

Wanting Fully Without Attachment

by Miki Kashtan

The origin of suffering is attachment.

– The Buddha

The Talmud tells us that in the world to come, everyone will be called to account for all the desires they might have fulfilled in this world but chose not to. The things we desire—the desires themselves—are sacred. Who put them in our hearts if not God? But we have been taught to be ashamed of what we want; our desires become horribly distorted and cause us to do terribly hurtful things.

– Alan Lew, from *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared.*

IF YOU HAVE HAD A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OR HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH personal growth workshops, you have no doubt heard many times that letting go of attachment increases happiness and well-being. The principle is simple, but exactly what does it mean to let go of attachment, and what do we do to get there?

Sometimes it appears as if spiritual traditions suggested that the only way to let go of attachment is to give up on what we want. But is this the only way to interpret the old traditions? Is wanting really inseparable from attachment? Or is it possible to want what we want with full passion without the constriction of being attached? Can we remain genuinely relaxed about whether or not we get what we want? And if we can do this in our *personal* lives, what about as *social* and *political* beings, as we relate to the state of the world? Why would we even want to release attachment when our passion is for the world — be it for social justice, peace, sustainability, or any other cause?

The challenge arises primarily when we experience tension between what we want and what is or what seems possible. We frequently respond in one of two ways. Externally, we might try to force what is to conform to what we want by outright coercion and threats or by using more subtle forms of demands. Internally, we might try to suppress or give up on what we want. Both of these strategies lead to suffering. Neither of these paths engages with life openly. In both we are forcing others or ourselves instead of being in a dialogic relationship.

What follows is an attempt to outline a new path, different from forcing or giving up; a path that affirms who we are and accepts what is; a path that allows creative strategies to arise from a quality of connection that recognizes and affirms our own and others' needs, aspirations, and dreams.

And what about social transformation? you may wonder. To begin with, if we are unable to tolerate the world as it is, we will be at war with the world, putting





ourselves in danger of re-creating the very same structures we are seeking to transform. The path of wanting without attachment supports our work for change in two key ways. Internally, as we grow in our capacity to want without attachment, our inner peace increases. Externally, our capacity to release attachment and continue to want and work toward our deepest dreams provides a foundation for an entirely different approach to working toward change in the world: we can then work without urgency, with less burnout, with more capacity to dialogue with those we encounter along the way, and with a sense of clear vision instead of opposition.

Accepting Our Humanity

THE PREMISE AT THE HEART OF THIS PATH IS THAT EVERY HUMAN ACTION OR reaction is an expression of some human need that's shared by us all; that everything we do in this life has a need at its core; that all of us have needs; and that the needs are always there, underneath all our thoughts and actions. This path is an invitation to grasp experientially and become comfortable with the radical notion that needs are not a "problem" that will eventually go away if we work hard enough, but rather a deep expression of life.

Our choice is not whether or not to have needs. Our choice is only about how we relate to our needs and make choices about our thoughts, words, and actions. When we fight our needs, they are more likely to run us unconsciously, leaving us with less choice. When we own our needs in full and embrace them not just as unhappy, unavoidable experiences but as core expressions of our humanity and aliveness, we find more self-connection and have the freedom to make choices that attend to our needs as well as to the needs of others.

What can we do to find a way to deepen our understanding and experience of the role of needs and to overcome the obstacles to owning and embracing our needs? We start, as so much spiritual practice suggests, with the truth of where we are. Ask yourself: What images does the word need evoke in you? When you think about yourself having needs, what is your reaction? When you think about others having needs, what is your reaction?

Most of us have internalized a few core messages about needs. One is the equation of needs with powerlessness, vulnerability, and lack, and of the appearance of not having needs with strength, power, safety, and wholeness. Another, related theme is that having needs creates dependence, which is often frightening, while appearing not to have needs is more aligned with independence and self-sufficiency. On a deeper level, having needs carries a sense of shame for many people, particularly evident in the use of the word "neediness." That shame has at its core a fundamental question so many of us wrestle with: "Do I matter?" Instead of accepting our fundamental human vulnerability, we learn, often at high cost to ourselves, to ignore, deny, override, or in some other way suppress our needs so as not to appear needy to others.

Because needs are the stuff of life, they cannot go away. Consequently, when we don't allow ourselves to have a need, what we lose is freedom. We lose access to conscious choice about how to meet this still-present but unacknowledged need.

Ultimately, at whatever cost, we will continue to act based on our needs. The cost of suppressing needs can be internal -- a sense of exhaustion, isolation, or despair -- or it can be external and lead us to act in less caring ways toward others, even as we try to hide our needs because we believe they are shameful. Think about it: When have you recently screamed your need instead of expressing it? Did you try to suppress your need for some time leading up to the scream? Is part of the scream at the other person actually a scream at yourself for not having expressed yourself sooner?

