

Chasing Contentment

In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha describes the root of our suffering as attachment or craving¹ “The Buddha saw that the nature of the untrained mind is to crave pleasant experiences or to push unpleasant experiences away.¹” In our daily lives, this “optional suffering” can be described as wanting things to be different (not wanting what we have or wanting what we don’t have). More specific examples may be, “grasping for the ideal life partner or the ideal job, for success, money or power.¹”

The irony of this grasping is that it actually creates the suffering we are hoping to eliminate: whenever we desire or cling or try to hold onto any experience, we are creating the condition for suffering.

If we remain unaware, our cravings keep us caught. Our cravings can never be satisfied; and no matter how wonderful an experience is, it will come to an end, and then we will be faced with some desire again.¹

Have you ever noticed how you feel when you are grasping for things that you believe will make you happier? Do you ever notice feeling contracted (closed down to other options, bounded by our desires) or feeling of separation that may be amplified. Sometimes you may even find yourself feeling a victim to the object you desire, clinging to it for your happiness? For example, you might feel that unless you attain that object, you cannot be happy. Does this grasping actually serve your happiness?¹ Does this grasping actually serve your wellbeing?

Our attachments may manifest in different forms: attachment to pleasant experiences or objects; attachment to opinions and beliefs (unchanging, true and right, put down others, or not listen to those

with whom you don't agree); attachment to habitual ways of doing things, including rites and rituals (the *only* way or the *right* way); and attachment to a permanent perception of ourselves ("I"), as an unchanging being ¹

These attachments are really part of our illusion of control and our attempt to exert control over our all aspects of our lives including the experiences, and conditions.

In what way do you notice the tendency to get caught by attachment and instead find yourself chasing contentment, by seeking what you don't have or not wanting what you do have, becoming a victim of your beliefs or habits of doing things, or even your perception of yourself?

Recent Example

From *Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* by Elizabeth Gilbert²

"Around the time Elizabeth Gilbert turned thirty, she went through an early-onslaught midlife crisis. She had everything an educated, ambitious American woman was supposed to want—a husband, a house, a successful career. But instead of feeling happy and fulfilled, she was consumed with panic, grief, and confusion. She went through a divorce, a crushing depression, another failed love, and the eradication of everything she ever thought she was supposed to be."

http://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm?book_number=1921

In response, she takes a year of self-inquiry. "In order to give herself the time and space to find out who she really was and what she really wanted, she got rid of her belongings, quit her job, and undertook a yearlong journey around the world.

The subheading of the title is “One woman’s search for everything across Italy, India and Indonesia.” It starts out as a pursuit, a process of grasping:

She set out for one year to seek pleasure in Italy through food, language and its culture, to seek spiritual devotion in India at an Ashram, and to seek balance in Indonesia.

Here are a couple of relevant pieces of wisdom she learns along the way:

- 1) While in Italy, she learns to live in more in the moment. If she wants to eat gelato for breakfast, she does etc.

- 2) While at an ashram in India, a peer she had a conversation with a peer there: “I have searched frantically for contentment for so many years in so many ways, and all these acquisitions and accomplishments—they run you down in the end. Life, if you keep chasing it so hard, will drive you to death. ... At some point, as Richard keeps telling me, you gotta let go and sit still and allow contentment to come to you.” (p. 155)²
(Letting go of the illusion of *control*.)

Gilbert is inspired to become, as her guru advises her, “the scientist of [her] own inner experience. (p. 174)²

Later, while meditating in India, she admits:

“Why have I been chasing happiness my whole life when bliss was here the entire time?” (p. 200) And it is when she has the urgent thought “I want to hold onto this experience forever!” – that is when she started to tumble out of it, the “I want”.

