

Awakening the Laughing Buddha within
By Joe Hoare and the Barefoot Doctor

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Thank you

I have so many people to thank. I am reminded of the Carl Sagan quote: “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe”. I am aware of so many influences that have shaped this book.

First of course is my family for their boundless support. At times I felt I was wandering in the desert and their support during this phase – the gestation – was invaluable.

Secondly, all my friends and colleagues in the healing world and Mind Body Spirit scene whose insights have shaped my life beyond recognition. To me, it is now one of life's givens that we are spiritual beings having a human experience. How I used to scoff at that kind of statement.

Thirdly, all my friends and colleagues in the laughing community are a source of continued inspiration. Our time is coming. The idea of laughing for health, happiness and wellbeing has unassailably taken root.

Fourthly, there is a special band of pioneers who know who they are. The pioneering role is sometimes a lonely one and it has been good to share kindred spirit moments with you.

Fifthly, my 'boys'. I am lucky enough to live in the same city as two of my oldest friends. You can't beat an old friend.

Sixthly, there was a decade with June Burrough and the Pierian Centre which became a byword for warm, supportive, insightful excellence.

Finally, though they don't realize it, all my squash partners. To laugh, be good-natured and zen as the adrenaline pumps your system and you race around a tiny box is the most demanding and rewarding practice I've found.

And thank you everyone else, because you've all contributed too. **Joe.**

Introduction.

I've produced this book with my insightful friend the Barefoot Doctor to encourage, inspire and give you heart on the zigzag journey through life.

For my part, it is a synthesis of 20 years of self-development, and a previous 25 years of conscious adult awareness. Based on the premise that laughter precedes and boosts happiness, it is a guide, a story, a journey and a manual so you can awaken your own Laughing Buddha within. Its simple steps have transformative effects. They will empower you, assist all other heart-opening and loving-kindness practices, and establish you firmly as the captain of your own life.

Here in the West an enormous cultural, psychological and spiritual transformation is occurring. Increasing value is being put on the quality of our inner experience as well as outer achievement. Through disciplines like Positive Psychology we are beginning to recognize the importance of intrinsic values as well as extrinsic ones. We are beginning to realize how important it is to enjoy the journey.

We are beginning to understand how the Quantum world is the scientific equivalent of the ancient Hindu model of 'Indra's net' and that we are all connected. We are coming to realize that the quality of our inner life is important for the

world and not just for ourselves, and that in fact there is no separation at all. 'I am in you and you are in me', says Deepak Chopra, meaning we are all inextricably interconnected on an energetic level. The quality of our thoughts and emotions, and the intentions behind our actions, color not just our life but in this inter-connected way we're now beginning to understand, all life. This is not narcissism, nor indulgent introspection, but both modern physics and ancient knowledge. It means every one of us is a contributor to the happiness, sanity and quality of life in the world.

We all matter.

To those who don't know me I often appear to be a Pollyanna figure, cheerful, optimistic, and fairly easy-going, almost in denial. The truth is that the reason I am now an incorrigible optimist is because I've bled, suffered, been crushed and broken-hearted, manifested and faced down my greatest fears, and have emerged joyful.

Not one of my past experiences has maimed me or in any way diminished me. On the contrary, I look at them all and say 'thank you'. All the scars on my heart and consciousness have been mended in the Japanese tradition of kintsugi, 'Golden Seams'. In that tradition broken porcelain is repaired with gold and so can become even more wonderful than before. My own scars are not places of weakness but of strength, they are golden seams. They are expressions of a life lived, loved and healed, and these are the qualities I look

to bring to life in others. After a typically tortuous journey I have come to a place where I'm happy to use my own story to give people hope, courage, strength, compassion and most of all to encourage open-hearted, joyful connection, both with themselves and others.

To those wondering how to do this, how to awaken your Laughing Buddha within, I say the most important qualities are gentleness, kindness and patience. The more you develop these qualities, the richer your own life experience becomes. You experience more love and delight, and you experience them more regularly and frequently. Yes, you also have to be smart, tough, strong, irrepressible, articulate and so on but these are secondary. I have encountered so many people who were using these as their primary tools in what appeared a successful life when suddenly they had a crisis and had to embark on their inner journey. They then found they needed all the kindness and compassion qualities to heal. The qualities of toughness, strength, smartness and indomitability were all useful but they were servants to kindness, compassion and self-love.

This is also my own experience, from my attempted suicides, my insomnia hell, and my perfect Fear moment, which I write about later. What matters most is to bounce back, to keep saying 'yes', to be prepared to experience hurt again and again. It is vital not to let past pain in any way diminish your present and let fear overpower dare. You have

to dare to keep turning up in your life, learning and getting wiser, and to keep letting go of your ego and your 'story' one melt at a time.

This book will help you.

Developed in collaboration with that master of modern Taoism, the Barefoot Doctor, it draws together insights from two robust bodies of knowledge and creates a superb framework to enable you to combine your Laughing Buddha and Taoist practices. It's a powerful combination, injecting F1 hybrid vigor into the page and reinforcing the waking up process.

