

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (2) **"EARTHLY DESIRES ARE ENLIGHTENMENT":** **TAKING CONTROL OF OUR LIVES**

AS THE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR of politicians surges to the forefront of public debate, two contrasting undercurrents of American thinking rise into view. One side tells us to suppress desires because they are nothing but trouble—the suppression or even denial of desire should be celebrated as a sign of virtue. Meanwhile, the other tells us that human desire is natural (and good!); that we should trust our feelings and desires, and do whatever they move us to do, so long as we do not infringe on the rights of others. Experience, however, tells us that neither the suppression of nor abandonment to desires leads to satisfaction in life. Then how do we live with the reality of our abundant desires and still become happy and fulfilled?

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism helps shed light on this issue through the concept called "earthly desires are enlightenment." The original term in Japanese is *bon'no soku bodai*. The Japanese word *bon'no* derives from the Chinese interpretation of the Sanskrit word *klisa* (or *klesa*), which means defilement, pain, affliction, distress, evil passion, moral depravity, worry, trouble, infection or contamination. The Chinese interpretation also implies delusions or temptations arising from passions or ignorance that disturb and distress the mind. The Japanese word *soku* means to be immediately present or to be the same as. And finally the Japanese word *bodai* is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *bodhi*, which means knowledge, understanding, perfect wisdom or the enlightened mind. Put simply, this Buddhist concept tells us that our desires and suffering—all that torments our mind—can be the source of wisdom and happiness.

On the surface, however, this concept is contradictory. Our desires often cause delusion and suffering, which are the exact opposite of wisdom and happiness. In this sense, defining desires as an obstacle to enlightenment, rather than as enlightenment, seems more reasonable. So the logical extension of this line of thought will be that we have to eliminate our desires in order to attain enlightenment. This is exactly what was taught in the monastic Theravada Buddhism, which the populist Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle") Buddhists called Hinayana ("Lesser Vehicle"). Taking this view of desires to the extreme, Theravada Buddhism taught the annihilation of self through religious austerities. In other words, as long as we have a body and mind, we will continue to suffer from our desires. So we must reduce ourselves to nothing, or so those Theravada monks thought.

The Daishonin's Buddhism, however, explains that both "earthly desires" and "enlightenment" are intrinsic to our lives. So any intent to deny either is itself a delusion. In this regard, the Daishonin states: "Among those who wish to become Buddhas through attempting to eradicate earthly desires and shunning the lower nine worlds, there is not one ordinary person who actually attained enlightenment. This is because Buddhahood cannot exist apart from the lower nine worlds" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 403). The Daishonin defines "earthly desires" as "the obstacles to one's practice which arise from greed, anger, stupidity and the like" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 145). Earthly desires such as greed, anger, stupidity, arrogance and doubt have a negative influence upon our lives, causing delusion and suffering. The Daishonin teaches that since such earthly desires are ever-present, we must develop wisdom and inner strength so that they do not influence us negatively, and so that we may transform these functions into a driving force for our spiritual growth.

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The Daishonin stresses the importance of inner strength to control our “earthly desires” as he encourages us to “keep the three paths of earthly desires, karma and suffering in check” (GZ, 984). Desires give rise to actions, but when those desires are steeped in delusion, those actions create negative karma, which in turn leads to suffering, which gives rise to more desire, and so on.

THE key for us to develop inner strength to stem this negative cycle lies in our prayer to the Gohonzon, in our chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The Daishonin states: “Believe in this mandala [the Gohonzon] with all your heart. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?” (MW-1, 119). Though this was written to the parents of a child suffering from a physical illness, “sickness” can be broadly interpreted as earthly desires or all that causes spiritual or physical anguish such as problems with health, relationships, family harmony, money or career. As long as we firmly believe in the Gohonzon and continue to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, no suffering or hardship can be an obstacle to our happiness. With a powerful prayer to the Gohonzon, our earthly desires not only cease to cause suffering, but also become an impetus for our wisdom and happiness. The fact that they motivate us to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with a strong prayer in itself suggests the transformation of earthly desires into enlightenment. To illustrate this point, the Daishonin states: “Through burning the firewood of earthly desires, one can manifest the wisdom-fire of enlightenment” (GZ, 710).

Because we have earthly desires, that is, suffering and delusion, we pray to the Gohonzon. Our hardships are often our greatest motivation to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. When we make a determination that our desires and hardships are yet another opportunity to strengthen our faith and our life, they no longer function as earthly desires that torment us.

Through our prayer we can sublimate our base desires into noble and creative causes. Through the Buddhist practice, an egoist whose only concern in life is to gain material wealth can change into a person of magnanimity who gladly uses wealth for the sake of others’ peace and happiness. Sexual desires can be destructive. Shakespeare writes about them as: perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame, /Savage, extreme, rude cruel, not to trust (Sonnet 129).

Passion, however, if imbued with wisdom, can become an impetus for our affectionate expression of humanity as the Daishonin states: “Even during the physical union of man and woman, when one chants Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, then earthly desires are enlightenment and the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana” (MW-2, 200).

We cannot avoid our passions. But whether, when they arise, we act wisely and compassionately, or foolishly and selfishly, may determine happiness or suffering in life. The spirit to use whatever desires arise as fuel or “firewood” to empower our prayer to the Gohonzon and thus to bring forth wisdom, is the key to making the principle that “earthly desires are enlightenment” a reality. If we leave the “firewood of earthly desires” alone, they will simply remain a source of suffering. Only when we ignite the firewood with the spark of faith in the Gohonzon, can we bring forth a bright flame of wisdom and happiness from within. Through the concept that “earthly desires are enlightenment” the Daishonin teaches us how to create the greatest possible value from our natural desires and suffering, while neither denying them nor abandoning ourselves to them. This Buddhist principle thus offers us a new approach to the problem of human desire—one that is neither self-denying nor hedonistic.

Viewed from the standpoint of delusion—desire does not “equal” enlightenment. But

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viewed from the standpoint of enlightenment itself, earthly desires are indeed enlightenment. This is because a Buddha experiences desires while maintaining full control of them, always bringing forth their enlightened quality to the fullest benefit of self and others. □

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