

## THE DYNAMICS OF CRAVING

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Wanting—whether to acquire something or avoid something—is the fuel behind every action. If you think about it, everything from drinking a glass of water to binge eating is the result of wanting. Sometimes the feeling of “I want” is subtle and barely perceptible, like a soft whisper in the ear: “Candy, candy.” Other times, the wanting becomes craving—a feeling of desire that is so demanding and overwhelming that you feel driven beyond reason to get what you want. In this case, whether you’re wanting to take away an unbearable feeling of despair or to feel the rush of pleasure that comes from enjoying, say, a frothy iced beverage on a sizzling-hot day, you’re responding, without much of a say, to craving.

There is actually nothing good or bad about cravings. They are part of the force of life. The key is how we relate to them. Do we relate to them mindfully? Or do we get blinded by them? Instead of enjoying the taste of a piece of fresh fruit, we’re often caught up in trying to satisfy the feeling of craving. There is no freedom in this kind of eating. The precious awareness of what we are eating and the choice about what we are doing, each essential to mindful eating, are lost.

The power of craving is humorously highlighted by Nasrudin, a legendary character in Middle Eastern folklore. Stories about Nasrudin are often used to illustrate the antics of the human mind, because he can be silly, clever, and mystical all at once. Nasrudin and a friend went to a restaurant and decided to share a plate of eggplant. They argued fiercely about whether the eggplant should be stuffed or fried. Tired and hungry, Nasrudin yielded to his friend’s craving for stuffed eggplant. After placing the order, his companion suddenly collapsed. Nasrudin jumped up and started running. Someone yelled, “Are you going to get a doctor?” “No!” Nasrudin shouted back. “I’m going to see if I can change the order!”

This story wonderfully depicts someone blinded by craving. Such mindless grabbing can be all-consuming as well as dangerous at times. We can reclaim our mindfulness by becoming aware of how craving calls to us—the messages that stir the feelings of “I want,” “I need,” “I must have,” or “I must avoid.”

For instance, when you listen to the voices of craving, you might find the “inner seller.” This voice offers a highly seductive sales pitch: “You deserve it. You’re special. You’ve worked so hard. Eat whatever you want.” The job of the inner seller is to accentuate the advantages and obscure the disadvantages of whatever it’s pushing. While it may be true that you “deserve” a piece of cake for a job well done, responding mindlessly to this pitch may not result in satisfaction or be in your best interest. Any behavior that runs on autopilot is less likely to offer you the intimacy and reward that come from mindfulness.

Another voice of craving is known as the “inner critic.” Its messages are typically very demoralizing and sap motivation: “There’s no point to mindful eating. It’s just a gimmick like everything else. Besides, you fail at everything you do anyway. So what’s the point?” Listening to these messages without awareness makes us more vulnerable to them. But in that moment of awareness, we can wake up to the fact that such monologues are just a string of words racing through our minds. We don’t have to follow them like servants.

When you look even closer, you might find a powerful alliance between the inner seller and the inner critic. Both of their messages are demanding your attention. The seller is trying to seduce you into the illusion of pleasure that comes from getting what you want. At the same time, the inner critic is trying to tear down your confidence, which helps make you more vulnerable to the flattering and seductive messages of the inner seller.

We do not have to rid ourselves of these voices of desire. In fact, it’s not realistic to think we can. But we can become aware of craving, its disguises, its messages, and its timing. We can become intimate with these voices and learn where they want to direct our thoughts and behaviors. Awareness is a form of mindfulness in action. Where craving seeks to enslave us, mindfulness opens up a space within us, so we can cultivate wise alternatives to its misdirection. Wisdom can arise and insightful connections can be realized.

Nasrudin was so entangled with his craving that he felt he had to choose between his appetite and a friend in need. Mindful awareness rejects neither the appetite nor the friend in need, but allows choices to be made from wisdom, not desperation. When desperation is not in control, we can offer generous attention to each moment. So whether our eggplant is stuffed or fried, we enjoy the experience directly, instead of living out the demands of countless desires.

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