

Infinite Good Humor

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I was reading a review of short-story collection recently, and the reviewer was noting that although the author wasn't experimental in the way she structured her stories, she was revolutionary or radical in that she treated her characters like adults, and her readers like adults. Unfortunately, that's pretty rare.

The same observation applies to the different religions of the world.

The Buddha is one of the few religious leaders who actually treated his followers like adults. There's very little in his teachings to baby you or to please your defilements or pander to your desires. They point to the fact that there is a really important problem in life and that, if we train ourselves to be responsible, we are capable of solving it. That problem, of course, is the suffering that the mind creates. And the solution is a skill. It requires a lot. You have to sort out a lot of things inside yourself and shed a lot of your childish expectations.

So the question is, do you want to be an adult? If you do, this is what you have to do. Look at yourself very carefully. Sort things out inside. Accept the fact that there is a right path and a wrong path, and you're responsible for making the right choice.

This point was driven home for me recently by something else I was reading. A modern Dhamma teacher was talking about how important it is to have a sense of flexibility on the spiritual path, saying that there are many, many different ways of getting to the goal, there's no one right way, and none of the ways, he said, are actually wrong. So you have to learn how to adjust and play with your practice.

Now, even though it is true that there's an element of play in the practice, it's not true that there are lots and lots of right paths up to the top of the mountain. If you've ever been on a mountain, you've probably noticed that some paths go to the top, some go other places, some of them lead you over the edge of a cliff.

It's the same with the rivers in the world: They don't all flow into the ocean. Some of them flow into the Great Basin, some into Lake Eyre in the middle of Australia. They just disappear into the sand.

Two things were especially disturbing about this particular teacher's observation that all paths are correct and that we have to be mature enough and have a broad enough vision to embrace the mall. The first was his saying that the path is basically a matter of learning to embrace our sufferings together with our pleasures in the world, to realize that you can't have the pleasures without the sufferings—which is pretty much saying that there is no real end to suffering.

The other disturbing point was that he illustrated his principle with a story about a high school basketball coach who'd been hired to coach a team of specially handicapped kids. Originally, the coach had had all kinds of plans for how he was going to whip the kids into shape in spite of their handicaps. But in the first day's session, he realized that he was going to have to scrap his plans. It took him 45 minutes just to get the kids to line up on one side of the room, facing in the same direction. This made him come to the conclusion that they were not there to win; they were there to have a good time. So he fostered an environment in which they had a good time. Everybody got hot dogs; everybody got prizes; you could stop the game at any time to dance. You could push the score button any time you felt like it. There was one game in which one kid really got into pushing the score button, and they ended up with a million points.

On the surface it's a nice story. But when you think about it a bit, it's pretty disturbing. This is spiritual practice? Throwing out the rules, giving prizes to everybody? To say nothing as to whether the coach's treatment of the kids was really the most skillful thing he could do for them, there's still the question of what the Dhamma teacher was saying about the basic spiritual problem when he used this story as a parable for spiritual practice.

If suffering weren't a real problem, and there weren't a real solution to it, then maybe the compassionate thing would be not to place burdens on people, not to set high standards for them, not to try to force them to develop any special skills. Or even to tell them that they should or could develop special skills. But the thing is, suffering really is a problem. It really squeezes the heart, and keeps on squeezing.

That, in fact, was Ajaan Maha Boowa's definition of stress: what ever puts a squeeze on the heart. It forces its demands on you. So if there's a path to put an end to those demands, to free the heart from those demands, then regardless of what it requires or how stringent it might be or how much effort it takes, to encourage people to take that path and to see it as the path, is actually an act of compassion.

Now, the idea that anything goes in spiritual life actually dates back to the Romantics. Their idea was that you're trying to embrace the whole world, the infinitude of the world, and that that requires you to step back and look at yourself from an infinite perspective. From that perspective, you realize that whatever you might think, no matter how sincerely you might think it, can be only one possibility among all the infinite possibilities in the world. This is supposed to open you up to being more creative in your expression of your spiritual feelings and not be bound by things that you or anyone else has expressed in the past.

Religious truths, for them, were simply works of art, expressive art, expressing your feelings on the subject of infinity. And as when you're making any new work of art, you don't have to be consistent with the works of art you did before. After all, you're not expected to give a true description of infinity, because no finite being can do such a thing. The only truth that's asked of you is that you're true in how you express your feelings about infinity as you feel them right now.

It all sounds very large minded: an art expressing infinity. And because it's art, it sounds like it's something higher than a craft. But what the Buddha taught was a craft. Instead of trying to be an artist, he took on the role of a master craftsman. He had mastered this skill and he wanted to pass it on to us. It's a very focused skill, focusing in on your mind and seeing what in the mind causes you to create suffering.

It's also a battle. There's winning and losing. There's doing the skill well and there's doing it poorly.

Now, there's a frame of mind that thinks that this sort of dualistic thinking is narrow. A craft focused on the issue of suffering sounds less exalted than an art focused on infinity. But when you look at the results, you realize, in this case, that the craft is better than the art.

Instead of leaving you to allow around in the expression of your feelings, it actually accomplishes something. It takes you out of suffering entirely, to a dimension beyond the world. And it honors you by saying that you're capable of doing this.

So, the Buddha's not handing out hot dogs to everybody. But he is doing something much better, something much more compassionate: treating us like adults—and asking us, do we want to be adults too? If we do, this is how we do it. And even though it's "just a craft" and not a creative, expressive art, it takes us a lot further than just learning to be expressive. And the results are a lot larger, more encompassing, and far more worthwhile.