



Being
Light



Laughter as a Path to Enlightenment

with Steve Wilson, MA, CSP

by Julia Griffin

Laughter is not really "taken seriously" by most of us on the spiritual path.

Yet if we carefully read and study the words of some of our most famous teachers, we will learn that frequent, spontaneous, infectious laughter may well be an important hallmark of the enlightened being.

In Carlos Castaneda's books, Don Juan and Don Genaro are constantly taken with fits of laughter to the point where they fall on the ground and roll around. Dan Millman's mentor also constantly finds himself overcome with total-body mirth. Werner Erhardt, founder of the *est* trainings, liked to say, "How can you can tell when you 'get it'? You laugh!"

But what if it could be the other way around? What if reclaiming our natural laughter might actually be not merely a byproduct of the state of "being light" but also an actual pathway to that state?

To learn more about laughter as a meditation and a way of life, we interviewed Steve Wilson, founder of the World Laughter Clubs. Steve teaches laughter as a kind of yoga that can lead us to enlightenment. He has valuable information to share with us about "the lightness of the heart."

Julia: Why is laughter important to our spirituality?

Steve: There is a sacred quality in happiness. I believe that happiness is an aspect of enlightenment.

Laughter is actually one of the ancient paths to enlightenment. For example, Hotei — the Laughing Buddha — traveled from village to village in sixteenth-century Japan, his laughter so contagious that everyone would begin to laugh with him and forget their serious questions about enlightenment.

Hotei's teaching was existential. Hotei wanted everyone to experience the joy that laughter brings. This was an actual meditation.

Julia: How did you become interested in promoting and creating laughter clubs?

Steve: The whole concept actually began in India. I was a mental health educator — a psychologist and psychotherapist — and was serving on the board of directors of the National Association for Self-Esteem when I was selected to lecture in India. There, I met Dr. Mada Kataria, founder and president of Laughter Club.

Through Dr. Kataria, I learned that physicians in India were promoting laughter clubs, or *Hasya Yoga*, for their patients. And so, with Dr. Kataria's help, I started the World Laughter

Tour and brought laughter clubs to the United States. WLT has since been recognized as a significant global influence in the practical applications of laughter and humor for health and world peace.

Julia: What takes place at a laughter club?

Steve: I'll begin by saying what we don't do. We don't laugh at each other — or at jokes. We laugh for the joy of laughing. Eye contact helps to enhance and stimulate laughter.

It is interesting to note that ninety percent of all laughter is not generated by jokes or comedy. Human beings are most likely to laugh when they are feeling connected, in relationship. When we feel close to each other, we tend to laugh during casual conversation for no apparent reason. Evidently, the laughter and smiling are ways of connecting.

There is always a leader who teaches everyone how to laugh aloud and learn to recapture his or her authentic laugh. And we have learned that movement and laughter together cause positive chemical changes in the brain. We have laughing exercises — physical exercises such as dancing or shaking hands or pretending to walk on hot sand. There is gentle stretching and deep breathing. We also have something we call Good-hearted Living, which teaches us to maintain a happy attitude throughout the week.

Laughter is introduced in a way that is flexible. Everyone is invited to take it to the depth that is beneficial for that person. It can be superficial — just enjoying the classes — or it can be profound. You can learn about the philosophy of laughing and how it can impact the world.

Julia: What are the perceivable benefits of belonging to the laughter clubs?

Steve: There are cognitive changes for those who are technically able to really participate. Laughter or humor

allow us to see the difficulties in our lives from a transcendent perspective. They enable us to process information in a different way. New perceptions can lead to different and healthier solutions and also can purge negative emotions and resolve mental tension.

Members of a laugh club learn to take themselves less seriously. There is also support for developing a happier attitude and learning to invite pleasant emotions into one's life. We support members who are forming new attitudes of positive living, and teach them how to deal with negative attitudes that they may encounter in the world. It's also an opportunity to meet friendly people who laugh with you and not at you.

