

## **BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE DESIRES AND ENLIGHTENMENT**

People encountering Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism for the first time are often surprised by the stance taken toward desire that seems to contradict prevailing images of Buddhism. For many, Buddhism is associated with asceticism, and indeed there are many schools and traditions that stress the need to eliminate desire and sever all attachments.

Needless to say, a life controlled by desires is miserable. In Buddhist scriptures, such a way of life is symbolized by "hungry demons" with giant heads and huge mouths, but narrow, constricted throats that make real satisfaction unattainable. The deliberate horror of these images grew from Shakyamuni Buddha's sense of the need to shock people from their attachment to things—including our physical existence—that will eventually change and be lost to us. Real happiness does not lie here, he sought to tell them.

The deeply ingrained tendencies of attachments and desire are often referred to by the English translation "earthly desires." However, since they also include hatred, arrogance, distrust and fear, the translation "deluded impulses" may in some cases be more appropriate.

But can such desires and attachments really be eliminated? Attachments are, after all, natural human feelings, and desires are a vital and necessary aspect of life. The desire, for example, to protect oneself and one's loved ones has been the inspiration for a wide range of advances—from the creation of supportive social groupings to the development of housing and heating. Likewise, the desire to understand humanity's place in the cosmos has driven the development of philosophy, literature and religious thought. Desires are integral to who we are and who we seek to become.

In this sense, the elimination of all desire is neither possible nor, in fact, desirable. Were we to completely rid ourselves of desire, we would end up undermining our individual and collective will to live.

The teachings of Nichiren Daishonin thus stress the transformation, rather than the elimination, of desire. Desires and attachments are seen as fueling the quest for enlightenment. As he is recorded as teaching: "Now Nichiren and others who chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo...burn the firewood of earthly desires and behold the fire of enlightened wisdom...."

In the same vein, the Universal Worthy Sutra states: "Even without extinguishing their earthly desires or denying the five desires, they can purify all of their senses and eradicate all of their misdeeds."

Nichiren Daishonin's approach has the effect of popularizing, humanizing and democratizing Buddhism. In other words, by making the aspirations, dreams and frustrations of daily life the "fuel" for the process of enlightenment, the Daishonin opens the path of Buddhist practice to those who had traditionally been excluded by the demands of a meditative withdrawal from the world, those, for example, who wish to continue playing an active role in the world.

It is thus not a coincidence that this attitude toward desires should be central to the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, with its emphasis on the role of lay practitioners. For people living in the midst of ever-changing, stressful realities, those challenges are a far more effective spur to committed Buddhist practice than an abstract goal of "enlightenment" through severing of all desires and attachments.

Overcoming problems, realizing long-cherished goals and dreams—this is the stuff of daily life from which we derive our sense of accomplishment and happiness. SGI President Ikeda has emphasized the importance not of severing our attachments, but of understanding and, ultimately, using them.

Often the faith experiences of SGI members describe events and changes that seem at first glance to be focused on the external, material side of life. But such “benefits” are only part of the story. Buddhism divides the benefits of practice into the “conspicuous” and the “inconspicuous.” The new job, the conquest of illness, the successful marriage and so on are not separate from a deep, often painstaking process of self-reflection and inner-driven transformation. And the degree of motivation generated by desires can lend an intensity to our practice that ultimately reaps spiritual rewards. “Earthly desires are enlightenment” is a key tenet of Nichiren Buddhism. Through our Buddhist practice, even the most mundane, deluded impulse can be transformed into something broader and more noble, and our desires quite naturally develop from self-focused ones to broader ones concerning our families, friends, communities and, ultimately, the whole world.

In this way, the nature of desire is steadily transformed—from material and physical desires to the more spiritually oriented desire to live the most fulfilling kind of life.

As SGI President Ikeda says: “I believe in the existence of another kind of human desire: I call it the basic desire, and I believe that it is the force that actively propels all other human desires in the direction of creativity. It is the source of all impelling energy inherent in life; it is also the longing to unite one’s life with the life of the universe and to draw vital energy from the universe.”

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