

IDEAL AND REALITY

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When we talk about ethical precepts, we have to explain how Buddhists understand our original nature. Our understanding is different from the idea that human nature is sinful. As Buddhists, we say that Buddha nature is universal to everyone, and that it is more good than sinful. Our complete understanding is that in its ultimate sense our nature is neither good nor bad, but in the usual sense we consider our nature to be more good than bad.

The Buddhist understanding is that when we practice in an inappropriate way, the result is the accumulation of karma, personal or collective, which is

a power that then drives us in the wrong direction. This is how Buddhists see sin or karma.

Karma means “activity,” but it is not just about what we ourselves do; it is something more complex and deeper in us than that. On one hand, karma is accumulated by the individual, and on the other hand, it is collective, because it is not just created by this body but also by our ancestors and from our beginningless life.

When we understand sin or karma in this way, we see that it is rather difficult to solve the problem of karma just through our decision to do so. It is not that easy.

On this point I think there is some similarity between the Christian idea of sin and our idea of karma, because both are inevitable and almost impossible to get out of. To finally get out of karma is to practice with no idea of good or bad, possible or impossible. In our practice we should improve ourselves little by little. Even if you attain enlightenment in some sense, you cannot change your karma as long as you live. So we have a long way to go.

Because of the impossibility of solving our problem of karma, we have the Bodhisattva vows: “Even though our desires are innumerable, we vow to put an end to them. Even though our way is unattainable, we vow to attain it.” These are the vows we should have forever. When we have them, our Buddhist way is alive. If Buddhism were an attainable teaching, then you would attain it, and that would be all; there would be no more Buddhism and no more need

to study Buddhism. But, fortunately, it is unattainable, so we have to continually strive to attain it.

Here again we have a paradox: we should attain it, but it is unattainable. How to solve this problem is to practice our way day by day, moment after moment. To live in each moment is the answer. When we are satisfied with our attainment, moment after moment, there we have composure in our life. We have satisfaction.

So in our way there is no idea of complete success or complete enlightenment, yet we are aiming for it. We have some ideals, but we know that ideals are not something we can reach completely. Ideal is ideal and reality is reality. We should have both the reality and the ideal, or else we cannot do anything. Both ideal and reality help our practice, so we should not treat either one as something desirable or undesirable. We accept ideal as ideal and reality as reality.

Even though our practice is not perfect, we accept it without rejecting our ideal. We do this by living in each moment, including the reality and the ideal, including everything. There is no other way to be satisfied with what we have at each moment. That is our approach to the ideal.

We understand Buddha as the ideal, as the perfect one, and at the same time we understand him as a human being. Although we have the ideal, there is no need for us to be bound by the ideal.

In Soto Zen practice we do not put too much emphasis on enlightenment. When we say enlightenment, we mean something perfect, a perfect stage you will attain. But actually, that is not possible as long as you experience it in terms of a good or bad stage, a high or low stage. That is not perfect enlightenment. So, we do not expect anything perfect, and we do not reject it. The ideal is ideal and reality is reality, and in our practice we have to have both sides.