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She Who Laughs Loudest: A Meditation on Zen Humor

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Articulating a Zen Buddhist perspective on humor, this paper examines the Japanese Zen Buddhist response of humor in the face of the suffering of situated existence and the motivations for this response. The examination will take the school of Rinzai Zen Buddhism as its exemplar. I argue that in order to appreciate the function of humor in Zen a number of cultural and historical influences must be considered: correlative ontology; the Buddhist notion of emptiness; the impotence of language; sense and nonsense; and the senselessness of transgression.

The following paper aims to examine the Japanese Zen Buddhist response of humor in the face of the suffering of situated existence and the motivations for this response. The examination will take the school of Rinzai Zen Buddhism as its exemplar. It is an essay of five parts. In order to appreciate the function of humor in Zen a number of cultural and historical influences must be considered: correlative ontology; the Buddhist notion of emptiness; the impotence of language; sense and nonsense; and the senselessness of transgression.

A few provisos before beginning: the trajectory of the argument presented here entertains and delimits connections between the humorous and the senseless on the grounds of the limits of meaning found in selected literature from the history of Zen Buddhism. It is my intention to present a framework through which the perpetuation of suffering that lies at the heart of the Buddhist tradition can be re-imagined and re-engaged lightly, loftily, and humorously. Through an appreciation of the conceptual undermining of Buddhist emptiness, it is possible to counterbalance the seriousness of situated existence with humor. It is possible to laugh in the face of it all. It is also important that I concede at the outset how utterly non-humorous the following treatment of humor is. I agree with Hans-Georg Moeller's observation of the unfortunate fact that "to philosophize about laughter is usually quite unfunny" (2010, p. 9).

It is first worth offering gratitude to those who have impressively engaged the traditions of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism and teased out a number of the functions and specific instances of humor in the canon. It is especially worth mentioning the work of Conrad Hyers, who in many ways served as a trailblazer for this line of enquiry. His belief that the comic spirit of Zen arises out of the abrupt collision of Indian spiritualism and the earthiness of the Chinese remains a powerful and persuasive one (Hyers, 1974, p. 24). As Buddhism finds its way from India into China, it is conspicuous how quickly the very strict regulations concerning bodily displays of good humor are laid by the wayside in order to better articulate the Chinese worldview. Hotei, the laughing heavy-set incarnation of

Maitreya Buddha, serves as a case in point. This trend is promoted and consequently accelerates as Zen Buddhism moves from China into Japan.

It is in the early schools of Zen Buddhism that we first come to encounter true Buddhist clowns. These clowns are not to be confused with lowbrow, base, and boorish buffoons. They are not instances of “the clown as some inferior species, approaching the infantile or subhuman or chaotic,” but instances of “the clown who in all his lowliness and simplicity and childlikeness, as well as in his iconoclasm and redemptive profanity, is truly great, truly profound, truly free” (Hyers, 1974, p. 30). The celebration of the lowly, the simple, and the childlike serve to reinforce Hyers’ belief that the earthiness of “Oriental Humanism,” and the influences of Daoism in particular, give way to the comic spirit of Zen, thereby elevating the playful and the humorous to the great, the profound, and the free. Zen’s self-descriptions are such that they promote themselves as playfully serious, and as seriously playful. The doctrine beyond words and letters becomes something of a Marx Brothers production, showing what can’t be said, and insisting that one forget the finger and look to the moon with a quick poke in the eye. Hyers describes Zen less crassly:

[Zen] is like a man up a tree who hangs on a branch by his teeth with his hands and feet in the air. A man at the foot of the tree asks him, “What is the point of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West?” If he does not answer he would seem to evade the question. If he answers he would fall to his death. (1974, p. 32)

This remains the precarious position of Zen Buddhism, perhaps the only spiritual school that advises one to kill its namesake, that depicts conflict resolution as tearing a cat in half, and that celebrates the tremendous insight displayed by placing a sandal on one’s head.

The seriousness and appropriateness of such disarming humor can only be ascertained with a correct understanding of the correlative ontology espoused by Zen Buddhism and the subsequent anti-essentialist connotations of the Buddhist theory of emptiness as it is taken up in China and Japan.

