⁵⁵ This matches the Tynes trickster trait of ‘situation inverter’: “By profaning or inverting these beliefs, the trickster brings them into sharp relief to show how much society values them.” William J. Hynes, *Mythical trickster figures contours, contexts, and criticisms*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1993), p. 172.

laughter. The Tibetans' faces remained locked in the smile, unphased by the unabashed dirtiness of the plain sexual language.⁵⁶

At the conclusion of the story (when the nunnery's abbess dies from shock), the smiles around the room communicated the near universal appreciation of the story (the MC even wisecracked that "[I] was going straight to the hell realms for that one"). After the open mic, multiple foreigners approached me to express their amusement with the story and asked where I'd found such a 'naughty' book. Some Tibetans in the area recognized me days after the reading, and would from then on refer to me as 'Aku Tonpa' whenever they spotted me in my academic gag show of a display.⁵⁷

This popular appeal and cross-cultural was not only limited to the 'unenlightened'; all of the *Rinpoche's*, for example, recognized 'Aku Tonpa's' name with a hearty laughter. One, Chokyi Nyima, requested that I recount a story⁵⁸; another, Mingyur, actually narrated one for me—and one rife with scatological effrontery no less!⁵⁹ In the story, Aku Tonpa tosses a frozen pile of excrement, dusted with lime, on a king's (who was a 'greedy tyrant') lap, the dubious missile carries a so-called miraculous inscription which Aku Tonpa reads a lot to the illiterate king: "The shit is from Heaven. He is the luckiest king when it drops in his lap." Immediately the pious king touches the excrement to his forehead in a gesture of respect, then nibbles a piece before placing the rest on his altar.⁶⁰ As opposed to the seamier side of his nunnery shenanigans, this is the side of Aku Tonpa who "is the advocate for justice, who uproots social oppression and

⁵⁶ Samten Dhondup attested to this 'plainness of sexual language' as a common property of Tibetan jokes', a feature that seems quite odd in light of the apparent 'neurosis' they carry. Personal Interview with Samten Dondhup, The Assistant Director of Tibetan Opera at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (and Aku Tonpa actor), McLeod Ganj, November 25, 2009.

⁵⁷ With my notepad, blue folder, large backpack, Team Tibet Jacket, and 'Om' Hat, my appearance was a truly burlesque and farce-like imitation of an anthropologist.

⁵⁸ I recounted the story of 'Aku Tonpa goes to a Nunnery', which Chokyi Nyima promptly corrected for detail and insisted that it was Drukpa Kunley who perpetrated the 'violation'.

⁵⁹ The question that prompted this retelling was: "Do you know Aku Tonpa?"

⁶⁰ Personal Interview with Mingyur Rinpoche, Sherab Ling, India, November 31, 2009.

subdues landlords.”⁶¹ His bold gesture lays bare, more than political argument, the disparity between peasant and king.

While this appeal may have been universal in McLeod Ganj, one population was identified that seemed slightly repulsed by Aku Tonpa’s ‘sex’ capades—feminists. It’s not hard to believe that many feminists are not amused by the total disregard for the feelings of the women who Aku Tonpa rapes.⁶² In an interview with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, one of the leading Buddhist feminists, expressed her gentle disgust (and I emphasize gentle) at the sight of one of the Kalsang Khedup books (“Aku Tonpa goes to a nunnery—God help!” she jokingly commented). While she could appreciate the ‘stiffness’ parodied by tricksters like Aku Tonpa, she constrained that she cared little for such phallogocentric stories “written by men for men.”⁶³

So what can we learn from Aku Tonpa’s deployment of humor? Both within specific cultures and world-wide, the humor and laughter evoked by trickster myths “are never exhausted in a single telling.”⁶⁴ Why? As Hynes argues, “beyond the surface humor, there is a deeper type of insight, irony and transformation at work in the trickster myths.”⁶⁵ We may laugh, but a deeper unfolding is at work; one that, on reflection, I began to see in teachers I had (and would later) encounter.

