

A Philosophical and Spiritual Approach to Recovery from Addiction

I lived---if that be the right word, which it isn't---a big part of my life in bondage to addictions of various kinds. I have known the loss of freedom---indeed, the horrible self-slavery, self-loathing and suffering---that is always the result of unhealthy, life-destroying attachments, cravings and obsessions. I am free now, and I intend to stay that way. I choose to live differently now---and I am very much alive!

It is said that we are born free. Well, never entirely free. However, part of the 'price' we pay for 'Spirit' (that is, the livingness and self-givingness of life) descending into matter, for the 'Word becoming flesh', so to speak, is that we invariably find ourselves caught up, indeed trapped, in a time-bound, self-centred prison which is not entirely of our own making but which becomes more and more escape-proof as we choose, hundreds and thousands of times, to identify with our 'false' (or 'illusory') sense of 'self.'

Now, this is how I and many others see it. I am very much aware that it is not the way everyone sees it---which may well be a good thing! The 'self' does not exist---at least it does not exist in the sense of possessing a separate, independent, unchangeable, material existence of its own---even though we try, ever so hard, to convince ourselves---that is, the person that each of us really is---that we actually are those ever waxing and waning, arising and subsiding, hundreds and thousands of 'I's' and 'me's' ('selves') that, in a dynamic, ongoing, ever-changing and seemingly endless process of 'self-ing', parade before us as our consciousness (or 'mental wallpaper') from one moment to the next.

My view on this matter is somewhat coloured by the fact that I am a practising Buddhist. Now, it has been written, 'No anattā doctrine, no Buddhism.' The concept of anattā is bedrock to Buddhism. Anattā means 'not-self' or 'non-self' rather than 'no-self'. The Buddhist teaching of anattā---of which there are several different (and even discordant) interpretations in Buddhism---affirms that there is no actual 'self' at the centre of our conscious---or even unconscious---awareness. Our so-called consciousness goes through continuous fluctuations *from moment to moment*. As such, there is *nothing* to constitute, let alone sustain, a separate, transcendent 'I' structure or entity. We 'die' and are 'born' (or 'reborn') from one moment to the next. As such, there is nothing to constitute, let alone sustain, a separate, transcendent 'I' structure or entity. We 'die' and are 'born' (or 'reborn') from one moment to the next.

A leading Buddhist writer has this to say about the illusory nature of the self:

'According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of "me" and "mine", selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems.' W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p 51.

Interestingly, the so-called 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous ('AA'), entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*, says more-or-less the same thing:

'Selfishness, self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt.' *Alcoholics Anonymous* [3rd edn]. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976, p 62.

'Being convinced that self, manifested in various ways, was what had defeated us, we considered its common manifestations'. *Ibid*, p 64.

Both Buddhism and the 12-step recovery therapeutic model and paradigm, together with Jim Maclaine's 'self illusion therapy' about which I will have much more to say shortly, are based on the psycho-spiritual principle of 'letting go of self.'

But here's the rub. It is a paradox of immense proportions that, for something which has no separate, independent, unchangeable and material reality of its own---and certainly no singularity---the non-existent so-called 'self' causes us so much damn trouble---mainly because we let 'it'.

I am aware that the concept or presupposition of 'self as an illusion' is not universally accepted and ordinarily has not been maintained in Western general psychological practice. The concept is, however, maintained in Buddhist psychology and in much recovery literature and its associated healing movements and programs, and it formed the cornerstone of the 'self-illusion therapy' successfully conducted by the Sydney-based addiction psychologist, the late Jim Maclaine, over several decades at a number of different Sydney metropolitan private psychiatric hospitals specialising in drug and alcohol rehabilitation. I will have more to say about Jim Maclaine's self illusion therapy shortly.

