



# Tricycle Teachings

# ADDICTION

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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## INTRODUCTION

For Buddhists, *samsara* is the continuous cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. We wander through these states of existence, suffering all the while, because we're compulsively attached to a mistaken view of the way things are. The best way to understand what *samsara* feels like might be to reflect upon our addictions. Although we typically think of drug or alcohol dependency when we discuss addiction, it's clear that compulsive behavior can take many forms. We can be addicted to all sorts of activities: eating, shopping, cultivating thought patterns, or even going to the gym, so that we turn ordinarily healthy habits into self-destructive obsessions. Enlightenment, then, can be thought of as breaking the vicious *samsaric* circle of our repetitive behavior. Of course, this is easier said than done. This Tricycle e-book offers Buddhist wisdom and advice on addiction and recovery.

—*The Tricycle editors*

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LEANING INTO RAWNESS

A psychotherapist discusses addiction

TRUDY WALTER

I used to love getting stoned. I especially loved to get stoned and read dharma. When stoned I was never bored: Every single piece of my world was reliably fascinating. My curiosity and delight with any- and everybody was palpable. I could read the newspaper and not have my blood curdle. Trees would twinkle and wave especially at me. It felt as if the miracle of my life was familiar and accessible again: Here I was once again in this cozy space. I got so into the addiction that I could hardly go for a walk without getting buzzed. Almost every high brought that tremendous feeling of contact—that feeling of being a part of every crack in the sidewalk, every mosquito trying to make its way in the world. Exhaustion was buoyed and did not weigh so heavily. With gratitude, not annoyance, humbleness, not resentment, I could carry on domestic routines: the care of two small children, a husband, and a dog; food purchase, preparation, and cleanup; laundry; not to mention a widening array of friends and participation in Buddhist practices that took daily attention, most of every weekend, though it was sangha-driven as well, with the abundant and never-ending celebrations, practices, feasts, and training programs. Getting stoned brought perceived relief but no real rest. I was part of a life-transforming scene that would change the world, and I didn't want to miss it.

I had heard stories from first- and second-wave practitioners from Tail of the Tiger that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche had held a special ceremony one evening where all who lived there were asked to bring their stashes of dope and bum them up in the campfire while he proclaimed “the end of illusion.” It didn’t make any sense to me, since I knew how much alcohol and other substances were being consumed there. It especially didn’t make sense when it seemed that my drug of choice was being condemned, while my husband’s drug of choice (alcohol) was being celebrated. Drinking lessons were held as we were taught about bringing awareness to inebriating the senses. Alcohol was sanctified during feast practice as our usually chaotic mind was redirected in “sacred space.” Why was my smoke not able to be in sacred space also? I only had one personal interview with Rinpoche, and I hungrily begged for an explanation of why he thought it was all right to use alcohol and not marijuana. Stoned or drunk, my friends and I seemed to get to be in the same psychic places. Why couldn’t he bless my chosen substance? Rinpoche paused for a long moment, and then quietly told me that when I relaxed into living my life I would be a terrific drinker. That certainly slowed down my momentum—it made no sense to me whatsoever. Perhaps it even stopped my mind, which, instead of just solving our problems, was what the teacher was supposed to do.

From that point of contact with Rinpoche it took many more years of smoking—at least every afternoon, and on bad days from early in the morning—for me to come to my own realization. Without fail every morning I would rise with the fervent vow that this would be the day I would quit, would no longer use this route to cope. Later, it took someone in my addiction recovery unit to tell me how this vow itself was the setup for using. Somehow it would trigger the glee and defeat of getting to a level of tension or frustration and then fold into “Fuck it. I’m smok-

ing, I deserve this and no one can stop me.” It took one wretched near-fight with my husband, where my trembling rage leaked into my awareness, to crack the momentum of my habit. I was already as stoned as I could get. It was a batch of fabulous weed. I felt something rise up in me that was so powerful it was undeniable. Instead of screaming and yelling, expressing and exploding, I felt myself implode. I took my vibrating rage and found myself, as I came to, desperately sucking my special pipe in an effort to make this ignition disappear. It was too late. The realization had seeped through beyond denial and confusion. Something had soundlessly snapped.

The hypocrisy of living half of my life trying to wake up by meditating and the other half trying to anesthetize myself was overwhelming. I knew I needed help. By myself I could not overcome the underlying desire to feel only the good stuff. No matter what I had learned from the dharma, I really wanted out of the violence of my anger, confusion, helplessness, hunger, and fear. With just a puff or two, anger simply got fuzzy and rounded off. What was so inutterably irritating just moments before would vanish. I had labeled the force of anger as small-minded, tightly wound up, territorial, uncompassionate, and surely unevolved. Somewhere along the way the word got out that losing your cool erased the karma of an entire month of sitting. This was not Rinpoche’s example: He did get angry and did display it. I always had the impression, from the infinite stories of those who were closer to him, that his anger was pure energy and not attached. He simply roared at someone and then it was over. My delusion was that if I got angry the world would fall apart, people would leave me forever and finally know how awful a human being I was. I was not and am not unattached. My anger resounds for years. Letting it go is an aspiration, not something that seems to work. Not expressing anger did not originate solely from our sangha: this was

the way my parents had operated as well. Also, beginning long before I was even conceived, both parents never let one day of their lives go by without a cocktail hour. Thus, on a cellular level, my being was accustomed to daily inebriation. Both parents were socially acceptable drinkers, and both were active participants in their busy worlds. Here in this dharma world, the *sangha* recreated the atmosphere.

Almost. There was a difference. When Rinpoche taught us about coemergence, he had two of us walk together to the front of the room and then suddenly split off in opposite directions. This was a stunning enactment of how closely the neurotic state of mind arises right along with the enlightened. There is no guarantee of choosing the awake route. It is only the pledge of allegiance, the vow to lean into the rawness of experience without filter and without props, that we have to count on. I have found that every vow I have taken as a twenty-year practitioner is a fumbling attempt to stop the perpetuation of illusion. I still scrape along on my knees a lot. In the dozen years since I quit using dope regularly, I have experimented a handful of times—"done more research," as they say in the recovery business. It always fails. I am relentlessly stuck back in the realm of anxiety or frustration that couldn't be smoked away. The connection to each step beneath my feet—to the place where things are allowed to simply be as they are—is what meditation practice works with. The illusion is in the fact that this contact is brought about by the drug itself, and it always fades as the THC passes through. The struggle for a practitioner lies in the infantile yearning for only the good stuff and not being able to hang out with the bleakness. Great ecstatic meditation periods have never been celebrated by teachers; we're always told to go back to the cushion, to let go of *all* that arises. Those grungy black emotions come and go with a will of their own. The pledge of allegiance is to the entire mandala, not just the part where there are only downhills and the

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wind is always gently blowing at my back. Far more often than I'd like to admit, I still actively yearn [or the moments of joy and oblivion that dope provided. It's embarrassing to find that my longing for spirit or connection the fast way hasn't really disappeared that much over time. I get caught sometimes in the dualism that pokes an annoying finger in my moralistic stance: "What a good girl I am for not smoking. Why don't I just give myself a tiny little break. Is it imperative that I be gentle and kind and lighten up? Light up! Where's my *maitri* [benevolence]? Where has not smoking gotten me? I am no more awake or aware than I was when I was smoking. What is my problem?" It's stark how much the ol' hair in the eyeball stings, and what treachery the mind pulls when it wants a break, and you know that giving it that break is destructive. The fire that Rinpoche lit to burn up illusion is still burning away in me.

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BARE BONES MEDITATION

Waking Up from the Story of My Life

JOAN TOLLIFSON

I was born in Chicago in 1948. I was born without a right hand. It had been amputated in the uterus by a strand of ruptured amnion. Newborn, I was brought to a room where there was a large pillow. My father was called out of the waiting area and taken to this room by the doctor. My father was left alone in there with me and the large pillow. He understood finally that he was being given the chance to smother me. But he didn't do it.

The doctor knocked. "Are you finished yet?"

My father didn't answer. The doctor came in and my father was still standing there.

Together they brought me to my mother. I don't know what she felt. She has told me that this was the only time she ever saw my father cry. He wept. And then he went out and got drunk. It was probably the only time he ever got dead drunk.

My Aunt Winifred had a psychotic break at the sight of me, and my Uncle Harold insisted on always photographing me from the left side. In some of my childhood pictures my right arm is outside the frame or in the next room.

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Cripples were mostly invisible back then. If you saw them at all they were begging on the streets, or they were the Easter Seal poster children inspiring pity and charity, or they were evil villains like Captain Hook. But they certainly weren't anything you'd want to be, not just because of the physical loss or difficulty involved, but because somehow the whole thing was tinged with creepiness. Disability was one of those things you weren't even supposed to talk about.

The central theme of my life was thus in place early: I was different, asymmetrical, imperfect, special. I was born without the hand that signifies purposeful doing. My life was about unraveling rather than producing, subtracting rather than accumulating. When I was very small and first heard about death, I dreamed recurrently about a person whose arm fell off, then the other arm, then each leg, until nothing was left. I was already on my way toward this mysterious disappearance.

I had a boyfriend in the second grade who loved my arm with the missing hand. He called it my power bomb. "Hit me with your power bomb," he'd whisper, and I'd slug him gently in the stomach, and he'd grin from ear to ear with wild pleasure. In the third grade he proposed to me, perhaps because of my magical arm.

But more often this arm was a source of humiliation. Children would stare and point and ask me about it. Adults would hush them up. I was the last to be chosen by the boys in dancing school, and I felt that I would not qualify as a woman. Women were supposed to be beautiful. They were not supposed to be missing body parts.

My absent hand was a kind of ticket, as it turned out. I was given a passport to marginal worlds, to the realms of the dispossessed, to the secret rooms of people's hearts where something is always missing or misshapen. But it was many years before I realized this. In the beginning, I just knew that I stood out like a sore thumb and that nobody was

supposed to mention it.

Hundreds of thousands were demonstrating against the Vietnam war in the streets of Washington and New York. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, as Malcolm X and President Kennedy had been. Cities went up in flames as blacks rioted in Newark and Detroit. Tanks rolled through the streets of America. The Democratic Convention in Chicago exploded into violence. There were the Days of Rage and the Weathermen started blowing up buildings.

I took speed and wrote term papers, read Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and Antonin Artaud. I drank straight whiskey and smoked Camels. I took acid and watched Nixon on TV, and realized that the men who ran the world were power-hungry killers in gray suits. My friends and I went to demonstrations in Washington, D.C., and some of us got teargassed and clubbed over the head. The police were the enemy. I was an outlaw.

I hated America. I hated school. I hated the whole screwed-up world.

And then my lover Miriam disappeared one day on the back of a motorcycle driven by another woman, a graduate student from NYU. I got very drunk that night, and when I saw them walking out of the coffee shop I chased them through the trees, shouting at Miriam, calling her a lesbian. It was my final insult.

I hitched to New York City and wandered the gray streets, crying for days. I wondered if I would ever meet another lesbian. I imagined myself alone forever.

America invaded Cambodia. The National Guard shot and killed student antiwar protesters at Kent State and Jackson State.

I discovered the gay bars of New York City. Strange, alienating places where the women wore heavy butch/femme drag and you had to keep

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buying the high-priced drinks or leave. It was the year of the Stonewall Uprising, when a bunch of drag queens fought back against a police raid on one of the men's bars, the official beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement. I slept with lots of men and a few women, too, and I would wake up afterward with devastating hangovers and no memories from the night before. I didn't know if I was gay or straight or what I was.

Once I woke up in a car full of strangers headed for California, where I spent several years living in lesbian bars, drinking alarming amounts of alcohol and taking every drug imaginable. But alcohol was my demon lover. I was often violent when drunk. I sold drugs, hustled drinks, had odd jobs that never lasted, took money from my parents, collected welfare, panhandled, went hungry occasionally, and sold my blood plasma for pin money. Once I answered an ad in the newspaper for a "female amputee" and did obscene things with my clothes off while a man filmed me in a motel room. My last lover before I sobered up was a prostitute-junkie who had just gotten out of prison. One night after I had been drinking I threw the TV through one window and the radio through another, broke all the furniture, swallowed a handful of pills, crawled down the highway in search of wine and woke up a few days later in the hospital with stitches in my forehead and an IV dripping into my arm.

I started sitting at the Berkeley Zen Center. One day Mel Weitsman, the abbot and teacher, passed me in the garden and said, "We've never talked."

"Talked?" I said.

He told me that it was possible to meet with him, to discuss my Zen practice. So I signed up. Maybe he could tell me what I should do with my life.

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The following week, I went in to see him at five o'clock in the morning. He was waiting for me in a tiny candlelit room with an altar. I was breathless. I bowed to him the way I'd been told I was supposed to, and sat down on the cushion opposite him. My heart was pounding, my throat was dry. I felt as though I were meeting God.

"How's it going?" he asked.

I nodded nervously.

"What comes up when you sit zazen?"

"I think about the future a lot," I told him. "I always do. I can't decide what to do with my life."

"You have to make a choice and then commit yourself," Mel said. "You have to burn all your bridges, so you can't go back. Nirvana is seeing one thing through to completion. Otherwise, life just becomes a lot of mental ideas about an imaginary future. You need to come back again and again to your breath, to the day you are actually having. Not the day you wish you were having, or the day you think you should be having, or the day you know you could be having somewhere else tomorrow, but this day that you are actually having right now."

"Jesus," I thought. "This can't be it."

"Are you still holding out the hope that you'll get there someday?" Mel asked. "That you'll find your ideal life?"

"I know it's impossible, but I'm still holding out the hope," I admitted.

"Your meditation practice will teach you the impossibility," he smiled. "Some people spend their whole lives looking for it, but never doing it," he said. "What is it?" he asked.

I wondered.

"That's your natural koan," Mel told me later. "'What is it?' Keep asking that question, all the time. Don't try to answer it. Just keep ask-

ing. “What is it?”

What is it? Wind, bus, thought, insect, sensation, sound, smell, breath. What is it?

All my life I’ve been waiting for something to happen.

My first retreat at Springwater Center [in Springwater, New York] begins. Complete silence is carefully maintained on these weeklong retreats. Eye contact is discouraged so that one can be completely inward and not caught up in constantly making connections or scanning to see how others are responding to you. Any necessary communication is done with pencil and paper. The only exception is that you can meet with Toni once a day if you want to, and every day she gives a talk. I have never been anywhere in my whole life where silence was this resonant and bottomless.

The constant printout of thoughts: commands and countercommands—TRY, DON’T TRY—planning the future, imagining all the terrible or pleasant things that could happen to me, or else endlessly running through memory replays like someone watching and rewatching the reruns of an old television program, giving speeches in my head, endless noise and chattering. Even when I wake up to the thoughts, I’m often unable or unwilling to let them go. They’re as compelling as any other addiction, maybe much more so. I’m addicted to myself. Why is it so scary, so hard to let these thought-loops go? I feel frustrated and close to despair.

Wanting something and going for it, we condition the mind, Toni says. Here we just watch. Watching the nature of wanting itself. Burning pain in my shoulder and neck, anger, frustration, irritation, exhaustion. Everyone makes me angry. Everything irritates me. There is a gray cloud

around my mind. No clarity. I don't want to be here for another minute in this painful, unmoving posture, in this noisy silence that won't shut up, in this body or this mind. What is all this about "no self," I think to myself. What about my history, my suffering, my progress—aren't these me? I feel the urge to bite my fingers.

Sitting on my cushion, I visualize a huge hot-fudge sundae. I grow exhausted. Exhausted beyond exhaustion. Finally, I go through an hour-long struggle with myself about whether or not to leave the sitting room at the next break and take a nap—forbidden and wimpy behavior in the Zen tradition from which I come, but perfectly acceptable here. I finally conclude that my sole motivation for continuing to sit is to bolster my self-image and impress Toni if she happens to come in, not that I think Toni herself would actually be impressed by this—it is my projection of her that would be impressed. I leave and go take a nap. This is a huge breakthrough for me, as if some reservoir of energy had been freed up. That night I find myself sitting after the last sitting, something I have never done before and have always found unimaginable.

After the retreat, I am having dinner with Toni and her husband Kyle, several of the people on staff, and a bunch of people from the retreat. I am telling the story of my life, and hearing myself doing it, noticing the pride I take in it, the way I shape and embellish it, and suddenly I feel a little sickened by it. Something rings false.

A group of us watch videos of Krishnamurti in the evening, made at the very end of his life. I have never heard him before. To pursue non-violence is a form of violence, he says, because when we pursue nonviolence it means that we are no longer attentive to what actually is, but are instead chasing after an idea. Attentive listening to what is has tremendous healing power. Just to "listen," without trying to "do" anything.

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I attend a staff meeting, with every intention of just listening and observing. But I become so ridiculously opinionated that I cannot stop myself from speaking up. I watch how attached I am to my opinions and their importance, how irritated and threatened I feel by those whose views are different.

I feel separate from these people. They're mostly men; I'm a woman. They're all straight; I'm gay. They're Easterners; I'm a Westerner. They all have two hands; I have one. I have a very strong "I'm Really Different" program. What is this attachment to my separateness? This feeling of being different, for whatever reason. Are any of these people here really so different from me? Do they feel any less separate? Why do I cling to various identities? Why do I feel as though no one really knows me until they know my life story? Tremendous fear arises at the thought of losing my labels, and at the same time there is immense peace in living without them, which is part of what happens on a silent retreat.

