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**Did Buddha Laugh? Zen, humour and pedagogy**

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## **Did Buddha Laugh? Zen, humour and pedagogy**

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### ABSTRACT

In academic and popularist text, Western interest in Zen pivots around its 'new age' spiritual appeal. Captured in titles like 'Zen and the art of X' or 'the Zen of Y', these texts explore the self-realisation necessary to relieve individuals of their often worrisome and frequently unwholesome 'selves'. Research and discussion of humour in education has been mainly concerned with its ability promote learner attention, motivation, comprehension and retention, or to facilitate positive teaching and learning relationships and environments (Powell & Anderson, 1985). Zen is introduced in terms of a 'healing deconstruction' (Loy 1996) that is radically anti-essentialising, in ways that have yet to be properly accounted for by poststructuralism. As well, Zen focuses on existential concerns and is interested in embodiment as knowledge, uses impermanence, suffering and death as resources for technologies of self. As a philosophical/psychological tradition, Zen offers a form of praxis for living a life in which humour is understood to be one of its significant resources. Humour provides a space for serious contemplation on issues that are often repressed or silenced. Taking the comedic dimensions of Zen teaching as a focal point, this paper explores humour as pedagogy. It highlights practices such as the strategic use of paradox, irony, incongruity, unconventionality and distancing; the dissolution of dualisms; and the deployment of radical scepticism in Zen teachings, to argue for a more encompassing consideration of the pedagogic dimensions of humour.

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### I

This chronic dullness in school helps students become anti-intellectual. Their lives outside of school are humorous, and comedy is one way they experience their subjectivity. When learning is humorless and emotionless, it denies them tow subjective values (Shor and Freire 1987: 163)

#### *Zen, Humour and pedagogy?*

This paper is a think-piece about the place of humour in pedagogy and is speculative, and philosophical. We make no attempt to provide a thorough review of literatures, or to outline a theory of pedagogy that includes humour, but instead our paper is an attempt at self-clarification that he hope provides some provocation for others to join in.

In part this paper is a response to recent attempts in Australia to re-articulate an answer to the question: what is good pedagogy? As examples, the New London Group (1996) have proposed a 'pedagogy of multiliteracies' for designing social futures in late/fast capitalism and the Queensland Education Department have sponsored the development of the Productive Pedagogies (Lingard, Mills et al. 2000). We think these developments are urgent, given the paucity of vocabulary for pedagogy in Australia in a context in which teachers' work is increasingly instrumentalised and life in schools for students provides few opportunities for bringing academic knowledge into conversation with their lifeworlds and the historical moment (Pinar 2004). Unfortunately neither of these two models properly acknowledge the identity work that young people must perform in schools (Wexler 1992) (Smyth and Hattam 2004). That for too many young people, schooling is an alienating experience requiring 'emptying of self' or damping of emotion and self expression (Wexler 1992). School suffers from an 'emotional vacancy' (Shor and Freire 1987: 163). Schooling is organised around discourses in which Reason/cognition are privileged and split off from the affective/emotional and hence the 'art of being' (Fromm 1992)) or the 'capacity to be fully human' (Wexler 1996: 3) is presented as devoid of traits such as love, compassion and humour. Our

analysis could take many lines of flight in response to this critique but in this paper we want to focus on humour or its lack. But then thinking pedagogy without humour is absurd, and so we ponder: why is humour absent?, how can we understand the pedagogical roles of humour? How might we think humour into our pedagogical vocabulary? And how might we ensure that humour doesn't become instrumentalised and hence stripped of its therapeutic/pedagogical power?

Of course there are many resources that are available to contemplate humour as a pedagogical strategy. A starting point might be Critchley's (2002) neat little book *'On Humour'* in which he outlines a range of resources including Beckett, Berger, Breton, Freud, and Wittgenstein to mention only a few. Each of these could be mined for insights. Critchley distinguishes between 'laughing at others' or 'laughing at oneself'. He argues for the later in terms of the value to self and society. 'Laughing at others' tends to be based on malice and sustains the power relations of the status quo whilst the later, 'laughing at oneself', he argues has therapeutic value, and we would argue pedagogical value also. We want to focus our attention on a resource not taken up by Critchley, Zen Buddhism, a tradition in which 'laughing at oneself' is a key pedagogical practice. The self, for Zen *is* the object of deconstructive work; that we take the *self* seriously is seen as *the* habitual practice that requires unsettling and hence Zen as a pedagogy invokes humour as a healing form of deconstruction: humour can be the way towards living what Critchley (1996) calls a post-deconstructive subjectivity: 'Post-deconstructive subjectivity would be a determination of the subject *after deconstruction*, a determination that succeeds the duty of deconstruction without lapsing back into the pre-deconstructive or classical conceptions of the subject ...' (p. 39)

We want to argue that unlike poststructuralism, Zen provides a pedagogy that takes us past just theorising a post-deconstructive subjectivity to experiencing non-self. Smith (1999) is useful on this point;

... that the West is currently at a kind of intellectual and cultural impasse, even a state of exhaustion, precisely because of being stuck in a particular kind of desire with respect to identity[/subjectivity]. Only through an abandonment of that desire, along the lines, say, of ancient Ch'an Master Huang-po's "great relinquishment" may it be possible to enter the broader ocean of wisdom that can enlighten our lived burdens as parents, teachers, colleagues, friends and especially enemies (Smith 1999: 12)

In this paper we want to take up Smith's challenge to go beyond the state of exhaustion of Western views on identity that are 'stubbornly entrenched as the theoretical axis around which virtually all the defining concerns revolve' (p. 13). Certainly for those of us interested in building pedagogy that is broadly critical in orientation we are presently stuck in an impasse: having rejected the 'clapped-out discreditable, historically superannuated ideology of Autonomous Man' (Eagleton 1987: 47) the other alternative on offer is the de-centred subject of the new identity politics. Whilst we have moved away from an essentialised irreducible *I* that was borrowed from Aristotle and further objectified by Descartes, to a more inclusive, pluralistic and decentred view of self, the point is that our projects—personal, social and educational—are still driven by a 'profound desire for identity' (p. 15). The fiction of identity itself seems to be immune from the sorts of deconstructive practices that characterise critical/poststructuralist pedagogical work.

