**BUDDHISM AND ADDICTION NOTES**

One of the most noticeable aspects of our culture is the dominant theme of consumption. In a consumer culture, happiness is qualified by what is consumed, or, at least, the ability to consume. This consumption is not solely organized around substances, such as food, drugs, appliances, and so on. It includes many intangibles as well, such as entertainment, reading, playing games…the list is quite long.

My parents were born during the beginning of the 20th century, and they experienced a lot of deprivation, especially during the 1930’s with the depression. After World War 2, the momentum of the war economy, which largely ended the impoverishment of millions of Americans (not to mention the billions of others around the world). In the 1950’s, the consumer culture was cultivated, through advertising as well as the role models who appeared in movies and on the newly developed tv. We are strongly conditioned to want—pleasure, comfort, convenience and pleasant distraction. In this way, we’ve developed into an addictive culture. One of the first books I read on addiction during my first years as a psychotherapist was “When Society Becomes An Addict” by Anne Wilson Schaef, published in 1988. She also wrote, with Diane Fassel, “The Addictive Organization”, also published in 1988. In these books, she made a strong case that addiction was pervasive in the culture of America.

According to the U.S. research in our culture, in 2013, 6.6% (about 17 million), age 12 and up were dependent on alcohol; 2.6% (about 7 million people), were dependent on illicit drugs. In 2012, an estimated 57.5 million Americans aged 12 or older, or 22 percent of the population, were current (past month) cigarette smokers. The U.S. research suggests that almost 3% of the adult population suffers from binge eating disorder. The issue of “internet addiction” casts a very large net, in that it could include gaming, pornography, social networking, and gambling. This involves not only computers, but also smart phones and other internet connected devices.

I am a certified addiction professional (C.A.P. #062) in the state of Florida, and over the 25 years of my professional experience, I have developed a broad-based definition of addiction, including these characteristics:

1. It is a behavior (whether or not it involves substances) that one does frequently or thinks about frequently. The amount of time behaving addictively increases; possibly the amount of time recovering from addictive behavior also increases.
2. The person develops a lifestyle that accommodates the behavior; the lifestyle may be very noticeable (a public intoxication) or hidden (internet addictions in their varieties of manifestation).
3. The person continues to compulsively behave in this way despite the negative consequences (too much time spent, too expensive, social isolation/relationship conflicts, loss of work, health problems, legal problems and so on). This is accompanied by a denial process that minimizes the negative consequences, sometimes quite irrationally.
4. The person becomes anxious and/or irritable when access to the behavior is restricted or inaccessible
5. If the person stops the identified addictive behavior, there’s a vulnerability to substituting another behavior in place of it.

Most of the consequences of these behaviors are relatively benign. It might be that someone spends too much time gaming on a computer with a resulting sleep deprivation, and there’s an accompanying social isolation, but beyond that the consequences are minimal. With the five criteria above any behavior can be loosely considered an “addiction”, primarily to the extent that the behavior interferes with normal functioning. At the least, these behaviors can be considered as significantly detracting from a person’s potential for personal life fulfillment.

Addiction can be considered a maladaptive coping strategy for stress. When we are stressed, parts of the brain create a cascade of changes in the way someone feels, thinks and behaves. The parts of the brain that are alert for threat send signals to the parts of the brain called the amygdala (which assesses the perceived threat) and the nucleus accumbens (which prepares for action). Interestingly enough, the same part of the brain is activated when the body is preparing to move towards pleasant experience. In this way, the mind/body interactions become entangled, leading to addictive behaviors. This graphic illustrates how this happens:

**Stressful Incident**

**Stress Reaction**

**Time Line**

**Behavior’s Effect**

**Addictive Behavior**

**Time Line**

An association develops between the stressful incident and the beginning of a maladaptive coping behavior, such as alcohol or computer gaming. The numbing of pleasurable effect of the behavior masks the unpleasantness of stress. Over time, seeking and activating the maladaptive coping becomes routine, even habitual to the extent that the person believes that the behavior is beneficial, despite any negative consequences that might occur.

**Stressful Incident**

**Meditative Effect**

**Time Line**

The practice of mindfulness brings awareness to the beginning of the stress reaction, then the practice of letting go releases the escalation of the stress reaction. This interrupts the urgently felt need for addictive behavior, which distracts or numbs the emotional effect of the stress.

How is this relevant to Buddhism in contemporary society? One of the basic principles of Buddhism is that avoiding distress and pursuing pleasure are strong and persistent drivers of human behavior. The culture that I grew up in (I was born just after the end of World War II) was run by people like my parents, who had suffered greatly, both financially and emotionally, from the turmoil of the first half of the century. Unfortunately, avoidance and distraction are core elements of a consumer culture.

Buddhism suggests that the most effective way to reduce and be free from distress is to mindfully understand the experience of distress, without avoidance or distraction, rather than numbing or pleasantly distracting from the experience of distress. This is manifested in the Four Noble Truths: there is **distress**, it has a **cause**, the distress can be **alleviated**, and there are **ways and means** to do so.

Relating to the graphic above, the **distress** is the increased activity of the amygdala the nucleus accumbens. The **cause** of the distress initially is a stressful event; without skillful coping, the stress increases and the amygdala/nucleus accumbens dynamic interaction becomes hypersensitized to the experience of distress. The function of an addictive behavior is to blunt or distract away from the experience of distress, *without actually reducing the psychological cause of anxiety*. The maladaptive response to the stressor is experienced as *craving and clinging*. The amygdala/nucleus accumbens remains overly sensitized, and the link between the onset of stress reactivity and the onset of addictive behaviors become conditionally linked. This process can be interrupted, so the psychologically distressed function of the amygdala/nucleus accumbens is **alleviated**. This retrains the mind to perceive the stressful event through different ways, and the link between stress reactions and the behaviors effects is drained of potency. The **ways and means** for this include the elements of the **Noble Eightfold Path**.