

Reflections on the Ultimate Disease

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Health has different meanings to different people, yet to most of us health is considered to be some desirable balance of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. From a transpersonal perspective health is measured by our ability to directly express and experience Self in the context of Creation (generally despite our-selves and the apparent circumstances in which we find our-selves.) Regardless of paradigmatic orientation, the word health speaks of the capacity to think and behave in some optimal manner. The interpretation of what materially constitutes “optimal” and just how it might be materialized is demonstrably a matter of great debate. One only need witness the great variety of habit, routine and lifestyle practiced around the globe today to recognize how the many elements of life might be affirmed in experience. Practice makes permanent, at least until we choose, whether out of boredom or learned necessity, to change our practices. As students of transpersonal reality, we can rest in the faith that through the course of a lifetime, if not many lifetimes, we all are destined to actualize perfect health by our own free will.

Yet there are pitfalls to this transpersonal healing process, for as habits become routines which become facets of lifestyle, we sometimes find ourselves growing dependent upon our practices and the tools to perform those practices. For clarity, dependence is defined as follows,

The quality or condition or relying upon, being influenced by, or being subservient to a person or object reflecting a particular need..., a pattern of behavioral, physiologic and cognitive symptoms that develop due to substance use or abuse; usually indicated by tolerance to the effects of the substance and withdrawal symptoms that develop when use of the substance is terminated.¹

Dependence is essentially a pattern of disempowerment. When we are informed that with faith nothing is truly impossible², it becomes clear that our “modern day” dependence upon technology reflects a great lack of faith in the power of free will to create our experience.

Our technology, which is to say our use of tools to mediate experience, is perhaps what most sets us apart as a species from the rest of our fellow inhabitants of earth. While

¹ Stedman’s Medical Dictionary, 27th Edition, 2000.

² Matthew 17:20 (“And Jesus said unto them, *Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.*”)

animals certainly use their physical bodies and to a very limited extent rudimentary props from the natural world to exert control over their environment, we humans have set ourselves apart from nature on an unprecedented scale. While technology has empowered us to dominate nature, it does simultaneously tend to undermine faith in our innate capacity.

This isn't to say that man-made innovation can't be wisely used as a crutch along the way of Self-realization. Though we are capable of finding inner peace by endogenous means, a relaxing massage can help us release muscle tension and emotional stress and so remind us of our true nature. Though we have the capacity to ever be the "life" of the party, a beer or two can help us overcome our shyness and so expose our innate ability to transcend self-imposed inhibitions. Through our connection in Spirit we each possess the capacity to communicate at a psychic level with one another from great distances, yet our use of the telephone can serve as a reminder and even a training tool in affirming that capacity. How often do we take full responsibility for our experience? Are we not rather prone to think in mechanistic terms of cause and effect – to attribute our relaxation to the massage, our sociability to the alcohol, our sense of connection to our cell phone? (And this is not to mention our shirking responsibility for less than pleasurable experiences.) As practical as it may seem to aspire to full potential by our own mechanistic devices, such practices, in as much as we rely upon them as the source of experience, affirm our dependence upon them. Our tolerance to the apparent benefits of our dependencies reminds us that even as the Tower of Babel, so must our reliance upon man-made mediation fall.

When dependence on a substance or practice so undermines free will that we no longer realize our ability to voluntarily overcome it, it is described as an addiction. While free will is no doubt our greatest stumbling block throughout our transpersonal history, manifesting untold suffering ever since the original "Fall", it is simultaneously our greatest means to understanding Grace. From a transpersonal perspective, addiction represents the ultimate disease, for it is a disease that undermines our most distinctive attribute and most precious inheritance as Children of God. As the behaviorists say, "When you're dealing with an addicted individual, you're not dealing with the individual any more. You're dealing with the addiction." By compromising our free will, our dependences necessarily limit our capacity to directly experience the true nature of Creation and of Self. Some (this author include) equate such direct experience, often called the mystical experience, with healing itself, and most agree that it certainly represents a sign of health. As those who would facilitate healing in its most fundamental sense, we are called to examine how dependence and addiction manifest in our cultural context, what perpetuates them and finally how they might be overcome.

