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The Only Desire That Is Complete Is Buddha's Desire

Recently I was talking about denial of desires. This can be very confusing. Our way is not asceticism, but actually, if you read our precepts literally, there is no difference. But what it means is completely different. This difference is what I want to talk about tonight. Or what is the difference between “to study” and “to listen.” Or why you started to study Zen. There must be some reason why so many people come to the Zen Center and practice Zen and study Zen. I think this is because our culture, our civilization, has already come to a dead end, and if you realize that you cannot go any further you may come to the Zen Center to find some way to go further. That is your feeling, whether or not you understand that we have reached a dead end or why we came to this dead end.

The foundation of our culture is based on individualism. Individualism is based on the idea of self. From the time of the Renaissance, we awoke and started to put an emphasis on our human nature, rather than something which may be called our “divine nature” or “holy nature.” We put more emphasis on what we are and what is our human nature. We wanted to express our human nature as much as possible. So, our holy nature or buddha-nature was replaced by human nature. That human nature, which is not what we mean by buddha-nature, is the starting point of our mistake.

Whatever thought we may have about an ideal society – whether it is based on communism, or capitalism, or individualism – all those thoughts are based on individual right, or individual power, or the supremacy of the individual. So, for instance, individualism or capitalism seeks for the freedom of our desire – our freedom – while communism puts an emphasis on the equality of profits or rights. But equality and freedom are not compatible. If you want to be free from everything; if you want to extend your desire freely, limitlessly, you cannot divide things equally, because you want to extend your desire as much as you can. If each one of you extended their desire, it is not possible to possess things equally.

But our conscience always tells us “you should be free in extending your desire. It is all right. It should be all right to act freely, to possess things as much as you can, as long as you don't disturb people.” But if you have too much, and others do not have so much, you don't feel so good. So this thought is not compatible because it is based on a self-centered idea. When we say “equality,” we mean equality of our human power. When we say “desire,” “limitless desire,” “freedom of desire,” it means “our” freedom, “my” freedom, or “someone's” freedom.

When there is no idea of holy being, or Buddha, or God, there's no idea that will provide some background to give an appropriate position for equality and desires or freedom. In order for us to accommodate that idea or thought without difficulty, it is necessary to postulate some big fundamental idea of non-selfish desire or limitless boundary, which is not just material or spiritual. Something beyond spiritual and material is necessary. That is so-called “non-selfishness.”

As long as our life is controlled or based on a selfish idea, it is not possible for every thought to find its own place without fighting with each other. So, there's no wonder why we have difficulty in our life when our life is based on a superficial idea of self or individual.

Before Buddhism some people practiced asceticism for their future good life: to be born in some place where they have a lot of enjoyment or a more perfect world. That is a kind of extended selfish practice. But our asceticism is not based on selfish desire. The purpose of our practice is to control our desires so that our desires will find their own place and act properly. We control our desire so that every one of us, without any difficulty, can extend our desire – that is our practice of asceticism.

The difference is that our asceticism is based on selflessness, while before Buddha, asceticism was based on a selfish desire or an extended selfish practice. When you set out to practice or study Buddhism, you have a lot of selfish ideas: "I study. I must know what it is," but when you want to listen to your teacher, there is not much selfish idea. That is the difference. This is a very important point. You should have a teacher to learn the truth in its pure form, without extending your selfish practice or understanding.

Study is also practice. It is not just intellectual. It is intellectual practice. It is not different from zazen because it is based on a non-selfish idea – it is not an extended selfish practice. We say you should practice zazen without a "gaining idea" – without a selfish idea. When you just sit because you are told to sit, only because that is Buddha's way, then you have not much of a selfish idea in your practice. When you eliminate the selfish idea from your practice, that is actually non-selfish practice – the true way of practicing truth.

So, instead of putting emphasis on Soto way, or Rinzai way, or Tendai way, we put emphasis on nothingness. Everything comes from nothing, and our way will be extended forever, limitlessly. That is how we study Buddhism.

Our desire based on a selfish idea is not acceptable. We cannot accept that kind of desire. But when our desire is unselfish, that is how we extend our way. That is the difference between asceticism in pre-Buddhist practice and our asceticism. Our way is different. The way to control our desire looks like it is the same, but actually it is completely different. This is the most important point.

To extend our desire is to be strict with ourselves. Without being strict with ourselves, we cannot do anything, because that will be the wrong practice. First of all, we should reflect on our practice. And before we say something we should reflect on ourselves. This is a very, very important point. You should not rely on some teaching, but you should reflect on yourself, and polish up yourself, and get rid of your selfish idea as much as you can. Even though you attained a wonderful enlightenment, if you forget to polish yourself, that enlightenment will not work. That is not real enlightenment.

When we realize ourselves, and after reflecting on ourselves, we are able to see "things as it is," then whatever thought we have is acceptable: "Capitalism is all right. Communism is all right. Nothing wrong with it." But when our understanding is based on a selfish idea, and when we try to force our opinion to others, without reflecting on our way, and when you attach to your own idea, rejecting other's idea, then your effort will end in a dead end. After all, you will fight with others, that's all, and both you and others will be hurt. You cannot survive anymore because you lose your true background.

When you think "there is nothing wrong with extending my desire" then if someone says you should control your desire, then you will feel bad – you will feel some restriction. That is "control" in its ordinary sense. But when you reflect on your desire and understand that your desire is pretty selfish, then naturally you will limit your desire to some extent. That is not control. That is the way desire should be. There is a big difference. Do you understand?

The point is, whatever the desire is, it is necessary to control. It should be under control. The reason we should control our desire is that the desire we have right now, in this moment, is not a perfect desire. More or less, our desire is a selfish desire. So, the only desire that is complete is Buddha's desire. We should know that. Buddha's desire is not some desire that we have actually right now. All the desires we feel we have are actually limited desires, not perfect desire. We should know that. When we don't know that, we will get into trouble. That is what I mean. The only perfect desire belongs to Buddha: the perfect one that include everything. Whatever Buddha does, it is all right, because Buddha is just one whole being. For Buddha there is no friend or no enemy. What exists is Buddha. So, for Buddha it is all right, but for

each one of us, which is a part of Buddha, it is necessary to accommodate our desire. If I desire much, I should ask if I may extend my desire a little bit more or not.

“Human nature,” may be understood in two ways. In comparison to buddha-nature, we say human nature in its humble sense and humble attitude. But, when most people say human nature, they may think there is nothing wrong with having human nature for a human being. So, they say “I can do whatever I like!” That is another kind of understanding of human nature. We should know that when we understand human nature in its more humble way, in comparison to perfect nature, then human nature makes sense. That is what we mean by human nature.

You should not interpret the same words always in the same way. This is how we study Buddhism. If we always interpret the same word in the same way, that is a mistake. So, we must constantly open our eyes, open our mind, and see the situation. That is the point.