⁶¹Stuart identifies two sides of Aku Tonpa; “One is the advocate for justice, who uproots social oppression and subdues landlords and tyrants. This Aku Tonpa assists the powerless populace and provides a role model in terms of resisting social oppression and striving for justice. The other side of Aku Tonpa is destructive towards religion and a clever swindler.” Dge legs, kun mchog, dpal ldan bkra shis, and Kevin Stuart, “Tibetan Tricksters.” In *Asian Folklore Studies* (58.1 (1999)), p. 9.

⁶²In the story referenced by Doniger, Aku Tonpa ultimately rapes the girl he has been coveting while she nonsensically cries “Vagina is raping me! Vagina is raping me!”

⁶³Personal Interview with Tenzin Palmo, November 27, 2009.

⁶⁴William J. Hynes, *Mythical trickster figures contours, contexts, and criticisms*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1993), p. 131.

⁶⁵*Ibid.* p. 132

Lamas say the darndest things:

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche

“When I look outside, I want to cry. When I look inside, I see there is no observer, so I want to laugh...What to do? When I look at both, both are lost.”

-Spontaneous song by Chokyi Nyima (as rendered by Thomas Doctor)⁶⁶

For five days (October 25-29, 2009), the Antioch students were privy to exclusive teachings from Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, which provided ample time to survey the teaching style of “one of the funniest *tulkus* out there.”⁶⁷ Almost immediately after his arrival, people began to remark on the emergent lightness and joy of the atmosphere. This ‘joy’ carried over to the Dharma talks. While we would nervously rise, awaiting the obligatory cue to prostrate, Rinpoche would enter with the utmost levity, greeting us with a sprightly ‘Hallooooo’ while waving his arms. He would then proceed to complete his prostrations, mosey over to his throne, and then literally plop onto his cushion with a sigh of apparent relief.

Following the first dharma talk (mostly a sober sermon on the religious character of Buddhism) I procured an opportunity to interview Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche. In it, Rinpoche affirmed the value of humor as a skillful means to allay the fears of Buddhism being a path of ‘negative asceticism’ (avoiding impure activities) and show rather than tell that it is one of ‘positive asceticism’

⁶⁶ Personal Interview with Thomas Doctor, October 27, 2009.

⁶⁷ Personal Interview with Yogi Mike, Local Yogi, November 2, 2009.

(cultivating immanently good qualities).⁶⁸ Humor, he reminded me, can also be harmful, and there was always a time and place where it could be inappropriate.⁶⁹ When asked whether he thought Aku Tonpa or Drukpa Kunley were funny, he broke down into his Yoda-like cackle, and (as I mentioned earlier) asked me to recount a story. I recounted “Aku Tonpa goes to a nunnery”, and he was surprisingly quick to correct my account, which he found error in. These stories, he said (contrary to the books I found) ought to be attributed Drukpa Kunley. Interestingly, he informed me that Aku Tonpa and Drukpa Kunley were interchangeable characters in some tales depending whether one was Bhutanese (Drukpa Kunley being their cultural hero) or Tibetan (in which case Aku Tonpa was the popular protagonist).⁷⁰ At the close of the interview, I feebly attempted to make a joke about his status as the emanation of Nagarjuna by bringing a blade of grass and inquiring as to whether it was his kryptonite.⁷¹ He was not amused, and as I left he bluntly stated that “maybe you are Aku Tonpa.”⁷²

Thirty-minutes into the Dharma talk that evening, Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche shifted from Tibetan into English to re-address the issue of “having a sense of humor”. Any seriousness in practice “needs to be qualified”. However noble its motivations and commendable its intentions, seriousness can also be a sign of attachment and bondage which inclines one to take oneself and

⁶⁸ Perhaps this answer lies in Tibetan Buddhism’s Mahayana heritage, which emphasizes the concept of Buddha-nature which holds that we are all inherently enlightened, needing only to realize this fact, rather than having to attain a higher state called enlightenment. Such positive rhetoric could possibly rise to a less nihilistic interpretation and thus (speculatively) to more fertile ground for humor.

