

What is there to laugh about in Buddhism?

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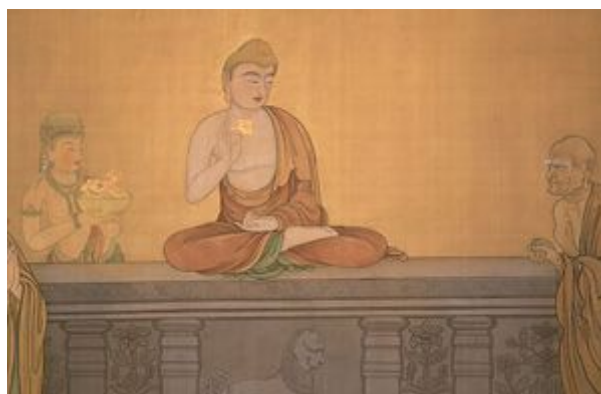
Buddhism is considered to be a somewhat pessimistic religion. Its basic teachings begin with the "Four Noble Truths", the first of which says that life is suffering – old age, disease and death. This is not a particularly joyful outlook on life, and one wonders whether there is anything to laugh about at all in Buddhism – if not the mad laughter of desperation. But that is not what the Buddha envisaged as a consequence of his first noble truth. He taught that there are reasons for suffering – human desires of various kinds – and that there is a way out of it: following the Eightfold Path; that is, a combination of proper moral behaviour and right contemplation, in order to be released from *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth.

Considering these fundamentals, Buddhists were not supposed to laugh. From fourth century India, we have a classification of laughter into six classes, ranging from a very faint smile (not showing the teeth) to uproarious laughter with slapping the thighs and rolling around. Needless to say, a Buddha was only to indulge in the first kind, called *sita*. And even monks were only supposed – if at all – to show smiles of the second category which barely reveals the tips of the teeth.¹

As it happened, Chan- or Zen-Buddhism – the most important school of Buddhism in China – is said to have started with a smile. At a sermon, Buddha once held up a flower without saying anything; only one of his disciples, Kasyapa, responded with a smile – this way showing that he fully understood reality as it is in this very moment.² Because of his smile in this so-called Flower Sermon, he later was considered to be the first patriarch of the Chan-Sect, the school of wordless understanding.



Flower Sermon



Kasyapa Smiling

¹ Conrad M. Hyers, *Zen and the Comic Spirit*. London: Rider, 1974, p. 34; Michel Clasquin, "Real Buddhas Don't Laugh: Attitudes towards Humour and Laughter in Ancient India and China." *Social Identities*, 2001, Vol. 7, Nr. 1, p. 98.

² What has been rendered in Buddhist terminology as "thusness" or "suchness" (sans.: *tathata*; chin.: *zhenru*).

But smiles are not laughs. In the course of Buddhism reaching China, there is a notable development: In marked contrast to its earlier history in India, we begin to encounter laughter – at least occasionally. I will try to exemplify this in a few areas and illustrate it with representations in art:

1. The story of the Three Laughs at Tiger Creek, involving Huiyuan, the founder of the White Lotus Society of early Chinese Buddhism.
2. The laughter of the alleged Chan disciple Hanshan (Cold Mountain) in the Tang period.
3. The appearance and popularity of the Laughing Buddha in Chinese iconography.

Instead of venturing into a general (and probably boring) phenomenology of laughter, I will conclude in a fourth part by referring to modern literature: a book entitled *The Laughing Sutra* by Mark Salzman (famed author of *Iron and Silk*). Here, I will not deal with Chinese religious, cultural or art history, but with a piece of fiction, not even by a Chinese but an American author. And yet, as I hope to show, in Salzman's treatment of laughter in his very funny book (modelled after the famous Chinese classical – and comical – novel *Journey to the West*), he hits on the head in what laughter in Buddhism – as true laughter of liberation – might be all about.