We want to argue that there are 'Eastern' deconstructive resources that have yet to be properly thought through in the 'Western' educational discourses. Against the secularising impulse in western scholarship, and that includes the critical kind, we want to argue that Zen Buddhism provides a form of healing deconstruction that might provide a way past this aporia that appears to leave us no other alternative than either suffer a neo-Nietzschean form of nihilism, or play along with the game offered by late capitalism and consume our way out of disenchantment.

The paper has these few moves: (1) What is zen? (2) critical theory/pedagogy encounters with Zen (3) how might we begin to understand 'humour' as a strategy or as a pedagogy and Did the Buddha laugh? (4) why its absence from our thinking about good pedagogy, and finally a (5) conclusion; So what?

## II

### *What is Zen?*

Western Philosophy has long been suspicious of 'pure reason'. In the Kantian tradition pure reason comprises metaphysical ideas and knowledges which appear beyond the limits of human experience. The dogmatism and capacity to self justification of religion was one of Kant's prime suspects; in the twenty-first century it has become a known guilty party. Kant's radical scepticism is not however uncalled for in the face of a Christian tradition where the Book and the Word of God is often deemed absolute and sacrosanct:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book; and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophesy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (*Revelation of St John* cited in Heyers 1973: 64).

Not all spiritual traditions are concerned with establishing their precepts above and beyond critique. Zen Buddhism is a case in point. Its iconoclasm is easily identified in constant reedits and reinterpretations of Zen koans and anecdotes and the Zen practice of amending its own scriptures and commentaries and stands in stark contrast to other traditions which regards the sacred as reproachless.

But of course there is more than one type of Zen Buddhism: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Soto, Rinzai, Pure Land and we might even talk about an emerging Western Zen Tradition that draws on all of these. For the sake of an introductory discussion, we can point to two types of Buddhism: one group follows a graduated path to enlightenment that involves a gradual refining of conceptual understanding that is the basis for meditation, and the second type (Zen) involves abandoning conceptualization from the outset and practitioners go for sudden enlightenment. Of course there are variations on both of these themes. In terms of defining Zen—how can we—Thich Nhat Hanh refers to Bodhidharma's (the First Ancestral Teacher of Zen in China, circa: fifth century) definition:

[Zen is] a special transmission outside the scriptures, not based on words or letters, a direct pointing to the heart of reality so that we might see into our own nature and wake up (Thich Nhat Hanh 1995: 34).

Zen, understood as a methodless method is not transmitted through scriptures but from 'mind to mind'. 'The image often used is a *seal* imprinted on the mind, not of wood, copper or ivory, but a mind seal' (p. 35). The transmission of mind to mind is of a very specific kind: the transmission involves resolving the predicament of the 'ego in ego-consciousness' (Martino 1960: 145). To help us out here we need to digress for awhile and we borrow Loy's analysis of the pain of being human. (For an alternative presentation read Martino (1960))

### *The pain of being human: (Mis)understanding anxiety*

Loy sets up his argument using Freud's theory of repression. Quoting Freud: 'The essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting something out of consciousness'. Whatever makes us feel uncomfortable, or whatever we do not want to cope with now consciously, we ignore or forget. But the repressed remains and

demands to come to consciousness, so repression can only be sustained through a continual effort. 'We experience the effect of this as a persistent psychic tension' (p. 6). The repressed though, often returns in disguise, in distorted form, as a symptom. For the early Freud, the primary human repression was sexual repression but, as Loy points out, Freud's attention shifted from sex to death as he aged. Contemporary psychotherapy has also made such a shift. For Loy, Buddhism, existentialism and psychotherapy all point to some form of resolution of death denial, that is, the way we deal with death-in-life.

As a basic assumption, humans know that they will die. This self-knowledge not only drives our self-preservation but must also be repressed for us to function with any modicum of psychological comfort. As a result we are 'hyperanxious' (p. 7) and use considerable energy in the denial of death. What seems clear is that all three traditions understand the human condition as being marked by a persistent psychic tension or hyperanxiety that arises in dependence on a repressed fear of death. This hyperanxiety goes by many names. For example, existentialism refers to the pain of being human in terms of an undeniable anguish. Sartre called it nausea. For psychoanalysis there are various forms of anxiety, 'including the low-grade neurosis called normality' (p. 51). Loy draws on Horney's work to define a 'basic anxiety', understood as 'a profound insecurity and vague apprehensiveness' or a 'feeling of being isolated and helpless' (p. 59). From a Buddhist perspective, this basic anxiety, understood as an existential angst, 'is the basic situation for all of us, due not to some adverse influences that happen to affect all of us but to the basically anxious nature of ego' (p. 59). For Buddhism, being human is understood in terms of dukkha, or as Loy puts it, 'a gnawing feeling of lack' (p. 51).

This hyperanxiety also has many diagnoses. All three traditions attempt a deeper explanation of the mechanisms behind this hyperanxiety. Using the language of psychoanalysis: 'whence does neurosis come—what is its ultimate, its own particular *raison d'être*?' (p. 59).

