



# Addiction and mysticism

## escaping from reality

IT'S odd – they seem to come from opposite ends of the morality continuum – but the state of addiction and the practice of mysticism have a lot in common. They both focus on a need and a hunger for true happiness. For centuries Sufi and other mystics have talked about the 'intoxication' they find in their practice. Addicts and mystics both have visions, passions and mania. The annihilation of self is a key ingredient in the process of both conditions. I could go on. Exploration of what these two experiences of life share may shed some much-needed light into the murk that surrounds addiction.

### ADDICTION INDUSTRY

Let me first establish the ground from which I speak. I was addicted to heroin and other drugs back in the sixties, when the NHS enabled doctors to prescribe pharmaceutically pure heroin and cocaine. My addiction ceased in 1975. I got straight at Broadway Lodge, following their 12 steps to conversion. I went to meetings for a year. Now, 30 years later, I still take no alcohol, tobacco or psychoactive substances. I am not 'in recovery', but a human being, a writer, entrepreneur and film producer, trying to understand what on earth this thing we are required to call addiction is. I am not an academic, a doctor, a psychiatrist or a counsellor, nor am I engaged directly in the addiction industry, but I can't stop trying to understand what started happened to me, in me, through me, 30 years ago. Back then I was one of 1,500 registered addicts in the UK, now the number is approaching half a million.

Most attempts to understand addiction end up objectifying it, trying to make it into a 'thing', an

Both addiction and mysticism can illuminate the path of self-discovery – but dependence is an obstacle to real happiness, says ex-user and author **William Pryor**

illness, an invading or inherited condition. This misses the point and perpetuates the difficulty out of which this industry is trying to find an exit. If, as I surmise, addiction is not an illness of any sort, not a condition that has any existence outside the confusion of the self, then it is not something I or anyone else can be objective about. The meaning of what I say on the subject has to be coloured by the structure of my self and the journey that is my history. Attempts to arrive at fixed scientific truths on the subject are doomed to fail. If they were possible, science and medicine would have fixed the problem by now. Instead it's growing at an alarming rate. And more and more of those working at the misery-face, trying to heal the fractured, are coming to the conclusion that what they do only somehow perpetuates the problem.

### SEARCHING

Yes, addiction has a physiological dimension. Its effects can be traced in the brain and the nervous system. But so can the effects of eating, running and love-making. To reduce addiction to chemistry – or indeed to unconscious psychological mechanisms – is to reduce such human drama to so many chemically or psychologically-induced jerks of the

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knee. But what if addiction is a detour in the hero's journey? No, what if the dark trek through addiction is the hero's journey itself? Maybe the stages of addiction are the Labours of Hercules upon the successful completion of which the addict emerges a hero.

An addict travels the by-ways of hell in search of meaning, purpose, functionality, but they were right on his doorstep, inside him, all the time. You start on the path of mysticism when you can't stop wondering what the point to being human is; addiction ends with the resolution that there is more to being human than the endless and one-pointed pursuit of the next fix, the next 'out of your self' experience.

"Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve," wrote Erich Fromm, the 20th Century philosopher and psychologist. Other animals just get on with it, while we humans spend a lot of time searching (and getting hopelessly lost while doing so) for happiness, satisfaction, purpose and meaning. It is just not an issue for animals: they don't have the capacity to reflect if they are happy. We do. We like happiness, even though we don't really know what it is and don't have it very often. We want it, especially when we are conscious of not having it, when we are unhappy, depressed. We want to escape not liking ourselves, the state of alienation we find ourselves in.

#### SLAVERY

There are plenty of experiences that seem to offer this escape, if only temporarily. Many we call pleasure, others euphoria and still others work, play and even love. They take us "out of ourselves". They even change us. But it doesn't last and we have to return to the state we were escaping from, to the very ground of ordinariness. Once we've had a glimpse of ourselves as "out of ourselves" heroes, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept the mundane version. The hero is free while the ordinary self is in a trap, a slave of his circumstances. In the sixties I could be a heroic avant garde writer when high on my NHS heroin, breaking the constraints, depressions and stupidities of ordinary life, but I had to return to the ordinary trap of my family circumstance.

Mysticism regards the human condition as one of slavery, addiction to circumstance. It asks how you can hope to know who and what you are when you are pre-occupied with the nitty-gritty of being you. As Plato said, we must first know ourselves before we can know God. You have to be able to transcend the emotional trap of being you to know what you are. The experiences we get addicted to seem to enable us to step outside this trap, to taste the tranquility of simply being, to know ourselves, but it is an illusion – we are dragged back, we have to take more of the drug, and when we do, that original experience is hard to regain.

"Pour out wine till I become a wanderer from myself; for in selfhood and existence I have felt only fatigue," wrote Rumi, the 13th Century Persian Sufi. For fear of persecution, the Sufis used a code to

disguise their teachings from the authorities. The wine he is talking about is a mystical intoxicant that has been given many names down the ages: Word, Nam, Music of the Spheres, amongst them. This wine can only be realised when we know ourselves, in the mystical sense.

#### PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

"As far as we can discern, the *sole* purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being," wrote Carl Jung. That's strong stuff: the sole purpose! My thesis in this essay is that addiction is a sort of concretisation, a getting-stuck, on the hero's journey we would all be making if we knew how. The addict has rightly construed that this ordinary life is not it – not until we can transcend it, that is, when it becomes really it! The hero inside the addict knows that the emotional slavery of the self must be overcome. Trouble is, he only amplifies that slavery by seeking to transcend it through externally-sourced psychosomatic experience because he must return to his chains. The mystic seeks to overcome his slavery by practicing simple being, being here.

Plutarch said that character is long-standing habit. We get used to being who we think we are. Addiction and mysticism are both about becoming what we think we *really* are, transcending the mundane. Both arise out of the pursuit of freedom, but addiction is more like a slave locking himself up

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in a steel box decorated on the inside with images that make him think of freedom. Mystical freedom is the ability to be one with the absolute at any moment, *in* the moment, from the centre of being, here and now. The self is a construct, a software complex that enables us to be here, in the physical and mental world. As Thomas Szasz wrote, "People often say that this or that person has not yet found himself. But the self is not something one finds, it is something one creates."

There is most definitely a spiritual aspect to recovery from addiction, but it is not that of being saved from an evil. No, life after addiction is no more (or less) than the next stage in the hero's journey. It's all spiritual. Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience." And real happiness? It can only be found here and now, not in a steel box decorated with images of happiness. ■

www.unhookedthinking.com is holding a conference looking at the nature of addiction on April 19–21, 2006 at Bath Assembly Rooms