by Joel Kramer
and Diana Alstad

wishful thinking

Desires often run our lives. Understand them and learn to seek pleasures that enhance your sense of well-being.

What are we searching for? We are all looking for something, aren't we? What is it that one seeks? There are many names for it: happiness, fulfillment, meaning, self-realization, inner peace, joy, enjoyment, love, well-being, peak experience. Many of the things we wish for are hard to describe and even harder to seek. A question that can be more easily approached is, "What is the nature of seeking?" This includes the arena of so-called spiritual seeking for mystical states, enlightenment, bliss, ego loss, nirvana, and the like. Becoming "more spiritual" usually means becoming better, or "more selfless"—more loving, compassionate, altruistic, or mindful. If we look beyond all of these names, I think we will find that what they all have in common is **wanting to feel good.** Although what we seek goes by many names, good feelings are pleasures.

Looking at pleasure and our desire for it in order to see how they each work is an inroad into the nature of desire, thought, and the human condition itself. Wanting to feel good, or better, is one of the most powerful mechanisms that drive us. Becoming aware of how this mechanism works can help create a shift in consciousness that will make your relationship to pleasure more realistic: You'll become aware of the potential consequences your pleasure seeking will have on you, the environment, and the world.

Many different experiences can give pleasure, and these are not the same for everyone. However, all pleasures have certain aspects in common. Pleasures exist in the body as feelings that we enjoy. This could involve satisfying biological

celebrating 35 years

In January 1977, *Yoga Journal* published its first article by Joel Kramer. In this seminal piece, "A New Look at Yoga: Playing the Edge of Mind & Body," Kramer coined the term *playing the edge* to denote a means of exploring our limitations and freedom through hatha practice. He also articulated how jnana yoga, or "mental yoga," can expand consciousness into a broader range of possibilities for daily life. That article and several others by Kramer and Diana Alstad published over the years by *Yoga Journal* have helped to shape modern yoga. See **yogajournal.com/edge** for the original story.

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needs, having sensual or aesthetic experiences, and experiencing a spectrum of more cerebral satisfactions like winning a chess game or a bet. A shift in bodily sensations or emotions always occurs, however large or slight. The feelings can be increased or diminished by thinking about them, but they quickly fade into memory. This is one reason we seek more and greater pleasures.

This seeking is actually the product of desire. Desire puts you in time, because within desire is an expectation—a belief or hope that getting the objects of desire will bring good, even better feelings. Desire is endless. Objects of desire might be anything from a tasty dish, love, or a trip to Bali to winning a Nobel Prize, conquering the world, or gaining immortality. There is no certainty that a desire will be realized, especially if it's an unrealistic fantasy or a programmed goal, or even a formerly known pleasure. And even if it's realized, the desire might not bring the expected enjoyment. Researchers have found that humans are generally pretty bad at predicting what will make them feel good over time.

Alstad and Kramer, writing together, use the pronoun "I" to keep the conversational tone of the original book, which was transcribed from Kramer's lectures.

BORN TO DESIRE

Desiring pleasure that goes beyond satisfying our physical drives seems to stem from a uniquely human, built-in, restless discontent instilled by evolution to prevent stasis and foster competition. The continual desire for more prevents us from getting stuck in any ongoing pleasures. In other words, dissatisfaction fuels our pleasure seeking. When we do find a way to make ourselves feel better, we soon take feeling better for granted. That becomes the new baseline of expectancy, and then we want more. Other desires that we think will make us feel even better capture our attention. We quickly adapt to whatever pleasures we have, which brings more desire, because desire is the fuel that we run on.

Have you ever noticed that bad or unpleasant feelings seem to hang on longer and to be stronger than good ones? There is a sensible evolutionary reason for this, too. Good feelings dissipate sooner to leave space for protective fear and anger: feelings that warn of threat, and so are more crucial to our survival. That is another reason we continually seek a state of feeling better through the accumulation of whatever we are conditioned to think will help us do so, whether it's wealth, power, status, material possessions, or spiritual credits. We seek ways to improve ourselves and become better people, believing that will also make us feel better.

Like pleasure, desire is double edged. Like pleasant memories or daydreams that can keep you from experiencing the uniqueness of the ongoing moment, desires can bring sorrow through dissatisfaction, feelings of lack, disappointment, envy, and resentment. On the positive side, desire can bring the pleasures of anticipation and be the motivation for change.

Many "spiritual" worldviews maintain that pleasure, desire, and the attachments they inevitably bring feed the ego and prevent spirituality. This is not my view. I am not judging the desire for pleasure or attachments. On the contrary, desires—for pleasure, for growth, and for goals like saving the world—are powerful and important core motivators that move us. What would your life be without your desires to inspire and motivate you? Desire, like love, makes the world go 'round. It's a fuel that evolution runs on.