Loy's Buddhist reading of the existentialist and psychoanalytic traditions indicates a sense of agreement about the nature of this hyperanxiety. Such 'ur-anxiety' is viewed as 'cosmic'. It invades us totally. The self is formed out of a need to defend against that anxiety' (p. 60). Anxiety, in this sense, is the basic underlying reaction and is formless, objectless, and non-specific. Such anxiety though, is so difficult to recognise and so, too, are our various defenses. From a Buddhist perspective, our 'basic anxiety' is often hidden behind a range of other afflictive emotions such as anger, hatred, desire, attachment, jealousy or covetousness. Existentialist and psychoanalytic theories propose variations on Freud's Oedipal complex, or what is now referred to as the Oedipal project. Such theories point to a number of variations on a theme in which our repression of death manifests as a desire to become one's own father, to become the creator of one's own life, to be one's own origin, or self-cause. The repressed denial of death requires some psychological defense, a defense against an amorphous feeling that 'there is something wrong with me', of 'not being good enough' and maybe even self-loathing. Our repression of death-in-life forces us to rationalise our shortcomings. We can try to feel special, that is to 'become different and better than everyone else, thus deserving a better fate' (p. 62), or else fuse with others and gain respite in anonymity: 'there's nothing wrong with me; I'm just like everyone else' (p. 62). 'In the first case I compensate by striving to become more real than others, in the second I reassure myself by becoming no less real than others seem to be' (p. 60).

To handle our repression of death-in-life, we need to be able to ground ourselves. To do that we need to not only convince ourselves that we are our own self-cause, but also we:

... need a world of dependable, self-existing things, fixable in objective time and space and interacting in ways we can learn to manipulate. This 'external' dependability of the world is just as important to us as 'internal' psychic organization, for either without the other would be helpless. (p. 66)

We accept ourselves as an objectified internal psychic organization and that the outside world is also dependable and self-existing through forgetting that our reality is a mental construct, and we live instead inside of habitual 'thought-props' (p. 65). We repress the fact that we reify or objectify the world and ourselves. Psychoanalysis thinks about this objectification process in terms of projection and transference. Simply put, we project onto the world, or transfer onto others, our own fantasies. Because we need to objectify the world to protect ourselves from the unbearable thought of death, we project that apparent objectivity and live as though the world is independent from us. 'The apparently objective world is unconsciously structured by the ways we seek to secure ourselves within it' (p. 66). Our fantasies, as automatisations, are not just mental but become embodied. Our projections are actually embodied in the world in the form of our own individual structuring which connects to 'a collective dream' (p. 67), maintained by each of us striving to secure or realize ourselves within that dream. Our projections change the world, in Loy's words, 'into the replica of one's unknown face' (p. 67). That is, our 'need for security becomes invested in wider social structures, which emphasize competing for socially agreed security and status symbols: money, prizes, power, and so forth' (p. 67). Normality then is our collective madness, in which we repress the truth of the human condition, and especially death.

### *A Buddhist critique of non-self*

For existentialism and psychoanalysis there is some-*thing*, an ego which engages in a process of self-reflection and the repression of its own impending death. And this *thing* called self or ego, is by its very nature anxious because of *its* fear of death. The ego is the *thing* that engages in the play of repression, feels guilt and engages in transference and projection. Anxiety then, is a characteristic of self, and is 'not adventitious but essential to the self, not something we have but something we are' (p. 16). Not being able to see past the reification of self or ego, anxiety then is ontological and primordial. There can be no end to it.

A Buddhist critique, understands this hyperanxiety as not being about repressing death but as something more immediate. From a Buddhist perspective, our problem with death is 'neither the threat of its actuality nor even its implications as impending possibility' (p. 52). Instead the problem arises because of a dualistic way of thinking, 'a no-win game that the ego cannot stop playing because it is constituted by that game' (p. 52). A Buddhist view suggests that 'life-versus-death is not the game the ego plays but that game whose play is the ego' (p. 21). That is, we impute self-existence, *thing*-ness, or some form of inherent existence onto the flux of our experience, which we grasp at and then cherish. But there is no-*thing* to grasp and cherish. 'The sense-of-self that arises is a fiction' (p. 12). Thurman (1998) is instructive on this point:

I questioned everything said by everyone ... except the one continuous report to myself that I was 'me'. I questioned who I was and why I held the opinions I held, feeling an urgent need to pin down my identity, but I never wondered if I *was* at all. (p. 2)

Out of a deluded form of forgetting that Buddhism understands as a basic ignorance, we grasp at what is a mental construct, striving to become real by becoming some-*thing*. 'The consequence is that the sense-of-self always has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense-of-lack, which it always tries to escape' (Loy 1996: 12). We experience this sense-of-lack, that something is missing, that something isn't quite right, because the sense-of-self, which is a conditioned consciousness, struggles to become unconditioned, autonomous, or real. Anxiety 'is generated by this fictional self-reflection for the simple reason that I do not know and cannot know what this thing I supposedly am *is*' (p. 21). But this project can never be completed because the ego-self is the effort or the struggle of awareness to objectify itself in order to then grasp itself: 'what is grasped is confused with what grasps' (p. 12). Our hyperanxiety is 'not something that the ego has, it is what the ego is' (p. 21). This is the crucial point of difference between Buddhism and existentialist psychology. This crucial difference opens up the possibility that hyperanxiety can be overcome ultimately; that liberation is possible.