Julia: I understand from what you have said that the loss of laughter and natural happiness is partly cultural.

Steve: In many ways, yes. Each of us is born knowing how to laugh. It is a natural, neuro-anatomical function. Blind and deaf children will laugh, even though they have never heard or seen anyone else doing this. And a child laughs about a hundred and fifty times each day.

But an adult laughs, on average, only about fifteen times each day! So as we "grow up," we learn to repress our laughter and our smiles. Somewhere in there, laughing and smiling become social behavior rather than spontaneous events. We forget the authentic laughter and smiling we knew as children.

We all have a natural, authentic personality, and a natural laugh is part of that personality. And yet truly natural people — people who have not learned to repress this authenticity — are often perceived as either immature or impolite.

There is this tendency for society to be suspicious of happiness, or even tangibly to disapprove of it. Happiness and laughter in our society can be targets for personal rejection!

Can you not remember times when you were smiling and someone asked, "What are you so happy about?" And you sensed that the other person was somehow offended by the way you were acting?

I'm not speaking here about laughing at other people, or even laughing in ways that upset them, but just about acting happy. Laughing or smiling can often attract major criticism in our society.

Julia: Okay. But what about "inappropriate" laughter. How do you deal with that in your laughter clubs?

Steve: We teach our students not to make fun of others, and also to become tolerant of other people's unhappiness. As a result, people who participate in laughter clubs tend to become more empathetic and don't impose their laughter on other people who may be busy — or hurting.

Julia: How does all of this affect the way we laugh?

Steve: Because society teaches us not to laugh in many situations — including work and school — we learn that natural laughter is not socially acceptable. As a result, ninety-five percent of all people adjust or repress their natural laugh. They adopt a false laugh. Just think about some of your friends and acquaintances, and you will recognize right away what I am talking about.

This false laugh can be so well in place by adulthood that we don't know, any more, the true sound of our own real laughter. We believe that our false laugh is real.

But when we begin to meditate on laughter and happiness, our authentic laughter returns. Experiencing laughing yoga through a laughing club is one way to return to that authenticity.

Julia: Can you summarize for us the many benefits of laughter?

Steve: We know that there are physical benefits for those who are able to truly laugh. Laughter stimulates physical healing and enhances creativity. It is rejuvenating. We release a large amount of tension from the face when we laugh.

Laughter can be sexual and good for relationships. It opens the heart.

Several minutes of intense, mirthful laughter produce results similar to exercising for ten or fifteen minutes on a stationary bike or a rowing machine. One hundred laughs are equal to ten minutes of aerobic exercise.

Laughter improves the immune system, relieves stress, and discharges physical and emotional tension. Humor perception involves the entire brain and serves to integrate and balance both hemispheres.

Julia: You mentioned people who are offended by others' happiness. I know that your laughter clubs touch upon philosophy as well as laughter. What have you found to be the best way to deal with people who may be jealous of another's happiness?

Steve: We try to help them become curious so that we can share with them. Of course, this doesn't always work. One approach is to say, "Do you realize that you're not smiling?" And when they smile, you can acknowledge their smile by telling them they light up when they smile.

Unfortunately, this kind of feedback doesn't work with everyone. So we try to look at unhappy people as our teachers. How can we "hold" our space of happiness in their presence, not becoming affected by their mood? We can also imagine that they are happy. Using our imagination in this way can certainly give us room for detachment.

We are using happiness and laughter in all the ways that we use other methods of enlightenment — but we also use laughter as a means of connection.

Julia: Your writings state, "The larger the library and storehouse of serenity in my brain, the easier it is to access it." Are you saying that the more we connect to happiness or good deeds, the happier we will become?

Steve: Let's start by saying that whatever we are in this moment is the sum of our consciousness — the sum of our thoughts. If we are rich or poor, happy or sad, it is the result of the sum of our thoughts.