In more recent times in the West, the idea that 'self' is not a thing but a construct has been gaining considerable momentum: see G Watson, 'I, Mine and Views of the Self', in G Watson, S Batchelor, and G Claxton, *The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and Our Day-to-day Lives* (York Beach ME: Samuel Weiser, 2000), pp 30-39; R Hanson with R Mendius, *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom* (Oakland CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009). It should be noted that even William James (the 'Father of Modern Psychology') wrote, 'In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he can call his.' (1981 [1890]) *Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), p 279.

We perceive life through our senses and our conscious mind. Over time, beginning from the very moment of our birth, sensory perceptions harden into memories formed out of aggregates of thought and feeling. In addition, we are conditioned to think in certain ways and to believe certain things about life. In time, the illusion of a separate 'witnessing [or so-called 'transcendental'] self' emerges. In that regard, it is generally acknowledged that the 'self' has many aspects including but not limited to the 'reflective self', the 'emotional self', the 'autobiographical self', the 'core self', the 'self-as-object', and the 'self-as-subject'. Thus, the position as respects the so-called is as follows:

'In sum, from a neurological standpoint, the everyday feeling of being a unified self is an utter illusion.' *Buddha's Brain*, p 211.

G Watson notes that 'recent studies' in the West support the view that the sense of self is 'not a thing but a construct, and one that appears to be considered as ever more widely distributed': G Watson, 'I, Mine and Views of the Self', in *The Psychology of Awakening*, pp 30-39, on pp 30-31.

Our mental continuity and sense---note that word 'sense'---of identity and existence are simply the result of habit, memory and conditioning. Also, as you all would know, genetics has a bit to do with it as well. At any rate, hundreds of thousands of separate, ever-changing and ever-so-transient mental occurrences ('selves') harden into a mental construct of sorts which is no more than a confluence of impermanent components ('I-moments') cleverly synthesized by the mind in a way which appears---note that word, appears---to give them a singularity and a separate, independent, unchangeable and material existence and life of their own. Now, it is through this perception of an internally created sense of 'self' that we experience, process and interpret all external reality. With alcoholics and other addicts, this false or illusory sense of self also becomes chemically altered (seemingly for all time)---with truly disastrous consequences for the addict and those associated with him or her.

In my own life, as a result of my addiction to alcohol in particular, I discovered that the mind---my mind---had become its own---and my own---prison. The mental construct of 'self' which I had built up over many years of self-obsession imposed severe limitations on how I saw life. My life's experiences were filtered through a distorted lens comprised of the totality of my various self-images. I did not see things as they really were because of this distorted lens. It was a classic case of 'self-will run riot' (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p 62)), to borrow a phrase from the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous. I am talking about all manner of selfishness, self-centredness, self-absorption and self-obsession---self, self, self! I am reminded of what the well-known British New Thought writer James Allen wrote, namely, 'Self is the lusting, coveting, desiring of the heart, and it is this that must be yielded up before Truth can be known, with its abiding calm and endless peace.'

In July 1995 I entered St Edmund's Private Hospital at Eastwood, in metropolitan Sydney NSW. (I had been a member of AA since January 1991, but my longest period of sobriety in 4.5 years was only 12 months.) My alcoholism had spiralled totally out-of-control and my life was an absolute mess. My actions whilst grossly intoxicated had brought me into big trouble with the law---not a good thing for anyone, but especially not for a lawyer. Intervention came as a result of the actions of my former law partner and my wife (from whom I was separated for some time until I finally got my act together). They made enquiries of St Edmund's, and I went in as in-patient, straight from the Hornsby courthouse. There I did the 4-week programme in 'self illusion therapy' conducted (and developed) by the above mentioned Jim Maclaine, and I went back to the hospital as a day or outpatient one day each week for some time thereafter.