Owning a need means experiencing relaxed comfort and acceptance about having the need, without any attempt, however subtle, to distance ourselves from the need, pretend that we don't have it, be harsh with ourselves for having it, tell ourselves that we should be different, or in any way hold any negative judgments about ourselves, even when we don't like our actions.

Above: We are at least familiar with the ideal of "wanting fully without attachment" in sports, where we are taught that fair play in a hard fought, enjoyable game is more important than who wins. A fine example this year was the graciousness with which Elena Dementieva (left) conceded defeat to Serena Williams in the Australian Open semifinal in January.

Previous page: Suzanne Sherman, artist and mother of four, imagines herself holding her family's needs with joy, without being so attached to outcomes that she represses her own desires or pressures others to comply with her demands.

When we work toward change in the world, we often neither suppress nor own our needs. Instead, many of us de-personalize our needs. We speak about what a government should do instead of talking about what we want; we use the language of what must happen instead of talking about our pain at what is happening and our longing for a different world. This approach, too, is rooted in a distance from our needs. "It's not about me," we say! We act as if taking personal ownership of what we want would diminish the strength of our message, or as if we would be taken less seriously if we brought our hearts into our work. Wanting, having a need, is still implicitly seen as weak, not strategic, shameful.

In addition, we often equate needs with selfishness, or with narrow self-interest, instead of recognizing deep, core human needs that transcend our separate, individualized existence. The talmudic rabbis said, "More than the calf wants to suck, the cow wants to suckle." We all know the deep satisfaction of giving without any expectation of receiving anything in return, of making ourselves available to offer support and nurturing to others in need; or the meaning of working toward a cause larger than ourselves.

To reach full inner freedom, we are called to redefine our notion of what having a need means, and to walk through the shame about having needs, about having a particular need, and about possibly having too much or too little of that need in relation to what we or others believe we should have. The goal is to live in peace with whatever needs we have in the exact form that we have them. Think about it: If you are not going to be you, who will?

The capacity to get grounded in the truth that lives inside us is a profound internal resource that leads to inner freedom. Even if others indeed don't accept us, even if no one takes our passion seriously, we can still make the choice to honor our needs. Each time we do that, we increase our freedom.

At the same time, if needs are, indeed, universal, then whenever we experience a need, we have something in common with all the people who also have that need. Although we may make different choices about strategies to meet the need, the experience of the need itself is common and similar to all of us. Every experience of having a need can be an opportunity to be in unity with the rest of humanity.

Moreover, needs are the basic unit, if you will, of life itself. Needs have an element of pure movement energy in them: motion toward life. When we can tune in to this aspect of our needs, sometimes we can experience a larger unity with life itself -- a melting into the spaciousness of all that is. If wanting is life, then any attempt to give up on wanting, even if motivated by the attempt to cultivate non-attachment, is a form of interfering with life.

From Need as Lack to Need as Life

WANTING FULLY WITHOUT ATTACHMENT REQUIRES US TO STRETCH OURSELVES IN TWO ways: toward wanting and toward non-attachment. Letting go of attachment is, in the end, about changing our relationship to, and experience of, wanting. There is a kind of wanting that is contracting and grasping and is about coming to take something from life. And there is a kind of wanting that is expansive and is about coming forward to *meet* life. Shifting from the former to the latter is what makes it possible to stay comfortably in the wanting. When we let the wanting be, we can experience ourselves as more alive, regardless of outcome.

Attachment interferes with goodwill, with creativity, with effectiveness, with care -- with almost anything. We then live in a world without options, thus in actuality closing the door to inner freedom. The first step toward living without attachment is to overcome a deeply ingrained habit of seeing our preferred strategy as indistinguishable from our need. If we separate the two and let go of a particular strategy as the outcome, we usually see more options, in the form of a variety of strategies to meet our needs, and are thus *more* likely to have what we want. Even if not, we can still experience a release of attachment that is not about giving up and contracting. Rather, it's about expansion and liberation, because we are no longer limited by having only one possibility.

The next step is when we can fully inhabit the experience of the need without attachment to outcome, without attachment to having the need met at all. But this may seem confusing. After all, isn't the very essence of having a need that we want to have it met? Did we not just



The artist here pictures herself in the two modes Miki Kashtan says we all adopt too often: pressuring others to do what we want and repressing our own desires. Suzanne says: "The recession has hit us hard. My husband and I are both seeking employment and in fear of losing our home. I agree with the author that when I become attached to the outcome, I invite fear and become immobilized, and when I let go and do my best each day, I have hope and more direction and the love of my family to guide me."