Our hyperanxiety then is not the 'terror of future annihilation' but 'the anguish of a groundlessness experienced now' (p. 51). It is not fear of death-in-life but fear of non-self. For Buddhism:

... the Oedipal project is an attempt of the developing ego-self to attain closure on itself, to foreclose its dependence on others by becoming a self-sufficient Cartesian-like ego. It is the wish to become ... 'self-existing'—something that is not possible'. (p. 11)

For Buddhism, the mechanism for the generation of existential angst, hyperanxiety's *raison d'être*, is ego's flight from contingency rather than its terror of annihilation. Our existential angst originates not from a denial of death but from 'the fact that our self-consciousness is not something self-existing but a mental construct' (p. 12). It is not death that is our deepest fear. Instead this fear of death is a symptom of:

the desire of the sense-of-self to become a real self, to transform its anguished lack of being into genuine being. Even the terror of death represses something, for the terror is preferable to facing one's lack of being now: death-fear at least allows us to project the problem into the future. In that way we avoid facing what we are (or are *not*) right now. (p. 27)

Our problems arise when our 'consciousness seeks to ground itself, that is, wants to become unconditioned and autonomous, which is to say *real*. If consciousness is ungrounded it can try to realize itself only by trying to objectify itself. We strive to become real by becoming *something*' (p. 12). The Oedipal project can then never be completed. The ego can never find a way to become *its* own ground because the ego *itself* is the effort, or the struggle of our unconditioned awareness to objectify *itself* in order to grasp *itself*. It is not that the ego is repressing death but that the sense-of-self that is a fiction, a mental construct, is struggling against its own non-existence, its own emptiness.

This feeling of hyperanxiety, then, arises out of the struggle to be what is impossible, our own preoccupation to make ourselves inherently existent. For Buddhism, the actual problem is our deeply repressed fear that our nothingness is a problem, but Buddhism predicts that the ego can be overcome by an unmediated experience of unconditioned consciousness. For Buddhism, our hyperanxiety, our sense-of-lack is not a basic metaphysical category but a conditioned effect and a continuing process, which allows for the possibility that existentialist psychology can not contemplate, a 'deconditioning that ends this sense-of-lack' (p. 76). Quite simply, when we stop attempting to realise our selves as a *thing*, our hyperanxiety abates. However, the sort of letting go that is required is one that has to get around the ego itself. This letting go is not easy. It means giving up our most cherished thoughts and feelings about ourselves. It means giving up those thoughts '*which are what I think I am*, to stand naked and exposed' (p. 27). In addition, the 'letting go that is necessary is not accessible to consciousness' (p. 57). The ego cannot resolve its own *lack* because the ego is a manifestation of that *lack*. 'In terms of life and death, the ego is that which believes itself to be alive and that fears death; hence the ego, although only a mental construction, will face its imminent disappearance with horror' (p. 57). So, for a Buddhist, the solution to the problem of death-in-life is not a struggle against the terror of death but rather the practice of terror endured. Rather than sustain the repression and its eternal return, projecting our lack onto others or introjecting lack in the form of guilt, the Buddhist path recommends abiding in the anguish with simple awareness. 'One does not do anything with that anguish except develop the ability to dwell in it or rather *as* it; then the anguish, having nowhere else to direct itself, consumes the sense-of-self' (p. 57). Having deconstructed the sense-of-self in an existential sense we realise that there is no lack because there has never been any inherently existing and autonomous self that is separate from reality.

Zen practice then can be understood to be a ‘straightforward, concrete assault upon the contradictory dualistic subject-object structure of the ego in ego-consciousness’ (Martino 1960: 154). For those practitioners who are courageous enough to really work on the question ‘to be or not to be’ with themselves and their teachers are in effect struggling with the question: what are you beyond the subject-object structure of your ego in ego-consciousness? And this question can’t be answered using the sorts of logics we normally get by with. This question or its many variations form the koans that some Zen schools use.

For by its very nature the koan does not permit itself to be fitted into any dualistic subject-object scheme of the ego in ego-consciousness. It can never ever be meaningful, much less be ‘solved’ or satisfied, and remain an object external to the subject. (p. 158)

## II

### *Critical theory/pedagogy encounters with Zen*

The Western encounter with Zen would be difficult to map in a book let alone in this paper. There are Zen centres in most capital cities, Western Roshis (Aitken 1982), and it would be an almost impossible task keeping up with all the books that are being published about Zen, by Zen practitioners. Of some note here of course, are the beat poets, many scholars are still referencing Howl (Gough 2002), the Jazz minimalists such as John Cage, and Leonard Cohen often does Zen retreat. And how can we forget Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. At least Pirsig was gracious enough to state that his book had nothing to do with Zen scholarship. There is an emerging conversation between the psycho-sciences and Buddhism of various kinds and Zen is part of that (Loy 1996a; Watson 1998). Having said that, there are few conversations between social theory and Zen but there are a some notable ones that we should mention.

As examples, Barthes (1982) *Empire of Signs*, uses the Zen Buddhist notion of satori (understood as a ‘panic suspension of language’ (p. 75) and working with a koan as central threads in his discussion about Japan as an empire of signs. Minh-Ha (192) uses traces of Zen in her conversation with French feminist poststructuralism. She makes reference to the Zen notion of nonduality: ‘The One is the All and the All is the One; and yet the One remains the One and the All the All. Not two, not One either’ (p. 140). The Zen material is considered ‘useless in a theoretical context’ (p. 141). Trinh also argues that there is also a tendency to mystify Zen in the academy, that Zen is often ‘recuperated into a dualistic and compartmentalised world-view’ (p. 141). Some other notable examples of a kind of dialogue between ‘East’ and ‘West’ are summarised in Clarke (1997). One of the most notable being Heidegger’s life-long interest in Asian thought.<sup>1</sup>

His search for appropriate language in which to ‘think Being’ led him progressively away from the conceptualising methods born out of European linguistic modes towards non-representational modes of utterance such as those found in Asian philosophical texts ... (p. 115)

As well, Clarke makes a special mention of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, there is the significant influence of Buddhism in their critical theories. Schopenhauer was especially interested in the Buddhist descriptions of the human condition, but he gave a rather pessimistic reading to a

<sup>1</sup> See May, R. (1996) *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*. London: Routledge. and Parkes, G., (Ed. (1987) *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii..