Desiring is part of the human condition. It's necessary for change and can move us to evolve socially, which is necessary for our survival. Attachment to what you have or want is inherent in being a social animal, because you're attached to what you care about.

The problem with desire is not *that* you desire but rather *what* you desire, and the ways that desire can be manipulated—whether by gurus, leaders, corporations, or a social system that equates human worth with accumulation. The question to ask is whether your desires, both

personal and social, are life furthering or life diminishing. Desires and attachments can be beneficial or detrimental, depending on the situation. My interest is in seeing how they work in us and how we can use them to live better. The more awareness we have of their workings, the more we can free ourselves from social manipulation and obsolete conditioning patterns, even genetic ones.

Some people maintain that wanting to be happy is the bottom-line desire, not pleasure itself. It is true that pleasures come and go, while happiness is an amorphous, many-faceted state that in any given moment may or may not contain pleasure and may even involve pain. Happiness that is not fleeting usually involves a sense of meaning and purpose: the quality of one's life, relationships, and work; general satisfaction; and an overall outlook containing some wisdom and emotional awareness. When you are happy, you are likely to feel more pleasure than when you are unhappy. But pain and suffering can be a part of happiness, too.

PLEASURE AND PAIN

It's natural and healthy to prefer pleasure to pain. Yet if offered the option of a painless life, I would not choose it. Pain plays as important a role as pleasure does in life's dramas. Life is change, and one changes either by growing or by becoming more rigid. Real growth often involves periods of confusion, discomfort, pain, and even suffering before a new direction evolves. In almost every life there are moments when you look back and say to yourself, "I've really grown." Upon looking carefully at the process that brought about the growth, you realize it was rarely free from pain and suffering: In fact, the feelings gave the feedback that showed you something was not working. Without them, there would have been no motivation to change. Pain, like necessity, is the mother of invention.

I am certainly not advocating the cultivation of suffering as a means of growth, as do some traditional worldviews that present suffering as a path toward spiritual realization. Pain and suffering do not have to be sought, because they are potentially around the next corner. But fearing and avoiding pain and suffering cuts you off from the adventures of the unknown, and inhibits growth.

WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING?

In seeking, you mostly seek the known—how would one seek the unknown? Suppose I were to tell you to look for something totally out of your ken, something completely beyond your experience. Where would you look? How would you know when you had found it? In fact, what we usually seek are things and experiences that we remember or have heard about and imagine to be pleasurable or good for us. Five minutes ago, last year, or 20 years ago, I had an extraordinary experience. I have cherished the memory of that experience ever since—whether it was the thrill of young love, the joy of having a baby, an exciting trip, an altered state. When I'm feeling bad, I think of it; it warms me, and I say to myself, "Wouldn't it be nice if I could feel that way all the time, or at least more often than I do now?" When we seek, is it not usually this that we seek—a repetition of the known? You can't seek the new, because it's unknown; you can seek only the old. So most seeking perpetuates the known.

People talk of wonderful experiences or states of being. Books entice you with promises of continual joy and bliss or delights beyond the mundane. You say to yourself, "That's for me." Then you search for the key to unlock the door to all those goodies. What are those "goodies"? Do you not simply translate all these ideas into other words or images that come from your experience or from hearsay?

It is also very easy to get wrapped up in the pleasures of the search itself, in the excitement of anticipation, relishing the good feelings to come. When we search for the meaning of life, the fountain of youth, even spiritual truth, the quest itself is often more exciting than reaching the goal. It gives life meaning and offers a worthwhile challenge. Once achieved, that goal may bring some satisfaction, but soon afterward, desire sets in again.

There are ways of being that can enhance or diminish happiness. But in these

what's your pleasure?

To make your desires work for you, examine the attitudes you bring to your pursuit of pleasure.

We're programmed to desire pleasure. Our desires are what keep us striving for the things that equip us to survive, like status, food, and resources. But if pleasure seeking becomes a primary goal, it will ultimately lead to a less-fulfilling life—one with less challenge and fewer opportunities for growth. By examining your desires, you can cultivate a more aware, curious, and discriminating relationship to pleasure and desire. It should allow you to enjoy pleasures that are right for you without overestimating their role in your overall happiness and satisfaction in life.

NOTICE WHAT TRIGGERS DESIRE

That we desire is genetically programmed; *what* we desire is often culturally determined. Notice how consumerism encourages you to compare yourself with those who have more than you do. Be curious about how many of your desires are inspired by external factors like advertising or by what others around you have or want.

ACCEPT THAT PLEASURE IS FLEETING

Expect pleasure to be transient, and recognize that the first response to pleasure's fading is to want more. Pay attention to how long a pleasurable feeling lasts and what you do when it ends. Do you feel energized, or depleted? Notice how quickly you adapt to positive feelings, new possessions, and getting what you want—how easy it is to take these things for granted and to want more.