⁶⁹ Buzong, a monk and assistant to Rinpoche, corroborated this: “Rinpoche is not funny...in private he is very serious about encouraging practice.” Personal Interview with Buzong, Assistant to Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, October 28, 2009.

⁷⁰ Dowman also states that “beer house raconteurs use [Drukpa Kunley’s] name interchangeably with Aku Tonpa, a lewd secular character who recurs in Tibetan folktales.” Such an interchangeability casts doubt on the historical authenticity on each of these respective stories (though these accounts are by no means competitive). Keith Dowman, *Divine Madman*. (Kathmandu: Dawn Horse, 1982), p. 22.

⁷¹ When Nagarjuna was implored by a prince to commit charitable suicide (by donating his head), “the only weapon which could be used to behead Nagarjuna was a blade of sacred grass, a result of the time Nagarjuna accidentally killed an ant while gathering grass for his meditation cushion.” So the logic behind my joke was that as the emanation of Nagarjuna (widely regarded as the second Buddha), Chogyi Nyima, like Superman, would also only have one weakness (a blade of grass). Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 64.

⁷² I still haven’t deciphered why exactly he said this.

ones situation as central and thereby over inflating ego and desire. The Buddhist path is “not just a matter of developing disenchantment with the impermanent nature of things.” It is about “laughing” and “not taking things too seriously”. This emphasis on ‘positive asceticism’ over ‘negative asceticism’ turned into an apparent satire of the Theravada/Sravakayana ‘septic tank’ meditation strategies. The Buddha, Sravakans believe, instructed disciples to meditate on the body as an ‘oozing sack of excrement’ so that they might cultivate revulsion for the flesh and move from a concern with worldly things to a desire for release. So, Rinpoche joked, whenever they find a girl attractive, they fall in love with a septic tank! The audience, both Antioch students and Ranjung Yeshe students, were rolling in the aisles at this depiction, and was, a student remarked, “a great way to wrap up the teaching because the laughter opened up our minds.”

Chokyi Nyima’s humor could also be irreverently blunt at its most colorful. Thomas Doctor described Rinpoche’s humor as “crazy...in its disregard for decorum”, and during one group interview, an Antioch student (who will remain unnamed) received one of Rinpoche’s impromptu serenades. After singing (upon request) one of his many spontaneously composed songs in Tibetan, he turned to the student and began to sing:”Oh flower girl...so pretty, so young...people worship your beauty...but soon, you will be ugly and crippled.” The student took it in stride (“Yes...I know”) and the assembly laughed at this unexpected jingle. That no one took offense at what would likely be construed as a verbal assault from a teacher (in the West, at least) was remarkable!

Venerable Lobseng, in one of his talks, also gave an account of Rinpoche’s ‘compassionate’ candor. When one of his friends visited Rinpoche to seek his guidance, Rinpoche, rather than gratify him with supportive words, told him “your mind’s full of shit” and

began to laugh!⁷³ But these wisecracks are not limited to others; Rinpoche was also quick to mock himself. After giving a lecture and guided meditation to all the students under the Dhamarani (?) tree, the entire group experienced a cumbersome moment in which no one spoke and everyone sheepishly awaited Rinpoche's next move. And in a sweeping moment of self and ritual parody, he inquired: "Why you staring at me like a zoo animal? (ha-ha-ha) You thinking...oh, there he is, little Yoda..." While this elicited laughter from most people, some were offended at his cheekiness. One observer complained: "How could he say that when we were respectfully waiting for him to get up?"

How does Rinpoche get away with such flippancy? Generally, we are loath to reconsider the shaky premises upon which our lives are built: "Many so-called 'spiritual' seekers are just 'Narcissus' in drag...they are not interested in the demand that is the True Guru. They are 'dogs' who come to their master only for a 'bone'." ⁷⁴ "Sometimes," Thomas Doctor maintained, "we need a little shock therapy to shake us up from our attachment. Bodhisattvas can laugh easily because we're stuck in doing the wrong things."⁷⁵ This 'shock therapy' provided by humor, then, is useful insofar as it helps us from becoming self-seeking practitioners only interested in rewarding our 'ego'.