Ours is a society plagued with dependence and addiction. Most who join its ranks, whether motivated by some romantic notion that "the West *is* the best" when compared to the trials of third world squalor or motivated by the corporate bulldozers burying the last remains of aboriginal innocence, grow dependent upon its technological mechanisms of conspicuous consumption. This is not to excuse those of us who were born into its tummy-filling yet sticky web of milk and honey, for to be raised in the context of our

cultural inheritance, with all its apparent advantages to the archaic lifestyles of the past, however far those “advantages” may distance ourselves from nature and even our very own nature, is to be conditioned into its acceptance as a given reality, as opposed to the highly novel and unnatural stimulus that Western Civilization at the turn of this millennium, in fact, represents. The most insidious form of dependence is that in which the dependent is completely unaware of her dependence and the destructive behavior it triggers, for without recognition, healing through dependence and addiction is not only unlikely – it is unlikely that the dependent will even seek or accept help in the healing process at all. It is rather more likely that such a dependent will push his lifestyle habits upon others, perhaps to justify to himself that such habits are indeed healthy and proper or perhaps just to make up for economic losses that such habits tend to generate. Regardless of motivation, our dependence upon “our way of life” represents a great hindrance to transpersonal healing and our ultimate destiny of perfect health.

To describe dependence as a disease of free will is to open a messy can of metaphysical worms, particularly when that description falls in the context of self-reflection. We like to think of ourselves as autonomous beings, capable of making decisions informed by objective perceptions, no matter how subjective those perceptions may actually be. That some poor souls might be unwitting slaves to certain behaviors and mindsets evokes our pity, but to consider our own behavior and mindset as addictive evokes defensiveness and denial on our part. As “creatures of habit”, defining ourselves in terms of what we think and do, we are resistant to change. The ego *is* our mindset. It is the sense of self with which we identify and the prime mover, or so we think, of free will. The suggestion that we have somehow unwittingly lost our free will in the context of ego itself not only insults the ego’s sense of autonomy, but also, as we are prone to equate egoic death with loss of free will, brings us to an inevitable conclusion which is incompatible with our sense of reality. The ego cannot be defined as the ultimate substance of addiction, we rationalize, for such an admission would invalidate free will itself. Despite the unpleasant fact that such denial typifies behavior of the addict, it does at least justify our habits, and so dismissing the implication that we are dependent upon our lifestyle, we retreat into our habits, for such implications are harder for the ego to swallow than the familiar comforts of “reality T.V.” and bowls of ice cream.

Let us then discuss those familiar behaviors which the ego finds comforting, asking how these behaviors, particularly those witnessed most readily in Western “Civilization”, perpetuate dependence. In our evaluation, it is helpful to consider both how such behaviors affect experience (immediately and in the long run) and how such behaviors affect subsequent behavior. How do we benefit from them and at what cost? In what manner and to what extent do they necessitate our continued and repeated experience of them? Two categories of behavior make themselves obvious: those in which we directly engage with Nature to yield primary experience, namely primary behavior, and those in which we engage Nature by proxy of technological (man-made) media, namely mediated behavior.

Primary behavior can be either endogenous or exogenous, meaning that while we can center our behavior on ourselves (spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically), we

can also direct our behavior outside of our egoic framework to engage in external relationships as a part of nature. All behavior, in as much as all experience is a matter of “Self meeting self”, is both primary and endogenous, meaning that the primary endogenous pathway is the common denominator of all experience. Primary behavior demonstrates our innate ability to affect our own experience, both as individuals and in the context of relationship. Such primary behaviors as eating, dialogue³, laughter, courtship, sex, childbirth, singing, sleep, dancing, breathing, exercise, playfulness, collecting, competition, worship, meditation, to name but a few, all seem quite healthy (if not necessary) endeavors which offer a pleasant spectrum of experiences. Each experience is conveyed with specific neuro-chemical and energetic changes in the body-mind, which seem to enrich our lives and perhaps highlight the essence of what culture is. Even in extreme forms, such experiences aren’t necessarily addicting, but rather simply vehicles for extreme experience. Take, for example, the rush of participating in extreme sporting events or the inner calm induced by prolonged fasting. Many primary behaviors actually hold the capacity to help us see beyond our personal framework of reality, to transcend the ego with all its paradigmatic givens and self-imposed necessities of behavior. The ecstatic boundary dissolution that we may experience during sex, pregnancy, chanting, meditation, etc. can expose our patterns of behavior for what they are and motivate us to change them. And let us not forget that we ever hold the potential to abstain and fast from our behaviors and diet, for perhaps no other course of action demonstrates our endogenous capacity to overcome dependence than abstinence and fasting. We are naturally wired for the mystical experience. We’ve but to clean up and quiet down to know God.

