

**Excerpt from forthcoming publication:**

***LIVING A CLOWN LIFE: HOW TO HARNESS THE POWER OF THE RIDICULOUS***

By Barnaby King

## CLOWN SPIRIT

I decided to call my organization 'Clown Spirit' because I see clowning as a spiritual as well as an artistic practice. While I love the theatrical potential of clowning, and love to create clown characters and performances that delight audiences without any hint of mysticism, there was something implanted in my most basic attitude to clowning from the start that always included a spiritual element. Founding Clown Spirit signaled a return to connection with spirituality after many years of disconnection and cynicism about the invisible and inexplicable. It was a coming home, full circle, to where my clown journey began.

My first and foundational clown training experience with Sue Morrison in the Clown Through Mask tradition had very significant elements of the mystical and spiritual at its core. In fact mask work in general, I think, is the most metaphysical of the performance traditions, since it often involves the feeling (if not the actual explicitly stated goal) of connecting with the spirit or energy of the mask itself and allowing that to possess you and guide you. Many of the exercises in Morrison's workshop are designed to help the student develop the ability to let go of control, to get out of the way, and to 'put' the mask into the body and the voice, utilizing all the senses as a channel for the energy of the mask to be expressed.

In one particularly powerful exercise, called 'Masterpiece Creator', you create a sound based on the feeling you get from running your hands over the contours of a mask. Keep in mind that these masks are not given to us but rather created through a highly spontaneous and intuitive process of molding clay with eyes closed in a semi-trance state. Having painstakingly paper machéed and then painted your mask, you close your eyes again and allow your hands to 'see' the mask and from there you produce a sound. This sound you then 'put' into your body. You visualize it occupying and filling up each part of the body as you walk, run and actively move in the space (with eyes now open). The intention, as I mentioned, is to remove your 'self', any part of your mind that

is trying to question, control or judge what is going on, and allow the sound to become the sole focus and guide. The movement that emerges in this state is that of the mask itself. You become entranced, in a sense possessed, by the mask, channeling something outside of yourself.

There is an inexplicable and mystical quality to all of this. On one level it is a very effective way of producing creative results: outlandish characters and situations that the logical mind would struggle to conjure up. On another level, thinking of the mask as an invisible force which takes possession of our bodies turns clowning into potentially a kind of quasi-religious practice. Of course, creative process and divine intervention have a long association. Artists for millennia have described their creative processes in terms of entering a deep trance-like state and even of being inspired or fed by forces beyond their control. Novelists, for example, will sometimes describe the experience of writing as one of simply allowing the characters to have their own life and to guide the emerging action, rather than trying to control them oneself.

But whether we choose to describe such experiences in terms of being possessed by powers outside ourselves, or rationalize them in more secular terms as accessing unconscious creative potential in the right-brain, in some ways doesn't really matter. The question is are we willing to go along for the ride, to allow ourselves to have the experience that is waiting for us, and to discover our own unfolding journey.

The notion of 'cynical benevolence', often used by Morrison, captures this intention to hold in balance two conflicting impulses: the desire or willingness to experience that which is beyond our realm of understanding; and the rational, skeptical voice which wants to reject all traces of woo-woo mysticism. Cynical benevolence is an intellectual concept of great playful ambivalence. It is a lens through which to reflect not only on artistic and clown practice but also spirituality in one's daily life. It is also a practice that allows us to bridge the chasm we feel between the persistent materiality of our everyday lives on the one hand, and the awareness of belonging to something much bigger than ourselves, a kind of oneness that some people call 'god', others the 'universe', and others 'consciousness'.

Within the phrase 'cynical benevolence', the 'cynical' aspect allows for our socialized tendency as skeptics and critics to be heard. We are allowed to indulge our inner 'Doubting Thomas' as much as we like, to ask critical questions and remain on the fence, unconvinced. But the 'benevolent' part introduces a softness to our shield, a mediating permeability that lets something in. That is, we must allow ourselves to at least have the ecstatic experience before rejecting it. 'Benevolence' calls on us to show kindness and acceptance to ourselves and to the larger possibilities about which we

are, frankly, ignorant. By allowing our cynicism to hold court we deny ourselves a potentially transformative experience. But equally if we try to bury our own natural distrust it may redouble and come back in greater force. So we hold the two competing influences in balance, accepting the paradox that we can be open and skeptical at the same time.

'Cynical benevolence' is a helpful term, but it risks becoming an abstract concept that is not grounded in the body. When the voices of rationality and reason flood our brains with doubt and cynical thoughts which block our path to being present to what is truly happening in the moment, we need specific tools to calm those thoughts and to return to presence. Such tools help us in life just as they do in clown. It is true that in life it is possible to stumble along and survive (nowadays at least) without being fully present, while in clown we must exist in this state of hyper-awareness and presence, otherwise we cannot truly say we are clowning. But if we want to lead awakened, fully joyful and connected lives, simply surviving is not a very inspiring goal (though it may feel like our reality much of the time). Having strategies to silence the critical voices of fear and anxiety, or at least to learn to see these thoughts as the waves and ripples on the surface of our consciousness, while gaining access to a deeper flow of existence and awareness, can improve the quality of our life, just as it can help us acquire a clown state. And one of the best and simplest tools we have for achieving this alteration is something we all do: breathing.

