

How to get what you want

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This is the season where personal longing and cultural expectations are ramped up in the media and by corporate greed. Most of the time we don't actually give very much thought to what others want; we are too wrapped up in our own self-centered dream. Suddenly, there is a high level of expectation and that expectation escalates in our own minds the closer someone is to us: a child, a life partner, a dear friend, and sometimes we find we are in anguish. Now that we are adults, we don't expect Santa to bring us just what we want; mostly we hope to get through the holiday season with some grace, at least not completely missing the mark for someone we love. With children it is easy: they generally tell you just what they want. They make lists. But with the adults in our lives, it is not so easy. Or maybe you know what someone wants, and just how impossible that is: my sister wants to find the love of her life, an aging parent wants to be able to live independently, or a friend simply wants a job. Because this is the season of wanting, I thought it might be a good thing to talk about today.

When I was at the monastery, I was helping with the web site, and one day things went spectacularly well. I was able to design something I had thought was impossible. Hogen, one of the abbots of the monastery, was just passing through the room. I was so delighted that I exclaimed to him, "I always get what I want!"

How could that be true? To understand, we need to take a closer look at this experience of *want*. And of course, the very best place to really study it is to become quiet and still. So let yourself become mindful just of your body and your breathing for a moment. Is anything wanted?

Wanting is a trajectory that is a double-tipped arrow: *what is it that you want?* And, *what is it that wants?* These represent two directions for mindful practice.

The very first step is to know that you are wanting...something. Often, we don't even realize this simple fact until something goes against us, or we become angry or depressed or anxious. This is particularly true on most spiritual paths where you have been taught that wanting is self-centered and wrong. So our wanting becomes cleverly disguised,

masked, or denied. Any distress can reveal to us the secret want that created it. So sometimes it is a matter of tracing backward from an upset to the original want.

What is it that you want?

- Does it have a form and name: a new car, a piece of chocolate cake, a bigger house?
- Is it just a more pleasant sensation, or to be rid of an unpleasant one, or is it just to feel something—anything at all, like the alienated young men in the film *Fight Club*?
- Is it some perception—to see a loved one’s face or feel his or her touch, to taste or smell something delicious, or to apprehend something with the mind?
- Is it a beautiful theory, a thrilling work of art, a lofty spiritual experience of bliss, or the remedy for some social ill?
- Or is it just a vague feeling of something missing, something needed to make everything perfect, or at least all right? The words “if only...” come to mind.

In other words, study the contours of *what is wanted*. There are no “whys” in wanting, it just is. Sometimes we can cleverly disguise our wanting as something noble, something socially approved. I call this the Miss America approach to wanting: I want world peace, or an end to hunger, or to save the environment. But sometimes it is much more personal: I want my children to be happy, I want to find the right work, I want to be less angry, less anxious, less depressed.

When you have identified *what is wanted*, the next step is to become more and more precise, more and more clear about the qualities of what is wanted that evoke longing in you. As you go deeper, notice in whatever is wanted, the three marks of existence: that it is impermanent, that it is bound up with suffering, that it is empty of some independent existence. Notice, too, that we have often very narrowly defined what it is that can fill that want, or in the opposite construction, we see something and create a want for it. Most advertising is based on this mechanism: creating want for something we didn’t realize we could want, or creating distress over something we didn’t know existed.

To study this experience of wanting, we first acknowledge that we are wanting something, whether we can put it into words or not. We begin by studying the sensations it evokes in the body: a gnawing in the gut, a constriction around the heart, an itch or a flush of heat. Sometimes the signs are subtle, and if we are not accustomed to paying attention to the body, at first we may be baffled. Be patient, and open a space in meditation to attune to the body. There will be some contraction or some sensation associated with wanting. Just hang out there, studying what that bodily experience is like. Don't rush to name or label it or do something about it, just observe.

In this way, we begin to turn our awareness to the other side of the double-tipped arrow: the one that wants. Typically, this is a piece of conditioning, or a subpersonality or part that we carry. It is not who we are. It is a vestige of our past formation.

