RIGHT VIEW AND THE PRACTICE OF ADDICTION

JEFFREY SCHNEIDER

At the beginning of a period of meditation, I offer the merit of my practice to all beings in the ten directions, and particularly for the benefit of those who suffer in the hell of active addiction.

One morning, as I made this dedication of merit, I began to think about what is meant by all beings. In the Buddhist cosmology, sentient beings wander through six realms of existence (the word samsara literally means to wander): the realms of the gods, the asuras, of humans, animals, hungry ghosts and of the various hells. And, as each of these realms, no matter how pleasant or painful, is still on the wheel of karmic existence, some sort of craving or clinging conditions the beings who inhabit them.

For the gods, perhaps, the addiction is pleasure. And we needn't think of it as some grossly material pleasure either, a sort of Roman orgy writ large. Rather, pleasure can be refined, aesthetic, cerebral, cool---and still habit-forming.

The asuras, the angry gods, are beings addicted to the heady stimulant of being right, of being angry about being right, of being willing to fight for things because "it's a matter of principle, dammit!"

And then there's us. More about us later.

The search for satiety and security is the constant goad of the animal.

The hungry ghost is addicted not only to the food and drink that never satisfies, but to the hunger itself. (For example, those who describe themselves as sex addicts will often admit that the hunt is as exciting, or more so, than the actual act.)

And finally, the frozen or flaming inhabitants of hell are bound to their suffering as much by choice (albeit often unconscious choice) as by circumstance.

So all beings, all of us, are created and conditioned by addiction.

That said, the focus of this essay is on the variety of addictions usually connoted by the term: abusive and persistent use of alcohol and drugs (either of the prescription or street variety). The origins of addiction (genetic, biochemical, familial, socio-economic, cultural, etc.) are not at question. The point is: once we are in the trap, how do we get out?

In the eightfold path, right view is listed first. It is the beginning and also the end of the path. Our view of reality is altered and corrected with practice, like a point that repeats itself on a rising spiral. At first, in both our introduction to practice and in our attempts to deal with addiction, right view is pretty basic. It consists of something like: "This really hurts----and nothing that I'm doing is helping." We all come to practice and to sobriety with suffering as the proximate cause.

Buddhism presupposes that insight is the ultimate means of liberation from suffering. But this insight is of a special sort. An intellectual knowing, an abstract ability to see the relationship between cause and effect is not enough. It is essential as a basis, but not of itself liberative. Rather the knowing that Buddhist practice aims at is the sort of knowing that we associate with the senses. We know by seeing that an object is near or far; we know when a sensation is hot or cold, pleasant or unpleasant, when a sound is loud or soft. This is a knowing that exists below the level of conscious discrimination. It is this sort of gnosis that Buddhism points to as the end of suffering. We must know, in our gut, that craving and suffering are identical---to the same extent that we know that to stick our hand into the fire will hurt. And we must recoil with the same instinctive alacrity.
But we don't. Mostly. Time and time again, we do the same thing expecting a different result each time. If it weren't so often tragic, would be slapstick. We fail to get the message. We take up the drink or the drug again, get involved in the same doomed relationships, overeat, overspend, over and over. And it is not just those who are called "addicts" by society who do this. Every human person frequently works against his or her own best interests on a consistent basis, thereby creating avoidable suffering.

Both Buddhism and recovery (and here I will note that I am using a Twelve Step model as the one with which I am familiar) propose a graduated approach to liberation. This is not to deny that insight can come in a momentary, blinding flash. But it can be the work of a lifetime to either incorporate that moment into our daily consciousness---or the work of a lifetime of practice to arrive at that single moment. The daily work of practice is what really accomplishes transformation.

We begin with honesty about our situation. This in itself can be a source of tremendous pain, as it presupposes our willingness to admit that most of what we've done to date has failed. But when the pain of continuing our course is greater than the pain of change, we will be more convinced. In talk about addiction, we often hear the word "denial" used in the sense that the addict denies the reality of his or her drug-induced situation. It is easy for a non-addict to see the insanity of this situation. But in reality, the suffering that most of us create for ourselves is also derived from denial---denial of the reality of cause and effect. We act as though we can escape the consequences of our actions; and this ignorance is the main fountainhead of most of our pain.

