

**RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN**

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

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Sunday, August 7, 2011

**Q** : What role does humour play in life?  
**A** Once a year, most of the priests in my tradition gather for ten days of physically, emotionally and intellectually demanding training. In close quarters, we change our habits of eating, sleeping, socializing and self-distraction. Punctuating the intensity and seriousness of this training is an endless series of jibes, teases and epic corny humour. Some might say the joking is "comic relief" for the stress of training. Not so. This misses the point of our practice, and I believe, religious life in general. Humour and intellection co-exist in an inextricable relationship. We have two-sided brains and it would be tragic indeed if we lost either our capacity to think in logical straight lines or to turn that upside-down with creativity and humour.

There is nothing in the Buddha's canonical teaching to tickle the funny-bone (not mine anyway). It was later teachers, notably the Zen tradition, who used and cultivated humour to greatest effect. The *koan* teaching device is well-known ("What is the sound of one hand clapping?", "What was your name before you were born?"). Laughter is often the first reaction; koans defy logical thinking and force us to connect with creativity. It "works" when it engages the intuitive mind.

If we think of the "medicine" of the famous Patch Adams, we understand the broader role of humour. He could interrupt the stuckness of patients' psychic energy and release the healing energy of laughter. In my own social work practice, I know I am passing a milestone with any client when I see them respond to or themselves make a joke. When I teach, I know one cartoon can make a point much faster than pages of charts and graphs. We could say humour is a short-hand we use to sidestep the sequential reasoning processes, to nail some truth without words.

One caution for our post-modern world - humour has morphed into some cruel, insensitive and discriminatory forms. The test of humour is not simply the laughter that follows. It is good humour if we gain insight into our human condition, find relief of suffering and grow as mutually respecting beings.

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