Jim Maclaine developed his own distinctive recovery program and form of recovery psychotherapy ('self illusion therapy') from a number of different sources, ideas and

techniques (including but not limited to Buddhist philosophy and psychology, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and the ideas and teachings of J Krishnamurti and Christian mystics). See, in that regard, J Maclaine, *Breaking the Bondage of Self: An Approach to Recovery* (Sydney: Interact Health Programs Pty Ltd, [July] 1983), *Program Notes* (Sydney: Interact Health Programs Pty Ltd, 1987), *When Someone You Love is Addicted to Alcohol or Drugs* (Sydney: Bantam Books, 1988), 'Self Illusion Therapy' [leaf] (Sydney: Interact Health Programs/St Edmund's Private Hospital, nd); J Maclaine with H Townsend, *When Someone You Love is Addicted to Alcohol or Drugs* (Sydney: Bantam Books, 2001) [revised and expanded (2nd) edn]. See also Melinda L Lake, *InterACT Treatment Manual & Participant Workbook for Addictive Disorders/Based on the Self Help Theory of Jim Maclaine* (Bloomington IN: Balboa Press, 2014); I Ellis-Jones, *Dr Ian Ellis-Jones ... Living Mindfully Now* [blog] <http://ianellis-jones.blogspot.com.au/>.

Maclaine used to say that AA and all the other 12-step programs were 'spiritual' programs of recovery because they used 'non-physical' means of recovery---namely, words (both written and spoken), ideas and concepts as a result of, among other things, the energy of association with likeminded people and the power of example, all of which serve as a 'power-not-oneself'. That is not to deny the place of pharmaceutical drugs and the like in the fields of addiction psychiatry and addiction medicine.

The first thing I had to do in recovery was to accept that I was a 'person among persons' (to use Jim Maclaine's words)---a vital and integral part of life's self-expression. I was told that I was not that 'witnessing [or so-called 'transcendental'] self', which was nothing more than a small part of the aggregation of the hundreds of thousands of 'I-moments' ('inner self images') I had manufactured in my lifetime ('image in a person', in Maclaine's words). None of those images were the 'real me' (the person).

The second thing I had to learn in recovery was to recognize that, although I had been living in a chemically altered state of self-obsession. Maclaine would explain to patients just how in addicted people the alcohol or other drug permanently changed the inner self images that gave one the 'deepest sense of identity'. The alcohol or drug created a 'new, enormously satisfying, self image.' The 'good news,' I was told, was that the 'person' that I am and had always been was nevertheless still in direct contact with external reality---that is, with what is---even though I was scarcely aware of it at the time.

Now, before we go any further, I want to make clear (hopefully) what is meant by the word 'person'? A person is a human body-mind as a whole, an autonomous and dynamic system that arises in dependence upon human culture and the natural world': *Buddha's Brain*, p 211, citing M Mackenzie, (2010) 'Enacting the Self: Buddhist and Enactivist Approaches to the Emergence of the Self', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol 9, issue 1 (March 2010), pp 75 - 99. As Maclaine explained it, 'self' was 'inside' and was nothing but 'image'; the 'person' was 'outside and actual'---a 'person among persons'. The philosopher John Locke wrote of the distinction between the two:

'We must consider what Person stands for, which, I think, is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places.' (1975) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II 27.9.

Similar views on the illusory or empty (that is, impermanent and identity-less) nature of the 'self,' as opposed to the ontological reality of the 'person,' have been held by the neurologist John Hughlings Jackson and the philosophers David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell (among many others). As respects the philosophical concept of the 'person,' as well as 'personality,' the ideas of the philosophers P F Strawson and Ludwig Wittgenstein (on self, mind, body, and person) together with the 'Boston personalism' of the American philosopher and theologian Borden Parker Bowne are most relevant.

Now, once I had fully accepted those facts---along with the admission that I was powerless over alcohol and my life had become (totally and hopelessly) unmanageable---I was then able to start to live differently ... and mindfully ... one day at a time and from one moment to the next.