PRACTICE: MEDITATING ON NEEDS

If you have ever participated in meditation of any kind, you probably know that most forms of meditation involve returning attention to an object of focus whenever attention wanders. Some meditation practices focus on the breath (many forms of Buddhist and Yogic meditation), some on certain bodily sensations (some forms of Vipassana meditation, for example), some on specific words (mantras in transcendental meditation), and some on specific sequences of ideas and images (some forms of Jewish meditation).

In an entirely similar manner, you can develop a meditation practice that focuses on connecting with needs. The object of focus is the line "I have a need for ____." Just as with any other form of meditation, your mind will likely wander. You will likely hear internal responses, such as: "But this need cannot be met; why bother?" or "Yeah, but this person is not going to change," or "I should just grow up and get over this petty wish of mine," or "This is not just about some personal need of mine. This is about everyone's right to dignity." The aim of the practice is to bring your attention back to the need you are meditating on—without harshness. Rather than punishing yourself for wandering, just gently bring your attention back.

Encountering and connecting with needs is different from naming them as checklist items. Whenever we do this practice, we can take a moment to breathe, to really experience the flavor of that need being inside of us—exactly what it feels like, what the sensations of having this need are, and what this need means to us.

learn how to want? What now?

This confusion is the heart of the paradox of non-attachment. Wanting and attachment are not the same. Non-attachment does not mean giving up on what we want. It only means letting go of attachment. Then we can grow and grow in our capacity to want. Then the experience of wanting softens our hearts and opens us up to life. Then we also grow in our strength, in our capacity to ask for what we want, and in access to imaginative directions for working toward what we want.

The attachment to having the need met often shows up in the form of a *should*. For example, in talking about her struggle with her ex-husband, a workshop participant said, "He is not spending as much time with my daughter as he should." As long as she holds a should in relation to the needs, she will remain contracted and her ex-husband will continue to pick up the demand energy and resist being with the daughter. The woman had little difficulty identifying the need at the heart of her struggle -- love! However, she had immense difficulty staying with the need and simply connecting with the movement in her heart. Instead, she kept being pulled into the idea that her ex-husband should spend more time with their daughter. Only with effort was she able to let go of all the notions surrounding the need (fairness, compassion, what he will do, what she will do) and simply be with her need for love, regardless of what was or was not going to happen. Once she was able to do that, her tension released and she experienced immense relief.

The pure experience of the need itself is just the movement of wanting that comes from our heart. We can expand into just wanting, a wanting that has neither joy nor pain in it. The point is not necessarily to be more comfortable. The point is to experience more freedom and choice by being present with what is, inside and outside. This capacity to sit with the need is one way to touch the ground of non-attachment. In this non-attachment, we can rediscover the beauty of being the human that we are, and of life being just what it is.

Interacting with the World

IF YOU ARE AN ACTIVIST OR IN SOME OTHER WAY ENGAGED WITH WORKING TO TRANSFORM external reality, you may wonder whether this path would ultimately lead to apathy or lack of engagement with the world. What about children's need for food or safety, for example? How can we not insist that these needs be met? Yet, even in this acute example, we can still see the difference between giving up and letting go of attachment. It is not about giving up on the hope for all the children in the world to be safe and have sufficient food. Nor is it about giving up on working to eliminate hunger and violence. Rather, it is about being able to tolerate internally the possibility -- which is also the current reality! -- that it just may not happen that all the children in the world will be safe and have sufficient food. If we cannot tolerate the possibility, then how can we have space inside to interact with life as it is? If our approach is based on what should happen, without this capacity to accept life, what would keep us from trying to force a solution? We have all seen so many historical examples of revolutions that turned into a new regime of horror. How will we ensure that we can sustain our vision and openness if we cannot tolerate what is happening and those who are supporting what is happening? To protect ourselves, we often turn away from the dual horror we need to experience to keep our hearts open. We protect ourselves from the horror of knowing that one child under five years old dies every six seconds, or almost 18,000 daily, from malnutrition and related causes (not to mention the effects of wars of all kinds). And we protect ourselves from the fear of succumbing to the anger and desperation that lead to re-creating domination and horror. Without the tools to keep our hearts open, many of us do, indeed, shut down and tune out the plight of the children so that we can even manage to continue with our own personal lives.

If, however, we remain open to the possibility that no solution will arise and at the same time continue to bring our heart and attention and action to working toward a solution, our work takes on an entirely different flavor. We work toward our dreams, we embrace the vision and our needs in full, and we remain open in the face of what is happening. In doing so, whether or not we have external success (and so far as I know, none of us knows how to move the world from here to where we want it to be), our work itself becomes a modeling of what the world could be. ■