While primary directed behaviors are by definition, quite natural, it is also clear that the manner in which we incorporate them into our lives is very much up to us, which is to say, a matter of free will. As precious as we may hold free will, it is by nature the very means by which we “fall”, only to be “cast out” of Nature’s Paradise. How much we eat, sleep, exercise, etc., and when and how often become functions of habit, and habits become subjects of dependence in as much as we identify them (consciously or unconsciously) as essential to our desired sense of self. We also recognize the potential for such behaviors to be perverted in terms of what they represent for the individual, and that representation becomes the motivating factor for the individual to engage in the behavior. Eating disorders, sexual addictions, self-mutilation, obsessive-compulsiveness, stealing, hoarding, manipulation, violence, and a host of other clearly addictive behaviors all demonstrate how natural benefits of primary behaviors can fuel addictions, and, in so doing, undermine an individual’s free will. Perhaps no other victim of addiction has been so strikingly portrayed in mass media over the last 100 years as has the drug addict, and so it is important to closely examine another primary behavior – the use of chemical substances.

All experiences alter our body’s chemistry, which in turn modulates our impression of those experiences. The body (and especially the central nervous system) is a wonderland of chemical interaction, and this is just in and of itself. Enter food (and, of course, water

³ In as much as “dialogue” is considered a function of language, it might be more properly considered mediated behavior – mediated by the technology of language.

and air), for our bodies do require sustenance, and the self-automated laboratory not only fosters physical life – it actually enables us to interact with the physical world around us. Even the basic building blocks of foods - carbohydrates, proteins and fats – alter our chemistry, and thus our behavior, emotional reactivity, energetic resources, etc. Nature provides the chemicals and we feast upon them. We learn through experience that while some substances pleasantly fill our tummies, others are noxious to the body, and so we adapt our behavior accordingly. Of course, some substances affect our behavior and experience in special ways, and as such, these substances have merited special distinction to be called medicines.

Mostly from the plant kingdom, medicines affect us in a variety of ways. With the exception of certain substances which influence the colonization of parasitic and symbiotic microorganisms living within our body, most medicines target our own receptors, and thereby affect change through endogenous pathways. Either by enhancing or suppressing certain functions, medicines can stimulate and sedate, suppress pain and give pleasure, alter consciousness, activate and promote immune and tissue healing responses, change function in just about every organ system, among other effects. Some of these medicines can have remarkable healing effect to body and mind, and as such have been refined in an effort to extract, isolate, replicate and redesign their active chemicals. Here we must redirect our discussion, for such “improvements” upon Nature expose themselves to be technological, and so, before we can reach conclusions about the addictive potential of medicines, whether the product of Nature or technology, it is helpful to first describe mediated behavior.

When we speak of media, we refer to man-made intermediate forms of communication/interaction, including: language, arts (visual, musical, literary) and the many modes of information transmission (books, magazines, papers, television, theater, radio, internet, video games, virtual reality), the countless technological means of industry, transportation and recreation (motors, computers, the wheel, to name but a few), and, for completeness sake, the ego. Mediated behavior is, at best, a reflection of Nature, a reflection with great potential to be distorted. In fact, the distortion would seem to be the point of technology, (or else why create it?) By manipulating Nature, we can concentrate and dilute, extend and shorten any of its many elements in myriad ways and so affect experience in the manner which suits us best. This ability, when considering the degree to which we engage in it, makes our species distinct in Nature, so distinct that, in the wake of technology, Nature recedes from our experience on a planetary scale. Of course, as an inescapable part of Nature, we are governed by its laws, and so all experience, however mediated and manipulated, is a function of the primary endogenous pathway. As our only conduit for experience, Nature is unavoidably our highest standard, and here we uncover, perhaps, the motivation underlying all dependent behavior – the motivation to reclaim the Absolute (Synchronicity, Wholeness, Perfection, Value and Infinity) which is our true Nature as Children of God. Ironically, though it may have first been an attempt to improve upon Nature, technology is our attempt to recover what it has displaced in our experience.

Sometimes it does, perhaps, do just that. Like many primary behaviors, mediated behaviors, such as appreciation of great works of art and spiritual literature, can take us to places outside our “normal” mediated range of experience, enough so to help us see again our options to mobilize our free will, and in the context of mystical experience overcome dependent behavior.

Yet mediated behavior, by definition, removes us from Nature. The ego, that veil of “self-awareness” through which we experience Nature, is our first invention which separates us from primary experience. Language, certainly our very distinctive human language, is a man-made invention which probably alienates us more from Nature (and our own Nature), even as we attempt to describe it. And then we have many forms of media which incorporate other basic forms of media, (language, music, images), which even further alienate us from Nature. Many of the primary skills that brought our species into this current age have been replaced by specialized skills which have only value in the context of modern technology’s infrastructure. One need only witness the mass disempowerment that occurs during a regional electricity blackout to recognize that we have grown exceedingly dependent upon technology to even survive. As we move away from primary behavior into the many layers of mediated behavior, with all its abstractions of abstractions, symbols within symbols, and gears upon gears, we are prone to lose touch with Reality, and this trend in light of our inescapable birthright (as Children of God), increases our tendency toward addiction.

