

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

it's the strongest desire we have, the most difficult to control and therefore capable of creating lots of suffering.

I live in a village where there are a lot of cats. Every year in February and March, in their breeding season, I can see male cats walking around that are dirty, skinny, bleeding from their wounds, stressed and looking miserable. Maybe they have some short moments of pleasure, but most of the time they have to chase, run, fight and struggle. When the breeding season is over, they return to normal life, in which they have time for eating, washing and grooming themselves, and playing. And they look definitely much happier. Only the cats who have been castrated show no interest in the breeding rituals and avoid all of its pain and stress. They don't seem to be sorry that they are missing something important, and they live approximately twice as long.

I don't think human beings are much different from cats, except our breeding season lasts all year long. Does this mean that if we all get ourselves castrated then this world would become a happier place? I don't know, and I hope we will not need to find out. Desire for sex is part of our lives. It is present in our culture, in social life, even on spiritual paths.

One of my favorite writers, Terry Pratchett, used to make a lot of fun of spirituality, and Zen in particular. He once wrote something I'll try and recap from memory: *What would be the point of being a hermit who, after years of meditating and renouncing sex had attained great spiritual powers, if there were no young women passing by the meditation cave from time to time, who would see you and say "Ooooh . . ."*?

Because we are human, there always exists the potential for sexual attraction between us. I even heard people say that the monks and nuns who vowed to live in celibacy are actually very sexy. Naturally, that's not what they intend, but it's present. So what can you do about it?

Speaking of celibacy, I'm not a monk and never wanted

to be one, so I don't know how it works in their lives, and what they do about sexual desire. Maybe one of them will write something about it here one day. But some believe that celibacy is essential for making progress on a spiritual path. Still, what is the relationship between celibacy, sexual desire and spiritual practice?

I believe it's good for each of us to decide what we want to do with our desire for sex and how we are going to control it. Each of us has to face this decision, whether we want to or not. Some pretend they don't have that ability or that there is nothing to decide. Some of us embrace this as a decision, not only to make spiritual progress, but also to live a happy life. Monastic vows are one such way to make a decision. Another is marriage, and it works for me. But even within these two choices, we still have to decide how to relate to our sexuality. There are also other ways that may work for other people. The key point, in my opinion, is to be clear about it and honest with ourselves and with others: "Am I potentially available for sex, or not?" And that's not easy, because when playing with our desire for sex, and others' desires too, this "maybe, who knows?" approach seems much more attractive. Thus, it is more seductive to pretend we aren't making a choice and don't bear responsibility.

So, keeping monastic vows, marriage vows or any other kind of vow is not enough. Moment to moment, mindfulness is necessary, not only with keeping celibacy or being true to your wife/husband/girlfriend/boyfriend/whatever, but with all your speech and actions, because our sexuality is always present. Fighting it makes no sense to me, because if we do, it will fight back and finally can take control of us. Keeping this spiteful snake far away is not a good idea to me, either. You may forget it's there and one day you may step on it. I'd rather see it for what it is and act with understanding, clarity and compassion toward ourselves and others.

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Desire for Fame: Unsurpassed Humility

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What is wrong with fame? Nothing at all! Like everything in the universe, it is not good, not bad. A strong voice makes a strong echo. That's all. In the case where our actions are beneficent, it can be natural feedback from the world that we have done some-

thing valuable, that our contribution to society is appreciated, that people see us as somebody who can enrich

human culture in some specific way. As long as our intention to help this world in the best way we can is pure and sincere, fame is only a by-product of our activity. But the problem is that our "I, my, me" mind wants to make that its business. That's the birth of ignorance and distortion. This kind of mind produces constant desire, which poisons our original clarity and makes us blind. Because this "I, my, me" is by nature something unreal and empty, it needs constant approval as food to exist, even at the cost of other beings. It is like a hungry ghost that never