Mingyur Rinpoche

"...a certain amount of levity is essential to Buddhist practice. For if, as the Buddha proposed, the essence of ordinary life is suffering, then one of the most effective antidotes is laughter—particularly laughter at oneself. Every aspect of experience assumes a certain kind of brightness once you learn to laugh at yourself"

-Eric Swanson in the 'Introduction' to *Joy of Living*⁷⁶

⁷³ Ven. Lobseng Tempa, "Dharma Talk", Burmese Vihar, India, November 8, 2009.

⁷⁴ Keith Dowman, *Divine Madman*. (Kathmandu: Dawn Horse, 1982), p. 12.

⁷⁵ Personal Interview with Thomas Doctor, October 27, 2009.

⁷⁶ Mingyur Rinpoche with Eric Swanson, *Joy of Living*. (New York: Harmony Books 2007), pp. 6-7.

There were myriad reasons to use Mingyur Rinpoche as a ‘unit of analysis’ in my study. Eric Swanson, in reflection upon his time with Mingyur Rinpoche, observed that “what has impressed me the most during the time I’ve known him is his capacity to meet every challenge with not only an enviable degree of composure, but also with a sharp, ingeniously timed sense of humor.” His ability to laugh “through the maze of personal pain, discomfort and despair” was, Swanson believes, “the most important lesson Mingyur offered me.”⁷⁷ In addition, he was recently dubbed as “the happiest man in the world”.⁷⁸ After meeting him, it is no exaggeration to say that he personifies the strong correlation between happiness and sense of humor.

“Each time I meditate, I laugh,” he uttered in a somber tone. After a pregnant pause, unsure whether he was serious or not, he exploded, “Just kidding!” and began to double over. For Mingyur Rinpoche, the importance of humor is the delightful buoyancy it brings to practice and the check on it provides to keep things from devolving into unqualified seriousness. The use of humor, moreover, has textual precedence dating back to the Buddha: “Buddha said: ‘When you give teaching, smile!’...So, in general, when I teach, I feel joyful, and I express that joy through laughter.” Lastly and most significantly, he stressed that a sense of humor still implied a sense of care (for sentient beings, rituals, etc.) but it meant “not worrying”: “Laughing a lot doesn’t mean I don’t care...I still care about the many problems the world faces...but I don’t worry. Worrying is never good for solving problems.”⁷⁹ This ‘care-but-not-worry’ ethos implies a certain levity, a sense of the cosmic absurdity of things, and spontaneity which suffuses Mingyur Rinpoche’s teachings.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 7.

⁷⁸ Daniel Goleman, “Sitting Quietly, Doing Something”, NYTimes.com, July 16, 2009.

⁷⁹ Personal Interview with Mingyur Rinpoche, November 31, 2009

After the interview, Mingyur Rinpoche offered me an exclusive teaching on *shi-nay* (shamatha) meditation. As a starting point, he asked about my meditation background. I communicated that I had some background (albeit limited) in Vipasanna, Zen, and Tibetan meditation. In response, he gave a caricature of the three ‘wrong ways’ to do meditation. He began with ‘Asian’ meditation, for which he did an impression of a sensei, struggling to maintain a ‘bamboo-straight’ spine and think of ‘nothing-ness’. The second was American, his impression of which was a slouched figure in an apparent blissful state, constantly chanting to himself: ‘Look at me, I’m meditating...So Blissful!’. And finally (and most surprisingly), he did a Tibetan impression, in which he began chanting in low inaudible tones, rocking from side to side. Of course, the entire teaching wasn’t just a pretense to make jokes. He made sure to check on my status when I was testing his methods. But he would not hesitate to burst into laughter, and help me laugh at what I thought were obstacles to my concentration. “Challenges are good,” he exhorted, “like a swimmer that enjoys swimming against the turbulence of water.” As I apprehensively offered my ceremonial *kata* to Rinpoche, he quipped: “You know, before you offer *kata*, you need to spin around three times and dance,” and then draped the *kata* over me.