Correlative Ontology: Funny Is As Funny Does

Zen humor is serious. It is as serious as Hegel or Kant. According to Moeller, “In Zen Buddhism the outburst of laughter as such is physically, emotionally, and socially applied philosophy. It is not an exaggeration to say that in Zen Buddhism laughter can be deemed a more appropriate philosophical practice than, for instance, writing or lecturing—or even thinking” (2010, p. 9). The embodied nature of social relations facilitates an affective transmission, which instructs and edifies in ways that language is unable to accomplish on its own. This remains equally true of texts that describe such relations. One need only consider the story of the dying Zen master as evidence in support of this claim:

A Zen master lay dying. His monks had all gathered around his bed, from the most senior to the most novice monk. The senior monk leaned over to ask the dying master if he had any final words of advice for his monks. The old master slowly opened his eyes and in a weak voice whispered, “Tell them Truth is like a river.” The senior monk passed on this bit of wisdom in turn to the monk next to him, and it circulated around the room from one monk to another. When the words reached the youngest monk he asked, “What does he

mean, "Truth is like a river?" The question was passed back around the room to the senior monk who leaned over the bed and asked, "Master, what do you mean, 'Truth is like a river?'" Slowly the master opened his eyes and in a weak voice whispered, "OK, truth is not like a river." (Hyers, 1989, p. 271)

In order to make sense of this "joke," we must first come to terms with the background of its punch line, and how the inclusion of the master-disciple relation facilitates the transmission of a rather complex philosophical idea. To begin with, regarding "river," it is at once both like truth and not like truth. The punch line builds on what is perhaps one of the most famous Zen sayings, which is often ascribed to Qingyuan Weixin:

Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters. (Suzuki, 1949, p. 24)

These three stages of development within Zen are all drawn upon in the story, highlighting the existential predicament of the Zen practitioner who is always being thrown back into the world, back into their ill-fated (disastrous) situated existence. The Zen master initially communicates his having attained the abode of rest by likening truth to a river only to concede his ongoing education through the insight that truth is not like a river. This concession promotes his function as master insofar as it instructs his young disciples who remain convinced of the truth of rivers, and not the likeness of truth to the truth of the river. The story highlights the paradoxical interconnection of the truth of the river and the non-truth of the river, and how both can be thought to be rightly ascribable to "river." While the intellect is unable to resolve successfully such a logical tension, the initial recognition of its failings and shortcomings is shown as a necessary step in both calming the mind and seeking the truth elsewhere. In this way, the truth and non-truth of the river are like truth (which both is and is not true). Significantly, as Suzuki notes, "Zen carries its paradoxical assertions into every detail of our daily life" (1949, p. 273).

These paradoxes are grounded in the Zen Buddhist appropriation and use of the Mahayana Buddhist theory of the two-truths, which has a direct bearing on the Buddhist notion of emptiness. In order to appreciate the inclusion of paradox in Zen, one must appreciate the nature of this notion of emptiness, and in order to appreciate the Zen notion of emptiness, one must appreciate the correlative ontology that is assumed by the theory of the two-truths. Through these movements, articulations of paradox, sense, and non-sense settle into comic style. Comic style, in turn, is able to facilitate direct transmission.

The Mahayana Buddhist theory of the two-truths is constitutive of the distinction between conventional reality and ultimate reality (Garfield & Priest, 2003, p. 4), where conventional reality refers to the realm of non-essential phenomena and ultimate reality refers to the very non-essential nature of that realm. In Zen philosophy, owing in part to influences from the Tendai and Kegon schools of Buddhism, the distinction collapses on itself to the extent that both truths are expressions of one reality, despite being seemingly mutually exclusive. Each position is dispelled through its self-contradiction upon analysis, including the position of ultimate reality, lest it should be misunderstood as substantive and essentialistic. The form the theory of the two-truths takes in Rinzaï Zen Buddhism can

therefore be understood as a development of the ideas of the second-century Madhyamaka philosopher Nāgārjuna (Whitehead, 2012). However, the Zen articulation of this theory leads to results drastically different from the work of Nāgārjuna, namely the affirmation of nothing as opposed to the negation of everything. This position is unique to Zen. The interplay of the conventional and the actual re-affirms the position of reality as comprised of convenient designations for phenomenal experience. However, as convenient designations, these same phenomena are without substance. They are empty. They lack an essence in the traditional philosophical sense. They are real only correlationally, and their being exists only in and through relations that are specific to them. No thing exists independently or from its own perspective.

