

A Good-Natured Attitude

January 30, 2021

An important quality you develop as you meditate is learning how to reflect on yourself. You might be 100% sure that you're right about something, but if you don't reflect on yourself, you'll miss a lot of the things where you've put blinders on.

Think about the Buddha, going through all those austerities, taking it very seriously, and then finally realizing after six years that it wasn't working. It didn't show any signs of working. If he pushed himself any further, he would die. So he reflected, "This must be wrong. There must be another way. There's something I don't understand. Could there be another way?" It was his ability to step back and consider that he'd been wrong: That's when he finally got it right.

So as we practice, we have to learn to master the step of stepping back and looking at ourselves, not believing everything the mind tells itself. And one good way of developing this ability is to develop a sense of humor about yourself.

They don't talk about humor much in the Canon. In fact, I can't think of any place where they mention it at all. But we're fortunate that we have the suttas, so that we can see the Buddha in action. We can see his sense of humor. When they recorded the Buddha's teachings, they recorded them in lots of different formats. Some people memorized his poems, some people memorized his dialogues, some people memorized his explanations of things. It's from the ones who memorized dialogues, showing how he interacted with other people, that we get a sense of his sense of humor.

The ajaans have a sense of humor as well. That was one of things that first attracted me to Ajaan Fuang. And even the ajaans who had a reputation for being really strict and harsh had their sense of humor as well. Ajaan Fuang tells a story about Ajaan Mun. When Ajaan Fuang first went to stay with him, he was still young. There was a community of nuns who lived down the road, and the monks would go past the community on their way for alms. There was one young nun who took a liking to Ajaan Fuang and she started knitting little things for him, making special central Thai food for him, that sort of thing. Ajaan Mun was watching this. He noticed that Ajaan Fuang wasn't interested, so he decided to turn his attention to helping the young nun.

One time the nuns came to him for instructions. He asked them if they were observing the eight precepts, and they said yes, they were. Then he talked about Lady Visakha seeing groups of people observing the eight precepts, and going

from group to group to ask them why they were observing the eight precepts. She talked to some old people, and they said, “We want to go to heaven.” She talked to the other groups and finally came to a group of young women and asked them why they were observing the eight precepts. They said, “We want something better than heaven. We want a husband.”

That was the end of the knitted things and the special central Thai food.

There’s even the story about Ajaan Maha Boowa giving a Dhamma talk one time about how Thai people are obsessed with lottery numbers. There was an elderly monk who was listening in, and by the end, the elderly monk was in tears from laughing so hard.

The type of humor that the ajaans had and that I appreciated was good-natured humor. They had learned it by learning how to laugh at themselves, seeing how they’d gotten into a rut, or were too straight-arrow about something—absolutely convinced that what they were doing was the way things had to be, that they were right on target, right on track. In the case of the monks who lived with Ajaan Mun, he would make a little comment to knock them off course a little bit, to make them stop and look back at themselves and see where they were blind to certain defilements in their own minds.

So it’s a good habit to develop, learning how to laugh at your own foibles. We *are* serious about the practice, because we’re dealing with serious issues: aging, illness, and death. But we don’t have to be grim about them. We have to remember that this is a middle way. If it were a way of extremes, it would be very easy. You’d just push, push, push to the extreme and break through. But to find the point of just right requires that you act and then you reflect on your actions. Step back a bit. That’s what humor is all about, stepping back.

The Greeks had a saying, “The gods laugh; human beings cry.” That’s because the Gods are removed. They see things happening in the human world at once remove and they can see the irony, they can see the incongruity in a lot of people’s actions—and they’re not threatened by them. That’s the important thing.

This is where a sense of humor goes with a sense of patience and endurance. On the one hand, humor teaches you to have more patience and endurance; on the other, patience and endurance make it a lot easier to develop a sense of humor. So think of the two qualities going together. If you feel threatened by other people’s misbehavior, it’s hard to have any healthy goodwill or compassion for them. It’s hard to be good-natured about your goodwill and good-natured about your compassion.

You have to ask yourself, “Why am I feeling threatened?” It’s usually because you don’t have enough resources inside. So you learn how to develop those inner

resources, develop a sense of how you can feel at ease with yourself—by the way you breathe, by the way you focus in the body, by the way you think about your meditation topics.

And notice what you can do without in your surroundings. When you realize there's a lot you can do without, you can live simply. You don't need a lot in terms of entertainment or pleasures, because you've got a sense of well-being inside. Then you don't feel threatened. When you don't feel threatened, this quality of being good-natured isn't limited to just good-natured humor. It also covers good-natured goodwill and good-natured compassion. Good-natured discernment, comes a lot more easily.

So work on developing your inner resources. Learn how not to be threatened by the fact that you can laugh at yourself. This has a lot to do with being good-natured in your humor about other people. If your humor is aimed solely at making fun of them, then the quality of being good-natured gets spoiled. But if you turn around and look at yourself, "Oh yeah, I've got those qualities too. I've got those weaknesses too. Here I am railing against other people, yet I've got those problems as well." Learn to laugh about that.

Then you can do something about it, which will take a lot of the power away from your defilements. If you treat them in a grim way, they get bigger and bigger and bigger. Ideally, you're serious about them but at the same time you have a sense of proportion. If you can laugh at them, you can cut them down to size. They're a lot more manageable.

So look for the humor in your own foibles. And learn how not to be threatened by the foibles of other people. As you develop these two qualities—patience and humor together—they become good-natured. Then in all your dealings with other people that require your equanimity, it's good-natured equanimity.

Ajaan Fuang made the distinction between what he called large equanimity and small equanimity. We can call it large-hearted and small-hearted. Small-hearted is when you say, "Nothing's any good anywhere, but I'm just going to learn how tough it out." Large-hearted is when you have a sense of well-being inside, and that sense of well-being isn't threatened by anything outside. Small-hearted equanimity doesn't last long. Large-hearted has staying power.

That's what you want to develop as you practice: staying power. And when you develop with a sense of humor together with that, then you can stick it out all the way. But it's not just sticking it out or enduring. There's a sense of lightness that goes with that, and when you can create a sense of lightness both inside and out,

then the things that are hard to bear become easy to bear. And the practice becomes something you can see all the way through.