## BREATH

Intentional breathing practice is a wonderfully direct and effective way of staying connected with our deepest roots, our most subtle impulses and our connection to all things. As we breathe mindfully and focus on the breath a dissolution of self occurs as we become aware of our interdependence and infinitely interconnected relationship with the world around us. This is the ultimate spiritual experience: to realize that the sense of self we carry around with us for most of our lives is a kind of illusion created by our over-developed brains; and to understand that we are really part of something much bigger, one tiny interconnected part of a massive cosmos, and that our existence is at one-and-the-same-time trifling *and* essential to the cosmos. Breath reminds us of the impermanence and interconnectedness of all things, including ourselves. It is an action over which our conscious brain has very little control, essential to our being and yet utterly beyond our limited perception of 'self'. We can simply observe it in action and, perhaps, play with its rhythms and tonalities. Beyond that it is a mystery, whose very existence roots our consciousness in the here and now.

The spiritual quest is not only to become aware cognitively of this bigger sense of ourselves, but to truly feel it, to experience it, to know it on a deeper level. And this is where breath can take us: from a cognitive awareness down into a felt experience and transformation. This is why breath is so powerful in our spiritual journey. Indeed the word 'spirit' comes from the Latin word 'spiritus', which literally means 'breath.' As so often is the case, the truth is baked into our language. Spirit is breath, and breath is spirit. And we can think of a number of quite poetic, metaphorical ways to connect the two concepts. For example, breath is invisible, yet we know it exists, so it is a perfect analogy for 'spirit' which we also cannot see. It is the invisible life-force, the thing that animates the cold hard materiality of the physical world, that brings things to life. And it is rather mysterious, or at least it was until Western science dissected and explained the process by which our lungs expand and fill, the air enters the alveoli, and we extract oxygen from it in return for carbon dioxide which then gets released back into the atmosphere as we spontaneously breath out.

The word 'spirit' also pops up as an element in many other words in the English language, and if we connect those words to their Latin roots we can begin to see how deeply connected we have been throughout human history to the mysteries of breath. The verbs 'inspire' and 'expire', as well their related nouns, 'inspiration' and 'expiration' or 'expiry', for example, all contain 'spirit'. To 'inspire', if taken literally from its Latin root, 'inspirare', means simply to breathe in. But it has come to mean much more: to motivate or energize, to affect or influence, to enliven or animate. To inspire someone is to instill in them the desire and energy to take action. To be inspired, likewise, is to be filled oneself with that desire and energy, which, it is felt, is drawn in from the outside, like breath. Inspiration is something we all understand as an experience: whether in the realm of artistic creation, sports, spirituality, relationships or work, we all know what it feels like to 'get inspired'. Yet its source is something mysterious. We see something or hear something, and suddenly, out of nowhere, we are filled with that energy to produce or act, to birth something into the world. Is this magic?

And then there is also to 'expire', which has come to be associated with the end of things. When a food product expires or reaches its expiry date, it is no longer supposed to be healthy to eat. It has decayed, perhaps, or its quality is compromised. It has run its course. We use the same word to denote the end of our own lives. If a person expires, they too have reached the end of their life. Yet, if we look at the root of the word it has a more benign meaning: simply to breathe out (expirare).

Many other languages have built ideas of soul, spirit or life force around words for breath, for example, 'psyche' and 'pneuma' in Greek, and 'prana' and 'vata' in Sanskrit. On one level we can see these linguistic connections between the idea of breath and

words like inspiration and expiration as purely poetic or metaphorical. In other words physical breath becomes a kind of stand-in or a way of visualizing that which is ineffable and mysterious: spirit. Inspiration is not exactly the same breathing in, but breath is a helpful analogy, because it feels somehow similar: when we get inspired we are filled with some kind of invisible life force and energy that empowers us to act, just as breathing in literally gives us the life force we need to sustain our bodies. Likewise, expiration is analogous to breathing out. It is easy to visualize death as a spirit vacating the body in the way that the breath physically leaves the body when we exhale. Spirit and breath have much in common. Both are invisible, life-giving entities that seem to move in and out of us involuntarily, of their own volition, enlivening and animating us with their presence, but leaving us a mere empty shell in their absence. Spirit, like breath, is the essence of life.

But on another level, the connection between breath and spirit is more than just poetic or metaphorical. Breath is a tool that not only helps our bodies stay alive but, when harnessed mindfully, can give us access to deeper levels of awareness, connection, wellness, spiritual, psychological and physical health. This insight is not a new one, but deeply rooted in many spiritual traditions, forms of non-western medicine, and languages. In Tantric Buddhism, *pranayama* is a technique that involves moderating the intake of breath in order to control the flow of life force ('prana' in Sanskrit) in and out of the body. The skilled use of this practice is said to affect the whole body, by cleansing impurities and obstructions in the *nadi* energy channel, allowing the prana energy to flow freely through this channel and upwards through the seven chakras.

