

## Hotei, Ho, Ho, Ho and Holiday Spirituality

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Here are two images of the spiritual life: In many Buddhist statues the awakened one, the shining one, sits or stands with a serene look, calm and composed. His is an image of transcendence, holy and pure. On the other hand if you ask the average American what the Buddha looks like they will tell you he is fat, with a very big smile, and if you rub his belly you will get good luck. The fundamentalist Buddhist would scoff at the fat man wanting to replace him with the true Buddha.

One December, I was driving past a home in my neighborhood at twilight. On the intimate front porch of the house, gently illuminated by the porch light, was a crèche, the baby Jesus reaching up to the sky, his earthly mother and father standing beside him looking on him with love, and wise men kneeling on the steps. Everyone was dressed in subtle colors. But, in the yard, at least two feet taller than Joseph, was Santa Claus. He was standing up in his sled posed as if waving to every passing car, his back turned to Jesus, with a huge smile on his face. Santa, the sled, the several reindeer were all glowing from within by their own inner lights. Clearly Santa was grandstanding. I could not tell if the homeowner was making an ironic statement or not.

The fundamentalist would tear down the Santa statue, rip the tinsel from the tree, cease all parties and end profligate gift giving. But I am no fundamentalist. Instead I say be happy. Laugh with Santa, or rub Budai's belly. Find what makes you happy and enjoy it. Find what makes you smile, find what makes you laugh, cherish these things and hold them to your heart. But do not cling to happiness. Let it be like a stream that leads you to the joyous lake. Let moments of happiness be like candles that light your way out of darkness to the greater and enduring light of the sun. For this sermon happiness is fleeting, momentary, dependent on circumstances. Spiritual Joy is something powerful, unshakable, grounded in the very nature of being, and transcending everything. Whether you are atheist or theist, Christian or Buddhist, I encourage you to see happiness as a servant of Spiritual Joy, a pleasant fragment of a larger good.

It has been said that there are no Buddhist blues guitarists because Buddhists assert there is no soul. And why can't a Buddhist vacuum in corners? Because his vacuum has no attachments. But laughter, they say, is the midwife of enlightenment, so I tell you the story of the Buddhist Hot Dog vendor. A customer comes up and says, with a not to subtle wink, "Make me one with everything". When he gets his hotdog he gives the vendor a ten, but gets nothing back. Where is my change? He demands. The vendor replies, "Change comes from within."

The Japanese call him Hotei. In Chinese he is Budai, and in our country he is known as the Laughing Buddha or The Fat Buddha. Santa may be inspired by a 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. Likewise Hotei is most likely a depiction of an eccentric 9<sup>th</sup> century Chinese monk named Budai. His Chinese

name, I am told, literally means "linen sack." He was a jolly, roly-poly monk who traveled from village to village, playing with children, bringing them trinkets and sweets in his sack, like an Oriental Santa Claus, and otherwise using his sack as a sleeping bag. The Laughing Buddha has become a deity of contentment and abundance, a symbol of contentment, abundance and joy. As a magic figure his sack never empties. Hotei is one of the Japanese Seven Good Luck Gods. Traveling Americans liked his image and brought him to our shores, not understanding anything about him but the obvious smile of happiness and tummy of abundance. It is guessed by many that his Chinese name, Budai, sounded exactly like Buddha and so he became the Laughing Buddha. Hotei is to Buddha as Santa is to Jesus. Buddha is tall and slender. Hotei is short and fat. Usually Gautama Buddha has curly hair, Hotei is bald. Buddha is enlightened, or serene, Hotei is on the path, happy and laughing.

Happiness is associated with happenings, happenstance, or fortune. It is fickle, shallow and fleeting. One sketch by the artist, Sengai, shows a bullfrog sitting, as if in meditation, but with a smirk on his face. The accompanying calligraphy reads: "If by sitting in meditation one becomes a Buddha..." (Then, it follows that all frogs are Buddhas). One Zen Buddhist idea is that Buddha nature is already in all things and yet latent, incomplete, waiting to be grasped. Enlightenment is thus something to prepare ourselves for, and seek, but in the end it comes of its own. Enlightenment begins with happiness and contentment and sitting still.