There is so much pressure to keep each of my identities, each of my labels intact. I think of all the pressure from the twelve-step programs to wear those chosen addict labels for the rest of one's life, the pressure in minority communities to identify oneself with the group. And in majority groups the same thing happens so automatically and on such a widespread level that it goes mostly unnoticed—one is "presumed" to be white, heterosexual, or able-bodied, and if you whisper anything contrary to that, people ask you why you're flaunting it.

Toni, on the other hand, questions all labels and images of who we are. She points to something beyond merely replacing negative images with positive ones. Flattery is as destructive as deprecation, she says. They go together like the two sides of a coin.

I told Toni how much her work scared me because I've worked so hard to get beyond the self-hatred and silencing of myself that comes



from growing up female, disabled, and bisexual in a patriarchal society, and I'm afraid that if I really let go into what she's talking about, this seeing through all images—of my self, even!—that all this progress I've made will be lost.

“You're afraid you'll go back to how you were in the past?” she asked.

I nodded. Her eyes lit up and she laughed her wonderful, warm laugh. “But you won't,” she said emphatically. “Of course you won't!”

A year went by. I sat with Charlotte Joko Beck and with Toni in California. I obsessed about moving to Springwater. And finally I packed up my things, and, in the summer of 1989, off I went. I was going to Springwater for six months as a volunteer.

“You're going to northwestern New York for the winter?!” someone asked incredulously.

I moved to the middle of nowhere, a place tourists would avoid at all costs—northwestern New York, the foothills of the midwest. And now here I am in a place with ice storms and deerflies and mosquitoes, living with a bunch of heterosexual men.

Perfect.

On the third night of retreat I meet with Toni. Suddenly thought turns her into the authority figure, the teacher, and I begin talking about me and what I should do with my life, wanting Toni to provide the answers. I feel the aliveness of our connection die. I'm using her, projecting onto her, not listening anymore.

I am full of self-hate afterward, as if “I” had somehow produced these thoughts. I toss and turn with nightmares. Someone in the next room wakes up screaming. I hear her roommate comforting her. The hours tick by. I lie awake biting my fingers in the darkness, unable to stop.

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The next morning when I meet with Toni I speak to her about this horrible addiction. It may sound trivial, but I bite the flesh, not the nails, often drawing blood, and I can get so mesmerized by it that I cannot bring myself to stop, unable to do anything else, my entire body in a spasm of tension. The whole experience feels both numbing and torturous, and inevitably fills me with self-hatred and shame. I've tried every imaginable cure and nothing has worked.

Toni listens, and suggests not trying to get rid of it! Simply to be with it, she suggests. What is it? How does it feel? What are the thoughts, including the desire to stop, the belief that I can't, the judgments of myself. Experience the sensations in my jaw, my fingers, my shoulder, my stomach, hear the sounds in the room. Just listen, to the whole thing, without judgment.

How exactly did "I" stop drinking, doing drugs, or smoking cigarettes? There were numerous attempts that failed, and then there was success. How did that happen? What shifted? Is there a person here, a "me," who is capable of deciding to stop an addictive pattern? And, if so, why doesn't it always work? Why do some people succeed and others fail? Why is it that someone like me, who successfully let go of many addictive behaviors, is still biting my fingers? Why don't I stop? What brings a person to the point of stopping?

Habit has two parts, Toni says. There is the habit itself (finger-biting, smoking, drinking, whatever), and there is the observer who wants to stop, who is also a habit. And there is the conflict, the battle between the desire to indulge, which is an escape from what is, and the desire to stop, which is also a movement away from what is.

Toni suggests that the only real solution lies in complete awareness. In such awareness there is no chooser who is "doing" the habitual behavior or the stopping, there is no program, no will, no intention, no judgment, no conflict, no separation from the problem, no self to be

improved or fixed, no direction. It is open, relaxed seeing.

I'm aware of myself being seductive, wanting attention. I never thought of myself as seductive before I began working with Toni. But it's going on so much of the time. Charming people, flattering them, assuaging them, winning them over, magnetizing them, wanting them to like me. I hear myself being too loud, not listening to others, caught up in my stories. Seeing all this, I watch thought judging and condemning me, the harshness of it. I am no good. I see how this constant image-making destroys the actual living connection between human beings.

Out of seeing, amazing shifts do seem to occur. But if we try to create shifts, to free ourselves, then we only get more and more entangled in our efforts.

I am eating lunch at a small cafe and there is a couple at the table next to me, and he is explaining his spiritual path to her. He tells her all about karma, reincarnation, the progress of the soul. He tells her that she was good in her past lives, because she was born into a healthy body. But, he says, if you have a butchered arm or something like that, it means you were bad. You did something you're paying for now.

Cripple. Queer. Girl. It means I'm bad. I'm sick. I'm a sinner. I'm unappetizing, unnatural, better off dead. A freak. I can't walk into a room full of children without it being a potentially traumatic event. I am full of rage and grief, and the only way out is the most radical. But I cling to my pain. I hear myself telling the story of how much I've suffered over and over and over again, like an old broken record, and I sense there's something false as well as true about this litany of oppression. I feel so humiliated, so deeply embarrassed.

I don't always feel safe about going to that no-self level. Sometimes this approach seems to reinforce the invalidation and denial of our per-

ceptions that we were all met with to some degree as children, and that women and minorities continue to be met with all our lives. When our reality is not culturally verified and we are made invisible, or made out to be crazy, we internalize this and discount our own feelings and insights. It seems to take years and years of work to begin to take one's own perceptions seriously again.

On the other hand, being here I've had to see that all perceptions are open to questioning, that these various political and psychological "truths" we construct in the process of healing ourselves aren't real either. They are constructions designed to explain reality, but they are abstractions and so inevitably fall short of the whole. They have their usefulness, but to the extent that we mistake them for reality, believe in them as dogmas and identify them as vital to our existence, we lose the ability to question them and move beyond them. We lose the ability to see accurately.

Cocteau was once asked, If your house was burning down, what would you save? Cocteau's answer: The fire.

What is the meaning of fire?

What would happen if I stopped believing that I've got a problem? That I'm insufficient, or unenlightened, or in need of improving? What would happen if I stopped believing I'm confused? If I stopped desperately searching for the truth? What would happen if I stopped worrying about where to go next?

What would we talk about? What would we do?

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3

A G L O B   O F   T A R

To really see inside yourself isn't easy, but it's something  
we can train ourselves to do.

UPASIKA KEE NANAYON

Even though we practice, we continue to fall for pleasant feelings. Feelings are illusory on many levels. We don't realize that they're changeable and unreliable. Instead of offering pleasure, they offer us nothing but stress—yet we're still addicted to them. This business of feeling is a very subtle matter. Please try to contemplate it carefully, this latching onto feelings of pleasure, pain, or equanimity. And you have to experiment with pain more than you may want to. When there are feelings of physical pain or mental distress, the mind will struggle, because it doesn't like pain. But when pain turns to pleasure, the mind likes it and is content with it. So it keeps on playing with feeling even though, as we've already said, feeling is inconstant, stressful, and not really ours. But the mind doesn't see this. All it sees are feelings of pleasure, and it wants them. Try looking into how feeling gives rise to craving. It's because we want pleasant feelings that craving whispers—whispers right there to the feeling. If you observe carefully, you will see that this is very important. This is where the paths and fruitions leading to nibbana are attained. If we extinguish the craving in feeling, that's nibbana.

The Buddha said that defilement [mental qualities that obscure the clarity of the mind: passion, aversion, delusion] is like a wide and deep

flood. But then he went on to describe the practice of crossing that flood as simply abandoning craving in every action. Now, right here at feeling, is where we can practice abandoning craving.

Bring the practice close to home. When the mind changes, or when it gains a sense of stillness or calm that would rank as a feeling of pleasure or equanimity, try to see in what ways the pleasure or equanimity is inconstant, how it's not you or yours. When you can do this, you'll stop relishing that particular feeling. You can stop right there, right where the mind relishes the flavor of feeling and gives rise to craving. This is why the mind has to be fully aware of itself—all around, at all times—in its focused contemplation, to see feeling as empty of self.

This business of liking and disliking feelings is a disease difficult to detect, because our intoxication with feelings is so very strong. Even with the sensations of peace and emptiness in the mind, we're still infatuated with feeling. Feelings on the crude level—the violent and stressful ones that come with defilement—are easy to detect. But when the mind grows still—steady, cool, bright, and so on—we're still addicted to feeling. We want these feelings of pleasure or equanimity. We enjoy them. Even on the level of firm concentration or meditative absorption, there's attachment to the feeling.

This is the subtle magnetic pull of craving, which paints and plasters things over. This painting and plastering is hard to detect, because craving is always whispering inside us, "I want nothing but pleasant feelings." This is very important, because this virus of craving is what makes us continue to be reborn.

We're stuck on feeling like a monkey stuck in a tar trap. A glob of tar is placed where a monkey will get its hand stuck and, in trying to pull free, the monkey gets its other hand, both feet, and eventually its mouth stuck, too. Consider this: Whatever we do, we end up stuck right

here at feeling and craving. We can't separate them out. We can't wash them off. If we don't grow weary of craving, we're like the monkey stuck in the glob of tar, getting ourselves more and more trapped all the time. So if we're intent on freeing ourselves in the footsteps of the arahants, we have to focus specifically on feeling until we can succeed at freeing ourselves from it. Even with painful feelings, we have to practice—for if we're afraid of pain and always try to change it to pleasure, we'll end up even more ignorant than before.

This is why we have to be brave in experimenting with pain—both physical pain and mental diseases. When it arises in full measure, like a house afire, can we let go of it? We have to know both sides of feeling. When it's hot and burning, how can we deal with it? When it's cool and refreshing, how can we see through it? We have to make an effort to focus on both sides, contemplating until we know how to let go. Otherwise, we won't know anything, for all we want is the cool side, the cooler the better.

Nibbana is the extinguishing of craving, and yet we like to stay with craving—so how can we expect to get anywhere at all? We'll stay right here in the world, right here with stress and suffering, for craving is a sticky sap. If there's no craving, there's nothing: no stress, no rebirth. But we have to watch out for it. It's a sticky sap, a glob of tar, a dye that's hard to wash out.

### Emptiness vs. the Void

To open the door so that you can really see inside yourself isn't easy, but it's something you can train yourself to do. If you have the mindfulness enabling you to read yourself and understand yourself, that cuts through a lot of issues right there. Craving will have a hard time forming. In

whatever guises it arises, you'll get to read it, to know it, to extinguish it, to let it go.

When you get to do these things, it doesn't mean that you "get" anything, for actually once the mind is empty, that means it doesn't gain anything at all. But to put it into words for those who haven't experienced it: In what ways is emptiness empty? Does it mean that everything disappears or is annihilated? Actually, you should know that emptiness doesn't mean that the mind is annihilated. All that's annihilated is clinging and attachment. What you have to do is to see what emptiness is like as it actually appears and then not latch onto it. The nature of this emptiness is that it's deathless within you—this emptiness of self—and yet the mind can still function, know, and read itself. Just don't label it or latch onto it, that's all.

There are many levels to emptiness, many types, but if it's this or that type, then it's not genuine emptiness, for it contains the intention of trying to know what type of emptiness it is, what feature it has. If it's superficial emptiness—the emptiness of the still mind, free from thought-formations about its objects or free from the external sense of self—that's not genuine emptiness. Genuine emptiness lies deep, not on the level of mere stillness or concentration. The emptiness of the void is something very profound.

But because of the things we've studied and heard, we tend to label the emptiness of the still mind as the void—and so we label things wrongly in that emptiness. We have to look more deeply within. No matter what you encounter, don't get excited. Don't label it as this or that level of attainment. Otherwise you'll spoil everything. You reach the level where you should be able to keep your awareness steady, but once you label things, it stops right there—or else goes all out of control. This labeling is attachment in action.



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So to start out, simply watch these things, simply be aware. If you get excited, it ruins everything. You don't see things clear through. You stop there and don't go any further. For this reason, when you train the mind or contemplate the mind to the point of gaining clear realizations every now and then, regard them as simply things to observe.

Reprinted from *An Unentangled Knowing: The Teaching of a Thai Buddhist Lay Woman* (Dhamma Dana Publications). Translated from the Thai by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

Upasika ("laywoman") Kee Nanayon (1901-1978) was one of 20th-century Thailand's foremost women dharma teachers and a widely published poet. In 1945, she founded a simple practice center in the hills outside Bangkok, and until her death, students from all over Thailand traveled there to hear her expound the dharma.

4

CONFESSIONS OF  
A DHARMA PUNK

How can I use my suffering to benefit others?

NOAH LEVINE

Noah Levine, born in 1971 in Garberville, California, began dharma practice in 1988 while institutionalized—having been arrested for drugs and violence—in Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall. He has been practicing since then, primarily in the Theravada tradition. The son of Patty Washko, and of Stephen and Ondrea Levine who are dharma teachers and pioneers in the field of conscious dying, Noah directs the Spirit Rock Teen and Family Program in Woodacre, California.

Levine holds an M.A. in counseling psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies and has written two books, *Dharma Punx* and *Against the Stream*. In 2007, he was the subject of a feature-length documentary film about his life called *Meditate and Destroy*. For the last several years, he has been teaching meditation in juvenile halls and prisons. The following notes were compiled from a conversation in 2000 with Tricycle in New York City.

Some people my age come to the dharma with a “peace and love” attitude, a hopeful perspective. But there’s a whole range of culture or

backgrounds—even within our generation. There are those of us who grew up in the seventies and eighties who thought that the hippie movement didn't work, that they kind of just sold out and became yuppies and didn't really follow through on their intentions. So in response there was this whole punk rock movement, a more aggressive, less peaceful and loving approach.

There was a whole generation of punk rockers saying, "We realize that we're being lied to, that this is all a sham, the American dream, that the Western world is lying to us about what the nature of happiness is." This attitude was being expressed in violence and in fashions and attitudes, even in livelihoods—this feeling that we won't participate in the system like our parents' generation did.

I went through a teenage rebellion, rebellion against society, against the system, against my parents. I was very deeply identified with the punk rock scene—anti-establishment, antiauthority, anti-peace and love. I wasn't sure what life was all about, but I was sure that I was being lied to. At sixteen I left home. I said I had enough of my parents' rules and I left New Mexico, I dropped out of school. Stephen and Ondrea were basically saying: "If you continue to act this way, you're gonna get yourself into a lot of trouble, you're responsible for your own actions." This teaching that actions have consequences went right over my head, and I hit the road.

There I was, this 16-year-old punk—Mohawk, leather jacket, studs, boots—on the streets. Within two weeks of leaving home I was arrested for public intoxication and assault and battery - I had hit someone with my skateboard. As a teen, I became entirely addicted to booze and drugs and sex and violence and external stimuli.

I was looking for happiness through entirely unskillful means, got myself into a ton of trouble and was institutionalized off and on for

many years for crimes having to do with stealing and drugs and violence, mostly stealing to support my habit. I started smoking pot and drinking at a very early age. In my early teens I was eating lots of hallucinogens—doing acid and mushrooms. By the time I was in high school, or should have been, I was doing PCP and crack and heroin and any kind of pills that I could get my hands on. At 16 or 17 I was completely strung out. And so I was sent to juvenile hall, to group homes, diversion and drug programs, counseling, probation, all that stuff.

When I was 17 years old, sitting in juvenile hall, two things happened. First, while I was on the phone with my father—complaining about all of the fear of what was going to happen at court next week, and the regret and remorse for what I had done—he offered me *anapanasati*, mindfulness meditation instructions. Using those instructions, I began, for the first time, to really look inward. I became aware of my breathing, counting my breath, breathing in one, breathing out two, and realizing, “Wow, in this moment I can actually just be with this breath and not have to worry about the future and the past.” It was a revelation for me, because I was spending all of my time in fear of the future, pushed and pulled by my thoughts and feelings.

I had this real opening in my cell and began what has turned out to be an ongoing meditation practice.

Another critical thing that happened during that time was, I was introduced to the twelve-step program. I realized that I was actually addicted to the booze and dope, and I started on the path of recovery. The first couple of years I wasn’t really doing the steps, I was just going to meetings and doing sitting meditation once in a while and still really looking for happiness outside myself. I did have that “Aha!” experience when I realized: Okay, it’s not drugs and alcohol, I’m not gonna find it there. But I wasn’t sure—maybe I’ll find it in sex, maybe I’ll find it in

stuff, maybe I'll find it in getting attention and continue into sort of being violent and the sort of street punk that I was. But I was sitting a little bit here and there when it got bad enough. Two years into recovery, I was in a ton of trouble for doing graffiti, for stealing, for fighting. I had everything I wanted—I got the apartment, the girlfriend, the car and the motorcycle—all that stuff that I thought would make me happy, and I was still feeling empty.

I got busted for doing spray paint, for doing graffiti, serious trouble in California. They wanted to put me in prison—\$20,000 worth of damage.

I was told I could go to prison for 17 years. They were trying to make an example of me. But it brought me to practice, it gave me that second “Aha!”—Okay, it's not drugs and alcohol, it's not sex, it's not money, it's not any of that stuff, it's not attention, it's not the motorcycle, it's not being with somebody, it's not the ego trip.

