

# Awakening the Laughing Buddha within, by Joe Hoare and the Barefoot Doctor

(available on <http://www.joehoare.co.uk/shop.html>)

## Chapter 1. How it all starts

*'Because of your smile, you make life more beautiful.'*

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

No one, fortunately, has ever described me as a Laughing Buddha.

However when I was described by my friend Will as a laughing yogi, I did listen although my resistance hackles immediately started to bristle. I have a deep and innate suspicion of terms like 'satsang', 'guru', 'master' and similar titles in the contemporary mind, body, spirit scene and instinctively shy away from them. When I got home I looked up both the Wikipedia (of course) and Oxford English Dictionary definitions of 'yogi' and I found its simplest definition is 'a practitioner of yoga'.

Further re-reading of basic terms reminded me that the fundamental definition of yoga is 'union'. The aim of the different yogic practices, traditions and disciplines is to help yogis achieve increasing degrees of union: of body with breath, and mind with body for example, up to a level of union of with the universe and the consequent sense of peacefulness and harmony.

Using these definitions, the term laughing yogi translates into someone who uses laughing for health and wellbeing, to achieve a sense of harmony with the universe, and to wake up Laughing Buddha qualities in others. I mentally commended Will for his perception and accuracy because after a typically zigzagging journey, that is exactly what I now do. After almost twenty years exploring personal development and therapeutic techniques which have included Chi Kung, NFSH Healing, Breathwork, 5 Rhythms, Overtone Chanting, Reiki healing, Meditation & Visualisation, Archetype healing, Massage, Dowsing, Contact Improvisation, Tai Chi, Free your Natural Voice, and others, I found the practice of laughing works best.

On a conscious level my own journey started with my first grown-up thought. I was 15 and had just been expelled from Eton for repeatedly getting caught drinking,

getting drunk, breaking out of the house at night, and the final straw - being in possession of an air pistol that actually belonged to someone else, the younger brother of a now-well-known environmentalist. My father was taking me to see a Vocational Guidance Counsellor and on the way over, Dad asked me if I had any idea what kind of career I wanted. I opened my mouth and the words that popped out were 'I want to help people'. He asked me if I meant being a psychiatrist and I replied no, it wasn't quite like that but I knew in my gut that I had no interest in a career like law, investment banking or politics.

I don't remember any more about that conversation but the 'I want to help people' bit stuck in my mind for a long time, gestating. It finally burst out of my consciousness like the alien from John Hurt's chest, about 25 years later in the first healing circle I attended. It was on the first day and we were starting to learn about distant healing. With his permission, we were about to send some distant healing to an emotionally un-expressive husband who had never been able to tell his wife he loved her, even though he could express his feelings for her to their children. That story resonated very profoundly with me as in hindsight I was a perfect model for emotionally repression and immaturity. Hearing his wife tell the story, I felt it was me and my story. As soon as the healing started, the turmoil that had started to well up in me when the story was being told suddenly erupted.

I had desperately been trying to hold down the emotional tension I felt starting to surge but I was suddenly overwhelmed. My heart was ripped open and I burst into uncontrollable tears. I sobbed and sobbed, overwhelmed and yet also relieved. My shell had shattered, and that cathartic breakthrough redefined my priorities in one heart-opening nano-second. Through that crisis I had 'woken up' in the way Gurdjeff, the Russian mystic, described. I had pierced the veil and had a direct personal experience of the spiritual world behind the material and physical one. My life, my real life, had started.

I have learnt my most valuable lessons from the crises and catastrophes in my life because like the snake shedding its skin, they generated life-changing opportunities. Painful though they were from the usual heart-ache and heart-break, to 3 failed suicides, insomnia hell, being bullied, complete material loss, shame and fear, I have allowed myself to learn from them all. I have been knocked to the ground many times

and my previous way of thinking has been comprehensively shredded. It is now my experience that life is unimaginably different from what I grew up to believe, and because I manifested my greatest fears and emerged from them both tougher and kinder, I feel lucky. I now know that words like impossible, unthinkable and unimaginable are relative, and that when we give ourselves permission, miracles happen. I have experienced three sublime times in my life when for a few months, everything was perfect. The first time in my late teens was a surprise, the second time about 20 years later had an element of recognition, and the third time, in my forties, I savoured because I knew it would pass. I look forward to the next one. I now do everything I can to encourage others to grow too without necessarily having to experience the extremes I did. You don't have to create an enormous crisis before you start the extracting the lessons and replace rigidity with flexibility. Because this experience has been seared into my consciousness, I feel increasingly relaxed about encouraging others to flex rather than break and my research showed how many cultures in the past have had the same insights.

After this initial catharsis, I put all the time and energy I could spare into exploring this new world. I was curious, insatiable and soaked up as much information and as many experiences as I could. Having started my life in the Christian tradition, I became a spiritual magpie. I delved into many traditions and explored many practices, and now my overall view of spiritual practice is summed up by the 7<sup>th</sup> principle of Huna: 'Effectiveness is the Measure of Truth'. In other words, 'does it work'? I have found laughing yogi practices work better than any other, as have other people too.

At the heart of awakening your own Laughing Buddha within is genuine, good-natured laughter. When we laugh in a genuinely good-naturedly way, we are capable of experiencing harmony, ie union, with our self, with others and with all life around us. With practice we can access this very quickly. We can all become skilled at bringing all our attention into the present moment in a joyful way. This gives us the potential to become an oasis of harmony in the discordant strife we sometimes find ourselves surrounded by. Sometimes that strife is with other aspects of our self, as we probably all experience regular conflicts between heart and mind. We get torn between what we think we ought to do and what feels right. Sometimes that strife is

with our family and other relationships, and sometimes it is with a grim set of physical circumstances. Being able to access an inner pool of peacefulness and harmony no matter what is happening around us is a wonderful skill to develop. As you awaken your Laughing Buddha within, this gets easier.