One of the greatest masters of Tibetan Buddhism, Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche, explains how control of the breath is the most important factor in attaining Buddhahood or enlightenment:

The most important thing, at the perfection stage of Tantric practice, is to work effectively on the *prana*. If, as a result, one attains mastery of the essence-drop (*bindu*), the mind, which is supported by it, will also cease to move, thereby giving the experience of bliss, clarity, and nonthought.

(Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche, cited by Elio Guarisco in his intro to Yangonpa, Secret Map of the Body, p. 78)

Crucially, the control of breath is both a physiological and spiritual practice whose aim is the attainment of Buddhahood. In the 11th Century, when Buddhism spread from India into Tibet, this concept of *prana* coincided with another related set of breath practices from the Ayurvedic tradition, called *vata*. In traditional Indian medicine, *vata* was one of

the three *dosa*, thought to be central to the wellbeing of the body: *vata* (wind), *pitta* (bile), and *kapha* (phlegm), which were generally treated through physiological means (medicines and massage) rather than ritual healing practices. But as these ideas spread into Tibet, they evolved and became associated with Buddhist practices and with the idea that healing was also a spiritual practice and that meditation and breathwork, for example, could be used to heal physiological disorders as well as facilitating enlightenment. Many of the significant innovators and writers of this period were seen as spiritual teachers *and* medical experts or healers. And in Tibetan thought, the negative mental states or 'poisons' of desire, hatred and ignorance were seen as directly related to physical disorders in the body.

In this merging of Tantric Buddhism and Ayurvedic medicine, then, a new understanding of the benefits of intentional or controlled breath evolved in which it was understood both as a process of consciousness alteration in order to shed suffering and attain enlightenment (i.e. meditation), *and* also as a means of maintaining bodily health or healing physiological disorders. Breath here is not a metaphorical image that helps us understand the mysteries of existence or to 'get in touch' with our spirituality. Rather, it is a fundamentally spiritual act in itself, uniting the artificial division between consciousness and the physical world.

I took us on this detour partly to show how deeply embedded the spiritual significance of breath is in many cultural systems, but also as a way to explore how clowning, by also tapping into the power of breath, is itself a deeply spiritual pursuit. And as such, intentional manipulation of breath also has great benefits for both our psychological and physical wellbeing, as well as simply reminding us of our connectedness with everything that is seemingly outside of 'us', and therefore dissolving the habitual sense of self we carry around with us.

## RED-NOSE MEDITATION

When I was developing my own pedagogy and practice of clown beyond the scope of what my teachers had taught me, which I see essentially as a creative process of making it my own, I was inspired by the idea of breath. As I mentioned above, Sue Morrison's approach to clown included a significant element of breathwork. Before the making and inhabiting of each mask, for example, we would visualize breathing in and out through a particular part or area of the body. Each mask being linked to one of the six 'directions', this breathing visualization also helped to connect us to the appropriate direction that we were working with. By focusing on the breath at this key moment of entering the direction and the mask, we open up to the possibility (cynical benevolence)

of an outside energy or force guiding us on our creative journey and towards a personal discovery. Breath not only *inspires* us metaphorically, but literally seems to be the source of images that appear internally as well as externalized sound and movement. Ultimately the mask is the form around which everything congeals and spirals. The mask is not just the physical object but an entire being or state that lives in us and expresses itself through us.

This process is transformational and beautiful, but I also wanted to be able to bring it into a form that was more accessible on a day to day basis for people who might not be in the midst of an intensive clown workshop. As a result I created a kind of clown breathing meditation, a way to connect deeply with our clown essence and energy through breath. This would serve as a warm-up prior to a clown workshop or performance, a way to access the clown state. But, as I discovered, it also had many benefits and effects beyond the immediate practice of clowning.

The meditation was designed to be easy to learn and practice outside the context of a workshop or the need for a teacher to be present. It can be achieved simply by following verbal instructions, as long as you then give yourself permission to fully embody and explore the basic breaths and gestures in your own way. So the description here is intended as a starting place for your own practice of the red nose meditation, not as a description of how it *should* look or *must* be practiced. Clowns love breaking rules and doing things in their own way. So make sure, if you try this at home, that you break the rules and do it your own way. That is, 'clown it'.

## NORTH

We start with the direction NORTH, which is 'My Inner Truth', as in when we say 'my north star' or 'my true north' to indicate the most important thing in our lives or the thing that gives us our sense of purpose and orientation. The breath for NORTH enters through the feet and legs and leaves through the belly directly in front of us. The in-breath is a drawing up of the breath from the ground beneath us, through the roots and trunk of the body, filling us with that energy that comes from the earth. And the out-breath is a projecting of that energy in a forward direction, like a beam of light showing us the way ahead.