You can study this part, and even converse with it, if you are patient and curious. How old is it? Maybe you can learn something about the history of this part, how it got created, and what it actually needs. Often you discover it is in conflict with some other parts, the parts that want to get rid of it, or fix it, or change it in some way. And it may be under the control of some other parts that are trying to manage your life so that this wanting part stays invisible. There are two ways to do that, basically: set things up so that it can be constantly gratified, or suppress it and pretend it doesn't exist. But like the difficult, demanding child that it is, it has to be managed somehow. So when the child says, "I want a pony!" the parent (manager) can respond in habitual ways: we can't afford a pony! We don't have any place to keep a pony! What's wrong with you? Or we might pretend we didn't hear that, tune out the child or try distraction: want a cookie? The child has a temper tantrum and we send him to his room. How does the child experience all of these reactions? Loss of connection, loss of care. In dealing with young parts within, we need a better strategy, a way of keeping the connection and demonstrating our infinite care. Does this mean we have to buy every pony? Of course not. We join the child: we say, wow! wouldn't that be fun! What do you think you could do with a pony? Really? What kind of pony would it be? Boy, I wish we could have a pony too! Or maybe two ponies, and we could play with them together! Where are we now with the part that is wanting? We are still in relationship, we are still caring, curious, and compassionate.

All day long we tend to be governed by our wants; moment after moment we follow our impulses; and in every moment we squander a precious chance for waking up and growing up. I can assure you, a life in which every moment is spent unfolding our true aspirations is a very different life: it is the life of a Buddha. Personally, I don't know anyone who lives this way all of the time, but we all know people for whom this is true most of the time.

So how is it that I could tell Hogen that *I always get what I want*? He asked the same question. What I immediately responded was this: *I get out in front of what's happening and want that*. I have no idea why that popped out. And of course what I had said was a bit overstated. In many ways it is a silly thing to say. Certainly I didn't want an earthquake in Haiti, a hurricane in New Orleans. I didn't want Lisa to be in a car wreck. But the car wreck having happened, I wanted Lisa to get excellent care and to have the people she loves around her to support her. So far, I seem to be getting what I wanted there.

But this is not about control of the circumstances of our lives. It is a question of how you meet them, and the quality of the life you inhabit. Of course, it is much easier to meet those circumstances if you are awake. In some senses you can see them coming, and take appropriate measures to meet them. More importantly, you can become a resource for others in the situation, who may be struggling or have some suffering by it.

What I am talking about is not some magical domain of prediction and control. It is about embracing life as it is, and as it is unfolding, without the extra suffering of wanting it somehow to be different. It's the practice turn in the middle of our chant, "caught in the self-centered dream," when we affirm: *life as it is, the only teacher; being just this moment, compassion's way*.

To be perfectly clear, in Buddhism, wanting is not wrong or bad. We have a tendency to demonize desire, that is probably a hangover from other faiths. Let me repeat that: *wanting is not wrong or bad*. It is often misguided or too narrowly defined, but it is not bad. It is simply recognized as a source of potential suffering, a source that lies, unlike many of our life circumstances, within our power. For example, when we want the perfect romantic partner to share our lives, there is nothing wrong with that longing. Looking more closely, you might realize that what you really want is to love someone. And then

you begin to become aware that there are opportunities for that everywhere, and with every single being. I felt it for the tiny green chameleon that wandered into the house somehow. He was so elegant and beautiful! Looking him in the eye I reassured him I would not hurt him, all the while casting about in my mind for some safe way to transport him outside. Chameleon rodeo! I set down a small container and encouraged him to go into it, which he calmly did. I was so delighted to finally set him among the bamboo by the door.

Your life in a moment goes from a life of lack to a life of abundance. Finding is a matter of knowing where to look. That is what I mean.

A chameleon is not a life partner, of course. Conversations tend to be one-sided, and I'm not so sure he cares how my day is going. Still, there are husbands and wives like this, I think. But in any event, don't miss the myriad opportunities for warm and loving connection and mutual care. And that is what practice means to me.

So on this holiday season, please continue your practice. Reflect on the past year, and see, as you think about the coming year, if you can distinguish your wanting from your aspiration. What I want for you is that you may live a wholehearted life, liberated from hindrances on your path to waking up and growing up. And remember:

I always get what I want.