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## Zen is not AN INTEREST

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*Tony Somlai*

Many American newspapers contain a weekly section that carries local interests in the community. This section will often catalogue numerous columns dedicated to social clubs, political causes, self-help groups, workshops, and a whole host of appealing activities. Americans expect to have this vast array of fascinations from which to choose. They live in a cultural supermarket of interests. They frenetically run from one interest to the next, neatly filling in a calendar already crowded with washing clothes, cleaning the house and taking the cat to the veterinarian. In these bustling, scheduled lives they find much to do and little time to do it.

Human beings chase after their interests with a frenzy. They are always running from one interest to another. It may be a group meeting for bird watchers, a bowling night, but it is a constant escape from one arousing activity to the next. Groucho Marx best described this frenetic life of interests with the statement, “Hello, I must be going.” Human beings fill their lives with the idea that something very important is going on here. They are constantly saying hello when they mean they must be going. The state of Wisconsin recently became lost in an interest that almost closed the state down, the Green Bay Packers football team. For the past six weeks there has been little else in the news other than one interest story after another about this team. Even reports of shootings on the evening news had a tie-in to whether the robbers were wearing Packer green and gold jackets. Everywhere people could only talk about this interest, only this game, Super Bowl parties, and the latest news about the team. Now this is interesting, because it is a game played by twenty-two grown adult males who are fighting over an oblong-shaped pig rendering before millions of people. Not good, not bad, just another interest to fill our busy lives.

For many people, this active pursuing of interests provides an illusion of control. They hold to the false belief that it is an inalienable right to pursue happiness through another self-involved interesting activity. For some Zen students practice is another “interesting activity” added to a growing list of appealing attractions and amusement. Practice is scheduled around softball, the gardening club, the writer’s group, and a horde of events that occupy space and give apparent meaning to a catalogued existence. Many of these interests focus on the distractions created by desire (food, sex, money, fame, sleep.) This draws human beings further away from what is immediately in front of them. This cycle of “interests” continues until big suffering appears, then it’s not interesting anymore, then it becomes too real.

It was also this way for the Buddha. He was wealthy, had many interests, was an expert in all of them, and had a very, very good situation. Good fortune had been with him until one day he saw old age, sickness, and death.

Our lives are not different from the Buddha's. Eventually, no matter how many interests we distract ourselves with, we come back to the very same thing that he saw: death, old age, illness, suffering. So one day the Buddha simply said no more interests, no more running, no more distractions, no more playing games in a dream. He let go of interests, sat under a tree and simply asked, "What am I?"

A life filled with one interest after another can, for a while, keep us falsely believing that old age, sickness, and death will always somehow be someone else's problem and separate from this life. These interests provide distractions that cloud clarity and confuse our direction. Then BAM—the loss of a job, body sickness, death of a loved one, the end of a relationship shakes the very foundation of this comfortable life of interests. It is this sudden "hit" of suffering that points to the immediacy of the Buddha's words that this life is very short and needs to be investigated deeply.

The idea of "interests" is such an imbedded cultural norm that one can imagine the historical Buddha coming back to modern America to give a talk and be introduced with, "Good evening and welcome to the weekly great religions forum. I'm happy to welcome our guest speaker for this evening, the historical Buddha, who has areas of interest in enlightenment, suffering, desire, anger, and ignorance." The bodhisattva vow of helping all beings and cutting off the root causes of suffering is trivialized by the strong attachment to our interests.

There is nothing wrong or inherently bad about interests or activities. Bridge clubs do not inherently send this universe to hell. But most people use these interests to get something, to distract themselves from this suffering world. They may want a good feeling, some peace, perhaps a comfortable relationship with other "nice" people. But it's important to ask, "What is the direction of this interest?" If it points to a together action that helps attain one's true nature and help all beings then you understand the direction of this interest. An interest intended to only create a good feeling, to distract from suffering, will always change



*Tony Somlai, Dae Kwang Zen Master, and Linda Somlai  
at the Original Root Zen Center.*

into more sadness and more suffering. Of course that is the time when most people begin searching for a new interest, something else that will make them happy. These types of interests will only create an opposite world with a direction that is not clear and always attached to another activity, feeling, or thing. It will continue the cycle of interests that lead to more suffering.

Recently, Dae Kwang Zen Master was discussing how to help Zen students realize the importance of a consistent practice. His statement about this was quite strong and clear: "People cannot practice at their convenience." When bowing time comes, then go bow whether it is convenient or not. Practice and life cannot be compartmentalized, put into neat little categories or a list of interests. It all comes together in this moment.

The question and answers about this existence of suffering are not found "out there" in a quagmire of interests. Every teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen points to "what are you doing right now?" It is important to get "interested" in the big question of "What am I? Don't know." Then suffering will disappear and complete happiness will appear for all beings. We practice so that our center becomes strong and our true job becomes clear, no matter what our interests. In that moment when Zen is no longer another interest, our practice and life come together and then we can do something.

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