We are increasingly familiar with the benefits that laughing brings. One of the most telling examples is Patch Adams, the US doctor who has been using laughter as a treatment with his patients at the Gesundheit Institute since 1971, and who was portrayed by Robin Williams in the film 'Patch Adams'. This is both a pioneering and enduring organisation and it is worth exploring some of their values because there are signposts and clues for all of us.

- Patients are treated as friends.
- The health of the staff is as important as the health of the patients.
- Care is infused with fun and play.

One connecting thread with these values is emotional warmth and another is lightness. Both of these are core practices for waking up your own Laughing Buddha. We are often impelled to learn new practices and develop new skills when we experience crises. The good news is we ourselves don't need to experience the full depths of such crises before starting to learn these inner harmony techniques. We can learn from observation, by extension and by other people's experiences. This means these techniques are easily accessible to everyone. You too awaken your laughing Buddha within by following simple steps.

The starting point and simplest exercise, as Thich Nhat Hanh's quote suggests, is *SAW* – smiling at will. It is a key skill that can be used at any time and in any circumstances. It can be used to keep your optimism levels high, as well as a general top-up for your mood and outlook. It is one of the easiest personal developments steps you can take, requiring minimal effort. It is baby step 1. There are two aspects to this smile, and the thread that connects these aspects is making it genuine and good-natured.

You can just do it, now, as you're reading this. Stop for a second, relax your face, and smile a gentle smile. Hold it for at least 5 seconds before reading on.

To make it a bigger exercise, it is helpful to do some facial warm-ups. Facial massage and stretches especially of the jaw muscles but also including forehead, eyes and cheeks, wake up and loosen the grip of your facial mask. Anyone who is a singer will recognise this style of warm-up as it brings your whole face to life and gets it flexible and expressive.

The next step is to smile in a genuine and good-natured way. The size of the smile is unimportant and it can be very small and still be effective. When it is genuine it involves two sets of facial muscles, zygomaticus major and in particular orbicularis oculi. These sets of muscles are around our mouth and eyes and when we smile a genuine smile, they automatically soften and express and communicate warmth, the 'milk of human kindness.' You can tell its genuineness by how it feels.

The final step is to keep this genuine smile on your face for 15 seconds. This takes practice because typically a smile is gone within a couple of seconds. Some people find it helpful to use the power of their mind by remembering or visualising happy experiences, or by remembering and hearing the sound of laughter with their inner ear. Others are experiential and are happy just to do the practice.

Do it again now?

One of the revealing studies on the power of the smile was done in 1988 by the psychologist Fritz Strack and his colleagues, and involved rating how funny people found *Far Side* cartoons. Before rating them, one group was asked to hold a pencil in their teeth, no lips, and the other was asked to hold the pencil in their lips, no teeth. With their pencils held in their respective positions, the group with the pencils in their teeth, no lips position found the cartoons much funnier than the lips, no teeth group. Effectively, the teeth, no lips group had their face in the position of a smile, and the lips, no teeth group had theirs in the position of a frown. The study showed that simply having their face in the position of a smile affected not only how funny people found the cartoons, but also that these feelings of enjoyment endured after the experiment had ended.

This practice works on a biochemical and psychological level. Biochemically, when we smile we trigger the endorphin effect and revitalise our whole body.

Psychologically when we engage mindfully and deliberately in a life-enhancing activity, we experience a sense of control of our life, and possibly a sense of

liberation. That is why your first Laughing Buddha wake-up step is this simple twice-a-day, morning and evening smiling practice. Put a smile on your face and maintaining it in a genuine and good-natured way for 15 seconds. If it helps, use the power of your mind to recall happy memories or anticipate future delights. You can of course smile lots more, and I hope you do. It is beautifying inside and out. Do it again now?

This comment arrived unexpectedly in my inbox one day.

*'I just wanted to let you know how I have been getting on since I came to the last Laughter Club meeting....I have been following your instructions to smile first thing every morning and last thing at night. Wonderful!*

*I have to say that I have felt a real change in me. My face seems lighter and I feel more positive.*

*Last week whilst reading the news on Bristol hospital radio my fellow news-reader read a funny story and I laughed until I cried and neither of us could finish the news through constant giggling. I do not remember the last time that I laughed that much and I wanted to thank you for giving me the courage to laugh out loud again.'*

Barefoot Doctor exercise 1

### Exercise Sequence 1

As well as referencing happy memories to help elicit a smile, relax your body, slow down your breathing tempo and picture this: a smile seemingly with an *a priori* existence all of its own, a very tiny and discreet smile, nestling right down between your legs bang in the middle of your pelvic floor, equidistant between anus and genitals. As you focus on it, breathing slowly all the while, watch it grow progressively larger with each passing exhalation. See the smile grow larger and larger until it fills your entire pelvic bowl, all the way up to waist level. And larger and larger still, until it fills you all the way up to your chest. And larger and larger still, until it fills your entire being, all the way beyond the tops of your ears, so that

your whole body is now one giant smile.

Stay with that, enjoying the subtle endorphin release for a few breaths, then ever so lightly, start to appreciate the huge Laughing Buddha to whom the smile belongs. You have now become the smile on the Laughing Buddha's face, which, you must admit, is quite an achievement for a mere mortal.

Return to this contemplation briefly yet frequently through the day, as you work, rest and play - and through the night too. Fall asleep doing it and you'll dream the jolly dreams of the Laughing Buddha the whole night long and awake enlivened and restored from the ravages of the world in the morning light.

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