

How to Work with Addictions

by Pema Chodron

The teachings tell us that there is suffering.

There is dissatisfaction and frustration. Often nothing seems to go right. There really is a wound. But it is not necessary to scratch it. Working with addictions is about not just impulsively grabbing for something to stop the itching, not just grabbing for something to fill up the space, not giving in to this impulse to feel okay and just to get comfortable as soon as possible.

When we scratch the wound and give into our addictions we do not allow the wound to heal. But when we instead experience the raw quality of the itch or pain of the wound and do not scratch it, we actually allow the wound to heal. So not giving in to our addictions is about healing at a very basic level.

It is about truly nourishing ourselves.

The view that is presented in the Buddhist teachings is not one of becoming a better person, or finally getting it right, but is a view based on trusting what we already have, of starting and staying where we already are.

So with letting go of an addiction, the instruction is the same, it is instruction to get in touch with our basic nature, to get in touch with the basic energy of the moment in which we are all caught up. Addictions can be to anything: we can use this process with what we traditionally call addictions or we can use this working with so-called *negative* feelings of all kinds.

The moment in which we give in to our addictions is a moment in which we are all caught up—in which there is tremendous karmic momentum to go forward in the same old way—to scratch the wound. This can be a wound which really bothers us—we can see the wound bleeding, we can see it getting worse and we will not stop scratching. We can actually even feel quite nauseated by what we are doing, but we just will not stop!

What allows us to stop is *maitri*, which in this case means a basic feeling that we do not have to be afraid of what we are feeling right now, that we do

not have to look for alternatives, that we aren't ashamed of what we are feeling in this moment. We are scared of what we are feeling. Instead, we can just let our warmth toward the wound, or the warmth toward that instant of time just be there as the working basis.

Maitri is settling down with the situation without looking for alternatives.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche talks about three stages in this process. The first is the warmth or maitri, the second is dropping discursive thinking and opening and the third is *communicating*. When we drop the discursive thinking and open, or *communicate*, what that basically means is that we we contact the moment fully.

At each moment of time, we can just completely cut discursiveness and open to the moment as an act of total freedom. We can cut through the solidity of identity, can cut through the solidity of our sense of identity, can cut through the solidity of our sense of *problem* and can just let the *problem* go. We can cut through the strong sense of "I need this now," "I have to get something out of this," we can cut through that.

But in order to do this we have to develop a sense that it is safe to stay with the present and not look for alternatives, that it is completely safe and even useful not to look for alternatives. Another way of looking at this is to say that we have a sense of warmth for the uncomfortable energy of the present moment, for the raw quality of energy, regardless of how irritating it is. And instead of being ashamed of being all caught up, we begin to regard it as a valuable place to be in. So there is some work that we need to do in preparation.

But what is so liberating about this that it is not saying that we just have to laboriously work and work forever. Once we have developed the habit of trusting, we can just abruptly cut, and find freedom. So the basis is maitri — that is the first moment. And the second moment is cutting discursive thoughts and opening like a flashbulb going off. And then communicating with what remains. When these moments become more continuous it is given a fancy name like samadhi or enlightenment.

And the most powerful time to do this is when we are all caught up.

There is a teaching, a very advanced teaching which people always perk up when they hear which says, The more neurosis, the more wisdom. People like this because they know they have a lot of neurosis. But no one can really understand this at first hearing because it doesn't ever feel like "the more neurosis, the more wisdom." It actually feels like "the more neurosis, the more despair." But what I have found in working with this is that if you are all caught up and it occurs to you to just open, there is so much energy which is available to wake up —there is so much more energy available at this time.

Often you feel that you cannot let go. But if you have the courage to just experiment with abruptly opening at this time, there is enormous ability to have the mind open completely because there is so much energy. Of course the energy is pregnant with wanting to close right back down into the discursiveness or the mood that you are in. But you do get "the most for your money," the most for your moment at this time when you are all caught up. You get the most for your instant —you are propelled further than you would otherwise go on the energy which pushes you further. The hardest time to do this practice is also the most powerful time to do the practice. The heavily addicted moment is the perfect time to do this since the intense energy of severe addictions can equally become the equally intense energy of wakefulness.

When you first begin working with this, particularly with severe addictions, you may find that you can delay acting for a while, but eventually you give in to your addiction. But that delay is also extremely valuable, as it becomes the seed for longer refraining and begins to develop our trust that it is possible. We start with delaying our addictive impulse for just a few seconds but eventually we have a longer and longer delay between the wish to scratch the wound and actually scratching the wound until finally we do not have to scratch at all. During that delay we begin to befriend the energies.