1. Huiyuan and "Three Laughs at Tiger Creek"

Huiyuan (334-416) is one of the great early figures in Chinese Buddhism. He resided in the Donglin-Monastery on Mount Lu in southern China and was the founder of the so-called White Lotus Society, which is considered to be the origin of Pure Land Buddhism.³ Huiyuan was said to have had contact with some interesting literati figures of his time, in particular with the famous field and garden poet Tao Yuanming (365-417) who lived not far from Lushan. Now the story goes that one day Huiyuan was hosting Tao Yuanming as well as a Daoist Priest called Lu Xiuqing (406-477). When he sent his guests off, they were approaching a bridge over a creek called Tiger Creek (*Huxi*). When Huiyuan had entered the monastery, he had made a vow never to leave the precepts of the monastery which ended at Tiger Creek. But on this occasion, the three gentlemen were so engrossed in their talk about Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism that they didn't realize they had crossed the bridge. After they noticed where they had gone, the three of them broke out in roaring laughter.⁴

The story is most likely not a true story (if the dates of the persons involved are correct, Lu Xiuqing would have been ten years old when Huiyuan died), but even if so, it has been ingeniously invented in order to illustrate important points.⁵ For this reason the story has often been depicted by painters. In Japan, it has been turned into a No play.⁶

³ Its main practice was worship of Amitabha-Buddha in order to be reborn in his Western Paradise.

⁴ One variation of the story has it, that a tiger, as the guardian of Donglin-Temple, gave a roar, and that they realized at this point that they were on the way of going too far, also resulting in their laughter.

⁵ One of the earliest sources of the story is a poem by the Tang Buddhist painter-poet Guanxiu (*Quan Tang shi*, j. 846, p. 9420).

⁶ Unfortunately, the paintings of the story by famous Chinese artists of the past are all lost, among others: Shi Ke, Li Gonglin, Li Tang, Muxi etc. See John Calvin Ferguson, "Stories in Chinese Painting," *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. LXI (1930), p. 50-51 (<http://libweb.uoregon.edu/ec/e-asia/read/00paintstory.pdf>).



Song Dynasty (anonymous): “Three Laughs at Tiger Creek”



Sengai (Japan): "Three Laughs at Tiger Creek"

What is there to laugh about for Huiyuan as the only Buddhist among the three gentlemen? Having noticed that, because of a lively talk with friends, he had broken his own rule, he must have realized that even solemn vows do not matter in the face of true human feelings of friendship. To explain it in Buddhist terms, also rules and vows are empty (*sunya*), and it

According to Japanese sources, there are over 60 paintings of this story by 32 Zen monks. Leo Shing Chi Yip, “Reinventing China: Cultural adaptation in Medieval Japanese No Theatre”, Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2004, p. 244.

would be just another way of attachment to give them more weight than necessary. Hence the laughter stands for a freedom from rules and regulations and insight into one's own limitations.

Furthermore, according to traditional reading, the meaning of the story is to show the limitations of each of the teachings the three men are standing for: Huiyuan for Buddhism, Lu Xiuqing for Daoism and Tao Yuanming for Confucianism (I don't know if the latter would have liked this classification if he had known). Even more so, their laughter implies the unity of the three schools. Su Dongpo (1037-1101) expressed exactly this insight in the following poem written as a colophon on a painting of the story (*San xiao tu*):

The three gentlemen:
 In gaining the idea, words are forgotten.
 Instead they utter a stifled laugh
 In their natural pleasure.
 [...]
 What do any of you know?
 And yet you are laughing.
 In the complexity of all life
 What is despicable? What is admirable?
 Each laughs his laugh –
 I don't know which one is superior.⁷

In their laughter, the three show their wordless understanding of the underlying common ideas of their teachings. This insight is conveyed at the beginning of the poem by an allusion to a well known passage of Zhuangzi in which he compares ideas or meaning (*yi*) and their expression in words (*yan*) with fish-traps and fish: Once one has got the fish – the idea (of the fundamental unity of the three teachings) – one can forget about the traps – the words (of the respective teaching).

Hence, in the end, there remains only laughter; it is the great equalizer uniting the three and their respective teachings, and it would be senseless to ask, as Su Dongpo points out at the end of the poem, which laughter is superior to any of the other.

