

A Laugh, A Smile  
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Perhaps it was serendipity, providence, kismet. But on two days in the last week and a half I woke up to the same piece on the Witness History show on the BBC World Service. It was a piece on the first World Laughter Day celebrated on January 11, 1998 in Mumbai, India. The founder of the day was Dr. Madan Kataria. He had developed a practice he called laughter yoga in 1995. He had been reading studies on the benefits of laughter and decided he would form a laughter club. He gathered a few people in a park, and they began by telling jokes. But that only lasted ten days. They began running out of jokes. Some jokes were hurtful. Some vulgar.

But Dr. Kataria did not give up on the idea. He knew that the body does not know if one is really happy or if one is simply acting happy. He had a new idea. His clubs would fake laugh, incorporating laughing in with breathing exercises, laughter yoga. Laughing lowers blood pressure and boosts the immune system. This time his laughter club worked. There were soon laughter clubs all over India and across the world.

Twelve thousand people showed up for the first World Laughter Day in Mumbai in 1998. That caused a traffic jam in which a famous Indian film maker was stuck. She said she was at a low point in her own life and seeing all these laughing women in white saris intrigued her. She decided right there in that traffic jam that she would make a documentary about the laughing club of India.

Dr. Kataria says laughter has no language. We all laugh in the same way.

Eventually it was decided that January was too cold in some parts of the world, so World Laughter Day was moved to the first Sunday in May. Dr. Kataria said that he hopes that the day might help spread health, happiness and world peace through laughter, [BBC World Service - Witness History, The first World Laughter Day](#).

That is a pretty tall order. Health and happiness I get. But world peace? But a certified laughter yoga instructor [Laughter Yoga International - Health, Happiness and World Peace](#) Clint Darr claimed in his TedX talk that habitually practicing smiling and laughing with others makes better citizens more able to listen to each other and work together for the good of the community [World Peace Through Laughter | Clint Darr | TEDxCoMo \(youtube.com\)](#) . To quote Mother Teresa, “Peace begins with a smile.”

I was listening to a teaching by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh where he told those gathered for a retreat to remember this breathing exercise, “In/out, deep/slow, calm/ease, smile/release, present moment/wonderful moment,” and he then went on to speak on each section of the gatha. “Smile/release.” He says, “Breathing in, I smile, breathing out, I let go. I let go of my projects, of my worries about the future, of my regret concerning the past because the present moment is

so wonderful. And I am capable of touching the wonders of life in the present moment. Breathing in, I smile. And the smile has the capacity of releasing all the tensions that are left on your face, on your body. This is a smile of victory. This is a smile of lovingkindness directed to your own body, your own feelings. And when you breathe out you become a much freer person. Release. Nothing is as important as your peace, as your stability, as your freedom. You cannot exchange these valuable things for anything else. Nothing is worth to exchange your peace, your well-being, your ease. So 'release' here means you have become yourself. You are capable of releasing all your...ideas, even your ideas of happiness. Each of us is caught in our idea of happiness. We believe that we will be truly happy when such and such conditions are available. So we have an idea about happiness. And we don't know that that very idea of happiness is the obstacle for our being happy. And if you are capable of releasing that idea of happiness, happiness will be born in you right away. Well, there's a young man who thinks that he can only be happy if he gets that degree, that diploma. There is another young person who says that well if he cannot get into that position, he cannot marry that person, then happiness will not be possible. So we set up conditions for our happiness, and we are caught in that idea. But happiness can come to us at any time if we are a free person. Why are you committed to only one idea of happiness? When you are committed to one idea of happiness, you limit your capacity of being happy. And if you let go of that idea of happiness, then happiness can come from every direction. One country might be caught by one idea about happiness. The whole nation might think that 'unless we realize this five year program, unless we embrace that ideology and realize it, there will be no future for our country, our people.' And maybe during 50 years or 70 years we are caught by that idea of happiness, and we have created a lot of tragedy within our country, our people just because we get caught in one idea about happiness. And maybe 50 years later, 70 years later we find out that idea of happiness has been the obstacle for the happiness of the whole nation. So if you are lucky, you can release that idea. As individuals we also commit the same kind of mistake. We invent an idea of happiness. We cling to it. And we say unless I realize this, happiness will never be possible. That is why many of us cannot be happy. So releasing things, letting go of things is a very important practice. And among these things, the idea of happiness. Let us look deeply into our idea of happiness, and we might find out that it is exactly that idea of happiness that has prevented us from being happy. And this teaching is very clear in Buddhism. Breathing in, I smile. I know happiness is possible at any moment. The wonders of life are available at any moment. I can touch them. I can be happy without any condition. And that is why, breathing out, I can release," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3RkhdU9Thc>. Smile/release.

Not this congregation will be happy when we have x number of members, x amount of pledges, a full-time minister of our own, have x amount of money in an endowment. Happiness can be here and now. Smile for yourself. Laugh for yourself. Give that smile to another. Share that laughter with another.

Andrew Tarvin who describes himself as the world's first Humor Engineer teaching people how to get better results while having more fun, [About the Humorist - Humor That Works](#), says that the biggest difference between smiling and laughing is that smiling is personal and laughing is public," [The Difference Between Smiling and Laughing - Humor That Works](#). I am not sure

about that, but that is likely why Dr. Kataria formed laughter clubs not smiling clubs and why he suggests that laughing together is a step toward world peace.

But smiling and laughing have personal benefits too. Life coach Jennifer Smith says that,

**“1. Neurotransmitters called endorphins are released when you smile.**

“These are triggered by the movements of the muscles in your face, which is interpreted by your brain, which in turn releases these chemicals. Endorphins are responsible for making us feel happy, and they also help lower stress levels. Faking a smile or laugh works as well as the real thing—the brain doesn’t differentiate between real or fake as it interprets the positioning of the facial muscles in the same way. This is known as the facial feedback hypothesis. The more we stimulate our brain to release this chemical the more often we feel happier and relaxed.

**“2. Endorphins make us feel happier and less stressed.**

“They also act as the body’s natural pain killers. For sufferers of chronic pain, laughing and smiling can be very effective in pain management, as can laughing off the pain when you bump an elbow or fall over.

**“3. While the release of endorphins is increased, the stress hormone cortisol is reduced.**

“Cortisol is more active when we feel stressed or anxious and contributes to the unpleasant feelings we experience, and by lowering it we can reduce these negative feelings.

**“4. Laughing expands the lungs, stretches the muscles in the body and stimulates homeostasis.**

“This exercises the body, replenishing the cells from a lungful of oxygen and gaining all the benefits of exercising the body.

**“5. A good laugh can be an effective way to release emotions.**

“A good laugh can help you release emotions, especially those emotions that you might bottle up inside. Everything looks that little bit better after a good laugh and life can be seen from a more positive perspective.....

One of Smith’s suggestions is to “Spend time with friends and family that make you feel happy. Surrounding yourself with happy, fun-loving, optimistic people will bring out your happy side, and their behaviour will rub off on you as you subconsciously mimic their behavioural patterns,” [7 Benefits of Smiling and Laughing that You Didn't Know about - LifeHack](#). I would like us to turn that around. Let’s commit to being the friend or family member who is the happy,

fun-loving, optimistic person who brings out the happy side in others. Give away your smile. Share your laughter. Change, not just yourself, but the world for the better.