

Chapter Seven

Things: We Own Them They Don't Own Us

Much of our lives is spent purchasing, returning, taking care of, cleaning, putting away, moving and getting rid of things. We acquire possessions through purchase, gifts and inheritance. Once we are owners, possessions demand, a large portion of our life energy. How do we become more skillful in our relationship to things? What do we do with the things we no longer use and the things that belonged to the people we loved dearly? Like our choices and attitudes about time, our choices about possessions also shape our lives.

Most of us experience a complex range of intense emotions toward possessions. As Americans, we are trained consumers. We often purchase with mixed feelings, however. We know we have too much stuff. At the same time, we often feel, in fact are conditioned to feel, that we don't have enough.

Gaining a deeper understanding of your relationship to the material world can enhance your enjoyment of the things you have. It helps to recognize that you're conditioned to want more things. Unquenchable desires power our economy. An American Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg, tells a story about a friend who said that when she was learning to talk, her favorite phrases were, "I need it! I want it! I have to have it!" For many of us, this is an ongoing mantra of our lives. Understanding both the will to own and the impact of owning can free us to let go of things we no longer want or need.

One paradox about possessions is that owning and desiring things can bring both pleasure and joy, as well as anxiety and disappointment. Desire does not by its nature have to become greed. It is a life force propelling us to move towards people, experiences and things that we want. One great challenge of desire, however, is that it can slip into greed very easily. Then, we might find that we are making huge decisions

about our lives in order to fulfill our greed. Working skillfully with desire means learning to distinguish between need and greed, and learning to hold our desires more lightly, not take them quite so seriously.

We can use our possessions artfully to create places and spaces that nourish us. Traditionally possessions represented years of savings and were passed on through generations. Yet, because we have become accustomed to the disposable nature of most things, we are less aware of how profoundly our possessions can shape our environment. Working skillfully with our possessions means that we can derive great benefit from each thing that we have and let go of the rest.

Pause Before You Purchase

One way to handle the overload of possessions is to keep things from coming through the door. "But I want things! Things make me happy," we say. We all know that that it's true up to a point. Your fifteenth special momento t-shirt probably makes you happy for about a day, then it goes on a pile with fourteen others. On TV, radio, the internet, and in magazines, we are offered pictures of how good things could be, if only we purchased something. Americans consume an enormous amount of the world's resources, and there is no sign of diminishing demand. In fact, we are exporting our consumer-oriented lifestyle around the world.

What does this have to do with us? Even the prudent among us participate in over-consumption. There is a personal price to this. When our own desires for things are out of proportion to actual need, we cease to enjoy them as much. Then, old unused things collect. Even new unused things collect. Elizabeth's experience is not uncommon: "I'll go to the mall and see all kinds of things I think I need, and then I get them home and leave them unpacked in the corner of the living room. I don't have time to unpack them, let alone put them away. Later, I look at them wonder what I was

thinking. I don't really need this stuff, I have lost the receipts and now I'm stuck with things that I have no room for, after all."

Does this mean, "No more shopping fun?" No, it doesn't. You can still enjoy the sensuous pleasures of shopping, of choosing the colors and the textures. But shop with the awareness that it's just not fun to be snowed under by belongings. It's not economical or ecological to throw good products away when they aren't fully used. Buy fewer things of better quality. Truly savor the things you buy. Use them well. Allow them to shape your beautiful space.

Acquisition provides an excellent field for examining our underlying beliefs – beliefs about money and purchasing are powerful. We buy to look good. We shop to assuage hurt feelings. We spend our money to cover our fears. Take some time to sit with the anxiety of buying less. Mark said, "I go to the mall every week to check out the electronics. Most of the time I come back with something new. But I often don't open it. Sometimes I forget what I bought the week before, and I discover that I have two now. I decided to skip the mall run for a month to see what happened. A month seemed like a very long time. But I learned something. I realized that I go for the glamour and the sense of power that electronics seem to give me." Most of us have our areas of buying addictions. It might be sports equipment, clothes, books, CD's or make up.

As you take the challenge of pausing before purchasing, you open a rich realm of learning about what's beneath the addiction. What are you covering up? What are you really longing for? When you give up an addiction, you can start to get what you really need. Go back to your vision of what you want in life, and slow down when you are buying things. Less is more. Buy something only if you absolutely love it, if it's been on your list for several weeks, and if you are sure that you have a place for it. Otherwise, let it go. Think of all of those things that you thought you really wanted that you are now putting in the "give-away pile."