As with all the directions in this clown meditation, NORTH draws our attention to some human way of thinking that is ultimately flawed. All the directions held together remind us of that fundamentally flawed nature, but also allow those ways of thinking to dissolve as we come into awareness and balance. So NORTH is all about our desire to project ourselves into the world and the future, to structure and plan and control, to know our

destiny and perhaps even to shape it. The forward projecting breath symbolizes that foolish but common belief in our own power.

In my own red-nose meditation, each breath is accompanied by a movement that helps me visualize and actualise the breath in my body. This is not an essential part of the meditation, however, and you may develop your own movement or do it in total stillness with only the breath and the inner visualization.

As I begin to breathe in for NORTH I bend slightly and reach towards my toes with my fingertips. As the breath enters I follow the line of it up the legs with my hands, not touching the legs but a few inches away. When I reach my maximum inhalation, my hands have come all the way to around the belly area and then, as I begin to breathe out, I push forward with the hands in a movement reminiscent of Tai Chi or Xi Gong. As I do so, I imagine the breath forming a beam of light that shoots forward out of the belly and makes a path for me, a path I must follow. It is the light that goes before me and shows me the way.

## SOUTH

The breaths come in pairs, and SOUTH is the natural contrary to NORTH, bringing balance by reminding us of the inherent ridiculousness of our illusion of control. It is the direction of playfulness, risk and danger. It requires us to move, or to stumble forwards, even as we realise we are ignorant and foolish.

The breath for SOUTH enters through the belly and leaves through the back. It is a horizontal breath, moving through the body from front to back, like a wind. We begin where we complete the breath for NORTH, with arms outstretched in front, and as we breathe in we pull the arms in towards the belly, almost in a pulling motion. Then, as we begin to breathe out we curl the hands under the wrist and fore-arm and twist so that the arms can begin to push out behind us. Again, this movement is not required to get the benefits of the breathing meditation. But I have found it helps. The key is not to get stuck in any idea of how something has to be. Take it, try it for yourself, but then play with it and try different variations. Find what works for you and what sits comfortably and meaningfully in your own world.

As the breath shoots out of our backs and the hands (perhaps) also push out behind us in a kind of sweeping motion, we might find ourselves coming up onto our toes and being propelled forward. It is almost as if we were in water or a thick substance, and the motion of the breath and arms are like a stroke or a jet that pushes us rather unsteadily, such that we may even stumble forward from our standing position. Enjoy this feeling



and lean into it. This is the moment of jumping (or falling) into the unknown, the surrender to vertiginous play, where we do not have the control and structure we like to think we have normally. Perhaps it is something like stepping off the edge of a cliff.

Whether or not we explore this movement physically or just breathe and visualize, SOUTH has the feeling of letting go of certainty and moving into a beautiful empty field of unknowing. It is the play space that balances the illusion of control we had in NORTH. And it is releasing the baggage of the past.

## EAST

EAST is the direction of the heart and the emotions, which are critical for the clown. We must be in touch with our feelings as they come and go, but also not cling to them. We must remember that they are not a burden we must bear, but more like waves that we can move through and over. Breathing the direction EAST reminds us to connect with our emotions but also let them go and not remain attached to them.

The breath for EAST enters through the heart and leaves through the finger of the right arm. As we inhale and gather the energy into the heart space, we sweep the hand up the chest, over the heart area and then continue to rotate the upper arm outwards to the right, until extended. As the arm unfurls and the hands and fingers begin to extend, we exhale. So it is as if we are gathering up the emotional baggage from the heart space, holding it for a few moments, and then releasing it into the world. The circular action of the hand and arm reminds us that this process never ends but continues in a cycle of gather and release, inhale and exhale, hold and surrender.

There is something very cathartic about this breath, and strong feelings often come up as we pass the hand over the heart space. It is good to feel their strength as they wash over us, but then also good to know that we can simply open up the hand and let them go. Or rather, that we can simply let this process take its course, that emotions go as they come, without very much intervention at all. The movement, in this sense, is simply the reflection of a natural process that we so often block and obstruct by obsessing over petty resentments, anxieties, regrets, blame, guilt and so-on. Our bodies know how to let go if we simply allow them to go about their business. Everything is in the breath.

## WEST

WEST is the pair of EAST. It has a similar function, but relating to the head instead of the heart. The head is so full of thoughts, rationalizations, and logical ideas, which are

part of what makes us the beautiful humans we are. They are a super power. But they are also our worst enemy, because we start to believe them and identify with them. As clowns we can and must use our rational minds at times, but we must also learn not to take them too seriously. WEST reminds us of the value and the danger of our own cognitive powers.

The breath for WEST enters through the head and leaves through the fingers of the left hand. This time, as we inhale, we imagine the energy and breath filling up our skull and our brain and flowing down into the left side, where it leaves on the exhale. The left hand, in counterpoint to the previous movement for EAST, sweeps up and over the whole head area, capturing those thoughts as we breathe in. It then rotates outward to the left and extends, the fingers unfurling as we breathe out.