H.H. the Dalai Lama

“I love friends, I want more friends. I love smiles. That is a fact. How to develop smiles? There are a variety of smiles. Some smiles are sarcastic. Some smiles are artificial-diplomatic smiles. These smiles do not produce satisfaction, but rather fear or suspicion. But a genuine smile gives us hope, freshness. If we want a genuine smile, then first we must produce the basis for a smile to come.”

-H.H. The Dalai Lama⁸⁰

To vindicate humor’s status in Buddhism, the invocation of the Dalai Lama became a patterned response. “Of course humor belongs in Buddhism,” a Tibetan monk pronounced, “just

⁸⁰ H.H. The Dalai Lama, *The Path to Tranquility*. (New York: Penguin Compass,), p. 14.

look at His Holiness. He always laughs and makes jokes.”⁸¹ And indeed, it’s not a rare sight to see him laugh: “The Dalai Lama’s whole life story is a demonstration of the power of friendliness. He is everyone’s friend. He laughs with everyone all the time, the way best friends do.”⁸² Moreover, is that he has “all the woes of the world on his shoulders, especially the responsibility to his own people...and the message is getting worse.”⁸³ It would be perfectly legitimate for him to be bitter, depressed, and defeatist. But he simply isn’t; “he’s always a healing source for anyone who meets him with his vibrant sense of humor.” When John Cleese inquired why he used humor so much, His Holiness solemnly responded: “Laughter is very helpful to teaching and political negotiations...when people laugh, it is easier for them to admit new ideas to their mind.”

These jokes, however, do not always survive the translation. On one occasion, the monk said, he joked about how a forest hermit meditating on a hill, while in the middle of reciting the section “no eyes, ears, mouth...” was interrupted by a nomad who exclaimed “Why don’t you just say you have no head (*go-mindu*)?!” The crowd of Tibetans proceeded to roll in the aisles in fits of laughter; but when the English translation came through, Westerners were confounded and at a loss.⁸⁴ This bamboozlement might be attributed to the loss of comic kinesthesia and linguistic texture lost through the occasional dullness that comes with a translation. The reference could also have simply been outside the humor register of the audience, as Westerners are unlikely to be accustomed to *Heart Sutra* allusions, let alone jokes.

During his teachings on Tsongkhapa’s *Three Principle Aspects of the Path*, I was initially disappointed by the absence of humor. After all of the ballyhoo of the Dalai Lama’s light, natural

⁸¹ Personal Interview with a Tibetan Monk, McLeod Ganj, India, November 22, 2009.

⁸² Personal Interview with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, November 27, 2009.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Personal Interview with Wendell Hartford, November 27, 2009.

and spontaneous sense of humor, all of the teaching turned out to be nothing more than a doctrinally-bound and philosophically dense exposition of renunciation, no-self, and the realization of emptiness. But then during the 10 minute tantric empowerment, after I had all but given up on finding a laugh--he forgot to recite a line. But where's the humor in that? Rather than attempt to hide the mistake, he openly admitted to it: "Oops...I forgot...guess we have to do it over again!" Everyone in the crowd laughed at this forthright admission, and what was moments before a silent and tense crowd hanging on to every word of the Dalai Lama, eased into a light and joyous assembly. This openness and lack of pretense shows "a lack of ego" behind His Holiness' position.⁸⁵ At no point does he attempt to comport himself as a self-important deity, though Tibetans regard him as such. His humor is self-deflationary inasmuch as he laughs at himself and avoids any tendency to take himself too seriously (in spite of his authoritative status).

'We must laugh or we must die': A Conclusion

"If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh. Otherwise, they will kill you."