In my own writings, lectures and speeches, and in my counselling work with others, I have quoted often these wonderful, indeed life-changing, words of William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury: 'For the trouble is that we are self-centred, and no effort of the self can remove the self from the centre of its own endeavour.' Those words are very powerful, and very true. I will repeat them---'For the trouble is that we are self-centred, and no effort of the self can remove the self from the centre of its own endeavour.' Maclaine similarly wrote: 'Self is very circular; the part of you that you are working on becomes the part of you that is working on it' (*Breaking the Bondage of Self: An Approach to Recovery*, p 36); 'the part of you that was trying so hard to control [the addiction], was already in the grip of it ... an endless battle with yourself' (ibid, p 2).

As I see it, that is the fundamental problem faced by the alcoholic and other addicts. How can 'self'---which, in any event, is in total bondage to itself---change 'self'? It can't. The ego-self has to be thrown off-centre, and a 'power-not-oneself' needs to be found---perhaps deep inside the person in question---in order to find the necessary power to toss and overcome all forms of self-obsession and 'mental furniture'. Self-liberation is the goal. Self-liberation, self-realization, enlightenment, salvation---to me, they are all the same thing. In the words of the Zen Buddhist Alan Watts, we are talking about 'a state of wholeness in which the mind functions freely and easily, without the sensation of a second mind or ego standing over it with a club': A Watts, *The Way of Zen* (Penguin Books, 1962), p 43.

However, before self-liberation can become a reality the alcoholic or other addict must be very careful in how they go about this, for as many so-called mystics have found out over the years, the denial of the self tends only to increase one's obsession with oneself. In the words of Dr Norman Vincent Peale, who for 32 years was the senior minister of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, and who was a wonderful supporter of AA right from its very infancy---few ministers of religion have ever had Peale's understanding of alcoholism and addiction---the person in recovery must experience 'a shift in emphasis from self to non-self.' By a 'sense of

non-self' Peale means a 'sense of be-ing'---that is, a sense that we, the person that each of us is, can do that which the 'self' (or rather 'selves') in us cannot. I like these words from Vernon Howard: 'A free mind is one that failed so dismally in living up to its flattering self-images that it gave them up entirely': V Howard, *Cosmic Command* (Boulder City NV: New Life Foundation, 1979), # 1923.

In addition to working as a lawyer, educator and trainer, and a consultant and an author, I am also a Unitarian minister of religion, and a wellness (mindfulness) instructor and practitioner. Now, few people know of the existence of a very early and important connection between the 12-step recovery program Alcoholics Anonymous and Unitarianism. See, in that regard, my paper 'Unitarianism and Alcoholics Anonymous', <http://www.slideshare.net/ianellis-jones/unitarianism-and-alcoholics-anonymous>. On 26 November 1939, when AA was still very much in its infancy, the Reverend Dr Dilworth Lupton, then the minister of the First Unitarian Church (Universalist-Unitarian), Euclid at East 82nd Street, Cleveland, Ohio, preached a famous sermon entitled 'Mr X and Alcoholics Anonymous', http://silkworth.net/aahistory/mr_x.html. On 27 November 27 1939 the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* printed Lupton's sermon and it was met with a very positive reaction by the readership. It also brought about some inquiries about the new movement of AA and pleas for help from both alcoholics and members of their families. Printed copies of Lupton's sermon were distributed around early meetings of AA. By the way, Mr X was one Clarence Snyder, who was one of the contributing authors of the 'Big Book' of AA entitled Alcoholics Anonymous, which was first published in 1939. Snyder wrote the chapter entitled 'Home Brewmeister' (p 274 in 1st edition, and p 297 in 2nd and 3rd editions, of the 'Big Book', *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services)) and was an originator of Cleveland's [AA] Group No. 3.