Like for EAST, WEST's breath and movement is cyclical, reminding us that the thoughts keep coming and must continue to be released. This is the endless cycle of life, of being human, and it is both a blessing and a curse. We may sometimes feel beleaguered by our thoughts. And it is true that we can do little to control them. But meditation can also help us understand, through experience, that consciousness is not our thoughts, that we are not our thoughts. They go on all the time. But behind them is a deeper presence, our true being, that can witness the thoughts and not be limited or attached to them. The action of gathering and letting go, repeatedly, is an embodied practice that also helps us get in the habit of letting go of our thoughts even as we observe and listen to them.

## ABOVE ABOVE

I do not know why the word ABOVE is repeated in ABOVE ABOVE. It is how I was taught it and so I embrace it. But for me it has ritual significance. It is not only ABOVE, but even ABOVE that, perhaps. This space of ABOVE ABOVE is beyond the body, heart and mind. It is beyond comprehension. And yet we may feel it and connect with it. It is the sacred space, inhabited perhaps by the spirits, gods or mystical powers. I do not take these concepts too seriously, yet I allow them to affect me: *cynical benevolence*.

The breath for ABOVE ABOVE begins back at the feet, and we breathe in through the legs. But this time the breath comes straight up vertically through the midline of the body and out through the arms into the space above us. We begin the breath with the hands stretched down towards the feet, and as we inhale we sweep the hands and arms up the whole length of the body. The exhale begins when we reach the midpoint,

and continues as the hands and arms stretch up to the sky, at which point we release the breath upwards, straight up, towards the sacred space above.

The gesture of taking the breath from the earth and channeling it through the body into the sacred space above is a kind of offering to the clown gods, or whoever you imagine to be up there (just imagine something). We are saying through this gesture that we are fully connected above and below, dancing in the space of in-between, not holding or clinging to the energy but simply being a channel for it in this moment. As we acknowledge the clown gods and honor them, they are more likely to give us a good experience.

## BELOW BELOW

The final breath completes the cycle and is the natural counterbalance to ABOVE ABOVE. Here we take the gift that we are given by the clown gods in the sacred space and we channel it back down through the body, where it can live for a time, before continuing its natural flow into the earth. The energy lives in movement between the sacred space ABOVE and the earthly space BELOW. We must be careful not to break that flow by holding onto it. We must rather be a channel for it and host it for a while as we clown.

The breath for BELOW BELOW begins by inhaling into the top of the head. This is an opening up of ourselves to the power of the clown gods, and is perhaps the moment of greatest vulnerability in the sequence. At the same time, we follow the flow of internal energy by moving our hands down the whole body. As we begin to breathe out, the hands move further down towards the earth and we sink down into our lower half, grounding the energy as we do so. It is almost a feeling of landing, with a slight bounce, on the ground, having just been flying in the ABOVE space.

Returning the breath into the earth, as I said, completes the cycle which began with NORTH, drawing the breath up from the earth. Circularity is important. By returning things to their proper place we do not interfere with the natural cycle, but rather tap into it, become one with it. Sacred clowns are certainly experts in tapping into this natural cycle of energy, and as such they have a responsibility to complete the cycle and not impede its flow. Like environmentally-conscious humans who need the physical earth to survive but are trying to leave as little footprint on it as possible, we also need the spiritual energy that is flowing around us, but if we misuse it we put ourselves in danger and adversely affect the way the energy moves and feeds the rest of the universe.

## DIRECTIONS OF THE SELF

The whole mythology of breath and energy that I have described above is of course a kind of creative invention. I believe in it because I choose to believe in it, and I am not attached to it. 'Cynical benevolence' captures the ambivalence of a living relationship to the mysterious unknown aspects of our world, which we all feel and yet often deny or avoid. It is okay to feel confused and overwhelmed by these aspects of ourselves and our universe, but if we deny them entirely we turn away from a great wellspring of wonder and delight.

As a child I was brought up in a liberal Christian environment. I learned that I was innately sinful and that committing my life to God and Christ was the key to my salvation. At a certain point, when I entered university and began to learn to think critically about the world and institutional religion, I gradually lost my faith, and for a long time, in its absence, I felt a great sense of sorrow, as if some part of me was missing. I think that this sorrow and sense of lack is part of the human condition and primarily what drives people to seek solace in religious dogma. But it never really fills the gap.

When I discovered clowning in my late twenties it was a revelation and a kind of spiritual homecoming. The talk of clown gods and the directions of the self allowed me to connect again with the sacred and the mystical truths I sensed deep down, but with a lightness and freedom that was lacking in the dogma and restrictions of Christian faith. I sense that both originate in the same place. Perhaps the problem with organised religions like Christianity is that human hearts and minds have intervened too much in the natural flows and have tried to comprehend, structure and ordain what it should look and feel like to worship something beyond oneself.