<sup>2</sup> See Mistry, F. (1981) *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Prolegomena to a Comparative Study*. Berlin: de Gruyter. and Parkes, G., (Ed. (1991) *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago.. See also the chapter, Zen and Nietzsche, in Abe, M. (1985) *Zen and Western Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii..

philosophy that acknowledges the centrality of human suffering (Welborn 1968; Jacobson 1981). Schopenhauer's (1844) *The World as Will and Representation*, a book that gave expression to a Buddhist-inspired philosophy of a world that is, by its nature, transitory, godless, and an irrational affair of ceaseless striving and suffering, was a significant influence on the early Nietzsche. The problem of how such nihilism might be overcome without illusion was a central concern of his work. Nietzsche, in the spirit of critical theory, engaged in a philosophical critique of Western modernity, or a philosophical account of the contemporary Western condition. His critical theory though did suggest the possibility of the emergence of exceptional beings, the 'over-man' or *Übermensch*, capable of overcoming the 'all-too-human' and attaining the fullest possible 'enhancement of life'.

Also, Foucault made his own excursions into Zen (Carrette 1999). He spent some time in the Zen Temple of Seionji at Uenohara in 1978. In the short interview with the priest he makes his own joke in response to the priest's inquiry about whether his work is understood in Japan. He says that he thinks his name is easier to pronounce than Heidegger's. (of course Foucault's interviews are littered with self-deprecating remarks and especially when the interviewer attempts to impute an identity onto him, such as he didn't know what a postmodernist was and 'leave it up to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order'.) In the interview Foucault commented on the present crisis in Western philosophy. 'For it is the end of the era for Western philosophy. Thus, if philosophy of the future exists, it must be born outside of Europe or equally born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe' (p. 113).

As well there is the mostly forgotten work of Erich Fromm. Fromm, in distinction to most other 'Western' interpreters including those mentioned above, engaged with Buddhism in a somewhat different mode. His encounter with Buddhism was dialogical by nature. This is exemplified by the way in which the later phase of his work, a Buddhist-inspired phase, began with a book consisting of three essays that had their origin in a workshop on Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis. Fromm's engagement with Zen Buddhist ideas from this workshop, to quote him, led to a 'considerable enlargement and revision' of his own Marxist-inspired psychoanalysis (Fromm, Suzuki et al. 1960: viii). Unlike most other western interpreters, Fromm appears to have studied Zen Buddhism seriously and used this understanding to complement the development of his critical theory of well-being informed by Jewish and Christian mystics along with Marx and Freud. As examples Fromm used Buddhist ideas such as the distinction between 'having' and 'being', *satori*, and paradoxical logic.

### *Zen and critical pedagogy*

As far as critical pedagogy is concerned, there are very few attempts to engage in any dialogue with Zen Buddhism. As a discourse community, critical pedagogy finds it difficult to engage with the 'spiritual' and it seems that Zen Buddhism is read through such a lens. hooks (1994) makes passing reference to the 'engaged Buddhism' of Thich Nhat Hanh in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*. She borrows the notion of being 'engaged' which she defines in terms of linking awareness with practice to develop an argument about an 'engaged pedagogy'. But then for hooks the resource she draws on is the metaphor of 'engaged' which she borrows from Thich Nhat Hanh's work on socially engaged Buddhism but her published work has at best only a shallow engagement with Zen. hooks' references to Buddhism are indicative of the way in which critical theory/pedagogy has, up till this point, managed this dialogue. In her work there are only the barest of traces of the Buddhist tradition, even though she states that Thich Nhat Hanh has touched her deeply. This issue is exemplified in Florence's (1998) account of hooks' work. There is an assertion that 'the Buddhist view helped her overcome her socialization to a dualistic thought pattern that pits the rational and the effective in academic settings' (p. 216), but without any discussion of the Buddhist view. Florence's account, in fact, has no reference to any of Thich Nhat Hanh's books. Given the use of the term 'engaged' in hooks' recent work on pedagogy is a term she borrows from Thich Nhat Hanh, this silence around Buddhism only continues to mystify Buddhist wisdom-knowledge.

Recently though there has been a couple of important examples of scholarly engagement with Zen by pedagogues which we will mention briefly here.

Hwu (1998) takes up the point that Eastern philosophy has been either marginalised or mystified in curriculum discourses and proposes to contrast Zen and Taoism with post-structuralist thinking. The affinity between these two deconstructive traditions provides a bridge to start the conversation at least. By way of introduction he outlines the problem of representing the self in (Western) theory as characterising the limit of critique. Hwa uses Foucault's imagining of the 'disappearance of man' (in the Order of Things) as a way to introduce the notion of non-sense of Zen. For Foucault (1974), 'the void left by man's disappearance ... does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, that the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think' (p. 342). Hwa then outlines some of Foucault's later work on the technologies of self as a means to explicate a neat Zen-inspired discussion on the very contingency of the 'I' itself.

Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) provide a thoughtful mediation on the 'contradictory functions of silence in pedagogy' (p. 193). They want to unsettle the rather the binary that seems to be evident in the literature around voice and silence. As with most binaries, one side is all positive and the other all negative: voice is empowering and silence is oppressive. For part of their argument they refer to the Buddhism and especially to the 'nonduality between speech and silence' (p. 198). In speaking up for silence they argue, again drawing on Buddhism that silence provides the conditions for reflection and making sense of the world: the question is not voice or silence but 'how to experience silence?' (p. 200). They go onto to argue that: 'the strong rhetorical distinction between silence and speech conceals not only the emotional experience of silence and its mystical attributes but also wider social, political, and ethical issues such as the practice of silence as a powerful means to hearing the Other' (p. 201). Rather than understanding silence as negative, they argue that silence 'marks a readiness to listen and pay attention, an invitation to hear others as well as oneself' (p. 205). They borrow from Levinas's ethics and argue that 'only in silence that we are able to cultivate the humility necessary' to honour the Other (p. 206). They conclude with an argument that can be summarised by this quote:

Consequently, the tendency to push some groups to reclaim their voices is not necessarily liberating to them or an indication of 'good' ethics on the part of those who take this initiative. Developing the capacity to 'hear' the meanings of different silences is fundamental before one engages in any kind of silencing silences in the classroom. (p. 209)

Whilst not on the topic of Zen and humour this paper does provide some an example of the sort of dialogue between Buddhism and critical pedagogy we have in mind and the paper does present a cogent case for drawing on Buddhist insights for thinking through 'good pedagogy'.