2. Hanshan

Hanshan gives us another example to look at laughter in Buddhism. He, or rather his poetry, at least in the eyes of many Westerners, is regarded as the quintessence of Chan (Zen-) poetry, and hence he has become somewhat of a cult figure in the West. Historically, though, he is an elusive figure. We hardly know any certain dates or facts (he might have been a man of the 7th century); and a lot of what has been written about him since his rediscovery in the early 20th century, are scholarly conjectures, only adding to the puzzle of his life. But we do have a corpus of about 300 poems attached to his name, together with a preface by an alleged Tang official, Lüqiu Yin (prefect of the Taizhou County), all of which has been transmitted since Song times and is included in the collection of the *Complete Tang Poems* (*Quan Tang shi*)⁸.

First of all, Hanshan appears having been neither a follower of Chan, nor a monk. According to the preface to his collection, he lived in the Tiantai-Mountains of today Zhejiang Province

⁷ Leo Shing Chi Yip, p. 241. *Su Dongpo quanji*, II, p. 303.

⁸ *Quan Tang shi*, j. 806, p. 9063-9102.

near the Guoqing-Monastery which was the main temple of the Tiantai sect of Buddhism. What we can gather from the few sources suggests that he might have been a lay Buddhist living as a hermit on a mountain called "Cold Mountain" with loose contact to the Guoqing-Monastery, being friends with another lay Buddhist disciple working there in the kitchen by the name of Shide ("foundling")⁹.



Liang Kai, Yan Hui and Luo Pin: "Hanshan and Shide"

Hanshan is supposed to have written his poetry on cliffs and walls, and we find in them occasional laughter, but most of all, it is the description of his (and his friend Shide's) excentric behaviour in the mentioned preface, that made him famous as a "laughing Zen-Buddhist", resulting in many depictions of him (and Shide) in roaring laughter.

Let us just quote the relevant passages and then try to understand his laughter. According to the preface, this is what Lüqiu Yin heard about Hanshan:

Sometimes Hanshan would stroll for hours in a long corridor of the monastery, cry cheerfully, laugh or speak to himself. When he was taken to task or driven away by some of the monks armed with sticks, he would afterwards stand still and laugh, clapping his hands and then disappear. His appearance resembled that of an emaciated beggar, but every word he uttered was pithy, meaningful and inspiring. [...] Hanshan used to sing along in the long corridors of the monastery: "Oh! Oh! The transmigration among the three realms"¹⁰. Other times he would sing and laugh with the cowherds in the neighbouring villages.¹¹

Before setting out to the Guoqing-Monastery, Lüqiu Yin, looking for help, approached a Chan-Master by the name of Fenggan¹² who recommended Hanshan and Shide. Although they would appear as beggars and behave like madmen, they were, as he said, reincarnations of two famous Bodhisattvas (Manjusri and Samantabhadra).

⁹ There are also about 50 poems ascribed to Shide in *Quan Tang shi*, j. 807, p. 9103-9109.

¹⁰ Sansk.: *Triloka* 1) world of desire, 2) world of form, 3) formless world.

¹¹ Wu Chi-yu, "A Study of Han-shan", *T'oung-Pao*, 45 (1957), p. 410-413.

¹² Fenggan is said to have "picked up" Shide as a child.

When Lüqiu Yin arrived at the Guoqing-Monastery, he saw Hanshan and Shide in the kitchen in front of the stove roaring with laughter. When he bowed to the two of them, they cheered, holding hands and rolled over laughing. Then they said: "Fenggan has a long tongue. You did not recognize Amitabha at sight, why are you making obeisance to us now?"¹³

Afterwards they disappeared towards Cold Mountain. Lüqiu Yin's story ends similarly to Tao Yuanming's story of the Peach-blossom Spring: He sent somebody off to offer presents to them, but they had disappeared, not to be found again. He then had people gathering their poems written on rocks, bamboo or walls in the nearby villages and edited them.

Here, we are not concerned with questions of scholarship about the authenticity of the preface, poems and persons, but only with the history of reception of Hanshan who, particularly with his laughter, came to represent a certain attitude in Buddhism. And yet, if we would want to know from the transmitted story why Hanshan laughed or what his laughter was about, we would be hard pressed to come up with a convincing answer. For Hanshan and Shide appear to break out in laughter without any reason. Theirs is a seemingly wild and nonsensical laughter. In this trait we have something prefigured which will later become popular in Chan or Zen stories: Chan masters acting like clowns or fools, showing apparently mad or lunatic behaviour in response to questions of disciples, which, however, as a "teaching device" (*upaya*)¹⁴, was apt to bring disciples, stuck in their square ways, to enlightenment.

