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# Humour as skilful mean

**By Christian Kokon Gaudin**

*Contribution to the symposium "A zen dojo in the city today" at the temple of La Gendronnière, December 2017.*

I am Christian Kokon Gaudin. In 1995, Roland Yuno Rech gave me the Bodhisattva ordination and for almost ten years, I have been the creator and animator of the *Butsu Zen Zone*, the Zen meditation initiation stand at the Japan Expo of Paris, where I became "Master Banana".

I know that some people in the Sangha have been shocked by our presence in these manifestations apparently very distant of our practice. That is on one hand a little bit of a shame, and on the other hand quite good! Because our sangha gathers many very different talents and this diversity is a great richness.

There are many ways to present the practice, primarily all the traditional activities related to Zen (martial arts, ikebana, tea ceremony, buto dance, Zen stories, etc.) but also more current forms that speak to today's youth.

Given our small number of practitioners, what interests me personally is how to bring more young people to discover zazen, more young people to practice it and more young people to join our sanghas. And here I would like to insist on an important but underemphasized aspect of Master Deshimaru's teaching and practice. When the great elders who knew Sensei speak about him, they present him as a very strong Zen master, but also very funny, provocative, even bawdy.

## **So, fifty years later, let us ask the question: "Are you funny enough, dear masters?"**

I think that we have, as Sensei has shown us, every interest in using humour and "skilful means" to promote among our relatives or fellow citizens, a practice that can appear as very austere and in which certain Buddhist rituals and forms can remind us of dogmas, constraints and bad experiences linked to the Christian religion.

Nowadays, as Zen and meditation are 'trendy' and Buddhist statuary has replaced crucifixes and garden gnomes in the house of the average man, we could show, thanks to humour (which is absent from Christian spirituality but present in the Zen teaching of non-duality), that we do not have the same relationship to faith, religion and spirituality as our parents and grandparents.

In addition, I have often found in most of my dojo and sesshin comrades, humour, self-derision, good humour, even frank laughter. When I came back here after a few years of absence during which I fell in love with Japan, it is naturally what we chose, with my friends from the *Butsu Zen Zone*, this side of Japanese humour and pop culture, to initiate the younger generation to zazen.

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For more than twenty-five years, our youth became fan of everything that comes from Japan, including its traditional culture, thanks to manga's, video games, animation cinema, fashion, music and all that is called J-Pop. These young people know everything about the Japanese daily life and Zen is present in many fictions, because the master-disciple relationship itself nourishes a large number of successful series like Dragon Ball or Naruto.

My friends and I, already fans of this pop culture, found amusing and interesting to use it as a skilful mean to present true Zen to the French otaku\* masses, because France, etymologically "Buddha's country", is also the second country of manga after Japan.

Our artistic director Geneviève Gauckler has therefore created numerous posters to explain the practice, but also to entertain the festivalgoers with the new heroes of the youth. We did this in a mushotoku spirit of great freedom, not hesitating to photoshop Sponge Bob's head on Roland's posture or Homer Simpson's head on Deshimaru's. Thus, when festivalgoers walk past the booth which walls are covered with colourful and fun posters, and their first contact with Zen is a smile and humour ... It is easy then to invite them to just sit on the carpet and try to touch their mind.

There are other folk aspects of this geek culture that converge with Buddhists teachings, like the fact that one becomes Buddha when one takes one's posture, because many festivalgoers practice the "Cosplay" (Costume player), the realization of very elaborate costumes used to disguise themselves as their favourite heroes.

And we can take advantage of this happy carnival atmosphere ourselves to spend a few days in the middle of the crowd wearing kolomo, rakusu or even kesa, and everyone finds it top!

Similarly, Zen sounds and sutra's recitation in Japanese rather than in Molière's language are more exotic for this generation.

Concerning the forms taken by Soto Zen and its rituals, I simply think that we are not Japanese and that they will be adapted naturally. And while mindfulness meditation is in full swing, why not add some fun to our practice? In Japan itself, where Zen is especially known for funeral ceremonies, we find in some temples altars with manga heroes.

**So, wouldn't our Enlightenment mind and our complicated and conflictual relationship with religion lead us to take humour as one of the great markers of our own spiritual practice?**

In any case, this is my wish and this is what I intend to keep doing in the future, during sesshin, at Japan Expo as well as in my cartoonist activity.

*Christian Kokon Gaudin*  
aka *Master Banana* for the otaku\*  
chats.gaudin@gmail.com  
<https://www.facebook.com/ButsuZenZone/>

\* Otaku: the one who stays at home, by extension the fans of manga and Japanese pop culture.