LOOK FOR IMBALANCE

If your life is imbalanced on the side of working, putting others first, and self-sacrificing, your desires will reflect that. Addiction to destructive pleasures like overeating or shopping can be a way of rewarding yourself for being overworked, too self-sacrificing, or too self-controlling.

See if you can get to the source of your dissatisfaction, instead of being mechanically driven to desire compensation. Are your desires and pleasures functioning as rewards for working too hard or for doing things you don't want to do? Consider whether you might have a better quality of life if you had more time to devote to satisfying pursuits, fulfilling relationships, and interests that are meaningful and challenging for you.

BE AWARE OF HOW RIGID VALUES CAN GET IN THE WAY OF DESIRES

Sometimes we use self-discipline and willpower to make habits of things we think are good for us. Perhaps you have decided to write in a journal every day, or exercise, or cook healthful meals, or be a supportive friend.

But your "shoulds" can become so deeply programmed that you are tricked into mistaking them for desires, which can prevent you from having a flexible awareness of what's best for you in the moment. If you feel out of touch with what you really want, ask yourself: Does thinking about what you think you want to do give you energy, or does it deflate you? Look at the things you think you have to do, and ask yourself how many of them you actually have to do.

Try doing as little of what you don't want to do as you can. Don't change the sheets this week. Say no to that social "obligation." Rest today if your body feels tired. Let go of a friendship you no longer enjoy. Notice how the space created by not doing what you don't want to do allows new parts of yourself to surface, and how it affects your feelings of pleasure and desire.

times, which demand changes in the way we do things, we have little assurance as to the results of our actions. Consequently, a pervading undercurrent of fear tends to lead people toward more self-absorbed activities. Following your interests can be a way of breaking through conditioned habits and reaching a place that is more beneficial for both you and the rest of humanity, but it all depends on what your interests are.

No one can know or tell you what your interests should be, but if they involve the accumulation of personal wealth, power, or status through traditional routes, these do not amount to a new recipe for happiness, and they're not appropriate for the historic moment. So although following your interests can engage you, it is not a guarantee for having a meaningful life. Following your interests can bring pleasure, but as we've seen, pleasure is double edged and not always focused on the greater good.

The nature of pleasure is that you want more. If overeating didn't have stop mechanisms like indigestion, we could eventually eat ourselves to death. Not all pleasures have stop mechanisms, and many can be highly addictive—power, money, nicotine, sweets, alcohol, shopping, even adulation. The pleasures our species has enjoyed at the top of the food chain, enabling us to use the resources of our world casually and with little forethought, are leading us toward self-destruction. In times of crisis, there is a great pull to rely on known pleasures in the attempt to feel good.

It's important to see how pleasure and pleasure seeking, which are mostly on automatic, work within us. Awareness of the nature of pleasure and how it works allows us more freedom in action. This topic is especially important for these times, as it has been humanity's unaware pursuit of pleasures (particularly short-term ones) that has greatly contributed to the world's current dilemmas.

Although seeking pleasure can bring known pleasures (companionship, favorite walks or scenes, music, good food, travel, sex, and the like), there is the potential for sorrow in repeating familiar pleasures, or in basking in memory and desires. For in seeking the known, you can miss the thrust of life. As you're telling yourself how fine you felt, or are feeling, you're removing yourself from the potential that the living moment holds for you. You may fail to connect with a friend more deeply or to smell the perfume of the woods because you've replaced attention to the moment with thoughts about past and future pleasures.

The truth about pleasure is that, no matter how much you get, you never get enough.

Here's where the potential for sorrow lives. When I am reliving an experience, I remove myself from life's newness, its challenge, and along with this separation there can be sorrow. When this separation dulls living, it contributes to the feeling of not ever being or having enough: that I am not good enough, not smart enough, not kind enough, not rich enough—spiritually or experientially. The truth about pleasure is that ultimately, no matter how much you get, you never get enough. The dynamics of pleasure can keep you from totally engaging with life in the moment, which is where joy, communion, love, and creativity lie.

PLEASURES AND PITFALLS OF BELIEF

Pleasure and beliefs can be interrelated. I often pick my beliefs insofar as they will give me pleasure or allay fear and doubt. The beliefs that I am most attached to are the ones that bring me security and certainty, that are comforting and reassuring and allow a more pleasurable state of mind. You can see this for yourself. The more uncertain and frightening the world is, the better your beliefs make you feel and the more you cling to them, and the more they reinforce your worldview.

Beliefs that become part of my identity can separate me from you by making me feel a little superior to you, which

is pleasurable. I believe in capitalism or socialism or atheism or science or quantum realities or Buddhism, and these beliefs make me feel better than you, who do not believe as I do.