Emptiness: No-Thing is Funny

Instead, all things exist only inter-dependently. This includes the name-form construct of “things” proper, as well as Being and Non-being, Real and Non-real. In other words, the phenomenal world is made up of phantom-like entities that effect and are affected by each other. As a simple visualization, one might imagine wind-currents interacting with each other and shaping each other, all the while only being perceived indirectly through their influence on objects like trees. These trees, in turn, are perceived in their tree-ness only through their interactions with elements, such as the wind, and simultaneously effect and are affected by the wind, interacting with it and shaping it in its interactions with other wind-currents. This visualization would expand into a matrix of relations that would ultimately leave nothing out of its web. There is nothing that stands alone; no-thing has an essence. This truth concerning reality extends to social relationships, somatic practices, and spirituality as well. It is primarily in the realm of social relationships that we find the humor of Zen Buddhism used for the sake of pedagogy. From Ōbaku’s striking of his students with a staff, to Rinzai’s striking of his students with a roar, to Ikkyū’s striking of his students with presuppositional judgments through the breakdown of moral dichotomies, Zen works to break down conventional reality with an immediate and sudden realization. This realization is to be facilitated through paradox, through nonsense, and through humor.

Relaying a story about Ikkyū, Heinrich Dumoulin writes,

Once when he was begging, dressed in old clothes, he was given a half-penny at the door of a wealthy landlord. He later visited the same house dressed in the violet garb of his office. He was received in an inner room and offered a sumptuous meal. He then rose from the table, took off his robe, and placed it before the food, declaring that the festive meal belonged not to him but only to his robe. (Dumoulin, 2005, p. 196)

This story, in addition to being funny, is an excellent example of the correlative ontology at the heart of the theory of emptiness. The master-disciple relation overtakes the host-guest relation through a disruption of the phenomenal context. Ikkyū highlights the social illusion of status in offering the meal to his clothes. As a consequence of this correlative ontology, all things are understood as empty, in the sense that no thing has essence, or exists from its own point of view. Zen pedagogy is designed to achieve this disruption, to facilitate this sudden transmission, in a wide variety of ways. The records depict a regular use of shouting, of physical abuse, of the use of paradoxes such as are

found in koans, and oftentimes the use of nonsense. Rather than becoming upset at the situation, Ikkyū responds by ridiculing the underlying reality that gives way to the situation. Almost naked, Ikkyū makes us laugh at the social divide and its inherently empty nature.

While earlier schools of Buddhism, especially Indian Buddhism, consisted in rather serious logical or analytical exercises designed to gain insight into and thereby dissolve illusions, early forms of Zen added humor to the repertoire of tools with which to transmit truth. This aspect of Zen Buddhism has become its most popular and well-known feature. This development, however, is not without its own transgressions.

Indian Buddhist scholastics distinguished between six classes of laughter. Only the most restrained forms of laughter were considered appropriate for monks (Hyers, 1974, p. 34). Hyers (1974) describes these six classes of laughter as follows:

sita: a faint, almost imperceptible smile manifest in the subtleties of facial expression and countenance alone;

hasita: a smile involving a slight movement of the lips, and barely revealing the tips of the teeth;

vihāsita: a broad smile accompanied by a modicum of laughter;

upahasita: accentuated laughter, louder in volume, associated with movements of the head, shoulders, and arms;

apahasita: loud laughter that brings tears; and

atīhasita: the most boisterous, uproarious laughter attended by movements of the entire body (e.g., doubling over in raucous guffawing, convulsions, hysterics, “rolling in the aisles,” etc.).

This type of hierarchy is completely foreign to Zen, and to Japanese Buddhism more generally. Apart from its inception with the faint smile of Makakasho, Zen Buddhism has by and large been depicted as taking part in the three baser forms of laughter, and often exclusively in the basest form of laughter. This shift is made possible in light of the focus on the somatic dimensions of practice in Zen. Buddhism is not “all in the head,” but must be practiced throughout one’s being in all walks, talks, and guffaws of life. This practice requires new modes and means of communicating the *dharmā*, in light of the inadequacy of words and letters, of *sūtras* and *śāstras*; it requires a language that is self-reflexive and able to undermine its own constructs for the sake of pointing towards nothing.