I had seen people in the twelve-step programs and in the spiritual community, the Buddhist community, find happiness, but it wasn't happening for me in just not drinking, just not using. And so that was a turning point for me. I got a sponsor and started working through the steps and simultaneously started sitting retreats. I sat my first retreat in '91 with Jack Kornfield and Mary Orr, and right away it was like, “Oh, this is what I was looking for, this is where the freedom is, in this moment, in this breath, in this retreat practice, in the buddhadharma.”

So I started sitting retreats and I started working with the steps, and it was really simultaneous. I eventually took a two-year vow of celibacy when I was 20—in my prime!—*[laughs]* and went from being an indulgent addict to the other side: celibacy, practice, service. That period of celibacy gave me the incredible experience of being with desire and not satisfying it. I was choosing for the cultivation of my own spiritual prac-

tice that I wasn't going to be sexual—no masturbation, no intercourse, complete restraint. And I could really see clearly: Oh, desire arises and it passes away.

I started to ask: How can I use my suffering, my life's energy to benefit others? How can I be of service, not only to people in recovery but to everyone? I started working in the medical field. I thought, Well, maybe I'll be a paramedic or a nurse or a doctor—that's a good way to help. As I worked through the twelve steps and made amends to all of the people I had stolen from or fought with and offended in any way—I went out to hundreds of people directly asking for forgiveness, did that in the twelve-step program while simultaneously doing forgiveness practice in the Buddhist traditions—I started finding this freedom through the practice and realized, Oh my God, I can actually be comfortable in my own body! I can actually be happy and not be filled with fear all of the time or run around by aversion or grasping.

I think that the work that is most inspirational and important to me right now is with young adults, with people in their twenties and thirties, people of my generation—being able to share the dharma and the practice and offer instructions to my peer group. It just feels like a really wonderful use of this precious gift that I've been given.

To have the good fortune to hear the dharma and practice it, and then being able to say, "Check this out, try this," and to share it with others has been incredibly important to me. In my experience, there are definitely some people in their twenties and thirties who are interested and often very committed to practicing buddhadharma, but it's a minority of my generation that is represented at dharma centers, certainly the ones that I'm familiar with anyway.

I know from the sitting groups that I go to, from the retreats that I sit, from the conferences and teachings that I attend, that the sangha

appears overwhelmingly gray. I think that one of the reasons that the Zen and Tibetan and Vipassana communities were flourishing in the sixties and seventies, and attracting crowds of young people, was that almost all the teachers were of the same generation as their students. Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Trungpa, Ram Dass, all of them. It was not cross-generational teaching like it is now. It is a much different experience when a 19-year-old comes into a dharma scene now and their teacher is 60 and this teacher is wearing a tie and driving a new car. So the teachers are scratching their heads and wondering, “Where’s the next generation?” Other than some young reincarnated lamas, there are no people of my generation teaching the dharma. As the teachers have aged, so too has the sangha.

People complain, too, that it’s expensive to practice, although that’s not my experience. I’ve sat retreats for free, I’ve applied for scholarships, I’ve done what I wanted to because I was highly, highly motivated to do it. But still, it is not as accessible as it could be. It’s not easily accessible, and it’s also not attractive to young people because there are so few people of their age in the sangha. I practiced for 10 years with a sangha where I was one of the only young people.

As far as teaching goes, it certainly helps to have grown up in a dharma family and have a famous dad for a teacher; I’m sure it opens a lot of doors for me. But, as Stephen [Levine] has said, that will get you invited in for tea and that’s about it. If you don’t have something to offer, you won’t be asked to stay. It’s an interesting karmic situation for me to be in, and it is sometimes quite challenging to have such high teachers for parents, in my mind. I’ve been encouraged by Stephen and Ondrea to teach from where I’m at, to stick to what I know to be true and have experienced firsthand.

Stephen and Ondrea are the main teacher figures in my life, al-

though it's a tricky relationship because they are both parents and mentors. I also work with Howard Cohn and Eugene Cash from Spirit Rock Meditation Center. I feel that all of the Spirit Rock teachers have mentored me in some way over my period of employment there, whether by example, offering inspiration, or teaching together. I use the word "mentor" because I feel that they are not only my dharma teachers but also my mentors in becoming a teacher-in-training. I feel that there is some separation between coming just for meditation instructions and dharma teachings and actually looking for some guidance in how to teach the dharma. I consider them my mentors in the path of dharma teaching.

I think it would be entirely helpful if teachers were more willing to really train some of the next generation that are coming around. Of course, there need to be some parameters around it. After practicing for a couple of years, you're not really ready to begin teaching, for that it has to be maybe 10 years of practice or something. I'm wondering how come it's not happening yet. Is it because there are not many people are in their twenties and thirties that have been practicing for 10 years? I know five—that's about it. But I'm sure there are more of us out there.

One of the things that we see in our community—and I think that you can even apply it to all of America—is a real lack of any kind of rite of passage, of any kind of transition from childhood into adulthood, or even just from childhood into teen. At Spirit Rock we're beginning a rites of passage program. It's something like the Buddhist's answer to the bar or bat mitzvah. We have been incorporating Native American traditions into the teen program. We do a vision quest for teens, where they actually do a lead-up series of practices, a 6-week introduction to the tradition and the practice, about what to do with afflictive emotions, strong feelings, fear—fear that animals may come after them, or that hunger



will arise—the mind in all of its unraveling. And then they spend several days alone.

It's just incredible, I mean they get the opportunity to practice what the Buddha taught. They're sitting under a tree alone in the forest for two days—you know, at 14, 15, 16. They're watching their minds, watching their own nature. They're fasting—no food or water. And as we create this rite of passage we are reminded that there hasn't been an American rite of passage, other than sex and violence and drugs. In my own case, getting tattooed was probably some form of a rite of passage. Maybe it's just an ego trip. I mean, I feel like there's something within me that wants to be expressed in that way. What does it give me? Attention. Sometimes it's fun, sometimes it's a real nuisance.

Is there anything really deeply spiritual or psychological behind it? I don't know. It's something that remains within me, you know, a desire to be tattooed. It does set me apart from the mainstream—the mindless, sleeping American culture that I so disdain, that I have so much aversion to. And there's probably also some stuff around being a white male. I don't really identify with the power dynamic of being a white male in white male America. So being heavily tattooed sets me apart from that, which I enjoy, you know, not being identified with The Man.

Also it's a constant reminder, I look at my arms: Oh Buddha, Oh Krishna, Oh Om.... Ah, transformation, practice, compassion and wisdom. Yet being tattooed is motivated by greed and hatred and delusions [*laughs*—you know, it's quite a contradiction, isn't it? Even though I am still a novice, only 10 years into the practice, the amount of freedom and happiness that I feel, and genuine compassion—it's incredible, it's almost overwhelming to me sometimes.

My question is, coming from the depths of addiction, violence,

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greed, hatred, and delusion, have I just finally attained a normal state of mind? Am I mistaking this happiness for some spiritual experience because I came from such a depth? It seems incredible, that one can be comfortable, can be happy, can experience satisfaction in moments.

I'm not claiming to have any kind of high spiritual experience, but a tremendous amount of freedom is present, moment to moment, that I can share with others. It's a great question because I can see how people have these experiences and then all of a sudden they're like, Oh, I'm awake! Am I awake, or am I just finally at sort of a human level, when I spent all of this time in the hell realms and the animal realms? And now there are these moments of the bliss realms, of this kind of heavenly abode, and it's probably more like, Oh, finally I'm in this human realm and there are moments of hell and there are moments of heaven, but mostly it's just sort of—*this*.

5

EATING AND THE WHEEL  
OF LIFE

How to resist that cookie? The problem of craving in a world of  
abundance.

SANDRA WEINBERG

Knowing how much is enough when eating . . .

This is the teaching of the buddha.

—*Dhammapada*

“Knowing how much is enough when eating.”

It sounds so simple. Yet how often the matter of “enough” trips us up. For much of the world, getting enough to eat is the problem. Here in America we eat too much. Two-thirds of the population is overweight, nearly a third clinically obese; meanwhile, our ideal of physical beauty keeps getting thinner and thinner.

Increasingly, we exist in a love-hate relationship with our bodies and in a state of conflict over food. Denying the body with one hand, we stuff it with the other—then second-guess every morsel we consume. Whether we are ordering a five-course dinner at the Four Seasons or eyeing a plate of Krispy Kremes, our hunger seems to have far less to do with nourishment than with the gratification of desire.

We weigh ourselves against impossible standards, and when reality

falls short of our expectations, self-doubt—even self-hatred—is quick to follow. Judgment for dietary indiscretions is swift and harsh: a recent print ad for Kellogg’s Nutri-Grain health bars suggests how culturally ingrained this view has become. A bikini-clad model is shown reclining pinup-style, an enormous, icing-covered croissant balanced on her hip. The tag line says it all: “Respect yourself in the morning.” Food—the primordial form of nurture—is becoming a primordial source of suffering.

Ironically, the more we focus on the body, the more alienated from it we become. Increasingly, we resemble Mr. Duffy, the protagonist of James Joyce’s short story “A Painful Case” who “lived at a little distance from his body.”

From a Buddhist perspective, however, the body is not the problem. Rather, it is our thoughts about it that undermine our sense of well-being. What is required is a shift in perspective that allows us to understand the nature of craving and to welcome the body, whatever state it is in. When we can relate to the body and our appetites with compassion and acceptance, we will no longer have to live at such a distance from ourselves.

Why do we eat, anyway? Clearly, physical hunger is not the only drive. Eating soothes emotional discomfort and offers escape from unpleasant feelings of anger, disappointment, agitation, fear, pain, sorrow, loneliness, or simply boredom. In times of stress, nearly everyone turns to food. CNN reported that in the days after September 11, consumption of ice cream and sweets rose dramatically in New York City.

Often we associate eating with happy times and try to recapture good feelings by consuming certain foods. We eat out of habit: “What’s a movie without a bucket of popcorn?” We eat to be polite: “I don’t want to insult my hostess.” Sometimes, we eat in response to a vague feeling of lack, or a fear that there won’t be enough in the future: “I’d better take one before they’re all gone,” we reason. “It’s just a cookie, after all.”

For many people a cookie is just a cookie. Eating it brings a moment of enjoyment—or, at worst, guilty pleasure—and then they give it no

more thought. For compulsive overeaters, however, a cookie is the culinary equivalent of a loaded gun: one bite can send them spiraling into a hell realm of insatiable desire.

The Buddha identified three poisons that constitute suffering: craving, aversion, and ignorance. Overeating is among the most insidious of cravings, a form of suffering that carries much shame. In a society that worships svelte bodies and self-control, we are merciless toward those who appear to have neither. The overeater, faced with desire that seems difficult, if not impossible to extinguish, sees no recourse but denial. However, retreating behind ignorance of the consequences only perpetuates the cycle of mindless eating, yo-yo dieting, and morning-after re-criminations—and deepens its hold. Like a drunk suffering a hangover, a compulsive eater fresh off a binge has one overriding thought: Help! How can I stop this self-defeating behavior?

This is the very issue the Buddha addressed in his teachings on the nature of human suffering. We all want happiness, he observed, but we chase after it in ways that are sure to bring us pain. One of the Buddha's most profound teachings is the law of dependent origination, which expresses in exquisite detail the twelve interdependent links in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, spelling out how suffering arises and escalates. The principle of dependent origination (*paticca samuppada* in Pali) sheds light on repetitive and compulsive behavior, showing why—and how—the stranglehold of conditioning makes it so difficult to change. Through this teaching we see that in the presence of certain causes and conditions, certain effects are inevitable:

When there is this, that is.

With the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, neither is that.

With the cessation of this, that ceases.

—The Buddha, from the *Samyutta Nikaya*

In Tibetan Buddhism, the cycle of dependent origination is depicted graphically in traditional thangkas, or symbolic paintings, by the *bhavachakra*—the wheel of life, or wheel of *samsara*. The iconography of the wheel of life illuminates the truth that compulsive behavior doesn't arise spontaneously; the seeds are planted long before the moment of acting out. In the language of addiction and recovery, it is said that the “slip”—the lapse into compulsive behavior—happens long before the person takes the first bite of food or sip of liquor.

The 12 images on the outer circle of the thangka depict the coexisting conditions that entangle us in the endless cycle of human suffering. In examining these factors we see not only how suffering arises but also—this is critical—where we can intervene and make an inner shift to arrest the cycle.

The first link is ignorance—*avijja* in Pali. Ignorance is represented, appropriately, by a blind man walking with a staff. If we are deluded—if we fail to see our thoughts and actions clearly—we are bound to repeat our behavior. A key symptom of uncontrolled or unhealthy eating is denial that it is causing any problems. We ignore the reality that eating to get rid of discomfort only leads to more discomfort.

The literature of Overeaters Anonymous, a program of recovery from compulsive eating that follows the Twelve Step model, sums up this process: *First we were smitten by an insane urge that condemned us to go on eating and then by an allergy of the body that insured we would ultimately destroy ourselves in the process.* Until we can awaken from delusion and acknowledge the consequences of our actions, the pattern of self-destructive behavior will continue and even escalate.

The next link in the cycle of dependent origination is characterized

by volitional formations (*sankhara*), also known as karmic impulses. This stage refers to the mental conditioning—habitual thinking—and karmic patterns that inevitably lead to certain actions. When we are in denial, we make up stories to rationalize our behavior. Each time we act on one of those stories, we strengthen our belief in it, thereby reinforcing the behavior. The thangka image for this link is a man fashioning clay pots.

I once had a client who weighed over 300 pounds and had had numerous operations on her knees. She persisted in believing that her ongoing knee problems came from having no time to do yoga, not from being vastly overweight. This is an extreme example, but how often we make excuses for overindulging: “Well, there’s no point in starting a diet now; it’s the holidays!” “I know I shouldn’t eat this, but you only live once”; “Just one couldn’t hurt”; “Things have been so tough, I deserve a treat.” Rationalizations like these lash us to the wheel of samsara.

The third link in the cycle is consciousness (*vinna*), the faculty of knowing, depicted by a monkey swinging through the trees. (Here, the monkey is a symbol of the ever-changing mind.) This link refers to our perception and awareness of sensations as they arise, as well as to our mind state—angry, dull, or yearning, for example—which influences how we interpret sensory information. What gets our attention in the present is colored by our impulses and innate disposition—our habits of thought developed in the past.

Consciousness co-arises with the fourth link, mind and body (*namarupa*), pictured in the thangka as people in a rowboat. Consciousness shapes how the mind and body function, as in this familiar example: A woman who was dieting and feeling good about her progress got on the scale one morning, expecting a weight loss. Instead, the scale registered a two-pound gain. Frustrated and angry, she thought, “I’ll never lose

weight, so why bother?” Her intention to stick to her diet dissolved, and she went out and bought a pastry for breakfast.

The state of the mind and body influences the fifth link, the six senses (*salayatana*), represented on the thangka by a deserted town (also commonly depicted as a monkey in a house with six windows). Here we encounter an important distinction between buddhadharma and Western psychology. In the West, perception is associated with the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching) and their corresponding sense organs. In Buddhism, mind is considered a sixth sense organ, or “sense door,” because it continually interprets the moment-to-moment input of the other senses. Our thoughts and opinions about our sensory experience influence our perceptions and responses, as the *Dhammapada* so eloquently explains:

The thought manifests as the word;  
The word manifests as the deed;  
The deed develops into habit;  
And habit hardens into character;  
So watch the thought and its ways with care,  
And let it spring from love  
Born out of concern for all beings . . .  
As the shadow follows the body,  
As we think, so we become.

When a stimulus meets a functioning sense organ, there is contact (*phassa*), the sixth interdependent link, symbolized by a man and woman lying together in an embrace. Stimuli are constantly moving through us and around us, without our conscious awareness or volition. Contact brings awareness of a particular sense impression to the foreground. For



example, let's say a man has just come out of his boss's office after a particularly trying meeting that extended well past lunchtime. As he passes the receptionist's desk, he suddenly sees a basket of candies sitting there that he has never noticed before, and reflexively scoops up a handful.

Whenever there is contact, the seventh link—feeling (*vedana*)—arises concurrently. (The image for this link is a man with an arrow piercing his eye.) Feeling, according to Buddhist thought, is associated with one of three possible sensations: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. There is a deeply conditioned reflex in all organisms to move toward what is pleasant and away from the unpleasant. Some people eat to avoid bad feelings. Some continue eating even when they're full, either because the food tastes so good or because the process of eating is so pleasurable. A client of mine who was going through a difficult period bemoaned, "There's so much I can't do right now, but I need some kind of gratification. The chocolate looks so good. Even though I know I'll regret it later, I'll eat it anyway."

Links three through seven—consciousness, mind and body, the six sense bases, contact, and feeling—are intricately interconnected, arising automatically without our conscious control. Unpleasant feelings naturally lead us to look outside ourselves for a way to feel better; pleasant feelings lead us to look for a way to continue feeling good. That search sets the conditions for the eighth link, craving (*tanha*), to arise.

Here's a simple example of how this process unfolds: One person walks by a bakery without even noticing it. Another walks by and notices the smell of fresh bread, but continues on without stopping. A third person smells the bread and feels a rush of well-being: the scent triggers the memory of a delicious dessert she ate the previous week. Though late for work, she stops in front of the bakery window and debates whether or not to go inside and buy something to eat.