Clowning, by contrast, as a spiritual practice, offers deep inner and outward connection but with the release and freedom of play. As we enact a ritual practice we are in the flow. That is to say, we are dancing with the spirit instead of trying to control and direct it. The breathing meditation is a perfect example of this, because while it has a certain order and pattern to it, it is really intended as a starting point, a loose frame within which to play and find your own flow and your own meaning.

Cynical benevolence too is a playful concept, like a Buddhist *koan* or riddle that seems to be contradictory. How can we be both cynical about the mystical and also be kind and gentle enough to let it in and let it affect us. How can something affect us that we don't even believe in? It is a gorgeous and very clown-like problem. Clowns must thread the needle.

The answer to the riddle, if there is one, is that we must accept and embrace the contradiction. More than this, in clown we delight in such contradictions as sources of truth and fun. In fact, in clown we say that if we can face all directions of ourselves at the same time, we will laugh at the beauty of our ridiculousness. Because we are not one thing. We are not the unified and coherent whole we like to project. We contain multiple heterogeneous and contradictory aspects, beliefs, and attitudes. And it is in embracing this multiplicity or heteroglossia that we meet our truest self and find that it is a bottomless well of power, beauty, and humor: our clown.

This power, beauty and humor is central to a spirituality that I find I can put my trust in much more readily than in any institutionalized faith. And thus clown, for me, is a spiritual journey that I find to be deeply nourishing and endlessly challenging. The search for one's clown takes one in all directions--north, south, east, west, above above, and below below. But all these directions finally become one thing: not the 'self' of the kind most people identify with, in the sense of one's identity; but the deeper sense of *being* that lies beyond this self. In fact this *being* might be described as an absence of self, or an erasure of the self, which is what I think of as a truly spiritual act. We spoke about this at the start of this chapter, and I described how exercises in clowning deliberately require us to lose our controlling 'self' and to allow other forces to take the helm. Whether we think of those forces as inner or outer, accessing them is what I mean when I think or speak of spirituality.

The clown identifies strongly with this absenting of self, and we can see this is almost all approaches to clown. So, although the method I teach, which involves exploring the six directions, is explicit about this exploration being a spiritual journey, there is something in all clowning methods and techniques that gestures to the spiritual. And this is nowhere more clearly demonstrated and symbolised than by the most universally recognized of clown features: the red nose.

## RED NOSE

When we have completed the six breaths, or created the six masks, and visited all our directions, as I said, we come to a place where they combine effortlessly into a single breath or mask. This is the seventh breath or mask, which contains the others, but also goes beyond them. The red nose is the outward facing expression of this seventh mask. And it is, of course, a mask. So, like all masks, it is intended to reveal the truth, not to be hidden behind. Like all masks, it has two distinct but related functions. We might call these the theatrical and the spiritual.

The word 'theatre' derives from Greek words meaning 'place of watching'. It is a visual medium. And the visual appearance of the red nose has a particular effect on the way a viewer sees a performer. It marks them as 'other', a kind of character, like any mask might do. It tells us we are to understand this performer as not themselves. However, unlike any other mask, the red nose only covers one tiny feature and in some ways (like a tight bathing suit) accentuates the nakedness of the rest of the face. Somehow, when we see a person appear with a red nose, we pay more attention to their face and we see more in it. It never ceases to amaze me how, when a person goes behind a screen and then comes out again wearing the red nose, how their faces have transformed, how we are suddenly aware of the funniness and humanity of that face, how we see every single tiny feature with an absurd and exaggerated clarity. The nose itself, of course, also accentuates what is probably the funniest natural feature of the human face: the protruding proboscis. So, the combination of an exaggerated and brightly colored nose, and the somehow magnified grotesqueness of the entire face, combines to produce outward, visual impact which is critical to clowning. That is not to say one must wear a nose to clown. It is possible to produce that effect in other ways (even without any overt 'clown' features). But it makes it much easier, in my experience.

However, there is a whole other aspect to the red nose which takes us closer to the deep and spiritual connections I have been discussing in this chapter. For the red nose is not just seen by the audience; it is also experienced by the wearer. And the experience of wearing the nose has an effect for the one wearing it, which might be described as spiritual or perhaps transformational (a transformation which also becomes visible on the outside). There are a number of aspects to this inner experience of transformation, which I shall address individually, though they all happen at the same time in reality: dissolution of identity, unification with all things, reintegration with self.

## Dissolution of Identity

One helpful thing about wearing a nose (which can be felt and seen) is that it divests us of our individuality. This might seem contradictory, given what I just said about it drawing attention to our unique flaws. But the fact that the red nose is a common denominator for all (or most) clowns, means we are stepping out of ourselves and becoming a part of something bigger. It de-personalizes everything. So that, although we draw very much on our individual ridiculousness for the specificity of creating our character and our material, the clown represents a deeper level of human absurdity that we all share. In our clown we are all different and all the same; our difference is inherent to our sameness. When we see the clown we see ourselves reflected back at us, and yet we see someone quite different from us. It is in this space of impossible contradiction that the clown lives and plays. It is both me and not me, or not *not* me (to quote performance theorist Richard Schechner).

