

The Five Desires: Living Wisely with Ourselves

Editor's note: Periodically we've had a series of topical articles about fundamental Buddhist principles. For this issue, we've asked the European teachers to offer their views on the five desires: money, sex, fame, food, and sleep. Desire, at its root, is our own original nature. Desires point to essential elements of our lives. Clinging to desire, we seduce and delude ourselves. Seeing into desire clearly is seeing into our nature clearly, and living wisely with these essential components of our lives. We present these articles to offer guidance in how we participate with our own humanity.

Desire for Money: You Can Change Your Wanting-Karma

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Money and sex are like
a spiteful snake.

Put your concern
with them far away.

—Zen Master Seung Sahn,
Temple Rules

Money does not stink.
—Latin saying

In Buddhism we know that human beings have some desires that hinder and obscure their lives. Those desires are very intelligent, and they often appear as important values. Buddha spoke about five main human desires: money, sex, sleep, food and fame.

I want to say something controversial. Our late teacher, Zen Master Wu Bong, said one day that all those five desires, if digested, will become our treasures. That means originally that those things are not good, not bad. It's only human attachment and wanting more and more that makes them poison. If humans could use all those five desires correctly, then they wouldn't be a problem.

Here is an example about how the desire for money and using money correctly changes the value of the money.

Since ancient times, people understood that money may be a reason for murder, theft, war, hate, jealousy, low or high self-esteem, competition, suicide, and so forth. These circumstances and feelings associated with money can lead to the conclusion that money is something bad, in the same way that sex, fame and other desires may be seen as bad. From that perspective, it would be better if people—especially those who choose the spiritual life—didn't even touch money.

There is a famous story about a monk who was much respected in his small community. People often visited him to get advice. One day, however, the monk changed

his behavior. He started to ask for money from everyone who came to his place. After some time, the people became unhappy. It was unpleasant for them to experience greed from this monk, but they still needed his advice.

Then winter came, along with much severe weather. Near the end of winter, heavy rains came that lasted for a month. There was not enough food, not enough clothing, and everywhere was cold and wet. The greedy monk asked a senior person from the community to come have a talk. Then he gave him all the money he had collected. He instructed the person to buy food, clothes and wood for everyone in the community. All the people were overjoyed. But they also felt ashamed. The whole community realized the reason for the monk's greed, but they still asked him for more explanation. After they apologized to him, he told them that a long time ago during meditation, he had a feeling about the future of this community, about the flood and the hunger, so he decided to collect money.

People can deal with money in different ways. Some people collect money for pleasure, to possess things and to get a special feeling from owning them. It possibly gives them a feeling that there is something permanent in their life. Other people want money to get other things: fame, sex, good food, a lofty position, nice companions, a good home, or even many good places to live and visit, traveling, possessing great pieces of art, experiencing situations people dream of, being beautiful. The list of those things becomes longer and longer as time passes, generation after generation, and there is always more to acquire. There is nothing inherently wrong with all these things, but people mostly want them to forget about both their own emptiness and the human responsibility around life and death.

One other side of money and our desires is that many times, those desires obscure the very beauty and treasure of this moment. This is a story about that.

Ryokan, a Zen master, lived the simplest kind of

life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal.

Ryokan returned and caught him. "You may have come a long way to visit me," he told the prowler, "and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift."

The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away.

Ryokan sat naked, watching the moon. "Poor fellow," he mused, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."¹

There is another story about a man who wanted the money to buy a house in the most expensive place, somewhere like London or New York. He was working hard and also put some money into the lottery. He was always thinking, "If I get a house in the most expensive area then I will feel good." Finally, he won the lottery and he could buy a house in the most expensive area, where he was able to live with the most wealthy people. He was very happy.

After he moved to his new home, he decided to go for a walk to see the neighborhood. As he was walking and looking around, he realized that his home was small, and all the other houses looked better than his. He was upset and devastated. He was thinking only about how his house was so small, and how all houses around it were better.

This is a very sad story, about how having money and things cannot fill you up, and instead of giving happiness, it only makes one feel even more empty, even more hungry. He lost the sense of his life completely. It was because his mind was so hungry.

Is there any way to cure the desire for money, sex, food, sleep, fame and hunger?

Zen Master Seung Sahn said,

We can save money and send food over to Africa and India; that's OK. But many problems will remain. Taking away the primary cause is very important. It's like a game of pool. You hit the ball

directly into the pocket, and that's one ball in the pocket. But the high-class technique is to hit this ball and that ball and other balls, so that all of them go into the pockets. Zen-style action is like that; we can give money to help hungry people, but if we hit people's hungry minds, we can help change their minds so that they can help their own country. The high-class technique is to help people help themselves.²

The last story I want to tell is about Zen Master Seung Sahn's advice given to a student who was complaining that it was impossible for him to focus during meditation. He said, "When I sit, I always think about a few things: money, sex, a good job and again, money, sex and a good job. I suffer a lot. How can I stop?"

Dae Soen Sa Nim said, "You must do a thousand bows every day for a hundred days."

The student continued complaining, "I don't need more suffering. Why do I have to suffer even more?"

Zen Master Seung Sahn answered, "This suffering will help you to get rid of your constant thinking, and possibly you can change your wanting-karma."

After a hundred days, the student started a relationship with a nice girlfriend, got a new job and some money. Dae Soen Sa Nim used to say that it is better to do something (he meant strong practice) if you want something, rather than thinking about it endlessly. By doing something, then possibly we can start correct Zen practice. Then we can move from "for me" to "not for me;" beyond merely "getting something" to "then what?" As Zen Master Wu Bong taught, when we do that, then the five desires truly become our treasures.

Notes

1. From *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, compiled by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 32.

2. Zen Master Seung Sahn, from a dharma talk given in the United States on March 1, 1985. <http://www.kwanumzen.org/?teaching=how-can-sitting-save-this-hungry-world>

Desire for Sex: Our Breeding Season Lasts All Year Long

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In the Temple Rules, Zen Master Seung Sahn writes: "Money and sex are like a spiteful snake. Put your concern with them far away."

This is a controversial sentence. There are often questions about it during dharma talks.

Sexuality is an important element of our human body and psyche. How can we put our concern with it far away?

In most cultures, sex has been surrounded by regulations and restrictions. Everywhere in the world, you can go to jail because of sexual behaviors that are considered wrong. Just what exactly is considered wrong differs between countries.

Why is sex considered so dangerous? Probably because