Here we stand at a critical crossroads, where there is still room for conscious choice. The split second between having a feeling (*vedana*) and giving in to craving (*tanha*) is the optimal moment to intervene and break the cycle of *samsara*. This is our opportunity to awaken and move away from self-destructive behavior. With strong intention and the proper tools, we can develop the strength and concentration to withstand temptation. (See “Meditation to Work with Craving,” final page of this article.)

But what happens if we ignore this opportunity and give in to desire? In recovery circles one often hears the warning: Stay away from people, places, and things that trigger the urge to eat. This is skillful advice, but hard to follow. Unlike alcohol, or drugs, or tobacco, food is not a substance we can avoid altogether; it is essential for our survival. One frustrated dieter summed up the problem when he snapped: “You have to eat and not eat at the same time!” Daily life is filled with constant reminders of food, including our own thoughts about eating.

Any powerful association can set off a desire to eat. It may be the smell or sight of a favorite food, or even the sound of someone chewing. A description of a gourmet meal can elicit euphoric recall and intense craving. For a food addict, the most mundane event can be a trigger: one young woman has only to see someone snacking from a brown paper bag and she is off on an eating binge.

The Buddha called craving the root of suffering. *Tanha* literally means “thirst”; the thangka symbol for this link is a man taking a drink, but it could just as easily be someone eating. At this stage on the wheel of life, the attachment to feeling good and avoiding discomfort begins to trap us in an endless cycle of painful behavior.

Once we give in to craving, we are catapulted immediately into clinging (*upadana*), the ninth link. Here, the mind becomes fixated on

the object of desire. It grasps. The image on the thangka is of a monkey in a tree, grabbing for fruit. All possibility of choice fades. As one overeater described it, “Even though my mind is aware, the body seems to have made up its own mind.”

The trance of grasping sweeps us into the tenth link, becoming (*bhava*), depicted in the thangka as a pregnant woman. Now, with the first bite, the overeater’s thoughts constrict, hardening into identification with the drive to eat. All other aspects of one’s being gradually become engulfed in a fog of “more.”

With the eleventh link, birth (*jati*)—pictured as a woman giving birth—the compulsion to eat is firmly entrenched. Having lost the will to try to break the cycle, the overeater surrenders to every impulse; the first bite inevitably gives rise to the next. Yesterday’s relationship with food has set the karmic template for tomorrow’s. The twelfth link—aging and death (*jara-marana*)—is assured. This is the death of possibility, of options. The image for this stage is an old man carrying a corpse on his back. Now the urge to eat is conditioned, and suffering is guaranteed, as the wheel of samsara turns once more. The overeater’s feelings of physical discomfort are accompanied by tortured self-recrimination: *I can’t believe I did it again.*

The Buddha, of course, did not leave us caught in the cycle of suffering with no way out. Just as suffering arises moment to moment, so too does the possibility of freedom from suffering, he said. The Buddha taught from his own experience how to be free of unhealthy attachments: though we cannot escape painful feelings, we can choose how to react to them. Centuries later, Bill W., the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, echoed that theme in the Twelve Step program of recovery. To break the cycle of craving, we must see the truth as it is, however uncomfortable that may be.

For anyone watching their food intake, life seems to involve an ongoing internal debate: *Should I eat this or not?* But the real question, according to the Buddha, is not *Should I?* It is *What is happening right now?* Looking deeply into our experience, without judgment, we can explore the sensations, thoughts, and feelings that lie behind our desire to retreat into the ready comfort of food. (See “How to Say No,” final page of this article.)

Through mindfulness training, we can ease the grasp of delusion, allowing us to experience the truth of impermanence, the workings of karma, and the power of intention. Desire narrows our awareness till we see only what we crave; mindfulness helps us see other possibilities. As we observe that our cravings—no matter how strong—eventually pass, we no longer feel compelled to act on them. We discover where in the cycle of craving we can effectively intervene. When mindfulness is strong enough to create space between stimulus and reaction, the karmic attachment that leads to automatic behavior is weakened, giving us a chance to make wiser choices. Even our most intractable habits can be changed.

But even with a strong mindfulness practice, there may be times when it is difficult to break a conditioned response without additional support. The Buddha spoke of the importance of *sangha*—like-minded people with the same aspiration. To change harmful patterns, it is helpful to be around others who understand the pull of craving and are doing their best not to give in to it. For an overeater, “sangha” could mean a sympathetic friend, or a professional counselor, or a group of people with a shared intention, such as Weight Watchers or Overeaters Anonymous.

The message of the Buddha is that we are no longer doomed to be prisoners of our compulsions. When we take refuge in the Triple

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

Gem—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—we find a safe haven from the false promise of food, and open ourselves to wisdom, compassion, and the promise of liberation. We take refuge in the Buddha both as a historical figure who found true freedom and as the seed of possibility that exists within us all. We take refuge in the Dharma—the universal truth, the Way. And we take refuge in the Sangha, the community of spiritual companions who support our efforts to be free.

May all beings be at peace with their bodies.

May all beings be at peace in their bodies.

How to Say No

The Buddha gave many teachings on what to do about distracting thoughts. Certain practices can be adapted to help us when food cravings arise. What is important to remember is that in any moment, we have options; the practice is to find the skillful means for each situation.

*Intention is the key*; everything else rests on this. We all have different triggers for overeating; know yours. Also keep in mind what your goals are—not to eat, not to go off your diet—and which foods are important for you to avoid. Consider which emotions make you feel the most vulnerable, and when you feel that way, turn to meditation, affirmation, or visualization for support. Then, set and hold the intention not to pick up a trigger food.

*Substitute the thought of food with the thought of something more important.* For example, visualize the face of someone you love, or feel gratitude for all the gifts you have in your life. Imagine yourself engaged in some pleasurable activity; see yourself on that vacation you're looking forward to, for example. The Buddha taught, "As we think, so we become."

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

*Mentally follow the entire process* of giving in to the desire to eat. See the whole cycle from beginning to end. If you take the first bite, where will that lead? What has happened in the past? How will you feel the next day? If, instead, you refrain from eating, how might you feel?

*Ask yourself: What do I really want right now?* What is the feeling behind the urge for food?

*Stop whatever you are doing* at the moment you feel the urge to eat, and do something entirely different: stretch, yawn, get up and walk, make a phone call. Even a simple action can break the trance.

*Cultivate willingness to ask for support.* In Buddhist practice, we take refuge in the sangha to support us in our practice. For support in avoiding destructive eating, we can phone a friend who understands our intention, for example, or join a support group for overeaters. On an everyday level, “support” might simply mean asking the waiter to remove the basket of rolls from the table.

*Maintain nonjudgment.* If you overindulge, don’t punish yourself. You will only make your suffering worse. Instead, observe your behavior with a compassionate heart. Then remember the instruction that is the foundation of meditation practice: Begin again, with wise intention.

### Meditation to Work with Craving

Start by taking a few deep breaths. With a half smile on your face, imagine that you are inhaling a sense of calm and exhaling any tension, any thoughts about food. Allow the breath to return to normal. Bring your attention to your belly and the inner sensation of the breath rising and falling in that area.

When thoughts of eating or of a specific food come to mind, note “thought arising.” Become aware of the pleasant or unpleasant feelings

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

that accompany the thought, then shift your attention back to the body, experiencing whatever physical sensations arise. Cultivate moment-to-moment awareness. Not resisting, not forcing. *Just this, just this.*

Thoughts come and go. Feelings come and go. Allow yourself to experience the transient nature of thoughts and feelings, welcoming everything that arises as *Just this, not me, not mine.*

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6

SUNSET BOULEVARD

Might a two-mile strip of sex, money, and power be part of the true path to an American enlightenment?

ERIK HANSEN

Wednesday evenings, on our way to our weekly meditation group in Los Angeles, my wife and I must traverse the section of Sunset Boulevard that runs from Hollywood to Beverly Hills. Our approach to this famous strip is signaled by an enormous billboard—it used to be the Marlboro Man, now it's a fifty-foot silhouette of an Absolut Vanilia Vodka bottle—jutting up at the point where Sunset first starts to bend, before snaking along the foot of the Hollywood Hills. Once past the Absolut bottle, it's 1.9 miles of sex, money, power, glamour, glitz, and sleaze. Okay, perhaps it's not the prelude most conducive to an evening of meditation, but I think it serves as an apt metaphor for some of the challenges facing American Buddhists on the path to enlightenment. You can look, or you can look away, but you cannot avoid the impact of our culture.

In our larger American sangha, we often consider the evolution of Buddhism in this country, and in the West at large. But we might also consider the flip side: to see what insights Buddhist practice can offer into the experience of being American. This is the exercise I've set for myself as we drive past strip joints, liquor stores, tattoo parlors, and sushi bars, past the Roxy and the Whiskey and Hustler's sex emporium.



I know that my deepest mirror mind is stainless, but what about the rest of me? Can I cruise this stretch without the clouds of dissatisfaction and desire obscuring my mind's innate brilliance? No, I can't. That's the short answer. Take this moment, for example: I'm keeping pace with a silver-blue Lexus Rx300 SUV, my dream vehicle. I know that elsewhere in the world there is terrible deprivation—shouldn't that knowledge inform my values? But alas, at this moment all that distant suffering is just a faint shadow in a corner of my mind, while this beautiful Lexus is a tantalizing, tangible presence.

A million messages await me along this strip, and I decode them instantly. A billboard depicts a lean woman stretching in designer spandex, and no words are needed to remind me how important it is to wear nice clothes and stay in shape.

I sometimes think of my Zen practice as a process of “de-hypnosis,” reversing the developmentally necessary but contrary process—begun years ago by parents and teachers, schoolyard chums and siblings, screenwriters and advertising executives—of turning me into a good little American. They succeeded wonderfully. Before I knew much else, I knew that Trix were for kids.

So, as I cruise down Sunset, 45 years of conditioning locked away in my brain and nervous system, you might say I'm hardwired for America. Moment by moment, from this latent field of prior conditioning, “America” and “self” spring into existence, summoned, for example, by the billboard across the street advertising the next George Clooney movie. For a moment, I get to experience that subtle, compound being which is me-as-an-American-sharing-a-world-with-George-Clooney. I recall that he was on Letterman two nights ago, speaking with warmth and modesty about his beautiful costar, his latest project, his villa on Lake Como, and I was the guy who sits on the couch with his wife and

listens to movie stars talk about their lives. No doubt I'd be wise to toss my TV, unplug the radio, and cancel my subscription to *Newsweek*; the bite into a Big Mac, the trip to Wal-Mart, the casual chat around the water cooler will always zap me into this time and place, this realm of values, this American self.

My Zen teacher, Dr. Edward Wortz, sometimes says, "There's no fixed way to be [a Buddhist, an American, a human being], but there are consequences." No fixed way to be. Could this be true? It would mean that all judgments of ourselves and others—all moral absolutes—are merely human constructs. It would mean there's no place in the universe where judgments reside, except in the human mind. But before we get carried away, let's remember Dr. Wortz's second dictum: There are always consequences. No judgments, just karma. Freedom bound to personal responsibility.

That's why, at the end of this long drive, I am so happy to settle onto my zafu cushion, exchange smiles with friendly, familiar faces, and prepare myself for zazen. I feel my priorities reorder themselves along the axis of what is real. From the safety of my zafu, I wonder: Should I come a different way? I surely could do a better job of insulating myself from this clamorous culture. But it seems to me that this practice is not about forcing change or becoming an idealized version of ourselves. It's about life as it is, accepting who we are, American twang and all. In fact, total acceptance might be the most radical practice there is.

I contemplate the wonderful "okayness" of being American. Imagine, even that is acceptable. Yes, there are consequences, but if I want to take in a mind-numbing action movie, play games on the Web, or have a Heineken with my Monday Night Football, it's okay. "No fixed way to be" means that in each of us the American and the Buddhist come together in different ways. Labels never quite fit; contradictions are okay.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

Including this one: Like a jewel in Indra's net, my mind reflects not only all other sentient beings, but also Gilligan's Island reruns, presidential debates, Victoria's Secret ads . . . sex, money, power, glamour, glitz, sleaze . . . and Sunset Boulevard.

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7

THE DIGNITY OF  
RESTRAINT

Why you can't have your cake and enlightenment, too. We don't have  
to be slaves to our desires.

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

It's always interesting to notice how words disappear from common usage. We have them in our passive vocabulary, we know their meaning, but they tend to disappear from day-to-day conversation—which usually means that they've disappeared from the way we shape our lives. Several years back I gave a dhamma talk in which I happened to mention the word *dignity*. After the talk, a woman in the audience who had emigrated from Russia came up to me and said that she had never heard Americans use the word *dignity* before. She had learned it when she studied English in Russia, but she had never heard people use it here. And it's good to think about why. Where and why did it disappear?

I think the reason is related to another word that tends to disappear from common usage, and that's *restraint*: foregoing certain pleasures, not because we have to, but because they go against our principles. The opportunity to indulge in those pleasures may be there, but we learn how to say no. This of course is related to another word we tend not to use, and that's *temptation*. Even though we don't have to believe that there's someone out there actively tempting us, there are things all around us

that do, that tempt us to give in to our desires. And an important part of our practice is that we exercise restraint. As the Buddha says, restraint over the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body is good, as is restraint in terms of our actions, our speech, and our thoughts.

What's good about it? Well, for one thing, if we don't have any restraint, we don't have any control over where our lives are going. Anything that comes our way immediately pulls us into its wake. We don't have any strong sense of priorities, of what's really worthwhile, of what's not worthwhile, of the pleasures we'd gain by saying no to other pleasures. How do we rank the pleasures in our lives, the happiness, the sense of well-being that we get in various ways? Actually, there's a sense of well-being that comes from being totally independent, from not needing other things. If that state of well-being doesn't have a chance to develop, if we're constantly giving in to our impulse to do this or take that, we'll never know what that well-being is.

At the same time, we'll never know our impulses. When you simply ride with your impulses, you don't understand their force. They're like the currents below the surface of a river: only if you try to build a dam across the river will you detect those currents and appreciate how strong they are. So we have to look at what's important in life, develop a strong sense of priorities, and be willing to say no to the currents that would lead to less worthwhile pleasures. As the Buddha said, if you see a greater pleasure that comes from forsaking a lesser pleasure, be willing to forsake that lesser pleasure for the greater one. Sounds like a no-brainer, but if you look at the way most people live, they don't think in those terms. They want everything that comes their way. They want to have their cake and enlightenment, too; to win at chess without sacrificing a single pawn. Even when they meditate, their purpose in developing mindfulness is to gain an even more intense appreciation of the expe-

rience of every moment in life. That's something you never see in the Buddha's teachings. His theme is always that you have to let go of this in order to gain that, give this up in order to arrive at that. There's always a trade-off.

So we're not practicing for a more intense appreciation of sights, scents, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations. We're practicing to realize that the mind doesn't need to depend on those things, and that it's healthier without such dependencies. Even though the body requires a modicum of the requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, there's an awful lot that it doesn't need. And because our use of the requisites involves suffering, both for ourselves and for everyone else involved in their production, we owe it to ourselves and to others to keep pushing the envelope in the direction of restraint, to give up the things we don't need, so as to be as unburdensome as possible.

This is why so much of the training lies in learning to put this aside, put that aside, give this up, give that up. Developing this habit on the external level makes us reflect on the internal level: Which attachments in the mind would be good to give up? Could our mind survive perfectly well without the things we tend to crave? The Buddha's answer is yes. In fact, the mind is better off that way.

Still, a very strong part of our mind resists that teaching. We may give up things for a time, but our attitude is often "I gave up this for a certain while, I gave up that for so long, now I can get back to it." On retreat people tend to make a lot of vows—"Well, I'll give up cigarettes for the retreat, I'll give up newspapers"—but as soon as the retreat is over they go back to their old ways. They've missed the whole point, which is that if you can survive for three months without those things, you can probably survive for the rest of the year without them as well. Hopefully, during those three months you've seen the advantages of giving them up.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

So you can decide, “Okay, I’m going to continue giving them up.” Even though you may have the opportunity to say yes to your desires, you remind yourself to say no. This principle of restraint, of giving things up, applies to every step of the path. When you’re practicing generosity, you have to give up things that you might enjoy. You realize the benefits that come from saying no to your greed and allowing other people to enjoy what you’re giving away.

For example, when you’re living in a group, there’s food to be shared by all. If you give up some of your share so others can enjoy a bigger share, you’re creating a better atmosphere in the group. So you have to ask yourself, “Is the gratification I get from taking this thing worth the trade?” And you begin to see the advantages of giving up on this level. This is where dignity begins to come back into our lives: We’re not just digestive tracts. We’re not slaves to our desires. We’re their masters.

The same with the precepts: there may be things that you’d like to do or say, but you don’t do them, you don’t say them, because they’re dishonest or hurtful. Even if you feel that you might get ahead or gain some advantage by saying them, you don’t, because they go against your principles. You find that you don’t stoop to the activities that you used to, and there’s a sense of honor, a sense of dignity that comes with that: that you can’t be bought off with those particular pleasures, with the temptation to take the easy way out. At the same time, you’re showing respect for the dignity, the worth, of those around you. And again, this gives dignity to our lives.