The following poem by Hanshan might exemplify his laughter further:

In the house east of here lives an old woman.
Three or four years ago, she got rich.
In the old days she was poorer than I;
Now she laughs at me for not having a penny.
She laughs at me for being behind;
I laugh at her for getting ahead.
We laugh as though we'd never stop:
She from the east and I from the west!¹⁵

In contrast to the laughter of the three gentlemen in the first story (equalizing the three teachings), Hanshan's and the old woman's laughter is nonsensical: laughing at one for getting ahead, and at the other for being behind, for being rich and for being poor – from the higher Buddhist perspective of non-duality, both positions, as manifestations of duality, are empty and meaningless and hence only laughable.

Hanshan's laughter can be interpreted as laughter of disrespect and iconoclasm: It is an anarchic laughter, ridiculing the traditions as well as the rules and hierarchies not only of society but also of the monks and thus of the Buddhist cleric order (the *sanga*). One might even say that he is laughing at us as his onlookers across the ages. It is just those traits that – more than a thousand years later – have made Hanshan a cult figure of Western counter culture. In the fifties of last century, Hanshan was discovered by rebellious poets and artists of the American Beat Generation, who used Zen as a means to "glorify their own anarchical

¹³ According to the legends, Fenggan was supposed to be an incarnation of Amitabha. There are two poems ascribed to Fenggan in *Quan Tang shi*, j. 807, p. 9109-9110.

¹⁴ Clasquin, "Real Buddhas Don't Laugh", p. 99 (see footnote 1).

¹⁵ Burton Watson (transl.), *Cold Mountain. 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet Han-shan*, New York: Grove Press, 1962, p. 41.

individualism".¹⁶ Through the example of Hanshan, we encounter for the modern age a reception of Zen as anti-establishment behaviour; in other words, Zen (miss-?) understood as a pre-modern freewheeling lifestyle option or as an Eastern version of European early modern Dada nonsense-performance.

3. The Laughing Buddha

One of the most noticeable figures in Buddhist temples is that of Maitreya (chin.: Milefo). In the Mahayana tradition, which became dominant in China, Korea and India, he is usually understood as a Bodhisattva who – as a successor of the historic Gautama Buddha – is to appear on earth, achieve complete enlightenment, and teach the pure Dharma for the salvation of everyone. Hence, he is the Coming Buddha.

Because of this messianic expectation about Maitreya, there have been various Maitreya sects and religiously motivated uprisings in Chinese history. So-called Maitreyan rebellions wanted to eradicate the demons of the past and create instead a future Buddha world. Also, there have been a few people throughout history claiming that they were incarnations of Maitreya, not only in China but also in the West: from the Tang-Empress Wu to L. Ron Hubbard of Scientology – certainly also worth a laugh.

There has been, however, an important iconographic change from Maitreya as a slender looking and wisely smiling Bodhisattva in the Indian Buddhist tradition to the way Maitreya became depicted in China: as the fat bellied Laughing Buddha.



Maitreya: Gandhara Kushan (2nd century AD); Maitreya: Hangzhou, Feilai Caves

¹⁶ Umberto Eco, "Zen und der Westen" in Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973, p. 215. Among the authors of the Beat Generation, it was most of all Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac who referred to Hanshan. Snyder translated a selection of Hanshan's poems into English. In Jack Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958), which is dedicated to Hanshan, Snyder is the main protagonist (under the guise of Japhy Ryder).

The origin of the image of the Laughing Buddha is not quite clear; attempts to unravel its history have brought different solutions. One theory has it that it originates with one of the so-called Luohan-figures of which there is a famous depiction by the Tang painter Guanxiu: the Sixteen Luohans. The 13th of those sixteen, called Angida (Yinjietuo), is said to be the origin – or another incarnation – of the Laughing Buddha. Another theory suggests that the Laughing Buddha evolved out of a well-known Liang-Dynasty monk who carried a linen sac on a stick over his shoulder; hence he was called monk Budai ("linen sac"), and he was considered to be the incarnation of Maitreya. One also finds a view of a combination of the two, that is, Budai is a reincarnation of the 13th Luohan and so on.



