

Taming

BY KATHERINE PEW

the Hoarding Furies



From the time I could walk, I was a hoarder.

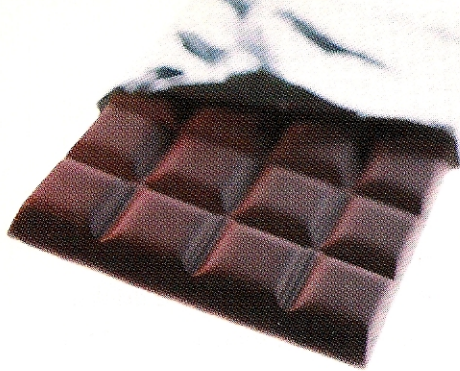
As a toddler I'd collect as many miniature boxes of raisins as I could get my hands on, stashing them all over the house. On Halloween I ransacked the closets for the biggest, sturdiest shopping bag I could find. I didn't want to take the chance of my trick-or-treat bag breaking. And if I happened to stumble on a house whose occupants had gone out for the evening, leaving behind a bowl full of candy with a sign saying "Please take just one," my friends and I would stuff fistfuls into our bulging sacks. My plundering induced twinges of remorse, but greed always seemed to win out in the end. When I got home, I slipped off to my room, closing the door behind me. There I spread all the candy out in front of me on the bed, sorting my spoils into piles of Snickers, Milky Ways, Kit Kats, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, and miniature Hershey Bars.

I stored everything in a large cookie tin—sometimes even two on a good year—which I squirreled away, and each day after school, I headed straight for my room to sort through it all, leisurely deciding what to have that day. I made the goodies last till Thanksgiving.

Easter egg hunts were another ritual that brought out the worst in me. Unfortunately for my two brothers, I was the oldest and fastest. I dashed around, ferreting out every chocolate egg I could find. When my parents surreptitiously tried to point out a hidden egg to my brothers, I'd say, "No fair! No helping!" Finally they had to resort to giving my brothers a head start.

I've always been embarrassed by my bouts of acquisitiveness, and I do my best to hide them, but they seem to get the better of me anyway. When I began studying the *Yoga Sutra*, however, and got to the *yamas* (the first of the eight limbs of yoga), *aparigraha*—non-hoarding or non-grasping—leaped out at me. I knew I had some serious work to do. *Aparigraha* means taking just what you need and no more—and being content with that. Not me. When I go into a coffee shop and spy a plate of free sweets on the counter, it's like Halloween and Easter all over again. I find myself sampling at least three or four, especially if no one else happens to be around. I began to monitor and reflect on my hoarding habits; and as I did, I met someone to whom *aparigraha* came effortlessly.

Last fall I took a trip with my father to Creede, an old mining



town in the mountains of Colorado. Ed Wintz, a cowboy friend of my dad's, took us horseback riding way up into the high country of the Weminuche Wilderness. After a few days with Ed, I realized that he is the embodiment of *aparigraha*. Our first night at dinner, Ed and my father were chuckling over an experience they'd had together the last time my father had been in Creede. They had made a reservation for dinner at a little family restaurant, and when they arrived, a flustered woman told them that there had been a family feud, and the kitchen was closed for the evening. She apologized profusely and insisted that their next dinner there would be on the house.

"Well, at least you got a free dinner out of it," I said. "Have you gone back yet?"

"Oh, no," he said, "It didn't put me out any. Your dad and I just went on to dinner at another place. I couldn't see as how they owed me anything." Ed doesn't jump at the chance to get something free out of life.

Another thing about Ed: his neighbor has a horse who regularly manages to get herself stuck in the barbed wire fence that divides their land. And it is always Ed who cuts her free. Some people might get a little aggravated at having to stop and untangle someone else's horse again and again. At the very least,

they might want a little gratitude in return for their efforts. Not Ed. He's never even bothered to mention it to his neighbor. This seems like an offshoot of *aparigraha* to me—not grasping for credit or recognition. Ed is remarkably, effortlessly, detached from the fruits of his labors. When he does a good turn for someone, he doesn't do it because he expects something in return. It brings to mind a *shloka* from the *Bhagavad Gita*: Krishna says, "The unenlightened do things with attachment [wanting some results for themselves]. An enlightened person does things with the same zeal, but without attachment, and thus guides others on the path of selfless action" (3:25).

Ed recently retired from his job running a dude ranch for the past forty years. Before he left, the owner said, "You've taken such impeccable care of things around here, I realize I don't even know who our farrier is. I guess I'd better get his name and number from you before you leave." As it turned out, Ed had been shoeing all thirty horses on the ranch for forty years and never even mentioned it. He could easily have hired someone else to do it, but he did it himself, taking on the extra work without thinking twice, and saving his boss thousands of dollars over the years—without a thought of remuneration. As Krishna says in the *Gita*, "Whoever does things without personal desire for the results is called wise by the sages. That person's actions are pure and he knows the truth" (4:19). *Aparigraha* seems >>>

skillful action

to go hand in hand with *santosa*—contentment. If you are content with what you have, you don't feel the need to grasp for more.

After devoting the better part of his life to caring for someone else's ranch, Ed has finally built his own house on land that has been passed down through his family since his great-grandfather homesteaded it a century ago. It seemed a shame to me that he hadn't been able to afford to raise his family on his own land and have his own ranch, but that's not the way he sees it. "I'm a lucky man," he says. "I got to spend my life doing what I love."

We spent our last night in Creede at the beautiful, remote guest ranch where his father had

been the foreman for thirty years. Ed grew up there. In our rooms there were baskets full of candy bars, M&M's, chips, and drinks. The moment I spotted mine, I felt that familiar quickening of the pulse and thought to myself, "Aha, these will make perfect snacks for the flight home." And lest I somehow forget them when I was packing up the next morning, I wasted no time in emptying the contents into my backpack. A few moments later the manager of the ranch stopped by to welcome us, and as we were chatting, her eyes swept across the room. To my mortification, I saw her pause to take in the decimated goodie basket. I winced, the heat rising in my cheeks. She

was too polite to say anything, but she was visibly startled.

As she left the room, I berated myself for my hoarding frenzy. Of course it was mortifying to be caught. But at the same time it made me remember Ed—and his innate sense of *aparigraha*. The urge to grasp had taken hold of me before I'd even been aware of it. But as I unloaded the contents of my backpack onto the bed, and pondered that mound of sweets, my stockpiling instincts receded; a sense of relief washed over me as I refilled the basket. The next day, as I boarded the plane for New York, my pack felt blessedly light on my back. ♦

Freelance writer Katherine Pew teaches yoga at the Jivamukti Yoga Center in New York City.

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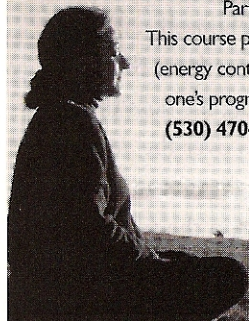
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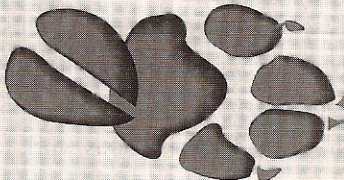
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