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The Only Desire That is Complete is Buddha's Desire

by Suzuki Roshi

Our way is not asceticism. If you read our precepts literally, it looks like there is no difference, but what we mean is completely different. Tonight I want to talk about this difference. There must be some reason why so many people come to Zen Center to practice Zen and to study Zen.

Our civilization has already come to a dead end. You realize you cannot go any further, and you may come to Zen Center to find out some way to go. The foundation of our culture is individualism; individualism is based on the idea of self. From the time of the Renaissance we awoke our human nature, and we started to put emphasis on our human nature rather than "divine" nature or "holy" nature. We wanted to express our human nature as much as possible. So holy nature or Buddha nature was replaced with human nature. This is the starting point of our mistake. Whatever the thought may be: communism, capitalism, or individualism, these thoughts are based on individual right or individual power—supremacy of the individual.

For instance, capitalism seeks freedom of desire and communism puts emphasis on equality. Equality and freedom are not compatible. You want to

Suzuki Roshi at Tassajara





Zen Center friend Jakusho Bill Kwong, third from left, attended a Zen teachers' meeting with the Dalai Lama at Dharamsala last spring.

extend your desire as much as you can. If you want to extend your desire freely, limitlessly, you cannot divide things equally. We tell ourselves, "We should be free to extend our desire, possess things as much as we can, if we don't disturb people." But if you have too much when others do not have so much, you don't feel so good. Those ideas are not compatible.

This kind of individualism, freedom of desire, and equality of our rights are incompatible because our thought is based on a self-centered idea. When we say "equality," equality means equality of our human-power. When we say "desire," "limitless desire," "freedom of desire," it means my freedom or someone's freedom. There is no idea of a holy being or Buddha or God. There is no idea which will give some background, give an appropriate position to equality, desire, and freedom. To accommodate these thoughts without difficulty, it is necessary for us to postulate some big, fundamental idea of non-selfish desire or limitless boundary of material or place, which is not just material or spiritual. Something beyond material and spiritual is necessary. As long as our life is controlled by or based on a selfish idea, it is not possible for every thought to find its own place without them fighting each other. So there is no wonder why we have difficulty in our lives, when our life is based on just a superficial idea of self or the individual.

Asceticism before Buddhism put emphasis on a future good life—to be born in some place where they have lots of enjoyment or a more perfect world. That is a kind of extension of selfish practice. In Buddhism our motivation is not based on selfish desire. The purpose of our practice is to control our desire so that our desires find their own place. When you study Buddhism, you have a lot of selfish ideas: “I study. I must find out what it is.” The reason you have a teacher is to learn the truth in its pure form, without extending selfish practice or self-centered understanding. You think there is nothing wrong in extending your desires. That is the mistake. Something matters; something is wrong. There is something wrong if you just extend your desire without thinking or without reflecting or without observing.

When I say you should restrict your desire, I mean you should not extend your desire in its limited sense. For instance, “This is my desire.”—you limit the nature of desire already. Without limitation means to have a wider understanding of desire which you can extend forever. The only desire that is complete is Buddha’s desire. We should understand this. The only perfect desire belongs to Buddha—the perfect one, which includes everything. Whatever he does is all right, because he is just one whole being. For him there is no friend or enemy. What exists is Buddha himself.

We say you should practice zazen without a gaining idea—gaining idea is based on selfish idea. When you just sit because that is Buddha’s way, *only* because that is Buddha’s way, you have not much selfish idea in your practice. When you eliminate that selfish idea from your practice, that is actually non-selfish practice, the true way of practicing truth.

In the first chapter of Shobogenzo, Dogen Zenji refers to an interesting story. There was a priest called Gensoku, who was taking care of the temple of Hogen Zenji. He thought he understood Buddhism very well, so he didn’t ask any questions of the master for three years. At last, Hogen Zenji asked him, “It is already three years since you came here; why don’t you come and ask some question?”

“I studied for a long time under Seiho Zenji, and I think I understand what Buddhism is completely.”

“How do you understand Buddhism?”

“When my former master asked me about my understanding of the saying, ‘To study Buddhism is to seek for fire,’ I answered, ‘It is like a man who was born in the Year of Fire seeking fire.’ Buddha studies Buddha. That is my understanding of how we study Buddhism.”

“You don’t understand what Buddhism is at all.”

Gensoku was very upset and he went away. Before he had traveled long, he thought, "Hogen is a famous Zen master. There must be some reason why he said this. It may be a good chance for me to have a real understanding of Buddhism." So he went back and asked Hogen what was the way to study Buddhism. And the master said, "It is like a fire seeking for fire."

As Dogen Zenji explains, when Gensoku thought, "I understand Buddhism; my understanding is perfect," his understanding was not perfect. When he gave up his intellectual understanding, his limited understanding, to seek for the truth, his mind opened and he was enlightened. Dogen Zenji says, "If you understand like the acolyte and think that is the way to understand Buddhism, Buddhism will not continue so long. If we stick to some teaching, Buddhism cannot be transmitted to us. When we limitlessly extend our true nature instead of selfish, limited self, then Buddhism is there. When we forget all about the intellectual limitation of the teaching, then true Buddhism will be extended forever."

Even though Shobogenzo is perfect, there is a need to study Buddhism under some teacher. That is why we recite the sutra before we start the lecture: Shobogenzo is here, and I bow to Shobogenzo; I study Shobogenzo with you. If I say I know something, that is wrong. The extended practice of bowing to the Shobogenzo is how I speak about it and how you listen to it. Confidence is not in some *thing*, but is something which you can extend forever. Something which comes from selflessness—the base, the foundation of all teaching. 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.

Without being strict with ourselves we cannot do anything. We should reflect on our practice; 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 yourself and get rid of selfish idea as much as you can. Even though you attain wonderful enlightenment, if you forget to polish yourself, that enlightenment will not work.

When we realize ourselves and we are able to see "things as it is," whatever the thought may be, it is acceptable. Capitalism is all right; communism is all right. When our understanding is based on a selfish idea and when we try to force our opinion on others without reflecting on our way, our effort will come to a dead end. You will fight with others, that's all. You cannot survive because you lose your background, your true background.

Constantly we must open our eyes, open our minds, and see the situation. That is the point. Okay? Thank you very much.