

## *A Sense of Humor*

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Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat had very different personalities. And it was good to live with different teachers that way: I began to see which aspects of a good teacher were constant across the board and which aspects were purely personal. One of the similarities I've noticed across the board with all the great teachers is that they have a good sense of humor, and particularly the ability to laugh at themselves.

This is something you want to keep in mind as you practice. Are you able to laugh at yourself? The ability to laugh at yourself implies some distance, the ability to step back and look at yourself from an outside perspective. The Greeks have a saying: "It's the gods who laugh." In other words, lots of stories from a human perspective are pretty tragic, but the gods sitting up on Olympus—being detached, standing outside the stories—are able to laugh. Now the gods' laughter can be pretty cruel, but the ability to laugh amiably at yourself is something else. It's a sign of understanding, a sign of humility.

If you're going to look in the Pali Canon to see which of the Buddha's teachings humor comes under, it comes under teachings on respect. You have the ability to respect something higher than yourself. And you're willing to look at yourself in the light of the teaching you respect more than yourself. That's what pulls you out of yourself and gives you perspective.

So it's not a minor thing, this ability to laugh at yourself. It's essential to the practice. If you can't step back and look at yourself in this way, step out of yourself this way, you're never going to get the proper perspective, you'll never be able to gain insight.

When I was making Ajaan Fuang's biography, it turned out that most of the stories I had—the ones he had told about his experiences out on tudong, out in the forest—were stories about how he had overcome problems, but there were also some stories he told about stupid mistakes he had made. One he liked to tell was of a time he went to a mountain up in Chiang Mai. There was a little monastery at the foot of the mountain, and halfway up the mountain was a cave. And some of the caves in Thailand—after all those many centuries of meditating monks—had been fitted out so that monks could live there, even during the rainy season. During the rainy season you're supposed to live in a place that has a door that can open and close. And so some of the caves have little rooms that have been fitted with doors that open and close. So he went to that mountain, wanting to

meditate in the cave. Well, he went up to the cave that afternoon, went into the little side room that had its door, opened the door—and there was this enormous snake in the room. Huge, as big around as his leg. He thought, “*Welllll*, maybe I won’t meditate here today or stay here tonight.” So he closed the door, went back down to the monastery. That night, as he was meditating in the monastery, he had a vision. Some devas came and said to him, “That wasn’t a real snake, we were just testing you.” That was it. A story of a test that he had failed, a test that most of us would have failed, too. But still, it’s important that he liked to tell the story.

Even Ajaan Maha Boowa tells self-deprecating stories. I never heard this one from Ajaan Fuang, I heard it later from other people who’d been with Ajaan Maha Boowa. One time Ajaan Maha Boowa went to visit Ajaan Lee, who was staying in Wat Pa Khong Kung at the time. That night, after the group sit and the Dhamma talk, he sought out Ajaan Fuang and asked him, “What about the other monks here? Who are the really good meditators around here?” And Ajaan Fuang cut him short with one sentence, he said, “I came here to meditate.” Again, that’s a story that doesn’t put Ajaan Maha Boowa in a good light, but it’s a story he liked to tell. I also think it’s interesting that in all those years I was with Ajaan Fuang, he never told me the story.

These are just some examples of how the really great teachers can laugh at themselves and why it’s an important part of the practice. This is what the teaching on not-self is all about: the ability to step back and look at these things that you identify with, these activities, the way you do things, and can see them from an outside perspective. That puts you in the position of the gods who can laugh. But because you’re laughing at yourself, it’s not cruel. It’s the laughter of recognition, it’s the laughter of learning, it’s the laughter of growing intelligence—which, in a lot of ways, is what the practice is all about.

So try to keep this perspective as you meditate. And look particularly at the areas where you think you’ve been doing something really smart, that you’ve got things all figured out—and try to back off to see what ways you haven’t.

Personally some of my favorite stories are ones of people going from one culture into another and trying to figure out what’s going on in the other culture, using their ingenuity and being very clever and then ending up being very wrong. Like the stories of the Laotian immigrants coming to America and being given places to stay, say, in a city like Minneapolis where it’s awfully cold. They look in their backyards and they see these wires strung out. They put two and two together and figure out these are good places to hang fish to dry in the sun. Of course, you can imagine the reaction of the neighbors when the Laotians come

out and instead of hanging out their clothes, they hang out fish to dry. I like that story, because the Laotians are the ones who tell it, laughing at themselves.

Try to think of how many times you've been working here in your meditation, worked really hard to figure something out and it seems to make sense—and then suddenly you realize how wrong you are. If you can laugh at that, you're on the right path. You've got what it takes. Because so much of the practice is gaining new perspectives. You can analyze humor and see that a lot of times it's a matter of a paradigm shift. Something means one thing in one context, but when you switch the context, it means something entirely different.

And that's what we're doing here. We're making paradigm shifts in the mind. And particularly paradigm shifts on what we identify with. You look at it in one way: these feelings, they're *your* feelings, your perceptions are *your* perceptions, and so on down the line. But you can suddenly shift around and see, "No. They're not." They are the same things, the same feelings, the same perceptions, but you give them an entirely different context and they're entirely different things. That's the nature of a lot of insight.

So it's not a casual or trivial thing, this business of having a sense of humor, of being able to laugh at yourself. This is what gives you the right attitude in the practice. This attitude is what enables you to stick with the practice—so that when you begin to realize how stupid you've been in certain things, it's not devastating, it's not horrible. You can laugh and you can learn.