Snyder's wife Dorothy had often implored Dr Lupton to speak to Clarence about his alcoholic drinking. Lupton did speak with Clarence on a number of occasions. Unfortunately, Clarence at that time was unable and unwilling to quit drinking. (He later did quit drinking.) Now, from his conversations with Clarence Snyder and with other members of the Cleveland group, Dr Lupton stated that he was convinced that the success of AA came through the application of four religious principles that, in Lupton's words, were 'as old as the Ten Commandments'. Lupton identified the four principles as being as follows:

1. The principle of spiritual dependence---being reliance upon what Lupton referred to as a 'power-not-oneself' (which need not be a 'higher' power as such, or a traditional God-figure, but simply a power other than one's 'self', the reason being, as I have already said, that 'self cannot change self'). Note: Although I respect those who like the expression, I personally dislike the expression 'higher power' as it tends to suggest that there are supposedly 'higher' and 'lower' levels or orders of reality (which, on both philosophical and scientific grounds, I firmly think is not the case). Significantly, Step 2 of 'The Twelve Steps' speaks in terms of a power 'greater than ourselves.' In addition, there are only 2 places (on pp 43 and 100, respectively) in the 4th edn of the 'Big Book' of AA where the actual expression 'Higher Power' is used, but there are numerous other places in the book where other expressions are used to refer to the need to find a

'power' or simply 'Power' (to overcome the problem of 'lack of power') and to the 'God' of one's own understanding.

2. The principle of universality---that is, anyone can recover from alcoholism and other addiction regardless of their particular religion or even if they have no religion at all.
3. The principle of mutual aid---that is, people tend to have the best chance of successful recovery when they have an opportunity to be exposed to the energy of association with, and the power of example of, likeminded people.
4. The principle of transformation---that is, a 'revolutionary change' can take place in the alcoholic or addict's life when reliance is placed on a power-not-oneself; the transformation results in a radical alteration of one's attitudes and outlooks, one's habits of thought. 'In the face of despair and impending collapse, [the person] has gained a new sense of direction, new power.'

I have seen these four principles work wonders in my own life and in the lives of countless others with whom I have been associated.

I want to say this---most sincerely and (hopefully) non-patronisingly---to each of you who is involved in various ways in the fields of addiction psychiatry and addiction medicine, that is, in helping others to recover from severe substance dependence. You are all engaged in a most noble enterprise. Personally, I can't think of anything more important. Intervention worked in my own life. Without the intervention of others, I don't think I would have ever recovered. As you all know, when it comes to the process of addiction there is no one rock-bottom, rather it is a bottomless pit. Unless and until a person can be brought to the point where they want recovery more than anything else---more than family, friends, job, reputation, and even life itself---there can be no recovery. Want-power---as opposed to will-power---is what is needed. However, when an alcoholic or other addict comes to the realization that 'there is [or, at the very least, may be] a way out', that they don't have to continue living in the way they have been living, and that they really want what others have obtained in and through the process of recovery, remarkable and seemingly miraculous things can and do happen.

I will finish with some words from the Buddhist scriptures:

O housebuilder! You have now been seen.
You shall build the house no longer.
All your rafters have been broken,
Your ridgepole shattered.
My mind has attained unconditional freedom.
Achieved is the end of craving.
— The *Dhammapada*, verse 154.

As I see it, the 'housebuilder' is the false or illusory 'self' (or rather 'selves' in us), held together by the 'ridgepoles' and 'rafters' of dependency. When we come to see

ourselves [sic] as we really are, we will attain 'unconditional freedom'---or, to quote from the 'Twelve Promises' of AA, we will come to know 'a new freedom and a new happiness' and 'self-seeking [sic] will slip away' (see *Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp 83-84).

Note. This article is based on a paper entitled 'From "Inebriation" to "Severe Substance Dependence" ... or Long Day's Journey into Light,' which was presented by the author at the 4th New South Wales Addiction Medicine Training Day, 'Involuntary Treatment for Substance Disorders in NSW,' held at Northern Sydney Education Centre, Macquarie Hospital, North Ryde NSW Australia, on 4 December 2012.

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