### III

#### *Theories of Humour*

By way of an introduction to thinking about the nature of humour, Critchley (2002) states that 'humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way things are represented in the joke ... between the expectation and the actuality' (p. 1). This of course sounds very much like the aim of critical pedagogy either as deconstruction or ideology critique. Humour upsets 'common sense'. Critchley (2002: 2-3) draws on Morreall (1987) for three explanations of humour and laughter:

1. Superiority theory. A perspective found in the work of Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes which sees humour as an effect of superiority achieved when others are disparaged or depreciated. Associated with ridicule, insult sarcasm and appears to offer little benefit for instruction.
2. Relief theory – Found in the work of Spencer, Darwin and Freud. Humour has a psychological basis. Jokes and ambiguities are a cathartic way of releasing energy or suppressed and forbidden thoughts. Jokes and ambiguities disguise or evade of aggressive and sexual feelings and anxieties. Laughter opens up avenues of communication and enables students to see ordinary information in unusual patterns and connections addition to teaching skill and techniques for developing positive rapport.
3. Incongruity theory – for Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard the source of humour is incongruity. The juxtaposition of odd inappropriate, inconsistent or unsuitable parts creates surprise and unexpectedness. For Kant humour ‘is the sudden transformations of a strained expectation into nothing’. Similar theory derailing normal flow of thoughts. News paper cartoons however rely on visual literacy, high sociopolitical awareness.

In terms of humour as incongruity, examples include the joke as ‘anti-rites’, that ‘mock, parody or deride the ritual practices of a given society’ (p. 5). Such humour involves a congruence between the social structure and the joke structure, or some sense of social contract at work, some agreement about the nature of the social world that the joke assumes. Through such humour we experience comic relief, a loss of control, a release of tension as a corporeal response, a chuckle, giggle or guffaw. But then humour as incongruity might also be more than comic relief: ‘the anti-rite of the joke shows the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage’ (p. 10) and may even have a ‘critical function with respect to society’ (p. 10). Certainly we can find plenty of examples of this in the humour used by social movements. Going after the incongruous can mean laughing at power and it’s contingency. But then some humour is fairly reactionary and serves to reinforce the social stereotypes and might be understood to be a ‘comedy of recognition’ which ‘simply toys with the existing social hierarchies in a charming but quite benign fashion’ (p. 11). Such comedy as diversion or scapegoating aims to confirm the status quo through ‘denigrating a certain sector of society’ or ‘laughing at the alleged stupidity of the social outsider’ (p. 12). ‘Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless’ (p. 12). One of his more generative distinctions though is around laughing at oneself and laughing at others (p. 14). This distinction provides a useful way to evaluate various forms of humour and for Critchley and we have to agree, the later is mostly unproductive and not that useful pedagogically. It is this idea of laughing at oneself that we’d like to focus on here and Critchley uses Freud as a way into his discussion on this point. Drawing on Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Critchley argues that the act of laughing at oneself, of finding oneself ridiculous, is not a depressing act but on the contrary ‘gives us a sense of emancipation, consolation and childlike elevation’ (p. 95). Freud’s argument is set up in his analysis of the difference between mourning and melancholia. Mourning is the response to the death of the beloved whilst in melancholia, the ego itself becomes an object. For Freud, melancholia is evidence of a splitting of the ego: that the superego emerges (as conscience) and denigrates the ego: the ego becomes ‘abject object’ (p. 97). Critchley reminds us of Woody Allen’s monologues as the ur-example. But then the melancholic might be understood to have ‘achieved a higher degree of self-knowledge than the rest of us’ (p. 98) and we might consider the melancholic philosopher as example and think Dostoevsky’s underground man. ‘This is why humour is essential in philosophy’ (p. 99). The way out for the ego is find itself ridiculous; humour then is an antidepressant. ‘The subject looks at itself like an abject object and instead of weeping bitter tears, it laughs at itself and finds consolation therein’ (p. 102). In this sense then humour is a profound ‘cognitive relation to oneself and the world’ (p. 102). Humour not only saves makes the superego a less sever master but saves the human being from the tragic hubris of the ego that imagines its own omnipotence and immortality. Crichley’s analysis here, whilst not written through a Zen perspective has strong resonance with the idea of struggling with ego-consciousness—laughing at self—however the Zen practitioner takes the process past ameliorating ego-angst to completing undermining it.

*Did Buddha Laugh? or laughing to enlightenment*

Humour and laughter have not always been welcomed in Buddhism and early Buddhist teachers regarded it as something to be avoided (Clasquin 2001). The question of whether the Buddha laughed was an early scholastic debate where it was argued that Buddha frowned upon laughter because of its association with superficial pleasure, self indulgence and sources of suffering such as ego, desire, attachment, ignorance and bondage; matters which evade deep and serious thinking (Heyers, 1973).