Guanxiu: The 13th Luohan (Angida); Liang Kai: "Budai carrying a sac"; Budai-figure

Be that as it may, the origin of the image is a puzzle that might never be satisfactorily solved and will thus not concern us further. Our interest is rather on what the image of the Laughing Buddha signifies.

First of all, it has been pointed out that his big belly signifies a big heart, that is, limitless tolerance and generosity¹⁷. That's why one often sees the Laughing Buddha with children playing all over him.

Second, his laughter is a happy laughter. This means the Laughing Buddha of the coming ages will bring future happiness – however not in the form of a rebirth in Western Paradise (as it is believed in Pure-Land-Buddhism), but in this life: His laughter promises the good life here and now: enough food (big belly) and many children.

¹⁷ <http://www.taoism.net/living/1999/199907.htm>



Laughing Buddha in Hangzhou

For this reason, it is not surprising to find the image of the Laughing Buddha in a prominent position when entering a Buddhist temple in China. A sculpture of Milefo, as the Chinese call him, is usually the first sight in the first temple hall, that of the Heavenly Kings.

Finally, we encounter in the iconographic history a change similar to that of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara who turned from a male figure in India to a female one in China, the Goddess of mercy, Guanyin, thus suiting the needs of the common people (very much like the worship of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Christian tradition)¹⁸. In the iconography of Maitreya, we have, likewise, a shift from an image transcending earthly life in India to a figure accepting this very life on earth in China.



Avalokiteshvara (India)



Guanyin (China)

This is very much in accord with the adaptation of Buddhism to Chinese priorities, to a Confucian oriented optimistic and worldly outlook on life, also suiting the needs of the common people. Hence, the message of Milefo's laughter to the followers of Buddhism in China seems to be: Buddhist teaching is not that pessimistic, after all.

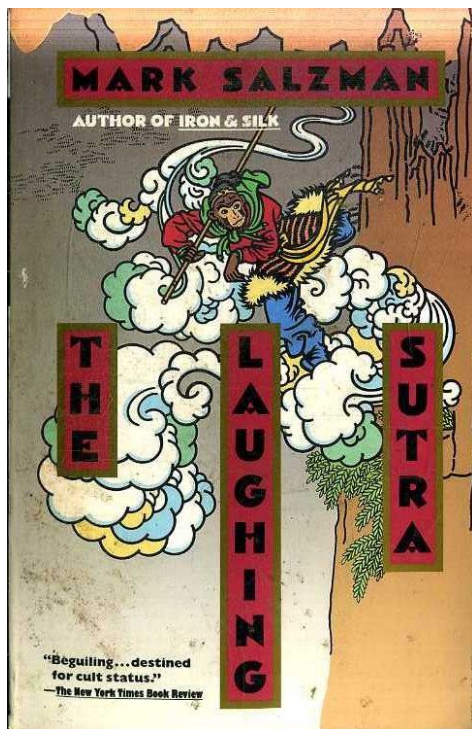
4. Laughing Sutra

The examples thus far have illustrated that – at least in the Chinese tradition – there was room for laughter in Buddhism: laughter over one's own limitations and follies, anarchic laughter of

¹⁸ Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-yin, The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001.

disrespect and finally optimistic laughter of worldly happiness. Neither one of those is a true laughter of liberation. Let us now turn to Mark Salzman's *The Laughing Sutra*, in order to see whether Buddhism also has this to offer.

Salzman models his book along the well-known Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West*. This novel deals with the Tang monk Xuanzang's journey to India in order to get the holy Buddhist scriptures that he then translates into Chinese. The story is known outside of China also because of one of the participants of the journey: the Monkey King, Sun Wukong (the name meaning "awakening to emptiness"). On their way, the group of five pilgrims (there are 3 more figures accompanying them) has to brave many dangers, ward off quite a few demons, experience many adventures and encounter a lot of strange and comic happenings in foreign lands. In the end, the story can be understood as a journey toward enlightenment.



