



PRACTICES FOR LIFE

GETTING REAL ABOUT Money and Desire

Success requires that you have the right relationship with money. You see, money is not, as the economists like to define it “the medium of exchange” or “the store of value.” Well, it is those things but also much, much more. Money is really the symbolic representation of one of the most powerful psychological forces of the human condition: desire.

Our default mode is to think of money as a “thing” and to want as much of it as possible. It’s one of the few things in life that we quite literally cannot get enough of.

Desire is an incredible force. In some sense, it is one of the defining features of the human condition. We have this ability to desire beyond the instinctual, immediate needs of the moment. We can project ourselves into the future and dream up all sorts of things to want. Desire is the force behind everything that makes our civilization great—our art, technology and ideas, our institutions and our scientific discoveries—all of these things are an expression of desire.

But where does desire come from? And is it always good?

In the past few years, I’ve been captivated by the writings of the great mystics. These are individuals who have experienced actual contact with God and Truth and have tried to put into words the nature of those experiences. Interestingly, you can find mystics in almost every age and across every known religious tradition. They have a lot to say about desire.

If you can look with an open mind at the writings of the mystics (and the teachings of the world’s great religions), you’ll find that they all come to the same conclusion about desire. In order to live well, it is something that you must overcome. No one has said it better than the Buddha: “Desire is the cause of all suffering.” What the mystics invariably say is that if you can overcome or somehow move beyond your innate tendency to desire, you can really change the way you experience your life.

But how do you overcome or go beyond desire? What does that really mean? Does this mean that you shouldn't desire at all? That doesn't seem to make any sense. If you don't desire, how do you even stay alive? And what about desiring good things, like when trying to help someone in need? That cannot be wrong.

I have wrestled with these questions for a long time and what I've come to realize is that they are unanswerable without the benefit of another of the teachings of the mystics. For desire is a psychological force that you cannot trifle with, a world-mover that operates both consciously and unconsciously. Recently, I've been getting into the depth psychologists and reading a lot of Freud and Jung. When I was a younger man, their ideas were completely inaccessible to me. Trying to read a paragraph of Jung, even ten or five years ago, was like trying to read a foreign language. But for some reason recently these writings have opened up for me. What I've learned from Freud and Jung is that you cannot just abandon or repress desire. There's something in our psychology that is constantly producing and channeling desire.

I found in Freud an incredible insight about the nature of desire. The idea is that desire operates within us like energy does in the physical world. It is something that cannot be created or destroyed. It is always there and can only be channeled and transferred from one thing to the next. What this means is that you cannot ignore desire. It will just come back to you in your dreams or unconscious neurotic behavior or, worse, some kind of psychological disorder.

I really believe that Freud is right about this. The behavior of spiritual aspirants throughout history seems to confirm the theory. For in many spiritual traditions, the archetypal response to the problem of desire is to essentially to reject the world completely and move to a cave or a monastery or the forest. This strategy is based on the idea of trying to close off as many of the worldly channels for desire as possible and leave only space for spiritual devotion. It recognizes explicitly Freud's point that desire is always there.

When the Buddha embarked upon his mission to realize God he took this exact path. But interestingly, when he came back from the forest, he told everyone that this is not the way at all. For me, this point has always really resonated. Why reject the world and life? How could that possibly be the right answer to the problem of desire? What about love, family and friendship? What about the desire to do good? Be courageous? To contribute? To create? There has to be a better answer than just sealing yourself off from the allures of life.

Ok, so what do we do? To overcome desire, you need to learn the secrets of detached action. The idea is most clearly articulated in the Bhagavad Gita:

You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of rewards, nor should you long for inaction.

Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself—without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat. For yoga is perfect evenness of mind.

In other words, to deal properly with desire it's not a matter of repression or avoidance. It's about transference. What Krishna is telling Arjuna here is that to overcome desire you have to use it as the energy of action. And you have to use it completely. Every bit of the energy of desire needs to be channeled into the work of your action. You cannot allow any thoughts of rewards or even the avoidance of punishment or pain to enter your mind. Your concentration on the action has to be complete. By the way, this is the EXACT same conclusion that the people who have been researching the "flow state" have "discovered." Obviously, this is no coincidence.

Ok, back to money. If you acknowledge that money is desire and you learn how to deal with it through detached action, where does that take you?

Engaging with money in this way allows you to overcome the unconscious programming of desire. It allows you to see the truth about money and to be more effective in engaging with it. You will become a better investor and better at managing your financial affairs. You will see more and more opportunities to use the energy of desire for conscious purposes, rather than be used by it. You will make better decisions about your work in the world and become less prone to financial manipulation.

Let me leave you with some practical examples from the world of investing. Behavioral economists have done these studies that demonstrate, for example, how we have this interesting quirk when it comes to making and losing money. We absolutely cannot stand the thought of losing money. So much so, that the intensity of our psychological experience when losing small amounts of money is higher than when we win a large amount. We feel the pain of a small loss more than the joy of a large gain.

This phenomenon is driven precisely because we tend to think of money as a thing rather than a force. And this false belief makes us do all sorts of nonproductive things as investors. We hold onto our losers, hoping to get "back to even" before we sell. We become psychologically anchored to the price we pay for an investment and measure (improperly) everything based upon that. We sell our winners too early. There are some nuances, of course, but to be a great investor,

you should essentially do the opposite of all this. What happens when you don't have the right view on money is that your judgment becomes impaired by a cloud of emotional content. You literally cannot see the truth of the situation because your mind is all wrapped in the emotion of desire—fear, excitement, doubt, worry.... If you can engage instead with a spirit of detachment, this cloud disappears. Not only can you see better, you can think better.

There are countless advantages that come from the right understanding of money:

- You can make investments that don't appear to make any rational sense—ones with enormously large future payout potential but maybe a small probability of success. This is the entire basis of the venture capital model. The ability to be unchained from the unnatural constraints of “prudence” or “rationality” gives you a huge advantage in life.
- You can more easily avoid and resolve conflict in your life. Anyone who has ever been in a lawsuit intuitively understands the emotional power of money. Sometimes all it takes is a large check to heal a deep emotional wound.
- You can learn how to use money as a means for authentic expression. This usually manifests in areas like the giving of gifts, support for the arts and philanthropy but it goes beyond that really. When you deal with money in the right way, you realize that every interaction you have, every little decision you make about what to buy and where to buy it presents an opportunity to do something good with money, to express something meaningful to another person. It functions like a message. “Hey, I really appreciate you and your work,” or “Hey, I am sorry I did that to you. Please accept my apology.” The opportunities are endless here.

Ultimately, getting real about money and desire is about bringing more and more consciousness to the unconscious forces of your life. The more you do this, the better off you will be. □



Nick Halaris
750 N. San Vicente Blvd.
Suite 800 West
West Hollywood, CA 90069