Don't be deceived by the apparent simplicity of the exercises. In psyching yourself up to keep persevering it helps to take baby steps. This is not 'baby' in the sense of 'not grown up' but in the sense of one small step after another. There is good research and history to encourage setting small, achievable targets that you actually meet because this encourages you to keep persevering. Just keep moving forwards. This is essential to help you through the dark lean phase between your initial enthusiasm and your place of confirmed knowing. You are likely to have an early affirming experience which shows you beyond any doubt the value of practice.

Next you'll be in that indeterminate phase after your initial flush, where you need what the Dalai Lama terms 'effort' to keep going. It can feel like hard work because it's taking

time and effort and you can't see any more results. There might even be disappointments. Hang in there. This is your crucial foundation phase. Soon you will have another experience which shows you beyond any doubt that your practices are helping. You just have to keep going through that middle phase. The good news is that it's not really very long. If you keep your daily practice going for maybe only 20 days, you'll have set up your new good habits. Just keep going. Your Laughing Buddha within is waiting for you.

As you wake up your Laughing Buddha within, you influence your energetic environment for the better at any moment you choose, and the more you do so, the more you see and experience this. You might astound yourself at the effect your practice has especially when you do it invisibly and inaudibly. An invisible smile given as a random act of kindness can elicit a visible one even from strangers. As you practice this you'll experience this yourself.

What follows in this book is a journey with exercises, science, ancient insights, and unexpected, spontaneous feedback. Enjoy!

And now it's over to the Barefoot Doctor.

Barefoot Doctor's introduction

Whenever someone close to me has died, I've experienced receiving an inheritance of sorts, by way of a direct cross-dimensional telepathic download of that person's particular gift for me. When my teacher of 'consciousness' and psychotherapy, RD Laing died, I inherited the ability to think deeply and in a relatively straight line, and to write - I also inherited the pen he wrote his books with. When Frank Kramer, my teacher of unconventional wisdom, died, I inherited the facility to disseminate unconventional wisdom, along with the stratagem for creating a viable platform from which to disseminate it - and I also got back the hair clippers I'd lent him. When my beloved PA, 'Naked Nurse', Carrie Carter died just recently, I inherited a healthy dose of her magnificent compassion. And when my dad, Victor, died, I inherited the capacity to laugh at every eventuality - I also inherited his laugh: the sound of my laugh became the sound of his laugh - I actually inherited my father's laugh. This was useful from the start as, unlike most people who inherit money on the death of a parent, I inherited a debt, and the laughter helped me take it lightly, as it's helped me take lightly all the various trials and tribulations ever since.

It's not as if I hadn't laughed at the twists and turns of life's theatre hitherto, but now it's a full-blown, raging default mode.

Daniel, my teacher of Chinese medicine, to whom I was apprenticed for nearly four years many decades ago, wouldn't even let his students take the qualifying exam till he'd heard them making patients laugh on a regular basis. He taught that laughter is the most potent medicine of all - before acupuncture, acupressure, herbs, bone-setting, massage, therapy and all the rest of it, laughter must happen for the patient to begin the path of recovery.

Patria, my 'fairy godmother' (everyone should have one), during a conversation about the woes of the world one day, also many decades ago, in which I was earnestly expressing my concern for the huge levels of bovine-like stupidity I was witnessing in the world, asked whether I imagined God found it all amusing. I shook my head. In return she shook her finger admonishingly, "If you think God's got no sense of humor, think again, young man" - and made me laugh.

Pragmatically speaking, laughter heals you by causing your diaphragm, the large transverse muscle at the upper abdominal level that provides your lungs their bellows motion, to flicker repeatedly - to contract and release rhythmically - until all the tension you've been holding in your solar plexus dissolves. This tension otherwise accumulates there because this is the region of the body responsible for processing incoming information, whether in the form of food, which is then transformed into nutrients in the bloodstream, or in the

form of ideas, which are then transformed into nutrients for the mind.

The first thing that happens when any new packet of information enters your system is resistance. This is natural and as it should be. If we weren't with an innate propensity to resist the new we'd not be here in form to discuss it in the first place: we'd have just continued to be undifferentiated parts of the continuum of swirling atoms and subatomic particles comprising our universe. So when new information arrives, whether as food or ideas, the first thing we do is resist. And this resistance builds up a residual tension in the soft tissue of the solar plexus region. This tension stimulates the release of cortisol, the stress chemical, which is highly addictive, and so leads us unconsciously to compound the solar plexus tension, thus leading to a vicious cycle.

This can be effectively addressed over time by becoming mindful of the build-up and using mental focus to relax the area progressively more, but there's nothing like a bout of belly-laughter for a quick release and if practiced regularly will have profoundly beneficial effects. This is also true for crying, of course, which is equally effective for dissolving the tension, as it causes the diaphragm to flick in the same way as laughter does.