Consider television alone. Writesentheogen enthusiast and social commentator, Terrence McKenna:

This drug was the first of a growing group of high-tech drugs that deliver the user into an alternative reality by acting directly on the user’s sensorium, without chemicals being introduced into the nervous system...No epidemic or addictive craze or religious hysteria has ever moved faster or made as many converts in so short a time...In the United States, there are many more televisions than households, the average television set is on six hours a day, and the average person watches more than five hours a day – nearly one-third their waking time. Aware as we are of these simple facts, we seem unable to react to their implications. Serious study of the effects of television on health and culture has only begun recently. Yet no drug in history has so quickly or completely isolated the entire culture of its users from contact with reality.⁴

Next consider what television conveys. Riddled with images (of inconsequential violence, distorted body image, materialism as its own redemption, etc.) which in the long run can only reinforce the perversions of natural endogenous experience as described above, television watching with its unsettling capacity to alter brain waves in a

⁴ From *Food of the Gods* by Terrence McKenna, 1993.

manner which renders our minds receptive to its programming, perhaps represents the single most addicting behavior that the human race has ever had to deal with on a global scale (language and ego being possible exceptions.) However, virtual reality, with its full 3-D impression on the senses, promises to supplant television from this dubious distinction if history holds its present course (though hopefully not to the degree as expressed in such works of science fiction as the Matrix trilogy.)

To describe mass media in such a negative light is perhaps an injustice. Events are now possible on earth that even those who vie to control its mainstream content couldn't have envisioned. Access to information, art and commerce has never been so easy (in recorded history, at least), and this seems somewhat liberating. Our ability to experience novelty would seem to be at an all time high, but is it really? When we resort to media for our experiences, what are we ignoring? What is the price for paving the paradise of natural experience and putting up a virtual parking lot? Does technology help us heal from our addictions or does it reinforce them? This question brings us back to our discussion of medicine, for it would seem that the more man manipulates the gifts that nature provides, the greater potential there is for addiction, especially with medicines that affect our neurochemistry.

Let us consider a few examples. Raw opium straight from the poppy is a natural analgesic, not only relieving pain but causing euphoria. Even in this form, for obvious reasons, its continued use can lead to addiction, especially when smoked. This potential for addiction was intensified when its active agent, morphine, was isolated, and brought to all time heights when the synthetic analog of morphine, heroin, was introduced (ironically as a cure for morphine addiction.) Alcohol is a natural by-product of fermentation and a natural sedative, and like opium, can lead to addiction when used regularly. However, with the advent of alcohol distillation technology, this potential was greatly increased. Glucose (yes, sugar is a drug) is a natural nutrient, euphoriant and stimulant and is found in most whole foods, yet when it is extracted from the sugar cane into a concentrated form, it can become highly addictive, leading to a host of metabolic disturbances when used regularly. The same applies to the coca leaf, a natural euphoriant, stimulant, appetite suppressant and source of vitamins and minerals which is somewhat habit forming when chewed in the raw form, but highly addicting as purified cocaine and devastatingly so when smoked as "crack". Nature has provided us with some strong medicines whose use, if not respected, can lead to addiction. We must, of course, include to this list of medicines tobacco, chocolate, coffee and tea, which, while not yet providing us with a more addictive synthetic analog, also must be respected lest our habits become addictions.

Despite the capacity for certain strongly psychoactive natural medicines to facilitate addictive behavior on our part, particularly when refined and redesigned, there are certain psychoactive plant substances which seem to be evoke the mystical experience, and in so doing actually enable people to overcome addictions without creating new addictions. The so-called entheogens (*en* = within/inner, *theo* = God/Divine, *gen* = becoming/creating), those plants held sacred around the world amongst indigenous peoples and archaic cultures for their capacity to dissolve ego, expand consciousness and

reunite their user with Divinity, have, as far back as humanity can be traced, been considered the most powerful medicines available.

Anecdotal and scientific evidence strongly support this entheogenic legacy. From members of the Native American Church who claim their use of peyote as the means of their salvation (not only from alcohol addiction, but from their own destructive lifestyle in general) to well designed studies which conclude that Bwiti plant (containing ibogaine) consistently aids people in permanently overcoming addictions to cocaine and heroin, we are presented with undeniable testimony to the power locked in these sacred plants. Even LSD⁵ has demonstrated consistent efficacy in helping individuals work through the egoic baggage that appears to lie at the root of addictive behavior. While it does follow that the more extraordinary the experience, the more we may be prone to depend upon the given behavior which engenders that experience, entheogens are virtually non-addictive in themselves, particularly when used in temperate, sacramental and socially supportive contexts.