Tools to Help You Pause Before You Purchase

- Shop from a list. Remember, *you will want more than you need*. Wait a couple of days or a week before you buy something that seems very compelling. In a week you may have forgotten about it. Buy it if it's been on your list for several weeks.
- Buy it only if you really love it, not sort of love it.
- Buy it only if you have a place for it. Whether you are buying clothes, toys, books, or kitchen equipment, remind yourself that everything you bring into your home or office needs a place. It's best to identify the place for this purchase beforehand. If you don't have space for it, either don't buy it or choose something else to get rid of.
- Make a list of things that you really want but think you can't afford. Include a special vacation or a beautiful piece of artwork. Perhaps you want to take a workshop or course.
- Keep that list with you when you shop.
- Put the money you don't spend on the clothes or equipment that you don't really need into a savings account. Save the money for something that you really want.
- Get skillful at comparing the allure of the new thing with the piles of unused belongings in your house.
- Examine your beliefs about ownership. What does ownership mean to you?

Create an "Alive" Place for Everything

Once you bring things home, you have to put them somewhere. This is where your new aesthetic comes to life. All the organizing advice supports the traditional wisdom, "a place for everything and everything in its place." I used to think that was a terrible

idea. It was so routine and uncreative. Finally, though, after many years of looking for misplaced items, I could admit that this practice helped me find my keys, shoes and sunglasses, because I had learned to put objects back when I was done using them.

Finding an "alive" place for everything takes this idea one step further. It means making sure that the things you own are in use. It means that when they are in place, they are in place for a purpose. The purpose may be aesthetic or sentimental, but the things have a specific meaning. When everything you own is actually in use in this sense, your office or house comes alive. You don't feel the dead weight of unused things around you.

Creating an alive environment around you enhances your own daily energy. As you think about finding alive spaces for your possessions, you'll begin to see which things have a purpose and which drain your energy. You'll realize that the twenty bottles of shampoo and conditioner on the shelves in the tub can be reduced to eight and then to two. The suit you have not worn for three years is no longer "alive" for you. You don't like it. You're not going to wear it. It could be alive for someone else, though, if you gave it away. Those training manuals from ten years ago are useless to you. You're not using them. They are creating dead space.

The harder questions concern your twenty beautiful vases, bowls, artwork, special books, some perhaps were presents, while others you picked up traveling. They take up space, and chances are you don't use all of them. Start to prune them. Let go. It's okay. In fact, you'll start to feel better and better as you are using the things you have rather than using your home as a storage facility.

An "alive" place for everything means that you store the things that you use frequently within easy reach. You have enough to meet your needs, but not too much. You love or use the things that you have. The energy in your home will feel fresh when you live like this because you are not maintaining unused, unappreciated items and when the things around you are in use, you have a sense of true elegance, a sense of fit

between yourself, your things and your environment. You are in relationship to the things you have. They become special because you are living your life with them

Exercise: The unused things in your space are like energy leaks. In *Clear Your Clutter with Feng Shui* Karen Kingston, suggests that you ask three questions about the things that you own:

1. Does it lift my energy when I think about it or look at it?
2. Do I absolutely love it?
3. Is it genuinely useful and [do I use it]?

Set aside a short amount of time, say ten minutes. Walk around a room in your home or try this in your office. Look at five different items in your space and ask the three questions about each one. If there answer is not a resounding yes to question 1, and an equally resounding yes to either question 2 or 3, then what is it doing in your life? Let it go.

If you decide to keep it, now ask, “Is it in a place where I can access it easily?” If not, find a better place for it. Sometimes finding a better place for something means creating that space. Papers tend to be more useful and aesthetic when placed in file drawers. Books also benefit from being stored in bookshelves rather than on floors and other surfaces. After you decide what you want to keep, make sure you have sufficient, attractive space to store it

Love What You Own

As you clear away your clutter and excess possessions, you start to discover some spaciousness in your home and workplace. You are creating space through letting go. Now, perhaps you have fewer things. The less you have, the more that the things you own can truly enhance your life through their beauty and usefulness. When we truly appreciate our things, we get much more satisfaction from them. Then, in turn, we need

fewer things. Our possessions can bring us art, beauty, knowledge, utility and pleasure.

As you let go of what you don't need, your true treasures can emerge. Recently, Debbie went on a search through her house for a special pair of shoes that she loves. "These are from Italy, and I love them, but I have so many pairs of shoes that I completely forgot about them for a while. Last year I found them in their shoebox at the top of a closet. They are my favorite shoes, but I barely wear them."