-Oscar Wilde

At best, this study is a think-piece attempting to reconcile the spiritual path with a sense of humor; at worst, it is a series of impressionistic vignettes drawing attention to paradigmatic instances in which humor is discernible to myself and myself alone. But it is also meditation against scholarly polemics that claim "the Buddha's compassion knows no laughter" and that to practice, we must transform into "cosmic blobs".⁸⁶ Humor is by no means solely the domain of late Zen traditions. For as Lama Anagarika Govinda discerns: "The Buddha's sense of humor—which is so evident in many of his discourses—is closely bound up with his compassion [...]His

⁸⁵ Tenzin Palmo cited a similar situation during a *wang puja* in which H.H. 'forgot his lines' and consequently laughed about it. Personal Interview with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, November 27, 2009.

⁸⁶ Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow: Tenzin Palmo's Quest for Enlightenment*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 171.

smile is the expression of one who can see ‘the wondrous play of ignorance and knowledge’ against its universal background.”⁸⁷ It is the laughter of compassion, which seeks enlightenment of other and their liberation. Humor in this context can provide access to a higher knowledge which sees through much worldly foolishness; and it may help in preserving higher knowledge too.

So what exactly is this ‘higher knowledge’? What is the function of humor in the spiritual path?

- 1) Humor brings into focus the present moment in contexts in which linear thinking may prevail to the exclusion of any other perspective. As the Dalai Lama told John Cleese, humor introduces a degree of curvature into such linear frameworks that cultivates a healthy and open perspective centered in the present (and not in dogma).
- 2) Humor thus helps us reframe situations; through the use of metaphor (e.g. ‘septic tank’) we are able to reframe understanding so that its significance (or absurdity) can be more effectively shared. Humor can challenge the validity of the boundaries we set, whether between people, group or ideas (e.g. any Aku Tonpa tale).
- 3) Humor also allows for fruitful self-reflection, helping one avoid the tendency to take themselves too seriously (as when H.H. the Dalai Lama forgets *puja* lines). Laughing at oneself and one’s own beliefs shows a kind of faith that escapes the literal-minded, those unable to set any psychic distance between themselves and their set of beliefs. For “a person may be so blindly committed to a particular religious or political perspective that she can never get ‘far enough away’ to see any humor related to it. She cannot see alternative patterns or flicker between them. She may even view attempts to get her to see alternate perspectives, let alone flicker between them, as irreverent at best, and

⁸⁷ Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Buddhist Reflections*. (New Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 2007), p. 55.

blasphemous at worst.”⁸⁸ Such a person, unable to flicker between perspectives, lacks a sense of humor.

- 4) Humor can also be a *metagame*, in which the beliefs about Buddhism can be parodied by its highest authority figures, possibly as a means of easing tensions and marginalizing the concerns of ‘serious-minded’ practitioners, and thus reduce negative emotions (e.g. Mingyur Rinpoche’s ‘three meditations’ spoof).

Ergo, humor gains epistemological significance for the Tibetan Buddhist as a means of generating a mindset of *detached engagement*. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, a teacher loved for his “great sense of humor”⁸⁹, expands:

When we begin to understand, not only intellectually but emotionally, that all compounded things are impermanent, then our grasping lessens...If we know, even a little bit, that some of our familiar concepts, feelings and objects exist only as a dream, we develop a much better sense of humor. Recognizing the humor in our situation prevents suffering. We still experience emotions, but they can no longer play tricks on us or pull the wool over our eyes...⁹⁰

The underlying nature of humor bears a very close relationship to authentic spiritual understanding of the Buddhist path. It is what keeps us grounded, keeps us related and prevents us from falling into the clutches of attachment. Lest we have our ‘bungs burst’ by Aku Tonpa, a ‘sense of humor’ will serve us well on the path to enlightenment:

The phenomenal world was frequently described by Indian philosophers as cosmic trickery: empirical reality is maya, a hoax, a joke, a deceit wherein a rope is mistaken for a snake. Seeing through the great metaphysical flimflam and epistemological bamboozlement, getting the ultimate joke then, might be liberation. Comedy might be religious gnosis, but it refuses to be so for with liberation the comic ceases to exist. Laughter would dissipate itself in silence, like warmth into coldness or light into the darkness. And so the clown, like a bodhisattva, resists release. He uses a tenacious laughter to keep himself rooted in the world for all its delightful folly.⁹¹

Let the foolishness innate in us and the wine of wisdom fermenting within join in coital calm.