3) Then, in Indonesia:

Elizabeth met Ketut, a ninth generation Indian medicine man, two years ago prior to this trip. She explained to him then that she wanted to learn to live in this world, and to enjoy its delights, but also to devote herself to God. He told her, "To find the balance that you want, you must keep your feet grounded so firmly on earth that it's like you have four legs, instead of two. That way, you can stay in the world. But you must stop looking at the world through your head. You must look through your heart instead. That way you will know God."²

Analogy

Training Dulce to stay within the boundaries of Cuesta park, where there is no fence. At first, I would run after her when she went outside the boundary. She would see me and go farther. I merely ended up chasing after her as we got farther and farther away from the dog park. Instead, what I needed to do was to stay in one place inside the boundaries of the dog park. When she would wander out of the boundary, I had to have the fortitude (and trust) to stay there and allow her to come back when she noticed that I wasn't within view. Even when other people informed me that she had left the dog park, I needed to stay where I was. Eventually, she did continue to come back and she learned to stay within the boundaries of the dog park.

Another Way

Ways to relieve suffering, to live without attachment – release conditions? Start by giving up the chase for contentment, stop exploring other lands, journeying to other worlds – away from yourself. Instead **be** right here, right now! Stop seeking and set your intention on being as you are ... explore that, take the journey inward.

1) *A Place to Sit*

By Kabir

*Don't go outside your house to see flowers.
My friend, don't bother with that excursion.
Inside your body there are flowers.
One flower has a thousand petals.
That will do for a place to sit.
Sitting there you will have a glimpse of beauty
Inside the body and out of it,
Before gardens and after gardens.*

2) To stay aware of this tendency, and to cultivate an alternative, in Metta (or LovingKindness) practice I always include an intention for happiness (my own and others) not based on conditions that I may seek: May I be happy with things as they are right now – no matter what the conditions.

3) Practice:

“Wanting” is at the core of what causes us suffering.
Wanting things to be different than they are right now.

Thich Nhat Hahn: Breathing in, arriving; Breathing out, being at home.

Quotes:

A quote from [Manish Champsee](#): "The happiest people don't have the best of everything, they just make the best of everything they have."

A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone.

[Henry David Thoreau](#)

References:

1. **The Beginner's Guide to Insight Meditation by Arinna Weisman and Jean Smith (2001), New York: Bell Tower**
2. **Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia by Elizabeth Gilbert (2007), Penguin**

STRIPPING

Strip off the shoes and pantyhose,
the grown-up drag. Undo

those soft white arms and their blond down,
moss made of light,

Wash away the sour working sweat,
fatigue of heels and fluorescent lights.

Unhook that tired bra, unclench the feet
with their worn-out travelogues,

knees, complaining in their bone cradles,
the drooling sex, and the shamed

belly, pouched like a stubborn mountain.
Release the years in a shower of moths shaken free

from an old sweater so full of holes
you can see through to the skin.

Strip off the skin. Let it hang
over a chair the way it has hung

from your body lately, exhausted,
confessing to years of experience.

Strip away experience, that false umbrella
blocking only the sun.

Strip your mind of these words, clods
of dirt kicked up by donkey mind, clouds

that will soon pass. Let the clang of language die
in your mouth. Let your overworked tongue

hang, innocent and dumb
as tomorrow morning. No one owns it yet,

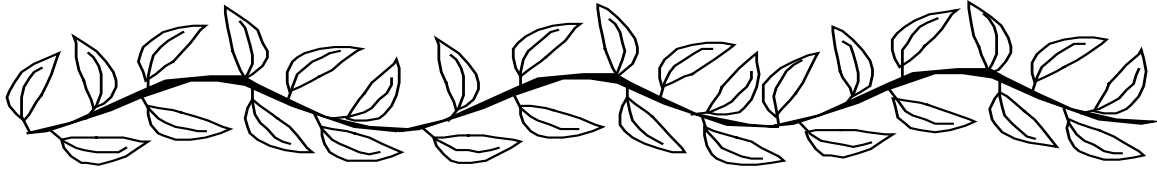
that paper mindress of time, meant
to be cast off after one wearing.

I want to strip. It's the jewel
at the center I seek; let me be oyster, hoarding pearl.

Let me be coal, sheltering diamond.
Though in my heart of hearts I am afraid

I may be onion, each white circle
of stinky tears hiding another

exactly like it. Or rose:
whose petals *are* her everything.



Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart

And try to love the questions themselves

Like locked rooms and like books that are written in
a very foreign tongue

Do not seek for the answers that cannot be given

For you would not be able to live them

And the point is to live everything

Live the questions now

And perhaps without knowing it

You will live along some day into the answers

Rainer Maria Rilke