For heavy addictions it is often useful to have as the initial goal something that is achievable. Our initial goal might be to delay fulfilling the addiction for a short period of time and then gradually lengthen the delay. This delay becomes the wedge we can use to bring down the whole addiction.

Working with delay of running off our destructive pattern increases our trust and helps to develop the healthful pattern. Again, we start where we are and

work slowly and patiently, without aggression for ourselves. This is maitri.

Then we just contact the moment with our sense perceptions. So instead of the sense of being all caught up in scratching the wound, we are able to let the discursiveness go. Out of a sense of warmth for the whole situation we are able to let the discursiveness go and then there is communication, this contact with our sense perceptions. In the Shambhala teachings they talk about contact with limitless ayatanas, limitless sense perceptions. What this means is that what was limited and becoming more and more miserable and introverted suddenly opens up and goes completely in the other direction.

There is the sense of everything going outward instead of everything being poisoned inward. Things open outward.

Rinpoche said to just abruptly cut discursiveness, open, and then disown. For instance, if you have a wonderful experience, just disown it. Even if nothing happens, just disown it. Then just go on. In another place Rinpoche says it is just like taking a photograph with a flashbulb. You just take one photo after another. There is a sense of just opening to the moment.

When you think of what you are doing here, you are completely cutting through the solidity of self-importance, the solidity of holding on in any way, completely cutting through the chain reaction of karma. It's pretty powerful, what you are doing here. The photographs are separate from each other; there is no ego "glueing" them together. This is what "disowning" means. The photos are there and taken but there is no one owning them. There are just these moments of warmth in which we communicate with feelings and are no longer identified with what we consider our poor, miserable, separate selves.

So specifically the process is: When you are frantically eating, smoking, grabbing for a valium or whatever it is and it occurs to you to try this, first you pause. The traditional teaching when we are all caught up is to bring to mind something which stops us, such as the face of our teacher or of someone who really loves us. But it could be anything that works for us.

For example:

1. Uneasy feelings come up and we say to ourselves something like: "I am not afraid of what is coming up. I have worked with feelings like this before. I can feel them. They are workable. They will teach me something. I know from experience I can trust this process." This is the first stage: maitri.
2. Then we let go of our words about it, for example, "just this one won't hurt me," "I have to have this now because..." and just be open to the space. It is as if the words were playing in a tiny little corner of the space or it's as if you are in an airplane looking down on them.
3. Then we communicate with the feelings that are left which are now wordless and move outward, as if the feelings weren't specifically ours but were shared with the whole human race. They are changed to a warmth for the whole human race. They are changed to a warmth and tenderness for the whole human condition. You are really feeling with all of humanity and your heart could melt from the intensity of the pain or longing.

The process can actually be quite fast, but we may have to artificially slow it down the first few times we do it.

What begins to happen as a result of practicing this way is a growing trust we can be brave enough to open and to stop scratching that wound. We trust that we can do it and we also see that sometimes we can't do it for very long, but we nevertheless begin to have a trust that it is possible. We begin to trust that we can connect with what is underneath the facade of protective devices, that we do not have to be afraid of that rawness, of that pain, of that wound.

And then we also begin to find that what we connect with underneath that facade or protective device is actually healing to us, it is actually nourishing to us, it is not basically frightening. It is not a sense of annihilation, it is a sense of warmth and expansion and a sense of enormous freedom and spaciousness. It is a sense of *coming home*.

And most important there is a sense of enormous simplicity. Just simplicity. We make life complicated when it is actually simple. Based on our experience of working with this, we develop a real sense that we can evolve

from being all caught up scratching our wounds, to a sense of the boundless nature, which is completely freeing and open and focused outward.

We can cut the karmic chain at any moment and just let go. We can cut through the solidity of identity, the solidity of the "problem," and just let it go. Rinpoche describes this by saying that "we can stop collecting dust on our woolly tails." We can stop collecting the dust of negative karma in our actions. The image is of just cutting through discursiveness and opening. In another place, Rinpoche says that this is as if someone punctures your tire Pop! or in this case, punctures your speech balloon. This is not exactly a gentle approach at this time, but is based on a gentle approach. It is a sudden glimpse which is also an experience of warmth at the same time.

In the course of working with this, our perception of ourself changes.

One person describes the change: he said that he used to think of himself as a confused person doing confused things, but now he regarded himself as a good person doing confused things. To him that was a big difference because underlying this was a change of allegiance and expectation from confusion to wisdom. The view is that the wisdom guide is inherent in each of us and that we can connect with that at any time and be completely free.