The Impotence of “Ordinary” Language

As a result of the correlative ontology adopted by Zen Buddhism, ordinary language, as a collection of empty signifiers, is ultimately unable to express or correspond with anything. Language, like things, exists only correlationally. Linguistic definition is possible only in light of the interrelationality of language as a whole. Understood in this way, language is said to communicate only about itself. There are no absolute ties that bind particular words to particular phenomena; there are only conventional ties that arise in context. Language generates expectations for itself, which are satisfied or not by contextually situated persons in a given relation. Zen Buddhism makes use of these expectations. It not only fails to satisfy them, but also deliberately offends them in an attempt to collapse, even if only

momentarily, the entire structure. The outcome of these failures and offenses is often humor. The following story about Rinzai serves as a case and point:

One day when the master and Puhua were attending a dinner at a patron's house, the master asked, "A hair swallows up the great sea and a mustard seed contains Mount Sumeru. Is this the marvelous activity of supernatural power or is it original substance as it is?" Puhua kicked over the dinner table. "How coarse!" exclaimed the master. "What place do you think this is—talking about coarse and fine!" said Puhua. The next day the master and Puhua again attended a dinner. The master asked, "How does today's feast compare with yesterday's?" Puhua kicked over the dinner table as before. "Good enough," said the master, "but how coarse!" "Blind man!" said Puhua. "What's buddhadharma got to do with coarse and fine?" The master stuck out his tongue. (Sasaki, 2009, p. 35)

Through a series of seemingly different conversations, the two interlocutors "descend" from abstract intellectualist paradoxes into exclamationally evocative dissatisfaction into communications beyond words and letters: into the somatic and the affective as a form of direct pointing. It is in this "base" mode of physicalism and zaniness that the koan is realized as an expression of the non-essential nature of the initial problem. The story's humor is embellished through the setting, as the exchange takes place at a patron's house, and yet the situation is itself drawn out as empty as Puhua exclaims, "What place do you think this is." Interestingly, the humor of the story is made possible in light of the fact that the conversation seems to occur in a non-place: at once in a host-guest relation, a master-disciple relation, and a master-master relation. The correlation is therefore depicted as many, before being undermined altogether in the culminating punch line of the sticking out of the tongue. If everything is non-dual, non-essential, and empty, then what could possibly be meant by "coarse?" More importantly, what does it convey in this story? If buddhadharma is non-dualistic, then there can be no "proper" practice by which to gain insight into the true reality of things. Any and all actions hold the potential for insight, including the vulgar or unconventional. In this way, too, the Zen Buddhist practice of humor in the face of suffering offers a unique method of "slapping" persons into a state of awareness. It offers a model for sudden realization through the building up of and failure to deliver on conventional expectations. The conventional truth of the situation is thereby drawn out and shown as it is: non-essential, empty, no-thing.

Using Nonsense: Expect the Unexpected

This practice makes use of the sense of nonsense. Operating outside of the traditional boundaries of sense, insofar as it is operating outside of the traditional boundaries of meaningful expectations, Zen Buddhist stories also prove constitutive of conventions in precisely the same fashion as humor. To "get" the joke is a similar realization as to "get" the meaning of the disruption of the situation. *The Three Stooges* are funny only insofar as they are not perceived as making light of chronic abuse and violence. Their slapstick unsettles relationships of cooperation and competition in the industrial and capitalist conventions of the time. In the same way, Puhua kicking over the table and Rinzai sticking out his tongue unsettles the relationships proper to their situation and even situatedness as such. In any given setting, expectations are made manifest in light of conventions appropriate to the situation, and it is precisely the intentional undermining of these

expectations that becomes the comic spirit of Zen Buddhist practices. Turning again to the records, a story about Ōbaku reinforces the shift from abstract intellectualism to the somatic and the non-linguistic as more suitable in its comic delivery of correct understanding. It reads:

Our Master once attended an assembly at the Bureau of the Imperial Salt Commissioners at which the Emperor T'ai Chung was also present as a layman who had taken the ten precepts. The layman noticed our Master enter the hall of worship and make a triple prostration to the Buddha, whereupon he asked: "If we are to seek nothing from the Buddha, Dharma or Sangha, what does Your Reverence seek by such prostration?" "Though I seek not from the Buddha," replied our Master, "or from the Dharma, or from the Sangha, it is my custom to show respect in this way." "But what purpose does it serve?" insisted the layman, whereupon he suddenly received a slap. "Oh," he exclaimed, "How uncouth you are!" "What is this?" cried the Master. "Imagine making a distinction between refined and uncouth!" So saying, he administered another slap. (Blofeld, 1994, p. 95)

These slaps, according to their own conventions, are showings of respect. They are practices with which to "wake-up" the layman from his expectations, even when such expectations are the unexpected. While it would be expected that a Zen Master would make prostrations to the Buddha upon entering the hall of worship, it is not expected of the Zen Master Ōbaku in light of his eccentricities. His prostrations are therefore disruptive to the extent that they remind the layman not to expect the unexpected if such expectations are dictated by reputation/convention. There are therefore three slaps in this story: the collapse of the expectation, the physical slap for transposing conventional understandings of cause and effect, and the physical slap for imbuing conventional actions with value judgments. It is for this reason that Zen masters are often thought to be odd in their behavior, to be something of tricksters and pranksters. They seem to be "poking fun" at serious social relationships. They use nonsense in order to dissolve the boundaries of convention, and as a showing of the dynamic instability and correlationality of the boundary between sense and nonsense itself. Such irreverence also makes manifest the ease with which its application can be inverted, the ease with which nonsense can make sense and vice versa. The foolishness of Ōbaku is thereby overcome through a sudden reversal in which the layman becomes the fool in light of a higher foolishness brought forth through a bow and a series of slaps.

This type of physical remonstrance is not uncommon in Zen literature. Rinzai, for instance, is regularly depicted striking his students as a form of direct showing.

The master asked a monk, "Where do you come from?" The monk shouted. The master saluted him and motioned him to sit down. The monk hesitated. The master hit him. Seeing another monk coming, the master raised his whisk. The monk bowed low. The master hit him. Seeing still another monk coming, the master again raised his whisk. The monk paid no attention. The master hit him too. (Sasaki, 2009, p. 34)

These seemingly senseless and comic displays highlight the innate reality of practitioners as one of anticipation, as expecting particular responses to be correct and others to be false. Slapping each monk, Rinzai is able to de-situate situatedness itself, and thereby instruct the monks that all expectation resides within convention and is therefore

illusory. All expectation takes place within and according to the *samsaric* worldview as conventional reality. For the reader, these episodes begin to form a coherent pattern, and with it particular expectations. It is for this and similar reasons that reflexive sensitivity must be upheld in identifying with any of the three monks. Regardless of what is expected, the reader must realize that they too would be slapped. The comic value of the story can then be extended beyond the humorous situation of cowering monks, all of whom are to be struck, towards the humorous situation of the laughing reader, whose response also warrants a good strike. In trying to anticipate the meaning of the story, and with it the answer to the initial question, the sense of the story gives way to nonsense, which in turn makes sense anew when anticipating senselessness.

The Senselessness of Transgression

With a sense of senselessness as the dissolution of boundaries in light of the correlational ontology made possible in light of the theory of emptiness, ideas of appropriate and inappropriate become problematic. Transgression is both ridiculed and celebrated. It is not funny as a radical resistance to the force of social conventions, but instead the very idea of transgressing, in its newly problematized situation, is itself funny. “What place do you think this is—talking about coarse and fine!” we say along with Puhua. Amidst suffering, convention becomes a crutch with which to make sense of the overwhelming angst that results from it. However, the Buddhist position is that situated existence consists in nothing more than conventional value ascriptions according to conventional truth. Both are empty in and of themselves. Suffering is only suffering correlationally, from a particular vantage point within a particular situation. The comic spirit of Zen is able to laugh in the face of the suffering of situated existence.

