

A Spiritual View of Addiction

Q. Do you have any suggestions as to how to make it easier to quit smoking and chewing tobacco?

A. Tobacco is an addictive substance, and to quit smoking requires strong motivation, commitment, and perseverance. As with any habit, it will be easier to break it if we are alert and mindful of the various inner and outer circumstances which prompt us to reach for the tobacco. If we consciously, with increased attention, choose to chew gum or suck on a lemon (as the Farmer's Almanac recommends) when we are in that tobacco-craving place, it will help. A doctor can prescribe a nicotine patch or homeopathic nicotiana tabacum to ease the withdrawal symptoms.

Paavo Airola's book, *How to Get Well*, recommends a juice fasting protocol to help detoxify from the effects of tobacco, alcohol or any addictive substance. Acupuncture might also be helpful.

Your question touches on a very widespread and typically human problem: that of addiction. The addictive tendency is an almost universally human trait. There are very few of us who could not become addicted to something, whether it is sugar, chocolate, alcohol, carbohydrates, sex, power or a drug. It is no longer considered correct to view addiction as a moral problem; now it is viewed as an illness. I believe this shift in attitude came about through a growing sense of human compassion and the understanding that judgment and blame have no place at all in an enlightened societal response to problems of addiction. This understanding is clearly true, and a sign of progress in societal attitudes. Yet it is also true that neither addiction nor any other illness can truly be healed unless the patient actively participates in his or her own healing. In other words, healing always requires that our human spirit actively engage itself in the recovery process. This awakening and exercising of our spirit is the whole meaning and purpose of illness, I would maintain. Even in cases of inflammation and infection when our spirit is working largely unconsciously through the active response of our immune system, nevertheless it is our spirit which directs the immune system's actions, just as a general directs his army in battle.

The healing of addiction, however, requires our spirit's engagement to be fully conscious and working through our own vigilant attention, intention and will. We use the phrase, "force of habit." What kind of force does a habit exert? It is clearly an unconscious force. In terms of levels of consciousness (and from the viewpoint of Anthroposophy) our soul is midway between our wholly conscious spirit and our wholly unconscious body. Through the body we are connected to the earth, and through our spirit we are connected to God. Our soul is capable, if healthy, of having a harmonious connection to both God and the earth.

Modern psychology recognizes that the human mind or soul has a conscious part and an unconscious part and that the unconscious part is strongly influenced by the needs and passions of our earthy bodily nature and is therefore not free.

In the conscious part of our soul we have the possibility of freedom only when we are fully awake. To be truly awake and truly free would mean to consciously choose all of our thoughts, words and deeds in the present moment, and to do nothing from mere habit. It is no wonder that Thoreau said, "I have yet to meet a man who is fully awake; how could I look him in the eye?" To be fully awake in Thoreau's meaning would be to have total mastery over oneself, which means rulership of our human spirit's higher and broader perspective over the narrow, personal perspective of our human soul.

Such rulership of our spirit, which we may be fortunate to attain in some small measure, not only gives us a broader outlook on life but also strengthens our will power to change bad habits. This was the great discovery of Bill W, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, who learned that the first step in overcoming addiction was to give up the illusion of "being in control" with his ordinary will and to humbly and painfully surrender to the will of a higher power. Taking that step put him in touch with his own human spirit and began the long process of replacing egotism with altruism, and replacing the unfree force of habit with the spiritual force of free wakeful, thoughtful discernment and choice.

We can access this spiritual force by exercising our capacity to think, to reflect and to question all of our personal opinions and assumptions. When we do this, we begin to use what Steiner called the moral imagination, and we are on the way to freeing ourselves from habits and addictions.

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