Holding onto things can be a way of connecting to your history. You might have heard stories from people about a particular chair or a table, and how their grandfather carried that particular table across the country. Or how this beautiful set of dishes belonged to "your great grandmother in Hungary." And these things evoke our families and our past. Something extraordinary can happen when the spirits of our forebears join with us in our own present day lives. They are treasures.

Slowly over time, you can fill your spaces with things that have special meaning for you. These items help tell your story. In Hebrew, the word for "thing" and "word" is the same. Thus, our things could be our words, and our words are part of our story. Loving your things helps you tell your story. Your special treasures then contribute to a place to live that is alive with meaning for you. Your things contribute to what we could call your landscape and your personal landscape influences how you experience life. If your environment is meager in meaning, you'll experience that meagerness in your soul.

Exercise: Select one of your favorite possessions. If it is small take it in your hands. If it is large, such as a piece of furniture, sit on or near it. Now, tell the story. You can tell

the story to yourself, a child, a friend, or write it in your journal. Notice how much a treasured possession can enrich your life. Now notice the difference between this and something that is not important to you.

Care for the Possessions You Decide to Keep

Caring for your things is a practice of seeing life energy, or God or the Buddha in everything. Things themselves have energy. When we treat our belongings with care, we become aware that the caring energy returns to us. Our personal environment reflects a high quality of consciousness. How you care for your things is a way of caring for the self.

There are several ways to care for possessions. Some of them are purely technical such as keeping them repaired. Others are aesthetic such as ironing shirts or tablecloths. Another type extends the life of an object such as oiling wood and leather. Each type of care is time consuming and can be valuable. Susan relates a time when at “about ten o'clock at night, I was wiping off the dining table. I thought, ‘I hate this. Why do I always have to be the one who clears off the dining table?’ Suddenly, I noticed the grain of the wood. And I started actually looking at the table. The grain is beautiful, and I noticed that looking at it made me feel peaceful. I thought, ‘I am revealing beauty.’ I realized that, in caring for the table, I was also caring for myself and my family. I not only suddenly felt relaxed, but I took care of the task much more quickly. I was not wasting time, I was doing something worthwhile. My resentful thoughts were brakes on the activity. Now I could set those aside.”

Caring for the things you have is a special category of “valuing maintenance time.” When we take care of our belongings, not obsessively, but with an attitude of

appreciation, we bring a sense of care to our homes. When you are wiping down the table, making the bed, or washing the tub, try doing so in a spirit of caring. Appreciate your blessings and your possessions as you give them the care they need. Think about this teaching which comes from the intentional community of Findhorn, “You can do it positively and really enjoy seeing a lovely shine come up as you rub, or you can do it negatively and just feel it is another job that must be done. When you start on a job, whatever it may be, see that your attitude towards it is right, and how very different an experience you will have. Your attitude makes it one thing or the other.”

Determined Discarding

Determined discarding takes the actions of moving belongings out of your house seriously. You might have begun this work in chapter seven, under “Getting to Ready”. Now you can take it further. Create standards for your determination. Whether you are clearing office files, computer disks, bookshelves, or closets, apply these principles. You will get rid of something if

- You haven't used it for a year
- You don't actually *require* it for record-keeping
- You don't *love* it, (just liking it isn't enough) or think it is beautiful
- It doesn't have deep significance for you. (Not a little nostalgia but deep significance)

Alternatively you might set standards for being very discriminating. Many people find it much easier to look for the few things that I will keep rather than identify what they have to let go of. It's a completely different experience to identify and set aside the things that:

- You use it regularly
- You require for bookkeeping
- You love or think are beautiful
- Have deep meaning for you

Deborah decided to keep only the clothes that she loved and felt great in. If she had passed up an outfit for a whole year, it would go out - even if it was cute and she only had to lose ten pounds to fit into it. At the end, she had a closet full of great clothes, and none the things that made her feel bad, fat, or ugly. She had a self-acceptance closet. When she opened it, she felt great.

Create a memory box for storing a few things that still release a flood of special memories. Keep a few of your treasures, just not all of them. A small carton, basket or small suitcase could be enough for your special things.

Kimberley used her move overseas for a year to discard as much as she could. "When we were packing I would load up the car every week and bring a load to the Salvation Army bin. When we were finally ready to leave, there was nothing extra upstairs. It is now beautifully and simply furnished. I had given most things away, and what is left is in the basement. I felt unencumbered. The house felt light. Now, I think, when I come back, I don't want to bring anything up from the basement. I like this feeling of freedom."