When you’re meditating, the same process holds. People sometimes wonder why they can’t get their minds to concentrate. It’s because they’re not willing to give up other interests, even for the time being. A thought comes and you just go right after it without checking to see where it’s going. This idea comes that sounds interesting, that looks intriguing,

you've got a whole hour to think about whatever you want. If that's your attitude toward the meditation period, nothing's going to get accomplished. You have to realize that this is your opportunity to get the mind stable and still. In order to do that, you have to give up all kinds of other thoughts. Thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future, figuring this out, planning for that, whatever: you have to put them all aside. No matter how wonderful or sophisticated those thoughts are, you just say no to them.

Now, if you've been practicing generosity and have really been serious about practicing the precepts, you've developed the ability to say no skillfully, which is why generosity and the precepts are not optional parts of the practice. They're the foundation of meditation. When you've made a practice of generosity and virtue, the mind's ability to say no to its impulses has been strengthened and given finesse. You've seen the good results that come from being able to restrain yourself in terms of your words and deeds. You've seen that restraint means the opposite of deprivation. Now, as you meditate, you've got the opportunity to restrain your thoughts and see what good comes from that. If you really are able to say no to your vagrant ideas, you find that the mind can settle down with a much greater sense of satisfaction in its state of concentration than could possibly come with those ideas, no matter how fantastic they are.

You find that the satisfaction of giving in to those distractions just slips through your fingers as if it had never been there. It's like trying to grab a handful of water or a fistful of air. But the sense of well-being that comes with repeatedly being able to bring your mind to a state of stillness, even if you haven't gone all the way, begins to permeate everything else in your life. You find that the mind really is a more independent thing than you imagined it could be. It doesn't need to give in to those



impulses. It can say no to itself.

The mind is even more independent when you develop the discernment that's able to dig out the source of those impulses and see where they come from, to the point where the whole issue of temptation is no longer an issue because there's nothing tempting. You look at the things that would pull the mind out of its stillness, out of its independence, and you realize they're just not worth it. In the past you were training the mind in a sense of hunger—that's what we do when we keep giving in to impulses: we're training ourselves in hunger. But now you train the mind in the direction of having enough, of being free, and you realize that the sense of hunger that you used to cultivate is really a major source of suffering. You're much better off without it.

It's important that we realize the role that restraint plays in overcoming the problem of suffering and finding true well-being for ourselves. You realize that you're not giving up anything you really need. You're a lot better off without it. There's a part of the mind that resists this truth, and our culture hasn't been very helpful at all because it encourages that resistance: "Give in to this impulse, give in to that impulse, obey your thirst. It's good for the economy, it's good for you spiritually. Watch out, if you repress your desires you're going to get tied up in psychological knots." The lessons our culture teaches us—to go out and buy, buy, buy; be greedy, be greedy; give in, give in—are all over the place. And what kind of dignity comes from following those messages? The dignity of a fish gobbling down bait. We've got to unlearn those habits, unlearn those messages, if we want to revive words like *dignity* and *restraint*, and to reap the rewards that the realities of dignity and restraint have to offer our minds.

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8

FOR A MOUTHFUL OF  
GRASS

The 8th-century Buddhist master on desire's trap

SHANTIDEVA

Some, under the influence of desire, work like slaves.  
They tire themselves out working long days  
And, when they return home in the evening,  
Their exhausted bodies collapse like corpses.

Some have to experience the disruptions of travel  
Or suffer from being far from home.  
Although they long to be close to their partners,  
They do not see them for years at a time.

Some, confused about how to earn what they desire,  
Effectively sell themselves to others  
Even when they do not get what they want  
But are driven without meaning by the needs of others.

Then there are those who sell themselves into servitude  
And work for others without any freedom.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

They live in lonely, desolate places  
Where their children are born with only trees for shelter.

Deceived by desire, people become fools.  
Some think, "I need money to support my life,"  
And, although they fear for their lives, go off to war;  
While others enslave themselves for the sake of profit!

Some, as a consequence of their desires,  
Suffer cuts to their bodies  
Or are stabbed, impaled,  
Or even burned.

We should realize that a preoccupation with wealth leads to endless  
problems  
Because acquiring it, protecting it, and losing it all involve pain.  
Those who allow themselves to become distracted out of attachment to  
wealth  
Will find no opportunity to escape from the miseries of samsara.

People attached to a worldly life  
Experience many such problems, and for little reward.  
They are like a horse forced to pull a cart,  
Who can grab only an occasional mouthful of grass to eat.

Those who are driven by uncontrolled desires  
Waste this precious freedom and endowment, so hard to find,  
For the sake of a few petty rewards that are in no way rare,  
For even animals can obtain them.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

Our objects of desire will definitely perish,  
And then we shall fall into the lower realms.  
If we consider all the hardships we have endured since beginningless  
time  
In pursuing meaningless worldly pleasures,

We could have attained the state of a Buddha  
For a fraction of the difficulty!  
Worldly beings experience much greater suffering than those who fol-  
low the path to enlightenment  
And yet they do not attain enlightenment as a result!

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9

DRINK AND A MAN

When does craving become addiction?

JOAN DUNCAN OLIVER

Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world?  
Which of us has his desire? Or having it, is satisfied?  
—William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*

Only two things have I ever craved as much as life itself: drink and a man. To save my life, I had to give up the drink. To give up the drink, I had to give up the man.

My desire for both was total, visceral: passion seeking its own DNA. The bond was physical, emotional, spiritual, chemical—drink, man, and I locked in a *menage à trois*.

It began, however, as a *folie à deux*. Alcohol was my first love: a constant, if feckless, companion in negotiating the scary home life of my teens. Early on I fell into the addict's faulty logic: I felt "normal" only when I was high.

For a while, it worked. A few drinks and I was prettier, sexier, more assured, less bookish and aloof. In no time, the desire for that state of mind became a craving for the only vehicle I knew could get me there—alcohol. By the age of 17, I was hooked.

In a sense we're all hooked, the Buddha taught. Not on alcohol but on a desire to be happy—which often means a desire for things to be

other than they are. According to the Second Noble Truth, desire, or craving (*tanha* in Pali, *trishna* in Sanskrit, translated as “thirst”) is the source of *dukkha*, dissatisfaction. For an addict or alcoholic, that thirst is literal and all consuming. (A Chinese proverb describes the cycle: Man takes a drink; drink takes a drink; drink takes the man.) Overdoing alcohol, drugs, food, or, for that matter, gambling, sex, shopping, even TV-watching, Net-surfing, and checking e-mail gradually erodes choice, until we’re left with little more than our desires and our efforts to satisfy them.

But where is the line between ordinary human longing and addictive craving? Even among specialists, what constitutes addiction remains a matter of debate. Narrowly defined, addiction is “chronic or habitual use of any chemical substance to alter body or mind states for other than medical purposes.” Certain substances—cocaine, nicotine, and the painkiller OxyContin among them—are known to trigger tenacious physical dependence. Alcoholism runs in families, and a genetic link has been established. But there is a saying in Twelve Step circles—“Alcoholism comes in people, not in bottles”—suggesting that addiction is more nuanced and holistic, and in large part as the Buddha saw it: a mental affliction. The Fifth Precept, one of the ethical guidelines originally set out for monks and nuns, calls on practitioners to “refrain from intoxicants that confuse the mind, causing heedlessness and lack of restraint.” That is precisely why I drank: to be more spontaneous and uninhibited. As I saw it, more alive.

In my teens, I took a line from the poet Marianne Moore as ultimate truth: “satisfaction is a lowly / thing, how pure a thing is joy.” Satisfaction was the opiate of the masses, I declared, and joy the nectar of the gods. I wanted nectar. That’s where the man came in.

We met one July afternoon 40 years ago, in Harvard Yard. It sounds

quaint now, but a friend and I were trying to liven up the weekly mixer for summer school students by spiking our fruit punch with whiskey smuggled into the Yard. Soon a merry group had gathered around us, to the envy of the other students. A few approached to ask why we were having so much fun. “We’re punching the Yard punch,” we sang our gaily, offering them a splash.

I don’t recall when T. appeared. Bur within minutes the conversation had sailed into deep waters, too intimate for turning back. The recognition was instant—karmic, some might have said. I was Dante encountering Beatrice:

*The moment I saw (him) I can say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depths of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt the vibration alarmingly in all my pulses, even the weakest of them. As it trembled it uttered these words: Behold a god more powerful than I who comes to rule over me.*

I was already in thrall to the Dewar’s god; that day T. joined the pantheon. Though our relationship, unlike Dante’s, was earthy, it was never earthbound. We lived in different cities, and when we met, which wasn’t often, it was always over a steamy brew of sex, talk, drink, and sometimes pot. For the next decade, through other affairs and vague talk of marriage, nothing came close to the raw, ravishing desire I felt for T. It was as mind-altering and addictive as any drug.

Then, as I turned 30, alcohol turned on me. The demon lover, it was all I could think about, though no amount I drank was ever enough. The Buddha understood this: that desire, whatever its object—a substance, a person, an experience, a state of mind—is insatiable. The addict’s hope is to become too sick, or sick of hurting, to continue. “Hitting bottom” is karmic grace: a moment of awakening in which the only desire is to stop desiring, and hence, to stop suffering.

Quitting—so simple, so logical to those who’ve never tried it—throws an addict unarmed into the pit with desire. Long after physical craving abates, longing may remain. The actor Robert Downey Jr. described it for a *New York Times Magazine* article: “the arm’s been cut off, but the phantom limb is still twitching.” Issues and insecurities masked by the addictive behavior are laid bare, along with other cravings. Smoking was up next for me, and even harder to quit than drinking. I stared down the true nature of desire while living at a Zen monastery. Despite subzero weather, snow, and gale-force winds, I would stand outside on the deck barefoot and smoke, stashing the cigarette butts in the sleeve of my meditation robe before returning to the zendo. Back on the cushion, every urge to smoke felt like Mara tempting Siddhartha on his long night under the Bodhi tree. Or Mara’s daughters—*kama-tanha* (sexual desire, in Pali), *bhava-tanha* (desire for things to be a certain way), and *vibhava-tanha* (desire to avoid losing what we have).

Siddhartha’s steadfast practice saved him, and by dawn he was the Buddha, “one who is awake.” What can we do when Mara and his daughters come calling? Both Buddhism and the Twelve Step recovery program propose a similar response: develop resolute awareness, generate wisdom and compassion. Craving creates tunnel vision: we see only what we yearn for. Mindfulness allows us to see that and much more, giving us the choice not to act on our desires. The one-pointedness with which we fixated on the object of desire can be turned to an object of contemplation, such as the breath. This helps stabilize “monkey mind,” the racing thoughts that beset most meditators at times, but make withdrawal especially hellish. Through Vipassana, or mindfulness practice, we begin to know things as they really are. When we see our craving and the devastation it has wrought, what we crave no longer seems so desir-



able. Through lovingkindness practice, we can begin the long process of self-forgiveness, and of healing relationships damaged in pursuing our desires. The driven ego-self that knows only “I want” begins to ease its grip.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung famously wrote a letter to Alcoholics Anonymous cofounder Bill Wilson, in which he described the craving for alcohol as “a low level of the spiritual search of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God.” Fourteen centuries earlier, in “Drinking Alone in the Rainy Season,” the Chinese poet T’ao Ch’ien hinted at the drawback of this method: “One small cup and a thousand worries vanish; / two, and you’ll even forget about heaven.” I often drank alone late into the night, desperate to dissolve a chronic sense of separation from life and from myself. Only after I sobered up and began practicing zazen did I experience true *samadhi*, union.

“A tenth of an inch’s difference, / And heaven and earth are set apart,” wrote the Ch’an patriarch Seng-ts’an in a classic poem we recited at the monastery. For me, not drinking was the tenth of an inch’s difference between life and death. Not returning a phone call was the face-off with Mara.

I had been sober less than a month when T. left a message that he was back in town. His voice on my answering machine set off desire so bald, so breathtaking, that I wondered how I had survived it all those years. This time, I knew I wouldn’t survive; I would drink. I didn’t call. Months later, I phoned to tell him I was sober. We never spoke again.

It wasn’t that my desire for T. was gone; just banked. I clung to a certainty that someday we would reconnect, this time for good. Eighteen years went by. One night as I was watching the Academy Awards on television, I heard T.’s name announced. He had won an Oscar—posthumously, the presenter said. Death has been a frequent visitor in my

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life since childhood, but this loss somehow trumped the others, as if the dashed hopes and missed opportunities of all those earlier deaths had been rolled up into one. Desire for the absent living is one thing; like addiction, it feeds on possibility, hope, denial. Desire for the dead has no such illusions. In mourning T., I had to put to rest the champagne fiction on which our relationship (my obsession, really) had subsisted. I kept thinking of the final *gatha* of the *Diamond Sutra*:

*All composite things are like  
a dream, a fantasy, a bubble  
and a shadow  
Like a dewdrop and a flash of  
lightening—  
They are thus to be regarded.*

Buddhism teaches us that desire, for all the agony and ecstasy, is no match for the truth. Addiction exacts a terrible price, but for the addict who recovers, there is the promise of a far more rewarding high: the “divine intoxication” that the Sufis speak of. Unleashed from my attachments to the drink and to the man, I could finally taste what I’d been craving all along: Joy.

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10

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND  
OF DESIRE

A contemporary psychiatrist uses ancient Buddhist wisdom to make sense of desire in our everyday lives.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK EPSTEIN

Since publishing his first book, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, in 1995, Mark Epstein, M.D., has done more to pioneer the meeting of Buddhist and Western psychologies than any doctor in this country. In 2005 he turned this cross-cultural gift to the polarizing topic of Eros. In *Open to Desire*, a book that envisioned a middle path where lust for life—questioned in some dharma circles—is no longer seen as the enemy.

Trained at Harvard, Epstein, whose other books include *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart* and *Going On Being*, is a longtime meditator who lives in New York City with his wife, Buddhist sculptor Arlene Schechet. We met one chilly afternoon in his basement office to talk about this thorny issue of desire.

—Mark Matousek

**Why did you write a book about desire?** After studying Buddhism for thirty years, I realized that people have this idea that Buddhism is about getting rid of desire. I don't think that's true, so the book is a defense of

desire, really—an exploration of the Middle Way, trying to chart out an approach to desire that isn't about indulging, necessarily, or repressing.

**Why does desire need defending?** From the Western, Puritan point of view, it's always been seen as dangerous, devilish, the enemy. From the Eastern spiritual point of view—as adopted by many Western practitioners, at least—it has the connotation of something to be avoided, a poison. As a psychotherapist, I've been trained not to avoid the so-called “real stuff”—anger, fear, anxiety—and this certainly includes desire. Desire is the juice. It's how we discover who we are, what makes a person themselves. I wanted to try to explore how to work with it more creatively.

Many of the ancient stories of the Indian subcontinent, like the *Ramayana*, the epic tale of separation and reunification of the lovers Sita and Rama, explore desire in an expansive, imaginative way. In the *Ramayana*, Sita is kidnapped by the demon Ravana and separated from her lover, Rama. Ravana wants to possess Sita totally. He is enthralled by her but can only see her as an object. Sita resists this, and in her isolation and imprisonment she deepens her own desire for Rama. The separation that Ravana brings about helps her to get more in touch with the nature of her own desire. I was intrigued by the way desire and separation are intertwined in the tale, as if you can't have one without the other. There seems to be a teaching there about what constitutes a true union. I've been reading over these stories to try to bring back some of this ancient wisdom.

**We should probably define our terms. Are we talking about sexual desire? Carnal desire?** I'm taking the psychodynamic view that all desire is really sexual at some level. Freud once said that he wanted to show that not only was everything spirit, but it was also instinct. One of the

wonderful things about the Indian perspective is that it doesn't make the same distinctions between lower and higher that we are used to. Lower and higher are one. There is a much more unified view, so that there is no question but that the sensual contains within it the seeds of the divine. The view in the West, at best, is that things are organized in a hierarchical way, with sensual pleasure being a lower rung on a ladder that reaches toward the sublime. In the Indian view, it's not a rung, it's the entire ladder. So I'm trying to keep a focus on sexual desire throughout.

**With the same general implications of clinging and attachment?** The question is whether clinging and attachment are an intrinsic part of desire. Sometimes in Buddhist scripture they really seem to be talking about desire in a more celebratory way. When I make my defense, I like to make that distinction. The Buddha warned against the clinging and craving that arise when we try to make the object of desire more of an "object" than it really is. If we stay with our desire, however, instead of rejecting it, it takes us to the recognition that what we *really* want is for the object to be more satisfying than it ever can be.

The Buddha's teachings emphasize that because the object is always unsatisfying to some degree, it is our insistence on its being otherwise that causes suffering. Not that desiring is negative in itself. We can learn to linger in the space between desire and its satisfaction, explore that space a bit more. In my interpretation, this is the space that Sita was in during her separation from Rama. When we spend more time there, desire can emerge as something other than clinging.

**Or addiction?** Yes. Desire becomes addiction after you have that first little taste of something—alcohol, great sex, getting stoned—that comes so close to complete satisfaction. . . and then you start chasing it. The same

thing happens in meditation: having that first bit of bliss, then it's gone. You want the perfection back. But you're chasing something you've already lost. If you stay with that widening dissatisfaction and think, "Oh, yeah, of course," then insight can begin to happen. In that gap.

