

# addicted?

# WHO, ME?

*Those of us with addictions often turn to the Dharma looking for a cure; perhaps a deepening of a spiritual awakening has already intervened. Even if we have no idea that we are addicted, or that there is any reason to stop, something about our life is not working. But are we prepared for feeling worse before we feel better?*

AMY BARTON-CAYTON, *psychologist and Buddhist practitioner*, tells.

*W*

hen I began practicing the Dharma, I already had over a dozen years of recovery having used twelve-step models and psychology to confront my obvious (once I knew what to look for) and not so obvious addictions/delusions. I also had as much time counseling people with a variety of psychic wounds, and especially those struggling with the abuse/shame/addiction cycle. But even though my outside looked intact, inside I still felt broken and empty. In fact, the spiritual seeking I had done before and after the twelve-step programs had reached a plateau and become intellectual rather than felt. My experience was that the world and my life were getting worse rather than better.

Then I went to a teaching on karma and *really* felt worse as I saw the real why of the karmic causes behind the decline of my life and the increase of the deadening inside. I didn't feel better until we reached the part of the teaching on purification and accumulating merit, and then I saw life and I weren't so hopeless after all. I was also able to see the way my addictions (especially to people) and recovery programs had helped prepare me for the profound path of Mahayana Buddhism. From diminishing my ego (not enough, yet) and recognizing the self-cherishing of a mind that thinks it is the worst, I was prepared to stay through the 'got worse' part until getting to the 'it's better' part. It has taken Vajrasattva purification practice and retreat, as well as putting into daily practice the life dictated by my cushion practice, that has helped me to really 'be my own therapist' and to follow (albeit imperfectly) a path of true transformation provided by my kindest root guru, Lama Zopa Rinpoche. This is the path that has gotten my insides and outsides matched up on the 'better most of the time' path.

But enough about me. Let's look at what professionals mean by addiction.

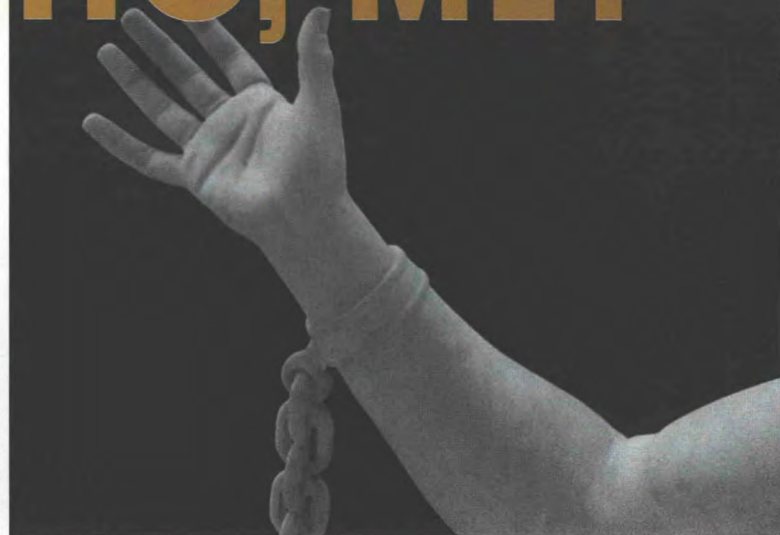


Photo: Kathleen Kondilus

In Western psychology and recovery treatment models, there are two basic types of addiction: substance (drugs including alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and food) and process (eating, working, sex and love, exercise).

Here's a check-list to see whether what we prefer to think of as a harmless habit has really become an addiction:

We begin to lose control (in small and large ways) of our use.

Our mind is obsessed (to use or not to use).

We break our own rules and values to use.

We continue to use although it creates health, relationship, or other problems for us and others.

Our inner world and personality are significantly altered.

The conventional view is that all addictions have a genetic predisposition in common, and an inner emptiness, which feels "bad" or "less than," even though we may defend ourselves by appearing arrogant rather than inferior.

