Desires are inexhaustible, but we can use this moment of disruption to ask ourselves what we really need.

To have what we don’t want. To want what we don’t have. To have what we want but not be able to keep it. These three conditions, grouped under the rubric desire, form the root of our suffering, says Buddhism. Left to itself, desire runs like a perpetual-motion machine that never, ever wears down.

This is not a particularly revolutionary insight. Street peddlers and shopkeepers, advertising agencies and marketing executives have always known the power of desire. They have all sorts of ways of fulfilling our needs, or of creating them when they don’t exist. Advertising especially relies on the fact that much of the time we don’t even know what we crave. Oh, we may realize as the Zappos box arrives on our doorstep, what I really wanted was love, [but by then it’s too late](https://tricycle.org/magazine/desire-in-buddhism/). What we have instead is a pair of shoes—and a growing hunger.

But what happens when we can no longer buy our way out of our discomfort, our loneliness, our fear? When another iPhone upgrade, another episode of [Watchmen](https://tricycle.org/magazine/watchmen-buddhism/) isn’t enough to buffer us from the stark truth that a human life is infinitely more fragile than we’re willing to admit? That the balance between illness and health—where health includes physical, psychological, and emotional well being—is so precarious, that a single virus, a thousand times smaller than a human hair, can tip it and within months radically changes the lives of eight billion people?

There’s no question that the coronavirus pandemic has caused untold amounts of pain and will continue to do so for some time. But we could also see its presence as the perfect opportunity to pause and ask ourselves what constitutes a fulfilling life.

Admittedly, this will not be the most pressing question on the minds of the hundreds of thousands of people in this country sick with the virus or the millions who are risking their lives to care for them. It won’t be on the minds of the bus drivers, grocery store clerks, mail carriers, and delivery people who are forced to continue going to work despite the risks because not doing so is financially untenable. Their focus is on surviving. So the onus is on those of us who have the space, time, and stability to consider the choices we make beyond those that ensure our survival. It’s on us to use this unprecedented moment to wonder, What do I really need and for what purpose?

In the Padotta Sutta, there’s a parable about four kinds of horses likened to four types of people with varying degrees of **self-awareness.** The first horse is so quick that it moves merely at the shadow of its trainer’s whip. This horse is like a person who, hearing of the pain and death of a distant villager, is compelled to find the meaning of her own life. The second horse moves when the whip touches its skin, just like someone who personally witnesses the pain or death of one of an acquaintance and is spurred to action. The third horse doesn’t move until the whip punctures its flesh, like a person who fails to react until she sees the pain or death of one of her close relatives. The fourth horse remains unmoving until the whip penetrates its marrow, like a person who must herself experience pain and the threat of death before waking up to the urgency of understanding her own existence.

The virus has brought death close. This is both its curse and its blessing. When life becomes very bare and fundamental, what do we turn toward to find true comfort? What will actually deliver on the promise of happiness that our societies have failed to produce?

At the end of his life, [the Buddha](https://tricycle.org/beginners/buddhism/who-was-the-buddha/) gave another teaching on desire. He said, “Having few desires is the Way.” He was asking: What do you really need? How much of it? And are your wants actually meeting your needs? These are simple questions, yet as a society we’ve routinely ignored or actively avoided asking them. So it’s both ironic and fitting that our confinement has opened up much-needed space to consider whether we can do things differently.

Like the rest of us, I’m looking forward to a time when life can return to normal, when I can not only see but also hold my family and friends, resume my long walks, my visits to museums and theaters. But as the days go by, the more convinced I become that we’re neither going to return to normal nor that there is such a thing as “normal”—unless we consider normal the unbridled greed that’s causing our own and the planet’s destruction. We could call it corporate greed, except corporations don’t have desire. People do. The same people who think it’s normal to rank life below profit, normal to incite others to protest for their right to die or cause others to die—and who call that freedom.

Still, I’m not pessimistic. I don’t see this virus as punishment for our past wrongs, although I do believe in the law of [karma](https://tricycle.org/beginners/buddhism/what-is-karma/) (cause and effect), and accept our current circumstances as the result of an intricate web of both individual and collective choices. I don’t consider the pandemic another war to be won. Instead, I choose to take the virus as a call to rethink our living.

**Perhaps we can use this time to begin to learn to want what we have.**To not want so much of what we don’t have. And to [willingly relinquish](https://tricycle.org/magazine/lighten-your-load/) what we can’t hold on to. We don’t have to renounce every inessential thing, nor would we want to. Mint-chocolate ice-cream and mystery novels may not be essentials, but life would be bleaker without them. We don’t need to get rid of desire because without it we wouldn’t dream, we wouldn’t grow, we wouldn’t innovate. We don’t need to become Luddites or ascetics. What we need is the willingness to look honestly at our wants and our choices and ask ourselves, does this make sense—not just for me, not just for now, but for everyone and for our future?

While nothing we do will make up for the thousands of deaths the virus has caused—especially the unnecessary losses of health-care workers, black and brown people, and the abandoned elderly—we can at least do our part to ensure that they not be in vain.

For them and for all those who’ve suffered through illness and loss, let’s ask ourselves what sort of “normal” we want to return to when the worst of the pandemic is behind us. Stepping forward from this point, what kind of world will we co-create?