A problem is that many beliefs that make people feel better aren't necessarily conducive to a well-functioning, caring society. The more alienating, divisive, and uncaring a social order is, the more people cling to beliefs—like racism, nationalism, and religious and cultural intolerance—that make them feel superior. But the energy that is put into feeling superior negates life. Each time I convince myself that I'm better than you, which is one of the few pleasures available to many people, I dull myself with self-congratulation that cuts me off from any real connection that you and I might have.

Ours is a world of separate beliefs and identities competing with each other for supremacy. The pleasure I get from feeling superior separates me from you and groups from each other, creating extraordinary sorrow, violence, and needless tragedy in the world. To see this fact—not to try to make it go away or negate it, but just to see the way it works—is a vital inroad into the nature of oneself and one's identity.

We tend to think in terms of high and low desires. I may create hierarchies of desires and evaluate them according to my beliefs—"low" desires for material gain, power, or sensuality, and "high" desires for God, spirituality, peace, and a better world. What we usually consider "high" and "low" desires very often comes from our social conditioning. I'm not saying that all desires are on an equal footing or that one shouldn't have preferences—we all do. Certainly, desiring something like good health is healthier than desiring to be worshipped. But whether desires are high or low, better or worse, they all partake in the structure of desire.

As we become discontent with known pleasures, it's not unusual to become bored or jaded and look for new, greater, supposedly higher ones. I may turn to spirituality, searching for bliss, higher states of consciousness, and mystical experiences. Mystics, spiritual authorities, and books promise ecstasy or bliss of one type or another and describe spirituality as feeling wonderfully special most or all of the time, or even throughout eternity. Believing them arouses desire, and so I search for those who can tell me how to get there. The promises of these spiritual authorities carry the weight of tradition, and are especially appealing when they coincide with my yearning for something more. I come to view spiritual experiences as providing the greatest possible pleasures. I may have had mystical experiences in the past, and long to repeat them. Special practices may make me feel better and give me predictable experiences that reinforce my hopes and beliefs.

LETTING GO OF DESIRE

The mind is so clever; thought is so sly. It says, "Well, all right. I see that pleasure and desire can contain sorrow and that to seek anything usually means seeking pleasure. So I'll stop seeking pleasure. I'll train myself not to have desires through one practice or another." Why do this? Do I think that if I let go of desire I'll feel better? Wanting to let go of desire has the same core desire within it, the agenda of feeling better. The ideal of detaching from desire has the not-so-hidden promise that new, more sublime, more spiritual pleasures will come one's way. Of course this is just another elaborately disguised way of seeking pleasure. The desire to be desire-less is but another desire. The thought that, because this desire purports to be spiritual, it is superior to more mundane desires shows how skilled the mind is at justifying any desire it is attached to.

Letting go of desires, especially unrealizable ones, can make you feel better. Detaching from desires is a control mechanism of mind that can be very useful in freeing oneself from old programming, since many of our desires have been conditioned into us. But since desire is part of the motor of change, attempting to let go of desire totally removes you from the creative momentum of life. There's real danger in dampening one's emotions, intuitions, and creativity—the danger

of being "detached" from inner wellsprings. Creativity doesn't spring from being detached. I seek, and I see it's in my nature to seek, pleasure. Sometimes I find ways of feeling good that are satisfying, but many times I don't. If I'm happy and satisfied, well and good; but if not, I see that seeking pleasure can remove me from life, creating sorrow, which brings more desire—a self-perpetuating loop of pleasure and pain. Then I want to stop, to escape the loop, but the very wanting to stop is another way of seeking pleasure, so there's great conflict.

Looking at pleasure, there seems to be no way out of its conflict. If I try to get out of it, the trying itself puts me back in. So what can I do? Is it possible to become free of all this—to move freely and on occasion break out of the confines of my nature, to move with a freedom in action that pierces through the limits of the conditioned mind?

The question I've been contemplating is not whether there are better or worse desires, or more or less pleasurable pleasures, but rather how desire and pleasure work in us and how they can hook onto anything. An answer to the question of "What to do?" leads to the basic question of whether an ordinary human being, not a saint or a guru or an expert, can see how this whole process works, and in the seeing itself move in that moment out of the conditioned habits that pleasures and desires generate, so that they are no longer problematic in living. Is it possible?

Of course, if I were to tell you that it's possible and you were to believe me, we'd just be involved again in belief. It's important that you find out for yourself if it's actually possible to come into direct contact with the nature of pleasure and desire, to see when yours are appropriate and healthy, and when they might not be. If you can see this as a part of how you mechanically work, without judging it in yourself, this awareness opens the door to its own movement. ✣

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