To put the smallest mask on is an act of inner transformation that shifts us out of our everyday behavior, our habitual concerns and anxieties, and deposits us into a universal pool of ridiculousness and absurdity of which we can drink endlessly without ever feeling that it gets personal. In clown, all the things we usually feel shame or guilt about, become toys and playthings. We can handle them without embarrassment because we are part of this tribe, no longer simply ourselves. And the red nose is the emblem of belonging: our membership badge.

We learn, through the nose, to divest ourselves of our 'selves' and in so doing we give up something most people cling to for dear life: our identity. If we identify too closely with all the things traditionally thought of as constituting the 'self', things like our attractiveness, appearance, health, intelligence, sexuality, desire, moods, strengths, weaknesses, fears, resentments, regrets, we find it impossible to clown because we take ourselves too seriously, and the one thing clowns must do is not take themselves seriously. We must be able to make light of ourselves. And so we must disassociate with all those socially-designated aspects of personhood that seem to make us who we are.

The paradox is that many people experience their clowns as being even more *themselves* than they are in everyday life. Indeed, in clowning, we become intensely conscious of our individuality in order to use it as material. So we must sometimes dive deep into those areas that have caused great discomfort or perhaps great joy in our lives, in order to learn about our world selves and what makes us inherently ridiculous (laughable). In doing so it is easy to get caught up in identifying with those things as the emotional responses wash over us. But we must also learn, as a Buddhist might learn, to detach from these aspects of ourselves, even as we see them and connect with them. We must learn to 'dis-identify', which is the opposite or reverse process of that which our whole lives have taught us. We must both accept our human reality and then know, deeply, that that is not all we are. It is a contrary way of thinking, a clown way of thinking.

As clowns, then, we are freed up to speak the unspeakable and to express the things most people find distasteful or shameful and to act in ways that seem inappropriate. And it is all because we learn, through the red nose and through training, that we are not defined by those things, that everyone shares them. It is our job to demonstrate that these things will not kill us, but rather, through laughing about them collectively, we are liberated from their power.

## Unification of All Things

The red nose is round, like the letter *O* or number *zero*. It thus resonates with the great power and ambivalence of that figure, which represents both absence and endless continuity with all things. A zero is a circle with nothing in the middle.

In Japanese Zen Buddhism, there is a spiritual practice that involves painting a circular figure known as an *enso*. The attempt to create such a simple, whole and symmetrical image, and the inevitable failure to achieve perfection holds the potential for great spiritual insight. The *enso* represents an enlightened view of the universe, the circularity and oneness of all things, but, paradoxically, it also represents the void, the emptiness that appears when we look for substance within that oneness.

The *enso* might be thought of as a portrait of reality, containing a deep lesson about the illusion in which we find ourselves as thinking beings. Our logical brains tell us that behind the actions of our bodies and the thoughts of our minds, there is a controlling force, a 'me', referred to by philosopher Gilbert Ryle as 'the ghost in the machine'. In this dualistic way of thinking, our bodies are like machines, implying that there must be some guiding force, a soul perhaps, at the centre of everything. Yet, like a ghost, when we try to look for this soul, we cannot actually find it. Likewise, the *enso* is a circle that implies something of substance contained within. But when we actually look inside, there is nothing, just empty space. But was there something there before we looked? Is it hiding from us? Are we looking in the wrong place? Or is it just not the kind of thing we can see?

It is no accident that the circle is the figure chosen to represent zero, representing absolute nothingness. The zero is a great cosmic joke, and the joke is on us. So it is perfect that clowns wear one on their nose. Because clowns also play in that philosophical conundrum or riddle of existence, the search for meaning behind surface structure. And just as the figure zero itself points to both dissolution of the ego (absence of self) and simultaneously to endless continuity, so the clown offers this experience of connection to all things, transcending the shell of the body and pointing to our ineffable oneness with the universe.

One way in which clowns do this is simply by their live-wire way of being in the space and with their audience. Unlike more theatrical performers, whose words and actions are often determined by scripts or ideas of imitating real life on a stage, clowns truly exist in the here and now and their words and actions resonate with the changing forms around them. When a clown comes into the space, they are like a finely tuned radio receiver, picking up every tiny fragment of information and letting it play them. Perhaps an even better image is a harp or piano that vibrates and resonates with whatever



sound waves reach it, not simply echoing the sound back but creating its own sound in response.