**So our relationship to desire is the problem.** That's the point I'm trying to make. Different teachers have different approaches to this: some recommend avoidance of temptation or renunciation, while others talk about meeting desire with compassion. Another strategy is to recognize the impermanence of the object of desire for instance, by countering lust with images of how disgusting the body really is.

Other teachers say that desire is really just energy that we have to learn how to use without getting caught by it. This is traditionally found under the rubric of Tantra, but it appears throughout the Buddhist canon. There's the famous Zen story in which the Buddha holds up a flower, and only one disciple grasps his meaning and smiles. There are many interpretations of this story, and mine is perhaps unorthodox. But the flower, in Indian mythology, seems to be the symbol of desire. Mara, the tempter, shoots arrows of desire at the Buddha, and the Buddha turns them into a rain of flowers. Kama, the god of Eros, shoots five flowered arrows from his bow. When the Buddha holds up the flower, he might be saying, "No big deal." Desire is something that can be met with a smile.

**As a therapist, do you believe that it's possible to reject desire in a healthy way?** Of course. There's something very useful about the capacity for renunciation. I think that renunciation actually deepens desire. That's one of its main purposes. By renouncing clinging, or addiction, we deepen desire.

Think of Shiva. In the Indian myths, Shiva is the great meditator, the

supreme renunciant. He was so absorbed in his meditation that the gods once tried to rouse him to come to their aid in a battle by sending Kama to wake him. But Shiva reduced Kama to ashes with one glance from his third eye. He was so powerful, he could incinerate desire with one look. But the world could not survive without Eros. The gods pleaded with Shiva, and he resurrected Kama as easily as he had destroyed him. He then left his meditative absorption and turned toward his lover, Parvati. They had sex for the next thousand years. The bliss of their lovemaking was the same as the bliss of his solitary meditation. This is the essential teaching of Shiva: that *tapas*, the heat of renunciation, is the same as *kama*, the heat of passion. One deepens the other. The Buddha's point, I think, was that by renouncing clinging we actually deepen desire. Clinging keeps desire in a frozen, or fixated, state. When we renounce efforts to control or possess that which we desire, we free desire itself.

**So it's selective renunciation.** I think so. Because you don't want to snuff out the love. They say that the Buddha taught each of his disciples differently. He could look at each of us and see where the clinging was. It may not be so much that we *have* desire as that we *are* desire. Trying to renounce desire is like trying to renounce yourself. This isn't the way to see the emptiness inside. But clinging is different. We can renounce clinging without estranging ourselves from desire.

**Selective renunciation deepens desire because you separate out what's addictive. You free up the erotic?** The question would be, What is the truly erotic?

**Enlighten us.** I think it has something to do with playing with separateness: trying to erase it while at the same time knowing that we

cannot. There is a tension between the control we wish we had and the freedom that is naturally present. There were great religious debates in 17th-century India about which would bring you closer to divine desire: being in a committed relationship or having an adulterous one. And the adulterous relationship won out because of the quality of separateness, of otherness, that the illicit relationship had. The relationship between husband and wife in those days was more about property. The woman was completely objectified; everything was scripted. There was no room in that relationship for the quality of hiddenness that makes something erotic—or of teasing.

In Japanese garden design there is a principle called “Hide and Reveal.” They make a path near a waterfall so that you can never see the waterfall entirely from any one vantage point. You can only get glimpses of it—there’s something in that that relates to the erotic. In psychodynamic language, this is the ability to have a relationship between two subjects, instead of a subject and an object. Can you give your lover the freedom of their subjectivity and otherness? Admit that they are outside of your control?

**Which in turn could help us remain unattached?** Any attempt to attach too much will only lead to frustration and disappointment. But attachment is a tendency that is endemic to our minds. We can’t just pretend it’s not there, but if you can keep coming back to the truth—that what we desire is not ours in that sense—we can confront our own grasping nature, which, if seen clearly, self-liberates.

**What are some of the practices, skills, that someone caught on the merry-go-round of desire can use to find the Middle Way?** Meditation is the basic tool for that. In training the mind in bare attention, not



holding on to pleasurable experiences and not pushing away unpleasant ones, we can learn to stay more in touch with ourselves. When we practice in this way, pretty quickly we can find out where we are stuck. The mind keeps coming around to the same basic themes. One of my first Buddhist teachers, Jack Kornfield, writes very movingly in his book *A Path with Heart* about his early experiences in long-term meditation at a monastery in Thailand. His mind was just filled with lust. He was freaking out about it, but his teacher just told him to note it. Despairing that it would never change, he tried his best to follow his teacher's instructions. And what he found was that, after a long period of time, his lust turned to loneliness. And it was a familiar loneliness, one that he recognized from childhood and that spoke of his feeling of not being good enough, not deserving enough of his parents' love. I think he said something like, "There's something wrong with me, and I will never be loved." Something like that. But his teacher told him to stay with those feelings, too; just to note them. The point wasn't to recover the childhood pain, it was to go through it. And eventually the loneliness turned into empty space. While it didn't go away permanently, Jack's insight into something beyond the unmet needs of childhood was crucial. This is one way to unhook ourselves from repetitive, destructive, addictive desire. It lets us go in a new direction—it frees desire up.

The way we try to extort love or affection from people can be very subtle. Or we may use food or drugs or television or whatever else to try to get that extra something. When we don't get it, we wonder what's wrong with us. And the layers of addiction are never-ending. An alcoholic can stop drinking, but that doesn't mean he's not using sex to the same end, you understand. These layers extend all the way down to someone in a monastery, who can still be addicted to some pleasant feeling in meditation. In Buddhism they say that the most difficult addiction to break is

the one to self.

The other tendency in meditation is to push away what we don't want; but aversion constitutes self as much as desire. This can lead to the anti-erotic, anti-celebratory, antiemotional tendency among some Buddhists. This keeps them feeling more cut off than they want to be.

**In a culture of addiction—with overavailability of nearly everything—isn't the learning curve especially steep when it comes to confronting desire?** One thing that has helped me think about this is the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's theory that there are two kinds of desire. A male desire (present in both sexes), which knows what it wants and is going after it, which is all about trying to obtain satisfaction. And a female desire, not just in women, which is more about interpersonal, and intrapersonal, space. The male desire is about doing and being done to, while the feminine desire is about being. Think of a baby at the breast. In one version, the breast is trying to feed the baby—it's forcing itself into the baby's consciousness, or the baby's mouth. In the other version, the breast just is. The baby has to find it, discover it, for herself. It's almost like our culture is hip to "male" desire, assaulting us constantly with "you want this, you want that." It's so much in the object mode that it doesn't yield the room for what she's calling a feminine desire, which is "Give me some space to know what I really want."

**What do you think about transcendence of bodily desire as a healthy path?** Transitionally, it might be valuable for people at certain times. So much of our conditioned experience is spent in the lower part of our body. And it's certainly helpful for the sick body. You want to know that your mind is more powerful than any of that, that you're not *only* that but exist psychically, emotionally—on many levels all at once. I remem-

ber when I would take classes with Ram Dass, and he would only teach from the heart up. He would lead guided meditations where the energy would only circulate from the fourth through the seventh chakras. It was always implicit, though, that we would bring the energy back down to the lower chakras eventually.

But transcendence as the ultimate thing, I haven't found that to be helpful. It seems like the only idea that really makes sense to me is this one: samsara and nirvana are one. Dissociating yourself from any aspect of who you really are is only a setup for future trouble. The ultimate thing has to be a complete integration of all aspects of the self.

**In your own evolution as a lover and practitioner, has your relationship to desire changed, hit walls—have there been tangles? Not to get too intimate. . .** It's always been a question for me. When I first started to practice, I was mostly aware of my anxiety. But as my mind started to calm down, I began to notice my own desire more. As if desire and anxiety are two sides of the same coin. I've always had a basic view, I suppose, that the Middle Path was the only way to go. Getting to know my first meditation teachers helped. I remember after one of my first Vipassana retreats with Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, I went into town with them to eat in a restaurant. I think they must have ordered meat or something—they had no pretension about them. It was such a relief. I didn't need to idealize them; their humanness was very obvious and very touching. For me it meant that I didn't have to try to be something other than what I was.

That's one of the main things that encouraged me to become a therapist—the relief I felt at not trying to be other than I was. Suzuki Roshi used to talk about using the manure of the mind as the fertilization for enlightenment. That's how I felt about accepting who I was. I understood

that I had to make use of whatever I actually was—not pushing it away was as important as not holding on to it.

**I'm interested in this question of transformation. Can laypeople actually transform desire? How much of this is imagination?** Tantra is all about the capacity to imagine. Once you understand the emptiness of phenomena, you have the freedom to imagine another reality—superimpose another reality on this one. It's just as real as this one, which you've already understood is empty.

**So the energy isn't actually changing?** The energy isn't actually changing, no.

**"Transformation" is a misnomer, then. Is imagination as important in connecting sex and love, do you think?** I think sexual desire is the physical attempt to reach the other, coupled with the intuition that they are forever out of reach. A famous psychoanalyst named Otto Kernberg speaks of sexual union as the experience of a lover revealing himself or herself as a body that can be penetrated and a mind that is impenetrable. You feel these two things simultaneously. Sexual desire has both the male and the female element: the attempt to possess or take over the other, coupled with the impossibility of ever really grasping them. And it's out of that combination that love, empathy, compassion—all those other feelings—emerge. Through realizing the lover's otherness.

**That's the basis of love?** I don't think that's the basis of love, but that's what happens when you're in love. Being able to appreciate, feel compelled by, the infinite unknowability of the other. It's a mystery you want to get closer to, where there's a yielding but not an ultimate merger. Both

of you remain free.

Sex is a real vehicle for experiencing this. Which is why, in Tibetan Tantra, they use sexual relation as a metaphor for what is realizable through advanced practices. Sexual relation is as close as one can come in worldly life to experiencing the mingling of bliss and emptiness that is also understandable through solitary meditation practice.

**Yet sex and mindfulness are not necessarily great bedfellows. Lots of us use, or have used, sex as a great way to get unconscious.** Yet even with the senses overwhelming us, there's still some awareness there. And it may be that very sort of awareness, of mind at the brink of going under, that's most powerful. The moment of orgasm is classically seen as a doorway to higher consciousness, but most of us don't stay there for very long. In fact, we run away from it, a little bit afraid of how overwhelming it is. As I understand it, Tantra is about staying within that doorway longer, to rest in the bliss. That's what you train yourself to do. The nonconceptual bliss that you can only really taste through intimate sex, or spiritual practice.

**Which is obviously very easy to become addicted to.** Yes.

**How does pleasure differ from joy, do you think?** Buddhist psychology says that every moment of consciousness has pleasurable, unpleasurable, and neutral qualities. Even after enlightenment, these feelings persist. They don't go away. But joy—the Pali word is *sukkha*, the opposite of *dukkha*, or unsatisfactoriness—is a fruit of realization. The capacity for joy increases as the attachment to the self diminishes. In the end, everything becomes *sukkha*. You know, even *dukkha* becomes *sukkha*. So I think it all becomes pleasure.

**Yet pleasure has such a bad rep in the Buddhist world.** And that's

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unfortunate. Because the Buddha taught not only about suffering, but about the end of suffering. Desire is only a problem when we mistake what's ephemeral for an object, something we can permanently grasp. It's only suffering because we don't understand. You know, this knowledge is encoded in the great Buddhist monuments, or stupas, that were built at the height of Buddhism's flowering in India. Surrounding the central mound of the stupa—where the ashes or bones of the Buddha or another enlightened being were stored—was a processional area where visitors to the stupa could circumambulate in a kind of devotional walking meditation. But enclosing the processional area was a great circular railing carved with all kinds of sculptures. These sculptures were often of all of the pleasures of worldly life, and they often included erotic scenes, couples in all forms of embrace, goddesses with trees growing out of their vaginas, these kinds of things. And you had to pass through these scenes, or under them, to reach the processional area. The pleasures of worldly life were the gateways, or portals, to the Buddha's understanding, as symbolized by the central mound. They are blessings that lead us further toward the Buddha's joy.

11

FEEDING YOUR DEMONS

Five steps to transforming your obstacles—your addictions, anxieties, and fears—into tranquillity and wisdom.

TSULTRIM ALLIONE

Demons are not bloodthirsty ghouls waiting for us in dark places; they are within us, the forces that we find inside ourselves, the core of which is ego-clinging. Demons are our obsessions and fears, feelings of insecurity, chronic illnesses, or common problems like depression, anxiety, and addiction. Feeding our demons rather than fighting them may seem to contradict the conventional approach of attacking and attempting to eliminate that which assails us, but it turns out to be a remarkable alternative and an effective path to liberation from all dichotomies.

In my own process of learning and applying the practice of *chöd*, which was originated by the eleventh-century Tibetan yogini Machig Lapdrön, I realized that demons—or *maras* as they are called in Buddhism—are not exotic beings like those seen in Asian scroll paintings. They are our present fears and obsessions, the issues and emotional reactivity of our own lives. Our demons, all stemming from the root demon of ego-clinging but manifesting in an infinite variety of ways, might come from the conflicts we have with our lover, the anxiety we feel when we fly, or the discomfort we feel when we look at ourselves in the mirror. We might have a demon that makes us fear abandonment or a demon that causes us to hurt the ones we love.

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Demons are ultimately generated by the mind and, as such, have no independent existence. Nonetheless, we engage with them as though they were real, and we believe in their existence—ask anyone who has fought an addiction or anxiety attacks. Demons show up in our lives whether we provoke them or not, whether we want them or not. Even common parlance refers to demons, such as a veteran who is home “bat-tling his demons” of post-traumatic stress from the war in Iraq. I recently heard a woman say she was fighting her “jealousy demon.” Unfortunately, the habit of fighting our demons only gives them strength. By feeding, not fighting, our demons, we are integrating these energies, rather than rejecting them and attempting to distance ourselves from disowned parts of ourselves, or projecting them onto others.

### THE PRACTICE OF THE FIVE STEPS OF FEEDING YOUR DEMONS

When I began to teach the chöd practice in the West over 25 years ago, I developed an exercise of visualizing and feeding “personal” demons so that the idea of demons would be relevant and applicable for Westerners. This exercise evolved into a five-step process, which began to be used independently of the Tibetan chöd practice. My students told me that this method helped them greatly with chronic emotional and physical issues such as anxiety, compulsive eating, panic attacks, and illness. When they told me the five-step process also helped in dealing with upheavals such as the end of a relationship, the stress of losing a job, the death of a loved one, and interpersonal problems at work and at home, I realized that this exercise had a life of its own outside of teaching the traditional chöd practice.

When we obsess about weight issues or become drained by a rela-



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tionship or crave a cigarette, we give our demons strength, because we aren't really *paying attention* to the demon. When we understand how to feed the demon's real need with fearless generosity, the energy tied up in our demon will tend to dissolve and become an ally, like the demons that attacked Machig and subsequently became her aides.

Feeding a demon will take about half an hour. Choose a quiet place where you feel safe and comfortable. Arrange a time when you won't be interrupted. Set up two chairs or two cushions opposite each other: one for you and one for the demon and ally. Once you're set up you will want to keep your eyes closed until the end of the fifth step, so put the two seats (chairs or cushions) close enough to each other that you can feel the one in front of you with your eyes closed. Keeping your eyes closed will help you stay focused and present as you imagine this encounter with your demon. However, until you know the steps by heart, you may need to glance at the instructions.

Begin by generating the motivation to do the practice for the benefit of all beings. Then take nine deep abdominal breaths, which means breathing in deeply until you can feel your abdomen expand. Place your hands on your stomach and notice it rise and fall. As you inhale during the first three breaths, imagine your breath traveling to any physical tension you are holding in your body and then imagine the exhalation carrying this tension away. During the next three breaths release any emotional tension you might be carrying with the exhalation and in the last three breaths release any mental tension such as worries or concepts that are blocking you. Now you are ready for the five steps.

### STEP ONE: FIND THE DEMON

In the first step you will find where in your body you hold the demon.

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Your demon might be an illness, an addiction, a phobia, perfectionism, anger, depression, or anything that is dragging you down, draining your energy. So first decide what you will work with. Finding the demon in your body takes you out of your head into a direct somatic experience. Think about the issue or demon you've decided to work with and let your awareness scan your body from head to toe, without any judgments, simply being aware of the sensations that are present. Locate where you are holding this energy by noticing where your attention goes in your body when you think about this issue. Once you find the feeling, intensify it, exaggerate it. Here are some questions to ask yourself: What color is it? What shape does it have? Does it have a texture? What is its temperature? If it emitted a sound, what would it be? If it had a smell, what would it be?

### STEP TWO: PERSONIFY THE DEMON AND ASK IT WHAT IT NEEDS

In the second step you invite the demon to move from being simply a collection of sensations, colors, and textures that you've identified inside your body to becoming a living entity sitting right in front of you. As a personified form appears, a figure or a monster, notice its color, size, expression and especially the look in its eyes. Don't try to control or decide what it will look like; let your unconscious mind produce the image. If something comes up that seems silly, like a cliché or a cartoon character, don't dismiss it or try to change it. Work with whatever form shows up without editing it. Then ask three questions aloud in the following order: What do you want from me? What do you need from me? How will you feel if you get what you need? Once you have asked these questions, immediately change places with the demon. You need to become the demon to know the answers.

