

HUMOR

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Zen masters have some humorous elements in their lives, and after their deaths we may understand even better how funny they were. They can be humorous because they have an understanding that is more than real—their humor is more real than reality. Reality is not so real. If you see a comic, that can be more real than the actual event. I think that because Zen masters have something real, they can always be funny. When they say something ordinary, in their mind they are always expressing it as if

they are drawing on something comical. For them, it is comical, but for us it is a very real and serious thing.

When I was at Eihei-ji monastery, Kumazawa Banzan was *kannin*, Vice Abbot. On the third or fourth day of a *sesshin* meditation retreat, he was very tired when he gave the Dharma talk. In the talk, he told us about a sparrow that had broken a *torii*, a shrine gate, made of stone. He tried to explain how the sparrow did it, and he asked, several times, “Do you understand?” It was funny, but no one laughed because he seemed so serious. The words he used to describe what the sparrow did can mean “stepping on the stone,” but they also mean “to break.” It isn’t possible for a sparrow to break a stone gate, but we thought, “This is a Zen story! What he means must be something deep.” Recently I found out that it had been a joke; he was just joking in a serious manner.

As he was trained very well in zazen practice, he was always serious, but he was always funny at the same time. It was not just seriousness, because it always had an element of happiness or joy in it.

I don’t think many people knew that he was telling a joke, and we didn’t talk about that story at all after the talk. When we were young, we did not like such ridiculous stories. We were serious students, you know. We didn’t like it at all that he was fooling us, so we didn’t talk about it. But quite recently I thought, “He was fooling us when we were practicing so seriously!”

For maybe ninety-six years he was fooling us. When he was dying, he stretched his arm out for the water pitcher and the attendant gave it to him. He drank from the pitcher and said, "Kaaaaa!" and he was no more. He vanished from this world. It was terrible. Newspaper reporters and famous Zen masters admired the way that he had died, but I think he was fooling us.

When he visited my hometown when I was in Japan five years ago, I tried to persuade him to come to America. He asked various questions about America, and it seemed to me like he would agree to come. But after I explained it to him for a long time, he finally said, "Oh, that would be a good job for Takashina Roshi. Not for me, maybe Takashina Roshi." He was always like that.

An old lady once brought and offered him a very sweet and very expensive melon. He looked at it and said, "Oh, very good, very good! But I don't want it. I will give it to my students." He clapped his hands and, right in front of her, told me to take it to my room. He did it so nicely that she could not be angry with him.

It is difficult to know what kind of mind he had. He was always the same, but what he did was always different. I knew him pretty well, but recently, even though I am not learning any new things about him, I am finding out little by little what he was doing. I think that is real comedy.

What Kumazawa Zenji was doing is something more than we can understand or see. We cannot take the things he did literally. Actually he wasn't doing anything. He was just moving his mouth, that's all. I don't know how to understand it, but Dogen Zenji has shown us how to be like him. Living with people and living in confusion—but also independent of the confusion—that is the core of our practice.