

## A Lesson from the Commonplace

Sen Soshitsu XV

In the *Genryu Chawa*, a treatise on chanoyu written by the tea master Yabunouchi Chikushin (1678-1745), Sen Rikyu (1522-1591) is said to have noted that *sabi*, an elusive kind of elegance born out of deprivation and poverty, is good, but that striving to achieve *sabi* is not. In other words, true *sabi* is born out of one's lifestyle as it is; it is not the product of calculation and study. Certainly *sabi* and striving to achieve *sabi* are related, much like a work of art is related to its copy, but the two are worlds apart in meaning and consequence.

Intellectually and aesthetically, an original work of art is preferable to a copy, however well the copy succeeds in reproducing the original. But problems arise once one becomes accustomed to a copy. Even knowing full well that it is not "real," those subtle characteristics that distinguish it from the original eventually become so indistinct that only a constant, conscious effort to keep them clearly separated in one's mind will prevent one from inadvertently mistaking one for the other. But no matter how blurred the distinctions, in the final analysis copies will always pale when compared with the original work of art, because a work of art is the end product of a quintessentially natural process, whereas a copy is the product of an utterly artificial process. This is true with all things.

The Chinese Zen patriarch Sengcan (Sosan, d. 606) wrote in his philosophical poem *Xin Xin Ming* (*Shinjinmei*) that "attaining the Way is without difficulty. Simply avoid picking and choosing." Though these words may seem elusive, they point to the natural way, the obvious way—in a sense, to the commonplace. We are all born with a natural inclination toward this way. But, ignorant of its existence and, consequently, our natural state, we compete—for status, for possessions, for influence, for spiritual attainment, for love—and pick and choose. Victims of our passions, we are emotionally and spiritually caught up in the tangles of likes and dislikes. So wrapped up are we in ourselves, it seems that the world never goes as it should and impermanence, pain, and suffering seem to be the only ways it knows. In the words of the famous Japanese Zen priest Dogen (1200-1253), "Loving the flowers, they wither; hating the weeds, they flourish." It is no wonder that all sorts of problems arise, so far have we strayed from the natural Way.

There is a story about a man who called upon a wise Buddhist priest to ask him what he should do to be happy. The priest told him, "Always be grateful and live one day at a time." Coming away from the meeting a little perplexed, the man strove to live as the priest had advised. After some time he still didn't feel he was happy, so he decided to pay a second visit to the priest. Confronting the priest, he asked him why he was still denied happiness. This time the priest explained that the man was too attached to the idea of striving to be grateful and that he should go about it in a more natural manner. Hearing this, the man departed and tried very diligently to be more

natural about his endeavor. But still the man was without happiness, for he simply transferred his attachment from striving to be grateful to striving to be natural and, consequently, forgot about being grateful. Once we become attached to anything, anything at all, the attachment itself, the delusion that what we are doing is what we should be doing, hinders us from finding the Way.

The phrase *Hibi kore kojitsu*, which can be roughly translated as "Every day is a good day," is often heard among Zen adepts and chanoyu practitioners. It refers to the acceptance of the fact that the present is all there is—to an acceptance of the commonplace. This is the attitude of one who has achieved an advanced state of spiritual purity and innocence, having vanquished the demons of discrimination and attachment. For those of us who have yet to overcome these, simply living a life of daily concern for others and putting aside our own desires will head us toward this state. By not becoming attached to the ideal of a "good day" and by living for others in an enriching way, every day will be a good day, naturally. 