Having come to these uncomfortable, but inevitable, conclusions, we must look for a way out. Buddhism defines three areas in which practice must occur to be efficacious: ethical behavior (sila), meditation (dhyana) and wisdom (prajna). In recovery work, the

So all beings, all of us, are created and conditioned by addiction.

names are different, but the functioning is the same. We must look closely at our lives, accepting responsibility and consequence for our past actions; seek to atone and make restitution where possible and necessary. Only with the calmness of mind that comes from living according to the precepts, can we have enough stability to practice meditation with any success. If we are living in fear about being found out, or in guilt and anxiety about things we have done, our meditation cannot be very effective.

Meditation itself can be seen to incorporate the entirety of the program of recovery as well as of Buddhism. When we sit down to meditate, we must practice both striving and surrender. We make an effort to sit up straight, to pay attention to our object of meditation, to stay awake and alert. Just so we must undertake on a daily basis those things which bring us further along the path of recovery (going to meetings, doing service, working with others, practicing the Steps, etc.). There is a lot of work to be done.

But, both in meditation and recovery, we must also surrender: to those situations in life beyond our control, to the process itself, to the time it takes (usually much too long for our liking) for change to happen, to whatever discomfort we bring to or discover in our sitting. Patience is not one of the more glamorous virtues, perhaps; but it is certainly one of the most necessary.

We must also surrender and accept the moment—the unrepeatable, irreplaceable, irritating moment in which our life occurs. Too often we would rather be some other place, doing some other thing, being some other person. If only I could be more patient, more calm, more settled in my meditation. If only I did not feel like such a failure so often in so many areas of my life. To surrender to the fact that we often feel this way, to nod sympathetically and to go on, is very difficult. But necessary.

I recall once, during a day-long meditation retreat, I was very bothered by my busy mind which would not settle down and behave, not settle into breath and posture and mindful attention. My mind had a mind of its own; the inner child was a brat. At some point, I just gave up and felt sorry for my poor, busy mind. I imagined rocking my mind in my arms like a colicky baby and saying, "Poor little mind. You are so busy and so restless and so tired. Poor little mind." Sometimes we must simply surrender to who we are, when we are and where we are.

In the midst of our radical imperfection, however, in the midst of the clamor our addictions have left behind, is the bodhisattva vow. The vow to remain in the world of suffering for the sake of all beings is wisdom.

In meditation we have the opportunity to observe the true nature of thought and feeling, of physical sensation, of all the five skandhas. And this nature is emptiness. Emptiness is the name we give to the lack of any abiding self which is capable of standing freely apart from the rest of reality on its own. All phenomena are of this nature.

However, emptiness is a negative (and very useful) statement of this essential fact. When we speak of it positively, we might use words such as interconnectedness or interdependency. All things depend upon and are defined and created and supported by all the other things they are not. To know this as experience is wisdom.

Because of the experience of interconnectedness, we realize the impossibility of striving for individual salvation. And because of the compassion that is born of a close observation of first our own, and then the suffering of others, we give ourselves over to the vow. This is, in the language of recovery, to turn our will and lives over to a power greater than ourselves.

The alcoholic, the addict, is in a sense a very lucky person, being one for whom the identity of craving and suffering is made abundantly clear, up close and personal. Seeing this, it is not much of a reach to understand the nature of the self and the nature of emptiness or interdependency. Of course, this implies the presence and availability of the teaching. Those who have suffered and who have been helped by the teaching of the Buddha, by the program of recovery, have a tremendous responsibility to carry the message from warm hand to warm hand. This is the Bodhisattva vow and this is how we practice with addiction.

Meditation itself can be seen to incorporate the entirety of the program of recovery, as well as of Buddhism.

When we sit down to meditate, we must practice both striving and surrender.