This responsiveness is most noticeable in relation to other people in the space (audience, for example), who are clearly seen and reacted to by the clown. So many clown games and exercises are designed to fine tune the student's senses (all the senses, not just hearing and sight) to the presence and subtle shifts in the mood of the others in the room. Unlike in most forms of performance, in clown the audience becomes much more than a body of passive observers, taking in and processing information from the stage. It becomes an active participant in a conversation that is alive and flowing, with the clown as a kind of super-conductor or lightning rod, connecting and playing with the collective energies in the room. At the peak of their powers they are able to make us feel that there is no performer/audience distinction. We are all simply being and creating together in real time, carried on a wave of creative flow and energy whose source is the divine in each of us. In these moments of dissolution of self and coming together in oneness, who holds the space, keeps us all safe, and brings us back to earth with the grounding power of laughter? The one wearing the sacred (red) circle on their nose, of course. Who else?

## Reintegration with Self

In the ideal clown routine, we say there are 4 parts: present yourself; bring me into your world; transform me; and bring me back with a new awareness.

After the dissolution of identity and the unification of all things that the red nose in itself does not bring about but facilitates, we must return to earth with all that we have learned and discovered and we must re-integrate it with our daily lives and with our persistent - if illusory - sense of self. The fact that the self and the ego are illusions is one aspect of this learning, of course. And reintegrating that understanding back into our everyday actions and interactions can have a wonderful lightening effect on us, reminding us that our thoughts do not define us and that we all have that *enso*, that breath of God, within us.

The *enso* also captures another aspect of the clown's gift to our understanding of who we are in the world. The tradition of painting *ensos* is part of a larger category of Japanese artistic practice known as *wabi-sabi*, or the beauty of imperfection. Usually applied to pottery, *wabi-sabi* honors the flaws, the signs of damage and wear, the asymmetries that are eschewed by Platonic notions of perfection in classical art. What we are accustomed to think of as failure or error appears as precious and sacred. Just as the *enso* can never be painted perfectly, so too *wabi-sabi* pots remind us of the

impossibility of true perfection and symmetry, and are prized for their cosmetic blemishes and their formal defects, as expressions of truth.

Yet, like the *enso*, it is not just about the end product, but the process: the attempt to create or recreate the perfect form, and the inevitable failure and fundamental ridiculousness of our ambition. Clearly the clown would sit very comfortably within the tradition of *wabi-sabi*. Clowns want to get things right. Their intention is often a successful outcome. But the execution always leads them through many failures, which are really the meat of the story, the expression of truth as we experience it daily in our lives: the failure to live up to our own expectations and those of society.

But the *wabi-sabi* pot and the clown are more than philosophical reflections on the truth of failure. They are celebrations of the beauty of imperfection. And each imperfection is in part a product of the individual's flaws, their uniqueness. As Stephen Nachmanovitch says in *The Art of Is*, 'Damage and wear to an object can reflect how precious it is to us -- how much we have used it and continue to maintain it. Each dent is the mark of a distinct story' (p. 175). And so, with a bump, we return to the self in all its distinctiveness, as expressed in its beautiful dents and flaws. They are beautiful to us because of the stories they tell, which are individual stories but also reach deep into the collective human story that we can all relate to.

## Out of the cage

Near the beginning of my solo clown show, *Flawed Genius*, I am holding a cage with what appears to be a white bird sitting on a perch, motionless. I look suspiciously at it and shake the cage.

'The bird seems to have died,' I confide in the audience. 'Doesn't look like it wants to be involved any more.' Getting frustrated I speak now to the bird: 'What's wrong with you? Come on. Make an effort!'

I reach into the cage, prod the bird with a finger, whereupon it swings down below the perch and hangs upside down. The exact timing of the words, the prodding and the fall is different each time and produces a range of responses: raucous laughter; sympathetic sighs; shocked silence. But beneath the varying qualities of particular performances and audiences, there is a mutual shared understanding of something we recognize to be deeply true. When audiences see me treat the bird this way, they understand my own very particular story. Perhaps they could not express it in words, but they see that my actions are deeply connected to who I am, my inability to nurture and

love, my tendency to punish those around me as well as myself. I am really the one who is in a cage.

Like the *enso*, the scene and the cage are expressions of imperfection, beautiful in its distinct flaws. But the audience also recognizes that this defect is not exclusive to me, but a collective imperfection, common to every human who has ever lived. While in so many ways we hold up the gold standard of the perfect relationship, we all fail to achieve it on a daily basis as we ignore, neglect, misunderstand, dominate, slight, or otherwise diminish other humans around us, keeping them and ourselves in cages of our own making. But in recognizing that our individuality is contained and held by the whole, we actually unlock spiritual insight. And it is by focusing on the flaws and defects that we gain access to this insight. To know--and feel--that we are not alone is a kind of release. The bars of the cage begin to dissolve.

Awareness of the oneness of all things, which is the true goal of the spiritual journey, is available via many practices and pathways. Clown is just one of these. It is the one I chose because I was drawn to its beguiling blend of theatricality, playfulness and deep self-exploration. To clown is simultaneously to know oneself and understand that self is an illusion. To see it otherwise is to remain trapped in the cage, with all the shame, guilt, regret and blame that we, as a collective, mount upon ourselves. Clown, then, ultimately is freedom. The door is already open. We have only to find it and take flight.