The *Laughing Sutra* combines its story threat with that of the *Journey to the West*. It unfolds in the modern period around an old monk by the name of Wei-ching (guardian of the scriptures) who has heard of a long forgotten sutra that Xuanzang was also supposed to have brought back from India:

A scroll so precious that whoever understood its message would instantly perceive his Buddha-nature, and – this was the remarkable part – achieve physical immortality as well.¹⁹

The content of this sutra is said to be based on a private sermon Gautama Buddha was supposed to have given to one of his most talented disciples:

In that sermon, Buddha described the formless, chaotic nature of existence. He insisted that the human situation is utterly hopeless, the universe unknowable, and our individual souls mere illusions. When the disciple heard this, he tumbled into

¹⁹ Mark Salzman, *The Laughing Sutra*. New York: Knopf Publishing, 1992, p. 11.

fathomless despair. In that moment of total surrender, he directly perceived that he had been enlightened and immortal from the very beginning, and dissolved into laughter so profound and free from delusion that even the stones around him shook in sympathy.²⁰

It was said that because of a misinterpretation of the disciple's laughter – it was taken as laughter of disrespect towards the Buddha (taking him for a fool) – the sutra never became popular and both sutra and the disciple had fallen into oblivion.

For some strange reason (which we will not go into here) the last extant scroll of this sutra is supposed to be in the USA, and Wei-ching is fortunate to find a young disciple, named Hsun-ching ("seeker of scriptures"), to travel to America in order to get this important scripture and bring it back to China. Hence, Salzman's story is just another "journey to the West" in order to get scriptures. He is accompanied on this trip by a fierce looking mythic and martial figure, Colonel Sun, who is nobody else but the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, only in another appearance.

The two of them also brave many adventures, journeying in the 1970s from southern China over the heavily guarded Hong Kong border into the territory and then travelling by ship to San Francisco. Particularly in the USA (but also in Hong Kong), there are numbers of slapstick encounters of cultural difference between China and the West (which also make his book *Iron and Silk* a wonderful reading).

Hsun-ching manages to get the Laughing Sutra and succeeds – with difficulties as an "illegal alien from China" – to return from Hong Kong to China ("probably the only man in the world trying to defect *back* to China"). There he is caught by the police and faces charges of anti-party and counterrevolutionary activities. He agrees to cooperate with the official propaganda bureau and a friendly party cadre allows him to bring the scroll to the ailing Wei-ching before it should be (as a document stolen from China) returned to a museum.

Before meeting Wei-ching, Hsun-chin opens the scroll and tries to read it himself, but he cannot make much sense out of it because of its special language. But then he discovers a postscript colophon at the bottom by the famous Tang monk Xuanzang:

This unworthy monk presents this scroll to the fearsome Dragon Throne as an example of the sort of corrupted texts which are now becoming popular both in China and in India. While the sutra begins properly, noting that all ignorance, and therefore all suffering, springs from our attachments to the illusory realm of the senses, it then diverges from the Path. It suggests that spiritual disciplines are just as deluded and illusory as material attachments.

Buddha was supposed to have this message, which is certainly in accord with the orthodox Buddhist teaching of emptiness, revealed to one of his most fervent disciples. But when the disciple heard Buddha's explanation, he did not respond in an appropriate or orthodox way, he rather flung himself wholeheartedly into all sorts of depravity. "By doing so, he supposedly lost his appetite for it, like a guest at a banquet who overeats until he vomits and then no longer wishes to eat any more." Xuanzang concludes in his colophon:

²⁰ Ibid.

Having thus momentarily freed himself from desire, the disciple suddenly realized that his own desire for enlightenment was, in reality, no different from a greedy man's desire for wealth and fame. When he understood the unity of all desire, he became enlightened and laughed very hard.

But Xuanzang gives a sobering assessment of the above story in his colophon:

While this anecdote sounds attractive, it cannot be true. It is well known from experience that the more depraved a man is, the more depraved he wishes to become; moreover, the depraved man often erroneously believes that he is experiencing great pleasure while indulging in lustful excesses. This is, of course, false pleasure and not useful to us in our search for Truth. We must avoid false pleasure at all costs, and must condemn literature of this type as worthless.²¹

With other words, according to the authority of Xuanzang, the sutra is a fake and completely useless. But as he had promised to show it to Wei-ching, Hsun-ching removes the colophon and visits Wei-ching in the hospital. Wei-ching is moved to tears that after his adventurous journey Hsun-ching managed to return the scroll to him and eagerly begins to read:

Hsun-ching, meanwhile, sat by the bed and smiled to himself. He was smiling because he knew Wei-ching would not have to endure the agony of reading the damning colophon; he had cut it off with a pocketknife and thrown it into a panda-shaped trash bin.