Notice that when you keep things, you have to deal with them. Instead of doing something that you love, you will be sorting through paperwork and unused belongings. You'll be moving them, trying to organize them, cleaning them, figuring

out where to store them — and you won't be doing what you love. So, watch how you talk to yourself.

Sometimes we hold onto things to avoid the grief of acknowledging that we are at a crossroads. When we let go, we are forced to recognize that we have made a choice, that we can't do everything in life. We are always making choices, letting go of the path that we won't follow. That is the nature of life. Keeping our possessions is a way of trying to keep our many choices alive. We think, "I still can go that route. I still have the things that allow me to take that path." We do this with our size 6 clothes, or our notes from the botany class that we loved. We still mean to take nature walks and pull out our notes. And yet, years go by and we haven't looked at them once. So what is going on here? If we keep those notes, we can imagine that we are still interested in botany. But we never touch them. So, is it botany that we are interested in? Or is it retaining the memory of a wonderful teacher? Or do we want the feel of earth on our hands as we work in the garden? Or was it those moments of pure curiosity that we loved, the pure exploration of something new?

When you look more deeply to see what it is that you are wanting when you keep these things, you may find something pure and inspiring. The botany notes may mean that you want to plant a tray full of geraniums, and to dive into the earth, and you can do this as well as let go of the notes. Can you see how keeping all the options alive can deaden your current life? There's too much swirling around in you. It's hard to focus. Yet, as you make those hard choices you free parts of yourself that linger, undeveloped giving you a chance to follow up on what you really desire instead of simply maintaining all that old stuff.

Exercise: You can do this exercise by imagining a specific pile, mess or drawer in detail. Alternatively, approach the messy place and find a place to sit facing it, or if it is a very messy area or room, in it.

Feel your way into it. What does it feel like? Where is the feeling in your body? Allow yourself to stay with that feeling in your body and explore where you learned to feel this way? How do you feel about the backlog?

Write about those feelings.

Now notice that you created it. You are the source of this. You are the King or Queen of the backlog. It's yours. Write about creating the mess.

Now imagine that the backlog is gone. Imagine life without your backlog. All the excess is gone, you can see the floors, desk, couch, dining table. You have a lot more space. Your calendar is manageable. You feel exhilarated each day because you are doing enough, and no more than you can do. Your surfaces are clear, your mind is clear, your heart is open. From this place, write about what your backlog has been doing for you.

As you write, consider the following benefits.

- Protecting
- Isolating

- Keeping you from what you really want
- Keeping you at home
- Keeping you out of the house
- Keeping you close to someone
- Keeping you far away from someone

- Covering anxiety
- Keeping you from feeling your loneliness
- Keeping you from feeling your feelings
- Keeping your inner critic alive and close to you
- Helping you be like someone you love

Once you have identified a benefit the mess, ask yourself if this benefit is what you really want?

And, if so – is maintaining your backlog the best way to get it? Explore whether there are other ways to get this benefit and give up your backlog.

The Special Case of Sorting and Discarding Piles of Paper

"I just get close to my pile, and I start to get confused. I could have been having a great day, and I can ruin it by sorting piles."

"Every time I try to sort out my pile, it seems that I create almost exactly the same pile next to it. I can't seem to get anywhere."

"I get bogged down so easily. I find myself reading through catalogues or old unsent letters. Or I get hung up on these outdated refund checks that I thought I had lost. I don't know what to do with them. Can they be reissued?"

Do these comments about those plaguing piles of paper sound familiar? The fact is, sorting piles is one of the great challenges of getting organized. The problem is that most of us recreate our piles over and over again rather than diminishing and then getting rid of them. Remember, if you go through the same thinking when you first

created that pile, you will recreate the same pile. The trick is to think different thoughts than those that you were thinking when you created them.

Your old way of sorting piles might have included thinking like, "I don't know where this (insurance form, bank statement, invoice....) goes, so I'll put it here until I figure it out." Or you might think, "I don't know if I want to engage in this activity (theater, lessons, community group)...." Or, "I'll probably need this information for something, but I am not sure what, so I'll leave it here in case I need it."

You can begin to see that your pile is a collection of unmade decisions, a pile of confusion, emotional stuckness and perhaps insecurity. In order to get rid of your pile, you need to be thinking thoughts such as:

- "I am going to take the time right now to figure this out."
- "I am going to create a folder for bank statements right now."
- "This is confusing. I'll call and get help, now."
- "It is important to completely deal with this item."
- "I'll make this decision now. Even if it is not perfect, it's done."
- "The faster I completely work through this pile, the sooner I can get out and do something that I love. I deserve that."