⁸⁸Hugh Lafollette and Niall Shanks, “Belief and the Basis of Humor”. In *American Philosophical Quarterly*. (1993), p. 336.

⁸⁹ Personal Interview with Layperson, Deer Park Institute, Bir, India, December 1, 2009.

⁹⁰ Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, *What Makes You Not A Buddhist*. (Boston: Shambala, 2006), p. 72.

⁹¹ Lee Siegel, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 15.

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Appendix:

Jokes to Jilt Your Jaws and Tilt Your Balance with RipRoarious Laughter

The Pope, Osho and Karmapa

It was a beautiful day along the coast, quiet, sunny and warm. The Pope, A Swami (Osho) and Karmapa had decided to take a day off from their various opinions and duties, rented a boat, and went fishing.

A couple hours pass, at the expense of several ocean-creatures. Then Osho spots a McDonalds at the beach. "Hey, I'm dead hungry. I'm off for a Big Mac". He jumps from the boat and quickly steps across the water. Karmapa goes: "Great, I'm in." Jumps from the boat, runs across the water to land, where Osho is already ordering.

The Pope stands a little behind, having never walked on water. But if those two non-Christians can do that, it should be no problem for him. He jumps the boat, goes "plop", and disappears.

Osho and Karmapa, enjoying their freshly materialized burgers, watch the scene. Karmapa: "That didn't look good." Osho: "No, we really should have told him about those underwater stepping poles."

Karmapa: "*Stepping poles??*"

Holy Cows

"Why are cows sacred in India?"

"Because they say OM backwards"

How many Sakyapas does it take to twist in a lightbulb?

Two: 1 to write the instructions and the auto-commentary, 1 to twist the bulb

✚ **How many Gelugpas does it take to screw in a light bulb?**

Three:

2 to have a debate about the nature of light and 1 to twist the bulb

✚ **How many Kagyupas?**

One:

But he has to spend years and years sealed in a cave first.

✚ **How many Nyingmapas?**

One:

But he has to dig up the instructions to find out the bulb is already in

✚ **No-town**

Q: Why are there so few Buddhist rhythm and blues bands?

A: Because Buddhists don't have any soul.

✚ **Tongue-[sis]ter**

There is a tongue twister (*Wendell forgot the Tibetan*) that sounds like "Your licking your mom's clit"

✚ **Flapping flag**

Four monks were meditating in a monastery. All of a sudden the prayer flag on the roof started flapping.

The younger monk came out of his meditation and said: "Flag is flapping"

A more experienced monk said: "Wind is flapping"

A third monk who had been there for more than 20 years said: "Mind is flapping."

The fourth monk who was the eldest said: "Mouths are flapping!"

✚ **Yak-yonder**

(*Lugh=sheep in Tibetan*)

Some tourists were wondering down a grassy knoll when they came across some Yaks.

'Look, look,' they cried. "No," the sherpas corrected, "Yak, Yak!"

✚ **War between virgin and penis (Tibetan proverb)**

Tug Ma hampa Chink

Tenko mikhyu phansang

Gongdo nantok sane

Tungo Tunga Garsong

The virgin is greedy

For she voraciously eats the head of the penis

As the testicles knock in dismay against her vagina

✚ **Flatu-glance**

Once, a rich aristocratic woman was daintily drinking her butter tea when she was began to feel a jet-stream of gas come out of her buttocks. The men opposite her felt it, and as they turned around they realized that she had farted. (*Yes, this really is a joke Tibetans told me*)