In the great spiritual traditions of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism the sacred is also associated with serious minded devotional studiousness where the antithesis to sacred scholarship is humour and laughter (activities commonly associated with comedy, triviality, and distraction). Zen Buddhism on the other hand is noted for its eccentric, outlandish and zany comic spirit. Like postmodernism and poststructuralism it recognises the significance of paradox, irony, incongruity, unconventionality and distancing; the dissolution of dualisms; and the deployment of radical scepticism, but then takes a slightly different take on all of that! The object of negation, the binary or dualism under deconstruction has yet to be identified by poststructuralism; the object is a trickster, an illusion, the ego itself, or that sense of sense that appear to us a stable, independent and permanent.

For the Zen teacher, the focus of their work with students is revealing the ‘cosmic joke’: but then unfortunately ‘we just don’t get it’, and so they require strategies that get under our guard, and humour is one of these. The joke, or the silly hallucination is a specific form of dualistic understanding that distorts the way we understand ourselves and others. The hallucination is so ingrained that the Zen method often resorts to a whole range of unorthodox approaches to break through dualistic consciousness, to gain an intuitive form of understanding of how the self abides, one that is a direct realisation and hence beyond conceptualisation. Our acceptance, normalisation, naturalisation of this dualistic mind, once revealed, is often experienced with a laugh—that we finally got the joke—and also with the release that humour/laughter offers.

The sort of humour we are inferring here, the humour of revelation/realisation/enlightenment has been discussed by Certeau (1986) using the preface in Foucault’s *Order of Things* as a case study. The first sentence of that preface begins: ‘This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered ... all the familiar landmarks of my thought Certeau draws attention to Foucault’s project in terms of his aversion to being pigeon-holed ‘within a hierarchy of domains of knowledge’ (p. 194) and his pursuit of a philosophical attitude that was about ‘how and to what extent it would be possible to think otherwise’. For Certeau, Foucault as a researcher, was on the look out for ‘some strangeness lurking there unnoticed’ (in this case Borges) that when read ‘take the expected and codified by surprise’; that shatter ‘all the familiar landmarks of ... thought ... breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things’ (Foucault 1974: xv). Foucault often talks of ‘bouts of surprise, the sudden jubilatory, semi-ecstatic forms of ‘astonishment’ or ‘wonder’ (Certeau 1986: 194). ‘Something that exceeds the thinkable and opens the possibility of ‘thinking otherwise’ bursts in through comical, incongruous, or paradoxical half-openings of discourse. The philosopher, overtaken by laughter, seized by an irony of things equivalent to an illumination ...’ (p. 194).

We are interested in the way Zen offers a form of praxis for living a life where humour is a significant resource providing space for serious contemplation on issues often repressed or silenced. Humour in Zen is can be understood as ‘healing deconstruction’ (Loy 1996) that is radically anti-essentialising in ways that have yet to be properly accounted for by poststructuralism. In Loy’s (1996b) words: Zen ‘offers the possibility of a ‘leap’ from theory into practice which Derrida has not undertaken’ (p. 2) and hence also to the ‘healing possibilities of deconstruction in a field ... [that] has too often been understood reductively. Zen offers the possibilities of

‘converting deconstructive *theoria* into a healing *praxis*’ (p. 10). Its pedagogical focus on existential concerns, embodiment as knowledge, and impermanence, suffering and death as resources for technologies of self offers an important framework from which to examine critical pedagogy.

In the Zen tradition humor became a pedagogical tool of enlightenment for two reasons. First being the legacy of Taoism which saw life as a dynamic interplay between ‘the way’ and the ‘ten thousand things’ (113) and second a theory of knowledge and humour which regarded being taken by surprise as able to reassemble order and see with new the light of a realization which release us from former ignorance. Humour in this context has little to do with the desire to strike others in a comic camouflage in order to discredit and laugh their positions out of being.

The Mahayana heritage of Zen holds that we are all have ‘educative’ potential in as much as we are all inherently enlightened and need only to realize this (rather than having to attain a higher state through other means). Humour is thus not necessarily a locked into the service of creating of positions of superiority and inferiority but has the capacity to deflate pride and ego – a species of *upaya* which precipitates new levels of insight (Heyers 1973). Humour can be used demonstrate the ‘serious foolishness’ of our faith in the ‘seriously real’ as a foundation of a ‘concrete ground of being’.

It is not the laughter of despair and tragedy that Zen seeks to trigger, but ‘the abrupt perception of absurdity’ – early devotion of simple particulars, the ‘suchness and mystery of things beyond the schemas of intellect and value judgement’ This focus runs against the grain of Western intellectual tradition where the quest is to find reason and purpose (regardless of their predisposition to periodically collapse) in existence and to despair over absurdity and the ‘tragic absence of the good, the true, and the beautiful in everything, (p. 102). Heyers cites a contemporary Zen anecdote:

A roshi lay dying surrounded by his monks. The senior monk asked if he had any final words of advice or instruction. The old master opened his eyes and whispered ‘Tell them Truth is like a River’ The wisdom circulated around the room till it reached the youngest monk who ask ‘What does it 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” (p. 103).

The ability of alternative philosophical positions to both be true and untrue and demonstrate the futility of trying to comprehend reality by means of an intellectual system. It is not that existence is absurd (existentialism) or cogitatively meaningless (logical positivism) but that it is absurd to grasp after meaning and cling to reality by means of this or that philosophical system (p. 104).

Seriousness, however noble its motivations and commendable its intentions, is also a sight of attachment and bondage’ which inclines to take oneself and ones situation as central thereby over inflating ego and desire (p. 117) identities, desires, acquisitions circumstances and fortunes become the center of all things, - rather than being an expression of freedom, we loose freedom by placing ourselves in subservience to the demands of ego and desire – comedy creates distance, - laughter at the folly of the desiring self grand schemes and involvement – humour create non-attachment refuses absolutes and endow with absolute seriousness. Being serious without taking oneself or aspirations too serious being involved while not being determined by this involvement – sincere but not imprisoned in it – living in the world without being conformed to it or bound by it. The comic perception is an emancipation (momentary from the fanaticism of the ego and the tyranny of a situation – entering a freedom and liberty of detachment which opens up through seeing ‘self and situation in a larger perspective - beyond seriousness and sobriety gravity and solemnity (p. 119) – no longer in bondage to seriousness – transcending narrow self centered concerns – refusing attachments to self which spells bondage.