In this way, Zen humor both fulfills and completely negates traditional understandings of laughter. Hyers writes, “Laughter may be sadistic, demented, nervous, morbid, crude, teasing, taunting, cynical, bitter. Humour may be a way of evading truth and avoiding responsibility” (1974, p. 19). Zen humor evades conventional truth and avoids the implicit responsibilities commanded by conventional truth. The laughter it promotes can be described along the lines of all the adjectives suggested by Hyers. However, by evading conventional truth, Zen humor points towards ultimate truth, and its laughter is only seemingly demented and nervous in the face of nonsense. It is only seemingly so to the extent that it makes no sense to impose value on senselessness. We can therefore agree with Hyers’ assessment that “to laugh is a sign of sanity; and the comic is deliberately used to break up concepts, to release tensions and to teach what cannot be taught in words. Nonsense is used to point to the beyond of rational sense” (1974, p. 35). To laugh a Zen laugh is a sign of understanding the limitations of the understanding, it is a sanity that bears witness to its own insanity and, it is an acknowledgement of the credibility of the incredible and the familiarity of the odd.

Zen takes itself seriously only in its ongoing folly. True liberation is made possible only through the dissolution of the reified, a dissolution which necessarily includes Zen specifically and Buddhism more generally. We are instructed to “Kill the Buddha!” should we come across him. Monks such as Ikkyū remind us that the scriptures make for excellent toilet paper. And everyone gets slapped. Everyone. Part of the motivation for this is the undermining of all conventions. Hyers writes, “Zen is iconoclastic in character; for before

true liberation can occur, all idols must be overturned, or stood upside down. Anything, however holy, is potentially an idol; therefore anything is a legitimate object of laughter” (1974, p. 103). This includes states such as prosperity, peace, and war. It also includes nation states, communities, individuals, and lineage. All aspects of life, insofar as they are true by convention within specific situations, are laughable, and are subject to the comic spirit. This is neither magnanimous nor petty, and remains true whether the situation appears perilous or stable. All things, in light of the empty and non-essential nature of things, are “funny.” Including urine.

In the hagiographic literature on Ikkyū, we find the following story recounted:

Once Ikkyū was taking the Yodo no Kawase ferry on his way to Sakai. There was a *yamabushi* [ascetic hermit] on board who began to question him.

“Hey, Your Reverence, what sect are you?”

“I belong to the Zen sect,” replied Ikkyū.

“I don’t suppose your sect has miracles the way our sect does?”

“No, actually we have lots of miracles. But if it’s miracles, why don’t you show the sort of miracles that your people have?”

“Well” said the *yamabushi*. “By virtue of my magic powers I can pray up Fudō before your very eyes and make him stand right there on the prow of the boat.”

And, with the beads of his rosary the man began to invoke first Kongō and then Seitaka.

At this all the passengers began to look back and forth wondering what was going to happen. Then, just as he had said, there on the prow of the boat, the form of Fudō appeared surrounded by a halo of dancing flames.

Then, the *yamabushi* made a ferocious face and told them, “You’d all better offer him a prayer.” This made other passengers very uneasy—all, that is, but Ikkyū who was completely unruffled.

“Well,” spat out the *yamabushi*. “How about you, Zen-monk? How are you going to deal with my miracle?”

“By producing a miracle of my own. From my very body I will cause water to issue forth and extinguish the flames of your Fudō. You’d better start up your prayers again.” And Ikkyū began to pee mightily all over the flames until at last the *yamabushi*’s magic was counteracted, and the entire image melted away.

Thereupon the passengers on the boat all bowed to Ikkyū for this wonderful display. (Olson, 2006, p. 367)

Despite its transgressive tone, this story is meant neither to offend nor to please. It must be remembered that all “transgressions” against the sacred fail to make sense in light of the doctrine of non-dualism. Killing the Buddha, peeing on sacred apparitions, using the scriptures to wipe away filth, these are all meaningful as practices of direct pointing to ultimate reality, to the relational interdependence of sense and value claims, and as exemplifications of a comic style used to dissolve illusions through the sudden collapse of expectations. Such humor extends the conventional beyond its sense through non-sense, ultimately allowing for insights into ultimate reality and the true sense of senselessness. They provide insights into emptiness and no-thing.

Occasions for this type of insight abound in all aspects of life, including the suffering of situated existence. Amidst suffering, take heed of the fact that it is only so from a limited contextual perspective borne out of convention and stick your tongue out. Note the place from whence you have discerned it to be so and ask yourself on what grounds it merits its

reified status and truth. Kick a table over, urinate, and laugh. As you laugh, do not be afraid to get your body into it.

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