Something of this spirit is reflected in the story of the late Zen master Taji, who lay dying. One of his disciples, recalling the fondness the roshi had for a certain cake, went in search of some in the bake shops of Tokyo. After some time he returned with the delicacy for the master, who smiled a feeble smile of appreciation and began nibbling at it. Later as the master grew visibly weaker, his disciples asked if he had any departing words of wisdom or advice. Taji said, "Yes." As they drew closer, so as not to miss the faintest syllable, Taji whispered, "Ah, the cake is delicious." With those words he died.

In Buddhist discussions of meditation in the first stage passionate desires and certain unwholesome thoughts like sensuous lust, ill-will, languor, worry, restlessness, and skeptical doubt are set aside and feelings of joy and happiness are maintained, along with mental activity. In the second stage, all intellectual activities are set aside, tranquility and 'one-pointedness' of mind developed, and the feelings of joy and happiness remains. In the third stage, the active sensation of happiness also disappears, while the disposition of joy remains in mindful equanimity. The fourth stage of Dhyana, all sensations, even of happiness and unhappiness, of joy and sorrow, disappear, only pure equanimity and awareness remaining.

There is nothing in the historical record about the teachings of Hotei, but there is a story of told that one day a monk walked up to him wanting to challenge his understanding and asked, "What is nirvana?" Hotei simply drops his bag, smiling, he doesn't say a word. The monk recognizes that liberation from clinging to all material things is the ultimate goal of the way. So then he asks, "How does one

achieve nirvana?" Again, Hotei didn't say a word, smiling he picked up his bag, and continued on his way. The other monk was amazed at the subtle teaching that awareness of our attachments and the discipline of following the way lead to liberation. Hotei, may not have tried to say anything. He was just happy to rest from his journey and then to be on his way.

In seminary we had some post cards for sale. One had Jesus, in the usual white robes, laughing as a boy swings at his pitched ball in a little league game. In another he runs with a mixed group of kids playing soccer. In every picture he was laughing and active, rather than bleeding on a cross. I liked those cards. Likewise, there is a saying on T-shirts these days: "Life is Good". I like the phrase and started repeating it when anything good happened. My wife pointed out to me that the saying was one of denial. Life is not always good. Often it is cruel and unfair, full of pain, illness and loss. So I modified my saying to life is full of good things. That is the beginning, but when the little things are gone then what is life? Mary Oliver speaks of this in her book of poems *Swan*. "If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb".

I like that: Joy is big, expansive, all embracing like Santa's hug, like Hotei's sack. Sometimes we are so busy seeking crumbs of happiness we miss the deeper joy.

Monks are sometimes extreme cases that remind us of what we all need. One of my favorite Zen stories is of the monk Royko. He returned from a day's journey to his little hermitage to find a thief searching about in the cottage. The desperate man, clutching Royko's begging bowl turns toward the monk, a knife in his hand. Royko says, "you have traveled far to visit me, you should not leave empty handed". Then he disrobes, giving the robes to the thief. The crazed man runs away with the robes. Royko sits down to meditate and the light of the full moon pours through his window. "Poor fellow" he mused, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon." The moon shines joyfully, the birds sing songs to joy, children laugh and joy is in their laughter.

Some people have depicted Santa kneeling in prayer, his hat off, beside the crèche. It does not work for me. Instead I think of him giving a gift to a child who has lived in poverty and hardship, reverently communicating with his smile and hug, "You are worth it, you are valued and valuable." Let the moments of happiness be strung together into a chain of spiritual joy. My faith is that it is not a choice between one and the other, no more than it is a choice between planting corn or harvesting it, between reading the first book in a series and reading the last. The beginning of happiness is a search for abundance and laughter. The end of the journey is a deeper, lasting, unshakable awakening to Spiritual Joy.