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### STEP THREE: BECOME THE DEMON

In the third step, you will discover what the demon needs by putting yourself in the demon's place, actually changing places and allowing yourself to see things from the demon's point of view. With your eyes still closed, move to the seat you have set up in front of you, facing your original seat, and imagine yourself as the demon. Take a deep breath or two and feel yourself becoming this demon. Vividly recall the being that was personified in front of you and imagine you are "in the demon's shoes." Take a moment to adjust to your new identity before answering the three questions.

Then answer the three questions aloud in the first person, looking at an imagined form of your ordinary self in front of you, like this: "What I want from you is. . . . What I need from you is. . . . When my need is met, I will feel. . . ."

It's very important that these questions make the distinction between wants and needs, because many demons will want your life force, or everything good in your life, or to control you, but that's not what they need. Often what they need is hidden beneath what they say they want, which is why we ask the second question, probing a little deeper. The demon of alcoholism might want alcohol but need something quite different, like safety or relaxation. Until we get to the need underlying the craving, the craving will continue.

In response to the question "What do you need?" the stress demon might respond: "What I actually need is to feel secure."

Having learned that beneath the stress demon's desire to hurry and do more lies a need to feel secure, you still must find out how the demon will feel if it gets what it needs. This will tell you what to feed the demon. Thus, having been asked "How will you feel if you get what you need?"

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the stress demon might answer: “I will feel like I can let go and finally relax.” Now you know to feed this demon relaxation. By feeding the demon the emotional feeling that underlies the desire for the substance, we address the core issue instead of just the symptoms.

### STEP FOUR: FEED THE DEMON AND MEET THE ALLY

Now we’ve reached the crucial moment when we actually feed the demon. Return to your original position and face the demon. Take a moment to settle back into your own body before you envision the demon in front of you again.

Begin by imagining that your consciousness is separating from your body so that it is as if your consciousness is outside your body and just an observer of this process. Then imagine your body melting into nectar that consists of whatever the demon has told you it ultimately will feel if it gets what it needs, so the nectar consists of the answer to the third question in step three. For example, the demon might have said it will feel powerful, or loved, or accepted when it gets what it needs. So the nectar should be just that: You offer nectar of the feeling of power, love, or acceptance.

Now feed the demon this nectar, give free rein to your imagination in seeing how the nectar will be absorbed by the demon. See the demon drinking in your offering of nectar through its mouth or through the pores of its skin, or taking it in some other way. Continue imagining the nectar flowing into the demon; imagine that there is an infinite supply of this nectar, and that you are offering it with a feeling of limitless generosity. While you feed your demon, watch it carefully, as it is likely to begin to change. Does it look different in any way? Does it morph into a

new being altogether?

At the moment of total satiation, its appearance usually changes significantly. It may become something completely new or disappear into smoke or mist. What happens when the demon is completely satisfied? There's nothing it's "supposed" to do, so just observe what happens; let the process unfold without trying to create a certain outcome. Whatever develops will arise spontaneously when the demon is fed to its complete satisfaction. It is important that the demon be fed to complete satisfaction. If your demon seems insatiable, just imagine how it would look if it were completely satisfied; this bypasses our tendency to hold on to our demons.

The next part of step four is the appearance of an ally. A satisfied demon may transform directly into a benevolent figure, which may be the ally. The ally could be an animal, a bird, a human, a mythic god or bodhisattva, a child, or a familiar person. Ask this figure if it is the ally. If it replies it is not, then invite an ally to appear. Or the demon may have disappeared, leaving no figure behind. If so, you can still meet the ally by inviting an ally to appear in front of you. Once you clearly see the ally, ask it the following questions: How will you serve me? What pledge or commitment will you make to me? How will you protect me? How can I gain access to you?

Then change places and become the ally, just as you became the demon in step three. Having become the ally, take a moment to fully inhabit this body. Notice how it feels to be the protective guardian. Then, speaking as the ally, answer the questions above. Try to be as specific as possible in your answers.

Once the ally has articulated how it will serve and protect you, and how you can summon it, return to your original place. Take a moment to settle back into yourself, seeing the ally in front of you. Then imagine

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you are receiving the help and the commitment the ally has pledged. Feel this supportive energy enter you and take effect.

Finally, imagine the ally itself melting into you and feel its deeply nurturing essence integrating with you. Notice how you feel when the ally has dissolved into you. Realize that the ally is actually an inseparable part of you, and then allow yourself to dissolve into emptiness, which will naturally take you to the fifth and final step.

### STEP FIVE: REST IN AWARENESS

When you have finished feeding the demon to complete satisfaction and the ally has been integrated, you and the ally dissolve into emptiness. Then you just rest. When the thinking mind takes a break for even a few seconds, a kind of relaxed awareness replaces the usual stream of thoughts. We need to encourage this and not fill this space with anything else; just let it be. Some people describe the fifth step as peace, others as freedom, and yet others as a great vastness. I like calling it “the gap,” or the space between thoughts. Usually, when we experience the gap we have a tendency to want to fill it up immediately; we are uncomfortable with empty space. In the fifth step, rather than filling this space, rest there. Even if this open awareness only occurs for a moment, it’s the beginning of knowing your true nature.

Although the method of personifying a fear or neurosis is not unfamiliar in Western psychology, the value of the five-step practice of feeding your demons is quite different, beginning with the generation of an altruistic motivation, followed by the body offering (which works directly with ego-clinging) and finally the experience of nondual meditative awareness in the final step of the process. This state of relaxed awareness, free from our usual fixation of “self” versus “other,” takes us beyond the

place where normal psychotherapeutic methods end.

## DIRECT LIBERATION OF DEMONS

Once we have practiced feeding the demons for some time, we begin to become aware of demons as they form. We learn to see them coming: “Ah, here comes my self-hatred demon.” This makes it possible—with some practice—to liberate demons as they arise without going through the five steps, by using what is called “direct liberation.” This most immediate and simple route to liberating demons takes you straight to the fifth step, but it is also the most difficult to do effectively.

Direct liberation is deceptively simple. It involves noticing the arising energy or thoughts and then turning your awareness directly toward them without giving it form as we do in the five steps. This is the energetic equivalent of turning a boat directly into the wind when sailing; the boat travels because of its resistance to the wind and stops when its power source has been neutralized. Similarly, if you turn your awareness directly into an emotion it stops developing. This doesn’t mean you are analyzing it or thinking about it, but rather you are turning toward it with clear awareness. At this point, if you are able to do it correctly, the demon will instantly be liberated and vanish on the spot. The technique of direct liberation is comparable to being afraid of a monster in the dark and then turning on the light. When the light goes on we see that there never was a monster in the first place, that it was just a projection of our own mind.

Let’s take the example of a demon of jealousy. I notice, “Ah, I’m getting jealous, my heart rate is increasing. My body is tensing.” If at that moment I turn toward the energy of jealousy and bring my full awareness to it, the jealousy will pop like a balloon. When we feed a demon

using the five steps, by the time you get to the fifth step both you and the demon have dissolved into emptiness and there is just vast awareness. Here we are short-circuiting the demon as it arises by meeting its energy consciously as soon as it surfaces, going directly to the fifth step.

Another example of a situation in which you might practice direct liberation would be an interaction with other people. You might be sitting with your lover, for instance, when you discover that something he committed to doing has not even been started. You feel irritation welling up. But then if you turn your awareness to this sensation of irritation, looking right at it, it disappears.

One way I explain direct liberation at my retreats is through an experiment. You might try it. Consciously generate a strong emotion—anger, sadness, disappointment, or desire. When you get this feeling, intensify it, and then turn your awareness directly to that emotion and rest in the experience that follows. Liberation of the demon can be so simple and instantaneous that you will distrust the result, but check back on it, and, if you have done it correctly, the emotion will have dissolved.

With considerable practice the next stage becomes possible: Here immediate awareness, clear and unmodified, is already stable, not something you just glimpse periodically. At this stage, you don't have to "do" anything; awareness simply meets emotions as they arise so that they are naturally liberated. Emptiness, clarity, and awareness are spontaneously present. Emotions don't get hold of you; they arise and are liberated simultaneously. This is called instant liberation. An emotion arises but finds no foothold and dissolves. At this point we have no need for feeding demons, because we are governed by awareness, rather than by our emotions.

The process of acknowledging our collective demons begins with our personal demons—universal fears, paranoia, prejudices, arrogance,



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and other weaknesses. Families, groups, nations, and even society as a whole can create demons that are the sum of unresolved individual demons. If we do not acknowledge these personal demons, our weaknesses and fears can join those of others to become something monstrous.

Through shifting our perspective away from attacking our enemies and defending our territory to feeding our demons, we can learn to stay in dialogue with the enemy and find peaceful solutions. In this way we begin a quiet revolution. Drawing on the inspiration of the teachings of an 11th-century yogini, we can change our world.

## THE STORY OF CHÖD PRACTICE

The great Tibetan yogini Machig Labdrön (1055–1145) received empowerment from her teacher, Kyotön Sonam Lama, with several other women practitioners. At the key moment when the wisdom beings descended, Machig magically rose up from where she was sitting, passed through the wall of the temple, and flew into a tree above a pond.

This pond was the residence of a powerful *naga*, or water spirit. These capricious beings can cause disruption and disease but can also act as treasure holders or protectors. This particular *naga* was so terrifying that the local people did not even dare to look at the pond, never mind approach it. But Machig landed in the tree above the pond and stayed there in a state of profound, unshakable meditation.

Young Machig's arrival in this lone tree above the pond was a direct confrontation for the water spirit. He approached her threateningly, but she remained in meditation, unafraid. This infuriated him, so he gathered a huge army of nagas from the region in an attempt to intimidate her. They approached her as a mass of terrifying magical apparitions. When she saw them coming, Machig instantly transformed her body

into a food offering, and, as her biography states, “They could not devour her because she was egoless.”

Not only did the aggression of the nagas evaporate, but also they developed faith in her and offered her their “life essence,” committing not to harm other beings and vowing to protect her. By meeting the demons without fear, compassionately offering her body as food rather than fighting against them, Machig turned the demons into allies.

There is a story, also about a water creature, in Western mythology that stands in stark contrast to the story of Machig Labdrön and the naga. The myth of Hercules exemplifies the heroic quest in Western culture. Accompanied by his nephew Iolaus, Hercules goes to the lake of Lerna, where the Hydra, a nine-headed water serpent, has been attacking innocent passersby. Hercules and Iolaus fire flaming arrows at the beast to draw it from its lair. After it emerges, Hercules discovers that every time he destroys one of the Hydra’s heads, two more grow back in its place.

Iolaus uses a burning branch to cauterize the necks at the base of the heads as Hercules lops them off, successfully preventing the Hydra from growing more. Eventually only one head remains. This head is immortal, but Hercules cuts through the mortal neck that supports it. The head lies before him, hissing. Finally, he buries the immortal head under a large boulder, considering the monster vanquished.

But what kind of victory has Hercules achieved? Has he actually eliminated the enemy, or merely suppressed it? The Hydra’s immortal head, the governing force of its energy, is still seething under the boulder and could reemerge if circumstances permitted. What does this say about the monster-slaying heroic mentality that so enthralls and permeates our society?

Although the positive aspects of the myth can lead to important

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battles against hatred, disease, and poverty, it also poses terrible and largely unacknowledged dangers. Among these is the ego inflation of those who identify themselves with the role of the dragon-slaying warrior hero. Another is projecting evil onto our opponents, demonizing them, and justifying their murder, while we claim to be wholly identified with good. The tendency to kill—rather than engage—the monster prevents us from knowing our own monsters and transforming them into allies.

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12

THE NON-USE OF  
INTOXICANTS

The 5th Zen Precept

NANCY BAKER

Typically, the first things that come to mind when we encounter the fifth Zen precept are drugs and alcohol, particularly alcohol, which in excess can make us drunk, inebriated, or intoxicated. There are many words for it. Originally, this precept was about refraining from buying or selling intoxicants, when selling was considered even worse than imbibing. And it's no wonder, since the earliest meaning of the transitive verb to *intoxicate* in English is “to smear with poison”—which is what I'd be doing to others were I to sell or give them intoxicants. On the other hand, we do say that the fragrance of certain roses is “intoxicating.” But what is intoxication really? Getting high? What exactly does that mean?

Before we get into the meaning of *intoxication*, it would be good to look at how the fifth precept is treated in the two versions of the Ten Grave Precepts considered foundational in Zen. Bodhidharma says of number five: “The ten dharma worlds are the body and mind. In the sphere of the originally pure dharma, not being ignorant is called the precept of refraining from using intoxicants.” Eihei Dogen says: “Not being ignorant. It has never been: don't be defiled. It is indeed the great

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clarity.” Some other translations include “Not giving rise to delusions is called not giving or taking drugs.... Drugs are not brought in yet, don’t let them invade, this is the great light” (Aitken Roshi); “Not allowing the mind to become dark is called the precept of refraining from using intoxicants” (Daido Roshi); “Where nothing can be brought in, everything is inviolable, this is exactly the great brightness” (Reb Anderson).

As the various translations indicate, intoxication has something to do with ignorance, defilement, delusion, darkness, and a clouding over of light or clarity. But is being intoxicated by the fragrance of a rose an example of delusion? If I hold the rose up to your nose, am I smearing you with poison? Surely not! The poet Rumi helps to distinguish among intoxicants in his poem “The Many Wines”:

God has given us a dark wine so potent that,  
drinking it, we leave the two worlds.

God has put into the form of hashish a power  
to deliver the taster from self-consciousness.

God has made sleep so  
that it erases every thought.

God made Majnun love Layla so much that  
just her dog would cause confusion in him.

There are thousands of wines  
that can take over our minds.

Don’t think all ecstasies  
are the same!

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Jesus was lost in his love for God.  
His donkey was drunk with barley.

Drink from the presence of saints,  
not from those other jars.

Every object, every being,  
is a jar full of delight.

Be a connoisseur,  
and taste with caution.

Any wine will get you high.  
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,

the ones unadulterated with fear,  
or some urgency about “what’s needed.”

Drink the wine that moves you  
as a camel moves when it’s been untied,

and is just ambling about.

—Excerpted from *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition* by Coleman Barks © 2004

Not only does Rumi suggest that there are many different kinds of intoxicants—“thousands of wines that can take over our minds”—but he also says that there different ways of being intoxicated. One occurs

when some grace comes to us—maybe just the fragrance of the rose. A more intense example might be a post-communion prayer from the Catholic Mass that has in it the line “O, blood of Christ, inebriate me.” Quite different from these are the intoxications that are the result of some wanting or even craving, and are thus adulterated with fear or some urgency about what we think we need. There are also many different varieties of this second kind of intoxication, and not all of them are pleasant. For example, our return over and over again to destructive patterns may not be consciously pleasurable, but it has some kind of payoff, otherwise we wouldn’t be doing it. We may be suffering, but there is something we are getting from it—we become intoxicated.

There are many types of intoxicants out there—drugs, alcohol, food, sugar, caffeine, nicotine. But there are other less obvious categories as well. Daydreaming, a form of tuning out, is a great intoxicant. So are blaming, analyzing, justifying, and storytelling. I need to tell my story, I need for you to know who I am, where I am, on and on.... Or forget about you, I’ll tell the stories to myself—if you really look, you’ll be aware that we can actually get high on storytelling. Apologizing is a great intoxicant. Obsessing—even better. Tuning out. Being a victim. Confusion. Suffering. One of the best is infatuation. There is a definite high there, and a clouded mind, for sure. And then there’s pleasure. The odd thing about pleasure is that instead of fully enjoying what is here, being able to be fully present with it, we are busy looking for more. We miss the true depth of pleasure by being intoxicated with the possibility of more.

The most interesting one, especially for those with a spiritual practice of some sort, is our intoxication with how we can be “better” than we are. We get intoxicated with a future version of ourselves. Or we simply become intoxicated with the future itself. Of course, we’re often in-

toxicated with the past, too. It is really worth looking at your experience in terms of the high that's there. In fact, with all these examples, what's important for practice is to inquire deeply, to discover the "high" that's there—especially the high that is disguised by a low.

Then there is the modern technology category of intoxicants—the Internet, cell phones, iPods, and who knows what's next. The front page of the *New York Times* on June 7, 2010, had a sobering (!) article titled "Hooked on Gadgets, and Playing a Mental Price." The darkness and delusion that come with technological intoxication can go so far as to cause loss of life, as in cell phone use while driving. As for TV, Thomas Merton, the great 20th-century Christian mystic, has the following to say: "Consider, for instance, the general atmosphere of pseudo-contemplation that pervades secular life today. The life of the television watcher is a kind of caricature of contemplation—passivity, uncritical absorption, receptivity, inertia—not only that but a gradual, progressive yielding to the mystic attraction until one is spellbound in a state of complete union." In Buddhist terms we might call this a kind of pseudo samadhi. On the other hand, meditation practice itself can become intoxicating, a kind of blissful tuning out where awakensness is missing.