One of the challenges for imaginative people is that they can think of lots of things to do with some of the papers in their piles: send it to someone, write an essay about it, use it as an idea for an event they might want to hold someday, save it for later, or create a new file for it (but they are not sure what file). The whole time that you are sorting piles remind yourself to use your creativity to *get through* the sorting, not make the sorting more complicated. Do not sit in a comfortable chair rereading old letters, and don't interpret why it is amazing that you found this item now. Recognize that

your piles of papers may include a wide range of items that are unrelated to each other and be prepared to think about many different things one after the other. That takes creativity and flexibility of mind.

Once you have prepared yourself to think differently about the task ahead, you are ready to begin.

1. **Set a short time limit.** Twenty minutes of real sorting is much more effective than an hour of horsing around, getting distracted, depressed, or bogged down. Use a timer. Set your timer for ten minutes. And then, set it for ten more minutes. This will help you stay aware of time. Then, reset the timer if you have the energy to continue.
2. Consciously **energize yourself.** Remind yourself of your purpose and vision. Put on good music with a beat. Tell yourself that this is a moment of truth. You are a clutter warrior. Pull out your sword of clarity and sort.
3. Remind yourself of **your purpose** in sorting the pile. You are looking for current financial papers, you need current health records, you might want to keep a few letters. Everything that you do not need goes out. Be ruthlessly realistic. This is the path to your vision.
4. Take a **short stack of papers:** no more than an inch high away from the main pile. Now, your energy is bigger than the pile. You can handle an inch of paper.
5. **Take care of each item completely.** Either file it, take action on it, delegate it or throw it away. *Do not put it in another pile because you don't know what to do with it.* This is the time to find out. Even if you spend the whole twenty minutes trying to figure out what to do with it, take the time. Then it's over.

When Frank a senior marketing executive got bogged down in his e-mail backlog he used the same tools. He would not open his inbox until he had established that he was an email Samurai. That image worked for him. He wouldn't even try to get through his inbox if he was on the run, rather, when he had ten minutes or more he would ground himself in his vision, his purpose and his warrior stance.

The Special Case of Discarding Our Deceased Parents' Belongings

When our parents die, we often have to with both with losing them and letting go of their possessions, which can represent a whole world to us. This is a sad topic, letting go of the beautiful shoes and dresses that were worn by a beloved parent, the books they loved, the cherished coffee cup, the special casserole dish can be painful. Pick a few special things that remind you of their essence. Pick out the china or the cufflinks that have value to you, and let the rest go. All those belongings won't bring your parent back. Giving or throwing them away does not make you a bad person. It doesn't mean that you didn't love your parent. It just means that you can distinguish between things and feelings and that is good.

Sandra's parents had passed away and she had thirty-five boxes of their belongings in the basement. She had no idea what to do next. She had no need for the things, yet she was reluctant to just give it all to the Salvation Army. That seemed disrespectful of her parents' well-lived lives. In addition, when she opened the boxes, she was overwhelmed by the sense of an era that had passed, that would never come again, and she grieved anew, not just for her parents, but for herself as well. "I open those boxes and I feel like an orphan. Then, I just can't do anything. I am paralysed with grief, longing, memories."

She decided to hold a special ritual for letting go of her parents' belongings. She wanted to create an event that was special, respectful and honoring of her parents and of her need to move on. She found an organization for the homeless that desperately needed the things that she could not use. She selected a few things that really mattered to her, that would represent her parents. She wrote a letter to her parents describing the special things that she had with her. She invited two good friends to witness the letting go of her parents' belongings, and in tears, she watched as the volunteers picked up the things.

She almost said, "Wait, don't go. I want those things, I can't let them go. It's hard to say goodbye." She knew that she was weeping for her parents, not for the belongings, but she felt another tearing away, another leaving. Her friends helped her let the things go. Later, she felt that she could claim more of her space and her life, and she created a practice of communicating with her deceased parents once a week to keep them updated on her life.

Practicing the Wisdom of Things

Mastering the wisdom of things in a consumer society can be as powerful as mastering a martial art. You will develop your character by affirming what you truly want and need, and saying 'no' to the rest. You will develop a sense of your limits, deepen your sense of who you are, and enjoy the courage of not getting too caught up in limitless desire.