From a Dharma perspective, addictions are about karma, grasping attachment, and mental laziness where the mind is in a pattern of self-cherishing and negative thought. Substances or processes, which are not inherently addictive, often become so because they are so good at producing a desired effect: sedating the judgment center to feel less inhibited (more fun), adjusting the mood (up or down), quieting the critical negative voice. In fact, when our addiction is working for us, trying to stop will produce a situation where we feel worse before we feel better. As part of my training in psychology we were advised to have a form for informed consent, warning people that this might happen.

Although we may be led to the Dharma seeking something, when we try to grab hold of it, we feel worse, and so we let go and return to the familiar comfort zone our addictions have created in our minds.





The Dharma is rich with methods to support people who are trying to change addictive reactions and patterns through the 'worse rather than better' passage.

In working with people, I have found that renouncing addictive use (the fifth lifetime layman's vow) is critical, as is developing bodhichitta for ourselves to diminish self criticism and a negative view of the self.

Unique to Buddhism is the pure view of emptiness. This is what makes it possible for us to change the view that we are inherently self-existently addicted or any other negative way of being. Working with the three principal paths enriches and can make real for us the idea that we have a precious human rebirth, which helps us to refrain from exercising the self harm which comes from addiction.

Important, too, is the practice of equanimity because it disrupts the patterns of attachment and aversion that fuel addictive behavior. Even when we are working with our minds in these ways, sometimes cravings for the addictive substance or process may arise. Using the visualization of our root guru entering our crown and staying at our heart is of great help, as is an analytical meditation, which looks at the 'I' who is craving, what will be gained, what will be lost, and so forth.

And so there is hope. The Dharma is rich with methods to support people who are trying to change addictive reactions and patterns through the 'worse rather than better' passage. It is the path to recovery. ☸



Dr. Amy Barton-Cayton has a bachelor's degree in English Literature, an MS in Counseling Psychology and a PhD in Sociology. She has been giving workshops and classes for 15 years and runs a thinking partner consulting and psychotherapy private practice.

A potentially purifying process such as the four opponent powers<sup>1</sup> left undirected to the karmic causes of grasping attachment will leave the attachment unpurified and persisting and, again, the sufferer feeling worse rather than better. If we are not given a teaching about the process of purification, and supported in taking the four opponent powers – such as exercising restraint one second, one minute, one hour, or one day at a time – then the attachment continues unchecked.

The four opponent powers are also used to purify past negative karmic actions as well as purify current negativities. We accumulate negativities of body, speech, and mind in the relentless pursuit of our habitual patterns of addiction. It is so helpful for us when this past arises to have at least an understanding that we can rejoice in the feeling of 'worse' as it reflects the depth of our purification.

### Replacing with positive actions

It is important to emphasize accumulating merit so that we establish positive karma and positive actions of body, speech, and mind to make a different template from the addictive one, which has been operating automatically. Guru devotion is a good, if not the best, place to start; so, too, is living by the ten virtuous actions,<sup>2</sup> and the six perfections.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The four opponent powers are:

(1) power of the basis – taking refuge and generating bodhichitta. As most negative actions are either committed in relation to the Three Jewels, or sentient beings, this starts the purification process by reaffirming our commitment to refuge and helping others instead of harming them.

(2) Power of regret – sincere, intelligent regret, understanding that the harm we cause others will definitely come back to us ... "Oh no! What have I done!!!"

(3) Power of the remedy – this is using a practice for purification such as

Vajrasattva practice, prostrations, reciting texts, etc. (4) Power of resolve – not to do the action again.

<sup>2</sup>The ten virtuous actions are to refrain from (three of body): killing, stealing and sexual misconduct; (four of speech): lying, divisive speech, harsh words, idle chatter; (three of mind): covetousness, ill-will and wrong-views (especially with respect to selflessness or the law of cause and effect.)

<sup>3</sup>The six perfections: generosity, morality, patience, enthusiastic perseverance, concentration and wisdom.