All of this seems to be about "me," and, needless to say, how I am always has an effect on others, but where are the others in this particular picture? We might agree that we get intoxicated by many different things, but surely we don't sell or give intoxicants to others. Oh yes, we do! We sell intoxicants all the time. We react. We blame. We manipulate. We seduce. We play it safe. We lie, steal, kill, and invite others to join us in speaking ill of a third person. Just look at something like joking as a way to avoid true contact. We are constantly inviting others into our barrel of heroin. We want others to be as untruthful as we are. Connected with this is another very important kind of intoxication: feeding



our narcissism. Often our desire is to seduce or manipulate others into praise or mirroring of us, into seeing us. Being seen, especially the way I want to be seen, is a powerful intoxicant. We can all charm each other with humor, infatuation, or admiration into complete inebriation. Some people can intoxicate themselves and a whole roomful of people with their narcissistic charm. “Narcissism” seems like such a strong, narrow word, but it is actually a weak, broad one. It is simply what takes the place of recognition of our true nature—a colossal case of mistaken identity.

Often we choose some intoxicant, maybe a glass of wine, TV, a phone call, to avoid discomfort. But there are even subtler intoxicants. One of the members of my sitting group came up with a wonderful metaphor several years ago in a discussion about the fifth precept: “I was thinking about this idea of being intoxicated. And I was sort of feeling what it is like to be worried, to revert to being worried, and it was kind of like a hard candy, you know, with a certain flavor. I could get that flavor back whenever I needed it. So that’s a strange kind of intoxicant, that familiarity, that touchstone.”

Sometimes we want to alter our experience just ever so slightly. I’m sitting here. I’m uncomfortable. I want to have lunch. I focus on the thought, and it actually becomes a craving complete with imagined possibility. It becomes an alternative to just being here, to just having lunch come when lunch comes. It isn’t lunch that is the intoxicant but the thoughts about it, the craving itself, which takes us away from whatever discomfort is occurring.

What are some of the discomforts we move away from and try to avoid with intoxicants? Being wrong, the fear of being wrong, negative emotions, being alone, being without reference points, being unsure, being afraid, being without approval or mirroring, being bored or restless, being overwhelmed. The odd thing is that some of us turn away from

these uncomfortable states and reach for an intoxicant, while others of us actually experience the state itself as the intoxicant. We can be pulled like a magnet toward these states of mind. We indulge in them and get high on them, especially if they are part of an identity. They are like drugs.

As with the other precepts, the first and most important step in working on this one is to get to know ourselves with no judgment. In this case it is to notice our intoxication habits, to bring our full attention to them, to be curious about them, to contemplate them in a state of openness, compassion, and wonder. Part of this practice is to discover those very subtle highs, including the ones that are disguised as lows. Each of us is different in this respect. It is important to find what works for you and practice meticulous attention in getting to know it. However, this is not about identifying addictions but rather about recognizing the state of intoxication. Once you find that state in yourself, ask what it does to your mind, to your awakensness.

And now let's look at those words: *ignorance, defilement, delusion, darkness—a clouding over of light or clarity*. Reaching for an intoxicant to avoid what is here, to cover it up, to feel better is obviously deluded. But what about being high itself? The most striking thing about it, it seems to me, is the lack of clarity, of awakensness, of presence to what is here. Think of the expression "I was carried away by ...." Intoxication carries us away from what is here, from the truth. In Zen the meditation practice of just sitting is called *shikantaza*. Japanese Zen master Kodo Sawaki Roshi, known as "Homeless Kodo" because he had no temple, had the following to say about *shikan*:

To practice the Buddha-Way is not-to-look-aside. Be one with what you encounter right now. This is called samadhi or shikan (just doing some-

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thing wholeheartedly). You don't eat in order to take a shit. You don't shit in order to make manure.

—Excerpted from *Shikantaza: An Introduction to Zazen*, edited and translated by Shohaku Okumura

Using intoxicants is to look aside.

What is the great brightness? The Dogen translations use the words *clarity, great light, great clarity, great brightness*. Clarity has something to do with delusion, whereas light is broader, and brightness is a particular aspect of light. That light, that brightness, the light of pure awareness we might say, is what shines through us when we are able to be completely present with what is, when we are awake and not intoxicating ourselves and others. It is the manifestation of the Buddha, of the Absolute, of the Great Brightness right here, right now when our minds are not clouded, defiled, darkened with all that is afraid to allow that brightness to shine. Zen Master Dogen's exhilarating "Death Poem" should not be mistaken for an expression of intoxication. It is, instead, that great brightness.

Fifty-four years lighting up the sky.  
A quivering leap smashes a billion worlds.  
Hah!

Entire body looks for nothing.  
Living, I plunge into Yellow Springs  
—Translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi

This is the precept of the non-use of intoxicants.

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13

RECOVERY AND THE  
FIFTH PRECEPT

It's up to you to decide if you have a problem.

DON LATTIN

Many of us who came of age in the 1960s convinced ourselves that getting high was the quickest—if not the best—way to begin the long, strange trip toward higher consciousness. Aldous Huxley, the man who wrote *The Doors of Perception* and turned Timothy Leary on to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, seemed to be saying that we could access ancient wisdom through the wonders of modern chemistry.

For a while at least, that theory seemed to hold true for me, and I suspect I'm not the only *Tricycle* reader who became interested in Buddhism following an acid trip back in the sixties.

Further on down the road, in the 1970s, I got a bit more serious about my Buddhism. I struggled through a few meditation retreats with the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn and even considered taking vows to become an official Buddhist. But one of the Buddhist precepts particularly bothered me. It was the fifth one, the one about abstaining from intoxicating drink, and presumably from other drugs that also gave rise to heedlessness.

I never got around to taking those formal vows and soon fell away from my meditation practice altogether. It took two decades before I re-

connected with meditation, in this case a Vipassana group. Getting high was still an important part of my daily routine, but I'd long since abandoned the delusion that alcohol and other drugs were somehow furthering my spiritual growth. I could no longer hide the fact from myself that I was an alcoholic and a drug addict—a functional one with a good job, a house, and a family, but an addict nonetheless.

As a journalist, I'd written about twelve-step spirituality and the burgeoning recovery movement, but I'd never felt like Alcoholics Anonymous was for me. I knew enough about Buddhism to know that its teachings about the dangers of craving and attachment (and obsession and selfishness and egomania) might offer a path out of addiction. After asking around, I discovered the beginnings of a Buddhist recovery network. I found the work of Kevin Griffin, the author of *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps* and more recently *A Burning Desire: Dharma God and the Path of Recovery*. I attended one of his retreats at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County. I also connected with an eclectic group of recovering addicts who were interested in Buddhism and gathered every Monday at a place we called the Koo-Koo Factory, a funky loft/performance space in San Francisco's Mission District. That group disbanded following the death of its founding angel, and I started attending a larger meditation recovery group at the San Francisco Zen Center. I also put a little more effort into finding an AA group that was right for me, and discovered that some of my old ideas about AA were based on too many preconceived notions and not enough personal investigation.

Several years ago, I started working on a book about the early years of the psychedelic drug movement. (It would be published in 2011 as *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*.) One question the book asks is whether drug-induced feelings of wonder, awe, empathy, and interconnectedness

are authentic religious experiences. My answer is that while the experiences may be authentic, the real issue is what we do with them. Do the experiences change the way we live our lives? Do they make us more aware and compassionate human beings? Looking back on my own history, I'd have to say that a few psychedelic drug experiences back in the day did change the way I think about the world and live my life. They did make me a better person. But I can't say the same thing about a few decades of experiences with other drugs, including alcohol.

In 2010, I interviewed six Buddhist teachers about their interpretations of the fifth precept. Some of them urged complete abstention from alcohol and other drugs. Others see nothing wrong with a glass of wine with dinner. Some urged caution but still saw some value in psychedelic drugs. One thing I've learned in my own recovery is that it's not up to me to decide if someone else has a problem with alcohol or other drugs. It's up to them. And I've come to feel the same way about the fifth precept.

So if you have a problem with the fifth precept, you might want to ask yourself just why that might be.

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14

J U S T   S H U T   U P

An interview with Zen teacher Robert Chodo Campbell

Robert Campbell Chodo began using amphetamines and alcohol at age 16. He continued using amphetamines until age 24, before moving on to cocaine for the next 10 years. In 1988, Campbell got sober after seeing a psychotherapist and joining Alcoholics Anonymous, where he attended meetings 3 times a week. While Campbell says that “AA unquestionably gave me the tools to make the life changes,” it wasn’t until he began his Zen practice in 1993 that he began to get “really, really sober.” Today Campbell is one of the Executive Directors for New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care, an organization that provides direct care to the sick, dying, and suffering.

**What’s your experience with addiction?** For me “addiction” is an odd word, because it’s such a catchall. When it comes to addiction we’re usually talking about alcohol or substance abuse, but there can also be an addictive quality to our thinking. When I latch on to thoughts, either positive or negative, and they become obsessive, it has the same quality as getting the fix—“I hate this, love that, want it, don’t want it; why is this happening to me, why is my life so difficult, why can’t I be more this or less that?”—and on and on.

As a kid I can remember thinking, “I’ve got to get the hell out of here.” I come from a long line of addicted family members, running



the gamut from smoking and drinking to gambling and drug dealing. More often than not there is a fair amount of violent behavior that is the norm in this kind of environment. So my earliest thoughts were of running away. The endless loop was, ironically, a healthy stream of obsessive thinking: “This is not healthy. I am not going to survive. I need to get out of here in order to survive.” And later that turned into “All I have to do is survive.” And then *that* opened the door to the life of addiction. In order to survive, I had to anesthetize myself with substances or behaviors.

**Did Buddhism play a role in your recovery?** Not in the beginning. I was five years sober before I found my Buddhist path and met my first Zen teacher, Dai En Friedman. I was in supervisory training at an analytic institute on Long Island, and every week when leaving supervision I would see this woman coming into the office. She was really amazing-looking—bald with piercing blue eyes—and I thought, “Wow. She’s someone I’d like to know.” The next time I saw her, I said, “Hi. I’d love to introduce myself to you,” and she said, “OK.” And I said, “My name’s Bob. I’m living out here, training in this institute, and I hear you’re a Buddhist monk.” She said, “Yes,” and I said, “Well, I’d love to learn a little bit about that.” Then for some reason I just blurted it all out: “I’ve been sober for five years, and I’m having a really hard time with it. I’m so depressed, and my childhood was terrible with incest and drugs and this and that. And I come from this long line of alcoholics and violence.” Basically, I just vomited all over this woman. Her response was the catalyst for my shift in consciousness: “You know what you need to do? You need to shut up. You need to shut up, and shut up long enough to hear your story, because it’s just a story, and you’ve been carrying it around now for what, 35 years, 40 years? And that’s what you’re living out of, so

how about rather than acting out of it, listen to it and take a look at it?” “How do I do that?” I asked “Just come to the zendo,” she said, “and let’s see what happens.”

**She told you to shut up.** Yep! And you know, sometimes we *need* to shut up. Actually nobody cares as much as you do about your story. It’s not that interesting to anybody else.

**That moment was as important on your path as the Twelve Step program?** Oh, yes. It turned my life around. I was sober, living a very comfortable life, and I was depressed as hell. I remember thinking, “If this is sobriety, I’m going back to drinking, because this is not fun. This is not the life I had imagined being sober was about.” Sure, I had the material gifts, but I was so unhappy. I hadn’t yet found the spiritual component you hear about in the Twelve Step programs. Yes, I knew all about Higher Power and didn’t question the concept, but it just wasn’t enough for me. When I started to meditate, things started to become clearer for me, and I was listening to someone who was speaking to me in a language that I could understand. I was listening to *me* with a fresh understanding of life. We could call it acceptance. It was real to-the-gut: “Sit down, shut up, stop with the story, and just take a breath. You’re addicted to the story. Start to unravel all that.” And that’s when I think that I really began to get sober, really sober.

**You were five years sober before finding Zen. Did Alcoholics Anonymous work?** I vacillate back and forth over this question. Did AA work, or did I walk into the right place at the right time and hear the right words? I went to my first AA meeting in a church on Park Avenue, with all these women in fancy coats and business guys from Wall Street, and here’s me from my world, which was very different from that. And the minute I

walked into the room, I'm thinking, "What am I doing here? This is not me." But someone was telling their story, and I thought, "Wow. Actually, you know what? This is me—the same story, just dressed up differently." So for a while I kept going back, as they say, to more meetings. So did AA help me? On one level absolutely: it kept me out of the bars and gave me a direction, but at a certain point I was like, "I can't hear any more of these stories."

**When you talk about Zen practice and the Twelve Steps, it makes me think about *self*-power versus *other*-power in dealing with addiction. Can we say that Zen emphasizes self-power and that you believe that you have to deal with your addictions yourself?** I would hate to come across as saying that I could've done this without any help from AA and the other programs. For sure, in the first years of sobriety what kept me coming to the meetings was the friends I made—the other comrades in the battle, if you like—who were also fighting their own addictions. We had this beautiful group of addicts together in recovery, and that's what kept me in the rooms. It was not so much what I was hearing from the Big Book [*Alcoholics Anonymous*, the Twelve Step sourcebook]—in fact, I hated Big Book meetings—but what I was hearing from other travelers on the road, all their war stories.

Could I have done it by myself? No. The rooms definitely got me to a certain point. But as I said, at five years sober I still did not feel that I was alive in the world.

**So maybe the other-power doesn't have to be God, but it's there. Perhaps that's where the sangha comes in.** The power for me is definitely not God. God played no part in it. Perhaps one day I will change my mind about that but a lot more healing has to take place. For me the power was the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, the community.

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: ADDICTION

My community was in the zendo. When I moved back to Manhattan in 1998 I was fortunate enough to meet my current teacher, Enkyo Roshi. She has had her own experience of addiction, so it was an easy fit. I could bring my questions about practice as a recovering addict to interview.

**If “addiction” is a catchall, as you say, should we employ different techniques when trying to work with our various addictions? Or is there a common approach that we can use, whether we’re addicted to, say, alcohol or compulsive eating or thinking or going to the gym?** I think it’s in realizing that we *always* have a choice. Even when we’re at the height of our addictions, most of us might think, “I have no choice, so this is all I can do.” I think we always have a choice. My path was that I chose to do more cocaine. I chose to do more drugs. I chose to behave in ways that were not skillful. I chose to put myself into dangerous places, knowing all the time that I didn’t have to do that.

**We always have a choice? Many people would say that being addicted to something means that it’s out of our hands.** I know that it’s not a popular foundation to stand on. I can only speak about myself, and I always knew I had a choice. My choice was to get fucked up. My choice was to do whatever I needed to do to put myself in another place physically, emotionally, psychologically. When I reached my bottom, to use Twelve Step terminology, that was the bottom that motivated me into to go into Twelve Step recovery. But was that my worst bottom? Was that the worst situation I’d ever been in? No. I actually woke up after a blackout on the corner of Thompson and Bleecker Streets, after being out all night. Was that the worst situation I’ve ever been in? No. And it certainly wasn’t the most dangerous. But I came out of that blackout, and I very vividly remember thinking, “This has to stop. I don’t want

to do this anymore.” It was a very definite choice on my part to not continue in that way.

I’ve worked with so many addicts over the years, from crack-heads, prostitutes, and ex-prisoners to crystal-meth addicts and overspenders, and what I’ve almost always found is there’s a part of that person that doesn’t want to do it—whatever that “it” is. Doesn’t want to shoot up again, doesn’t want to go out on the streets to cop, is tired of the meth scene. To me, that implies that they realize they have a choice. If I think to myself, “This is all I can do. This is all I know. There’s no other way,” then I’m leaving choice out of it. But if I have the capacity to think “Actually, it could be different. Do I have to do this?” there is a choice.

But I would also say: Don’t confuse choice for control. You don’t approach this head on and say, “I’m in charge now. I’m going to stop,” and everything is hunky dory from then on. Ego is not going to give up so easily. But something is going to happen. You reach the point where the only thing to do is to not do it, and stop talking and shut up. You shut up. You put your money where your mouth is. Don’t tell me you want to stop and then not stop. The talking is smoke and mirrors. Why would you talk about it?

**In Buddhism, within the framework of karma, yes, there is a choice. But there’s a certain sense of serendipity when a person says “enough,” or when that moment of choice presents itself. Why now and not before, or later? There’s a window of opportunity that somehow opens up because of causes and conditions that we don’t quite understand. Is there room for the idea of a moment of grace? Or karma? Maybe there is an opening into. . . My Buddha nature was there as the alcoholic. I was in Buddha nature in my blackout. But yes, in coming out of that blackout there was grace.**

**How do you understand this moment of choice from a Buddhist perspective?** We learn the first noble truth: There is suffering. And we can look at our dependencies, if you like, as a form of suffering. I now understand that suffering is not permanent, that nothing is permanent. This is not going to last; I can move away from this. These feelings, these cravings for alcohol, cocaine, sex—whatever the drugs—these feelings aren't undying. They will subside if only for a moment. In the early days of recovery, a moment of relief felt like a lifetime.

The other side of that coin is that the relief isn't permanent. I could be sitting there thinking, "Wow, I've got this totally licked. I haven't had a drink today," and then in the next breath I'd be saying, "Fuck, I don't want this. I want a drink." So it's not only the suffering that is impermanent; it's also the relief that's impermanent. It's a constant back and forth. Drink, don't drink; shoot up, don't shoot up; wake up, don't wake up. For all of us, not just the addict, it really is life and death in each moment. The choice is yours.

—Sam Mowe and James Shaheen