All three devices subsequently give rise to an endorphin release - the endogenously produced happiness chemical - and so give rise to a virtuous cycle. And while

developing mindfulness and mental focus to reduce tension is advisable as a long-term happiness strategy, of the other two, laughing is obviously preferable to crying, if you have a choice, because crying makes your eyes look scrappy and laughing is fun.

And you do have a choice. You can actually train yourself to laugh and remain in the laughing state (whether internally or externally) perpetually, constantly seeing the joke, always at one with the Laughing Buddha, the God or Tao informing and animating this entire spectacle we call life.

Which is why I was so happy when Joe invited me to collaborate on this wonderful book. As well as being one of the world's great gentlemen and a most affable and noble fellow, Joe is the consummate laughing yogi. I've watched him work a room and transform an atmosphere from one of mild fearfulness to one of powerful bonding in collective joy in a matter of minutes, simply by getting people to divest themselves of their adult veneers of stiffness and pretense and become as little children, laughing, hugging and all but skipping for joy.

And my part - the reason Joe called me in - is to bring you the practical 'exercise' aspect culled from the magnificent ancient Taoist system of wellbeing I practice and teach, a central theme and tenet of which is the encouragement of a perpetual state of laughter or at least laughter-readiness. He felt - and I agree - that these exercises will help you more

easily embody the Laughing Buddha within. They comprise visualization skills, breathing, manual release technique, realistic positive thinking technique, and the method of repositioning consciousness within the body, to augment the capacity for spontaneous laughter at the drop of a hat.

These exercise sequences are presented in progressive training form, so that at the end of each chapter you'll find yourself reviewing the previous exercise sequences and integrating them into the next one, all building cumulatively to a crescendo of eternal laughter.

You'll have noticed in the preceding, incidentally, a tendency to mix my religious and spiritual nomenclature, using variously and interchangeably the terms *God*, *Tao*, *Buddha* and so on. I suggest there is nothing contradictory about this and that all are merely terms expressing the ineffable, none ultimately sacrosanct in themselves. In any case I am, and strongly advocate being, a spiritual slut.

You may wonder what metaphysics of any kind has to do with learning to have a good laugh, but I suggest once this all becomes second nature to you, when in the midst of a proper belly laugh, you ask what could possibly facilitate such an unlikely event as being on a life-supporting planet in human form laughing your head off, if not something slightly beyond the obviously physical (the literal meaning of metaphysical).

You might have also discerned a subtle tendency not

to take myself too seriously. And I offer this as a pre-exercise before we even begin the book: stop taking yourself so seriously immediately.

See you shortly in the main body of the book.

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 my friend Will described me 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' 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 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, and to achieve a sense of harmony with the universe.

I mentally commended Will for his perception and accuracy because after a typically zigzagging journey, that is exactly what I now do, both for myself and for others. 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 & Visualization, Archetype healing, Massage, Dowsing, Contact Improvisation, Tai Chi, Free your Natural Voice, and others, I found the practice of laughing works best.

The Laughing Buddha is an archetype of happiness, abundance, and wisdom of contentment. It represents generosity and openheartedness, qualities we all possess and have the potential to develop. Everything that follows is to help you develop your own laughing yogi practices and awaken your Laughing Buddha within.

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 tell his children he loved their mother. That story resonated profoundly with me as in hindsight I was a perfect model of emotional 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 and that I'd been desperately trying to hold down ripped its way through my defenses. 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 Gurdjieff, 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 three suicide attempts, 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 ways of thinking have 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 arbitrary and 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 savored 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 extracting the lessons and replacing your 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 over the years my research has shown 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 7th principle of Huna: 'Effectiveness is the Measure of Truth'. In other words, 'does it work'? I have found these awakening your Laughing Buddha 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-natured way, we are capable of experiencing harmony, i.e. 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.

A precursor of what's to come, if you can manage it, is to take a big breath, hold it, and let it out with a good-natured chuckle. Not to worry if you can't, there's a gentle progression as you go through the book.

We are increasingly familiar with the benefits that laughing brings. One of the most telling examples is Patch Adams, the US doctor portrayed by Robin Williams in the film of the same name, who has been using laughter as a treatment with his patients at the Gesundheit Institute since 1971. This is both a pioneering and enduring organization 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 can awaken your laughing Buddha within by following simple steps.

The starting point and simplest exercise, as Thich Nhat Hanh's quote at the start of this chapter 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 development steps you can take, requiring minimal effort. It is baby step one.

There are two aspects to this smile, and the thread that connects these aspects is making it genuine and good-natured.

Can you 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 helps 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 recognize these warm-ups as they bring your whole face to life and get it flexible and expressive.

The next step is to smile in a genuine and good-natured way. The size of the smile is unimportant as 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.' This is the Duchenne smile. 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 visualizing 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.

Can you 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 faces 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 revitalize 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 maintain 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.

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.'

Now we've defined the quality of the smile, here is
Barefoot Doctor's 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.