This phenomenon is probably related to the observation that entheogens break us out of our mindset, awakening us to the fact that our view of reality is not the only view and that our approach is not the only approach. By, as the Fang people of the Bwiti cult say, “breaking open the head”, entheogens expand consciousness, even if briefly, but at times enough to observe not only the self-imposed (however socially conditioned) boundary of ego, with all its assumptions, presumed needs and denied incompatibility with the natural world, but also what lies beyond, which is not the much feared death upon which the ego obsesses, but rather an expanded and transcendent sense of Self. As the most thorough anthropologists have noted, use of entheogenic substances among traditional societies takes place in the context of culturally observed rules. It would appear that it is the absence of such behavioral boundaries in Western Society and not the chemistry of the substances themselves that tends to create the so-called “bad trip” experience. The non-ordinary experience that entheogens facilitate is not generally embraced by those living in an ordinary mindset, which must be respected if the non-ordinary mindset is expected to be respected. Care must be taken throughout and in the aftermath of such ecstasy, for though the entheogenic traveler may now look upon many social mores and taboos with a new-found sense of humor, society continues to take such matters quite seriously.

Such mystical experiences are, of course, not dependent upon the use of plant entheogens, for any exogenous stimulus, whether directly from nature or by some technological innovation, must activate our endogenous chemistry. Mystical experience, whether entheogenically produced or not, perhaps represents our greatest potential as human beings, particularly if we can apply such experiences to the mundane aspects of life. We short change ourselves when we depend solely upon exogenous stimulation for endogenous experience, yet such stimulation can remind us of our full inherent potential. As such, it is curious that the use of many of these entheogenic medicines has been made illegal. This, no doubt, testifies to an ominous societal pattern, one which would promote

⁵ LSD is actually a synthetic substance (though very similar to lysergic acids found in the seeds of certain types of Morning Glory.) Its high entheogenicity and low addictivity speak to our ability to manipulate nature in potentially constructive ways.

addicting behaviors while suppressing the use of medicines that effectively treat addiction. Who believes themselves to benefit from such an arrangement is a challenging question to consider, yet regardless of any underlying “conspiracies” that might be at work, such public policy attests to the power of such medicines to enable individuals to think “outside of the box” in which social structure conditions us to confine ourselves.

Of course, the only true limitation to healing is the ego. To better understand this and its relevance to addictive behavior, let us turn to the great transpersonal equation as put forth by Edgar Cayce, which essentially describes the primary endogenous pathway (“in a nutshell”):

*Spirit is the Life;
Mind is the Builder;
Physical is the Result.*

We are Spirit. Mind is but the operant function of living which generates our physical experience and sense of self. The ego does not really describe who and what we are, but rather who and what we think we are, and as this identification process becomes habit, we forget our true identity and become unwitting slaves to its replacement. We cannot bear the thought of doing without the ego. It is our ultimate drug of choice. We are simultaneously our own most unrelenting drug pusher and our own most disempowered addict. Yet as the equation re-minds, “Mind is the Builder”, so how do we change our minds in a constructive manner? Healing is getting to know ourselves better, and so, if we are to heal, we would do well to remember our spiritual nature and the consequences of that nature. All human experience, whether elicited by endogenous or exogenous stimuli, natural or technological means, provides ample opportunity to heal. Of course, some seem a little more efficacious than others.

Despite AND because our technological innovation, ours is an addictive society, yet this is not eternal condemnation to the hell of addiction, but rather an opportunity to learn from our turning away from Nature, that we might better understand our true relationship to It. While endogenous experience is the common pathway for all experience, it is worthwhile to consider how our use of technology and Nature might be better directed to break us out of our addictive behavior and its god-head, the ego. Given that technology has the tendency to replace mild addictions with more virulent versions, it is time to redirect our attention to the fact of Nature that, indeed, “Spirit is the Life”, and perhaps time to earnestly explore, despite “reefer madness” propaganda, the healing role that entheogenic medicine might play in the experiential recovery of that truth.

This article is by no means an exhaustive treatment on the subject of Dependence and Addiction, nor their implications to transpersonal health. It is with this consideration that Atlantic University is offering a course, in addition to its plentitude of course offerings on Transpersonal Development by primary and mediated means (such as Art and Literature), on the subject of Entheogenic Medicine. This course explores the traditional conceptions and uses of psychoactive plants, their cultural significance, their healing applications as

shamanic tools, and as means to Self-realization and overcoming addictions, and their potential role in the evolution of human experience.