It took Wei-ching nearly an hour to finish. When he came to the end, he let the sutra fall back on his chest. A look of sadness passed over his face, then he closed his eyes. Hsun-ching thought the old man was about to cry, but then he thrust his toothless jaw forward and, with great effort, sat up in bed. He rolled the sutra up and handed it back to Hsun-ching. "I am ashamed and very sorry to tell you this. This sutra has no value whatsoever. It contains nothing but superstitious nonsense. And I am deeply shocked that Xuanzang did not realize this when he translated it for the emperor. Perhaps he was a better traveler than scholar."²²

Wei-ching thus understands without the help of Xuanzang's postscript that the sutra is a fake. Hence all of Hsun-ching's endeavours and journey to the West appear to be in vain: "What a mess." But then, Wei-ching begins to laugh; and here is the final dialogue between the two:

"Excuse me for laughing," Wei-ching said. "But it is called the Laughing Sutra, after all. At least it was appropriately titled."

"I'm very sorry," said Hsun-ching.

"Don't be!" Wei-ching answered cheerfully. "I spent most of my life waiting for this book, and now I learn that it is useless! That is a terrible thing. But imagine how much worse it would have been if I hadn't found that out? Even if I live for only a day now, it is a day of freedom from yet another sort of ignorance!"

Wei-ching's eyes shone with inexpressible gratitude.

"Don't you see?" he cried. "You have released me! The boy I tried to teach Buddhism has taught me the greatest lesson of all! Buddha be praised for sending you to me! It is as Buddha said all along: Enlightenment cannot be found in books. It must be experienced directly! Foolish as I was, I did not take him at his word. But now I do! I am free!"

²¹ Salzman, p. 257.

²² Salzman, p. 259.

He was so exhilarated he nearly fell out of bed.²³

After this encounter, "Wei-ching enjoyed nearly two weeks of liberation from ignorance, then he died in his sleep."²⁴

Hence the story ends with the liberating laughter of enlightenment. But before interpreting the laughter of the *Laughing Sutra*, let us first deal briefly with the peculiar make up of the story in order to appreciate it better. As a book circling around another book (*The Journey to the West*), *The Laughing Sutra* is a typical postmodern novel. Not only do we have the re-appearance of characters – Sun Wukong as Colonel Sun – but the layout of the story is similar: a journey to the West in order to get holy scriptures; only that the main protagonist in the earlier story is a famous monk, whereas Hsun-ching, the "seeker of scriptures" in the later one, is a modern Chinese who has fallen from Buddhist belief and endeavours on his journey only out of gratitude for his father substitute Wei-ching. The adventures both are experiencing in foreign lands are equally comic.

Postmodern critics call this feature – a book about a book – intertextuality. This also means that it is helpful to know a little about literature if one wants to fully appreciate such stories. As Umberto Eco once said (in his "Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*"), intertextuality means that "books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told." Eco is himself author of one of the most famed postmodern books: *The Name of the Rose*, and *The Laughing Sutra* is also in conversation with this book. Both circle around scriptures dealing with laughter: in Eco's book, it is the lost second part of Aristotle's *Poetics* on the comedy which – once discovered – might set free the subversive power of laughter. In Salzman's book it is a scripture on laughter promising enlightenment which – once disclosed as a fake – shows that enlightenment cannot be found in scriptures – thus leading to liberation from ignorance and laughter of enlightenment. Hence, as Wei-ching says, the sutra, though a fake, is "appropriately titled".

As a piece of literature, the book offers no genuinely Buddhist views on laughter from a perspective of Chinese cultural or religious history. It is much rather the fascinating embedding of the liberating laughter of enlightenment into aesthetic laughter (appreciation of fine irony woven into intertextuality) that makes the book both a good reading – and a good laugh.

²³ Salzman, p. 260.

²⁴ Salzman, p. 261.