Our mind, or brain, is essentially a storehouse of emotional reactions and thoughts. If we are the sum of our repetitive thoughts, then we need to be careful what we think. And when we begin to replace unhappy or negative thoughts with positive ones, we begin to change.

Julia: You also mentioned something involving action, not only thought. You called it a program of "Good-Hearted Living." What does that entail?

Steve: Yes. I think that most philosophies embrace the idea of replacing lower thoughts with higher thoughts. But we also need to act on the new thoughts. This helps develop mindfulness. When we are aware of the pleasant feelings that good actions bring, we are increasing our happiness.

So Good-Hearted Living is a weekly plan to increase our happiness. It consists of focusing a different awareness for each day of the week. We suggest that laughter club members recognize opportunities to take some kind of action in fulfillment of the practice for each day.

On Mondays, the action is to give compliments. This helps overcome our tendency to criticize other people. Tuesdays are for flexibility and becoming open to new ideas. Wednesdays are for gratitude, where we focus on being happy for what we have instead of being unhappy for what we don't have. Thursdays are for kindness. And Fridays are for forgiveness, where we actively let go of anger in order to open a space in our hearts for more happiness.

Finally, weekends are for chocolate and fun.

When we take regular action each day, this becomes a habit. Good acts and habits make for a more productive life. Good-Hearted Living actually makes our lives more positive and cheerful.

Julia: Why would one choose laughter as a spiritual path? How would you weigh this against, say, the more "serious" paths?

Steve: There are many parts of spirituality. It's very subjective. I like the Native American analogy of looking at life as a wheel. People can be at many different places on the rim, but all the spokes of the wheel lead to the center — the heart of the spiritual being. Truth or enlightenment is in the center for all of us.

Everyone has a different way of reaching for the center. For one person, it may be very important to take the deep, hard path of study and spiritual retreat. For another, the light-hearted approach may be the answer.

But all of life is dual. If there is a serious side, then we also need to experience the happy side. There is a difference between seeking happiness as a hedonistic way of life and just being happy about our life.

But no matter what pathway we are on, we will eventually see that life has an absurd and ludicrous side. The Native Americans referred to this as the Prankster or Trickster. The Hopi culture revolved around clowns as a sacred component of living. Laughter was so important that when a baby smiled its first smile, the person the baby smiled at became the baby's "laughter godparent."

We have to laugh at the comedic side of our lives. It's important.

Julia: Does the path of laughter mean that we are never

serious?

Steve: Not at all. If we take the light-hearted approach to spirituality, we will see that there is a difference between being solemn and being serious.

Solemnity is something that should be saved for funerals and similar situations. But being serious means being responsible for the people and things in our lives. It is possible to be happy about our responsibilities. Laughter and joy are natural wellsprings that can give balance to the duality of life.

Julia: What thoughts would you like to leave with our readers?

Steve: The world has essentially forgotten how to laugh, and it continues to exist amidst misunderstanding, strife, and turmoil.

If happiness and laughter become a way of life, everything would change.

If we begin with ourselves — learning how to laugh and be happier — we are helping in a small but very real way to change the world.



Steve Wilson, MA, CSP, co-founded the World Laughter Tour in 1999 with **Karyn Buxman**. Since then, more than 100 clubs have been started in North America, Canada, and Mexico. Steve's new book, *Inspirations for Every Day of the Year*, was just published.

Steve knows that there are many people in the world who understand how to use humor and laughter for health, peace, and joy of living, and hopes through the laughter clubs to link these people around the world

and make their work more visible.

Steve Wilson's website is at SteveWilson.com. He may be contacted by email at Steve@SteveWilson.com or by visiting the World Laughter Tour website at WorldLaughterTour.com.

You can find out more about Dr. Kataria's Hasya Yoga clubs in India (*hasya* is the Sanskrit word for "laughter") at LaughterYoga.org.

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