Zen methods of instruction are indirect stemming from the ‘insight that words, even in their attempt to point to reality, have a special genius for clouding and concealing it, and blocking the fullness and clarity of the very experience to which they would point (Heyers 1973: 133). Worlds have a tendency to assume a life of their own – so that the ‘seeker of spiritual food will somehow mistake a knowledge of the ingredients and a recitation of the recipe for the meal itself, or that worse coming to worse, the cookbook will be eaten instead of the dinner (p. 133).

The method of Zen is to baffle, excite, puzzle and exhaust the intellect until it is realized that intellection is only thinking about; it will provoke, irritate and again exhaust the emotions until it is realized that emotion is only feeling about ... (Watts 1960: 19)

#### IV

*Why the absence of humour in our thinking about good pedagogy?*

Of course, humour has hardly been a central idea in any of the mainstream discourses on pedagogy and certainly humour is not part of educational policies. Even in the critical pedagogy literature humour is at best a minor chord. Given that these attempts to codify ‘good pedagogy’ are attempting to provide a curriculum vision for the future, when the present seems dominated by a curriculum that is unrelated to lived experience, we want to draw attention to this absence. On the absence of fun, and hence also humour, in talk about pedagogy and curriculum, McWilliam suggests that:

Modern prescriptions of good teaching as professional work do not sanction disorder-as-fun within their prescriptions of change-enhancing practice. As is the case with feminist pedagogy, any risks to be taken must be within the limits of the project, or else they risk too much. The project must be taken seriously. The texts must be serious texts. (McWilliam 1999: 175)

As McWilliam alludes to in this quote, the critical/feminist pedagogy project is mostly described in serious tones, and there’s a lot to be serious about, but unfortunately the project tends to be humourless. Too often the critical pedagogy class is experienced by students as ‘doom and gloom’.

But then of course, there is humour in classrooms, its just not sanctioned by policy nor claimed by theory. While many teachers would admit to using humour in various ways, serious consideration of its pedagogical possibilities and potentials have been almost entirely disregarded (Teslow 1995). Educational research entirely underestimates the significance of humour and where it has been investigated it is in terms of its use in promoting learner attention, motivation, comprehension and retention, or to facilitate positive teaching and learning relationships and environments (Powell & Anderson 1985). Not only are teachers activating humour as a pedagogical ploy—and our claim is based on anecdotal evidence only—but students introduce humour into the classroom as their own tactic to make the experience less dull and boring. That students are acting out in classrooms is perhaps the single most significant aspect of classroom life: and motivates huge amounts of research—improving education for girls, what about the boys, concern about educational disadvantage of Indigenous students and less affluent students. And the interest has mostly centred on the ways that students resist classroom life through either rebellion or passivity. McLaren (1985) reminds us though that clowning is one form of resistance that doesn’t fit neatly in these categories and one that provides educators with insights into ‘good pedagogy’. In the first instance the class clown offers more than comic relief: they deconstruct the familiar and make us aware of ‘just how boring school really [is]’ (McLaren 1993: 161). They also reveal the ‘tenuousness and arbitrariness of the codes’ (p 161) and rules. Like the Zen teacher the class clown often demands that the teacher laugh at themselves also. Class clowns a liminal figures that from time to time inhabit a social state that is ‘betwixt and between’, literally and temporarily removed from the social structure that is ‘maintained and sanctioned by power and authority’ (McLaren 1988: 165f). Liminality infers being liberated from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a social station, being a member of ‘some corporate group

such as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, or nation, or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as class, caste, sex- or age- division' (Turner 1974: 75). In the liminal, 'the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun. There is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance' (p. 75).

## V

### *Conclusion: so what?*

We want to argue in the end that humour be left out of the codifications of pedagogy because we fear that like other practices such as action research, or conscientization, the system will strip humour of its pedagogical power and turn it into a method, much like management consultants have with 'structured fun'.

The Buddhist view of the pain of being human provides a path beyond the problems of critical theory's sociologism. To reiterate, anxiety, understood by critical theory in terms of various diagnoses of damaged life (alienation, psychic survival, emptying of self) is always understood in terms of the social organisation. A Buddhist perspective does not deny the socially constructed nature of anxiety but wants to distinguish between causes and conditions. Rather than seeing 'society' as the cause of our predicament, society is understood as the conditions for its manifestation. Rather than seeing the self as a relay point for discourse, a Buddhist perspective sees society as a manifestation of the struggle of the ego to essentialise itself. The recent trend in critical theory towards a decentering of the Cartesian ego in favour of a de-essentialised deconstructive subjectivity resonates with this Buddhist view. Central to the move towards a deconstructive subjectivity is a critique of dualistic thinking. Buddhism pushes this critique still further and argues that dualistic thinking is not just an epistemological or even an ethico-political problem but ultimately an ontological one. Moreover, it is ontological in an existential sense. What this means, quite simply, yet profoundly, is the ease with which we can argue for a de-essentialised view of self, but then actually live our lives as though we are independent and autonomous. Intellectually we can go beyond binaries, but experientially, or existentially we still live them. What is missing from deconstructive work in pedagogy is the explanation of how we might realise a post-deconstructive subjectivity.

By way of a concluding comment: 'Nevertheless, you can not give courses to make teachers good humorists!' (Shor and Freire 1987: 162):

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