

What Is Enough?

by Lisa Hoffman

Have you ever been so hungry for a relationship that when you go to a party you only notice the people who seem like potential partners? Or have you been so attached to a potential job that you *knew* your life would be over if it didn't become yours? Such is the power of craving, the continual siren song in our lives.

A friend of mine recently fell hard for a man she barely knew, deciding he was made for her. Living 300 miles apart, they shared several long weekends, and exchanged passionate e-mails and phone calls.

She started planning how they could be together. Then he began disappearing for a week at a time, blaming work and accusing her of being demanding. One day he would be incredibly romantic, the next vague and remote. My friend became frantic, losing sleep, analyzing their conversations, and urgently trying to pull him closer.

He broke up with her over the phone on the day he was to visit her. Now she is working through her tears, realizing that there never really was a relationship. Longing kept her eyes closed to the reality that was happening and created the reality she desired.

"I'm amazed I could ignore all the warning signs," she said with a rueful laugh. "He's a decent guy – smart, creative, can be really romantic. But he is also judgmental, not all that generous, and rather distant. How could that ever have worked for me?"

The First Noble Truth simply recognizes that in life there is suffering. The Second reveals the cause of suffering as attachment, or craving. When I told her I was working on an article about the Buddha's Second Noble Truth, she encouraged me to use her story.

My friend's story is an obvious example of the link between craving and suffering. Everyone I know has such stories. Attachment to things and the havoc it wreaks can also be especially dramatic. How many people do you know who are in deep debt because of this obsession? Our culture lives the Second Noble Truth through our addiction to owning the new best thing.

Most craving, though, is pretty subtle.

A little attention reveals life is an attachment parade. A few examples of what I want on a daily basis: I want to sleep later, I want people to stop driving like idiots, I want to get a certain client, I want to get rid of a certain client, I want to eat a cheesecake. The parade features continuous feelings of delight or disappointment when my momentary desire is or is not satisfied. The continuum is easy to overlook yet colors my moment-to-moment experience.

It's easier to track the emotional side of craving in the more dramatic examples. During her three-month relationship, my friend was elated when she heard from her lover and crushed by his silences. She was sure they had the most amazing connection in history, and she was sure that she was causing his disappearances. She was riding the roller coaster of craving.

I've been there with relationships, chocolate, sex... and meditation bells.

Have you heard the one about the Zen priest-in-training who wanted the biggest meditation bell collection in town?

A few months ago I bought a small meditation bell to bring to meditation groups I lead. I adore this bell, which sits on a silky purple and cream-colored cushion and has a sweet, delicate ring. It also looks pretty great on my altar. Then I bought another bell for a ceremony I started to do in the evenings.

I started to notice I might be a little obsessed. The San Francisco Zen Center bookstore is a little shop packed with books, statues and much more. There are two small shelves of meditation bells in the back room. But when I walked into the bookstore, I walked into a meditation bell shop. All I saw were bells.

My desire for meditation bell ownership also revealed my attachment to my idea of how a Zen priest-in-training should be. Certainly not craving a collection of *any* kind. How could I ever think of ordaining? I must be a very shallow priest candidate. This line of tortured thinking went on for a little while.

Then I noticed that I was caught in wanting, which spiraled into some very self-absorbed and silly thinking. I didn't do anything, I simply noticed. When I became aware of this cycle, it gradually faded.

Even when craving doesn't end, awareness allows options. I don't need to automatically buy something or eat a pound of chocolate. I have the impulse, but I don't have to follow it. Awareness creates the space for me to choose.

In *A Path with Heart*, Jack Kornfield quotes William Blake: "Those who enter the gates of heaven are not beings who have no passions or who have curbed their passions, but those who have cultivated an understanding of them."

Meditation practice cultivates the skill of noticing craving when it arises. With the skill of noticing grows the understanding that it's just attachment. Awareness loosens the grip of craving. It is possible not to be a slave to what you want. Sometimes you'll succumb to what you want (especially if it's cheesecake), and sometimes you won't. Whatever you do, you can know that it is your choice.

By the way, I now have three meditation bells, which may be enough for any self-respecting Zen priest-in-training. I wonder, though, what kind of shop I will see next time I am at the San Francisco Zen Center bookstore.

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