

Bad habits – Causes and Cures

The trout is lured by the worm on the hook of the fisherman, the mouse by the cheese in the mouse-trap. A tragic irony of the struggle for existence is that living beings are often destroyed by what they desire. But at least the fish and the mouse have excuses: the bait and the cheese look like sustenance. Also, the fish and the mouse do not know in advance that they will be trapped. Humans seldom have either of these excuses. The temptations that wreck their lives are quite often pure indulgences known to be dangerous. For example, no one has to smoke for survival and all smokers are aware that smoking is dangerous.

Tragically Trapped

Consider the following World Health Organization statistics:

- ♣ Tobacco kills nearly 10,000 people worldwide every day.
- ♣ By 2020 it is predicted that tobacco use will cause over 12% of all deaths globally. This is more deaths worldwide than HIV, tuberculosis, maternal mortality, motor vehicle accidents and homicide combined.
- ♣ Half of those who start smoking in adolescence will die in middle age, losing around 22 years of normal life expectancy.

Consider further the following facts:

- ♣ An average cigarette contains 401 poisons and 43 cancer-causing chemicals.
- ♣ There are around 1.1 billion smokers in the world (about one-third of the global population aged 15 and over).

Thus, we have quite a sobering picture of the world around us. The statistics about other self-destructive behavioral patterns – alcoholism, substance abuse and suicide - are equally, if not more, alarming. And even among so-called normal people, practically everyone is victimized by some form of self-destructive behavioral

pattern - unwarranted expressions of anger that turn out to be disastrous, unintentional use of caustic words that break hearts and so on.

A question naturally arises: how does an intelligent human being embark on such a destructive course? Most people know that when they start, say, smoking, they are treading into a danger zone. But the media, their friends circle and the peddlers persuade them to experiment just once. Seeking a break from the humdrum daily life with its inane pleasures, they acquiesce. The impression of instant pleasure gets embedded in their mind and in future whenever they face a reversal, they tend to seek immediate relief through smoking. Every successive experience of smoking reinforces the earlier impressions, strengthens the tendency to seek momentary relief and weakens the voice of intelligence and conscience. Smoking becomes an irresistible demand, a compulsive need, an addiction. Smokers turn into helpless victims, driven again and again to the instant relief offered by the puffs.

Current Solutions

Here are some methods now in use for breaking addictions:

1. Knowledge: If people were better educated about the dangers involved, would that deter them from addictive indulgences? Maybe sometimes, but not generally. In fact, knowledge sometimes has the opposite effect. For example, in most countries, after governmental regulations made it mandatory to display the statutory warning, "Cigarette smoking is injurious to health" on every cigarette ad and pack, cigarette sales increased; the warning tended to evoke a daredevil spirit in smokers.

2. Emotional Support: People often turn to addictions when emotionally let down or betrayed by loved ones. Emotionally neglected adolescents are especially susceptible to addictions. Providing emotional support through personal counseling is a potential solution. But professional counseling often leads to chronic dependence on the counselor. And for many, professional guidance

costs too much. Friends can help, but in our fast-paced modern life, few people can invest the time and energy needed to consistently provide intensive emotional support.

3. Sublimation: Sublimation involves replacing a gross physical drive with a more refined substitute. For example, an alcoholic might try to seek refuge in music instead of alcohol. But this can work only if he has a strong liking for music and if his addiction to alcohol is not overpowering. Due to the alcoholic's recent mental impressions of indulgence in alcohol, that urge generally appears far more attractive than its substitute.

4. Willpower: Seeing the physical and emotional pain that he is inflicting upon himself and his loved ones, an addict may sometimes by sheer determination decide to give up his perverted habit. Unfortunately few people are able to muster such strong willpower. Even if successful, they face the grim prospect of an entire lifetime of constant inner struggle with the fear of succumbing at any moment. And failure often brings with it intolerable feelings of guilt, making living itself an agony.

5. Substitution: Addicts often try to switch their addiction to a less harmful substitute - smokers try patch or nicotine gum (which give small doses of the drug), heroin addicts try methadone and so on. While this may make the addiction less debilitating, the addict is still not freed from his emotional craving and mental dependence on external substances. Also the substitute drug continues to take its toll on the health and the wealth of the addict. Thus substitution leads at best to lessening of the evil and at worst to its perpetuation, never to its elimination.

6. Religion: Statistical surveys have shown that the religiously committed are less likely to succumb to seeking perverted pleasures. Adopting religious principles rigorously also sometimes helps addicts to free themselves. Dr Patrick Glynn writes in his book *God: The Evidence*, "It is difficult to find a more consistent correlative of mental health, or a better insurance against self-destructive behaviors, than a strong religious faith."

While each of these methods has had some small success, the real solution to self-destructive behavior lies in understanding its roots.

Let's consider the problem from the Vedic perspective.

The Vedic Paradigm

In the Bhagavad-gita (3.36), Arjuna asks Lord Krishna, "By what is one impelled to sinful acts, even unwillingly, as if engaged by force?" Lord Krishna replies, "It is lust only, Arjuna, which is born of contact with the mode of passion and later transformed into wrath, and which is the all-devouring sinful enemy of this world."

The background to this dialogue is the fundamental teaching of the Bhagavad-gita. The source of life in the material body, the actual self, is a non-material particle of spirit, known as the atman or the soul. The essential need of the soul is to love and be loved and to experience unbounded happiness through loving exchange. Being spiritual by constitution, the soul belongs to a higher dimensional milieu, the spiritual world. There the loving propensity of the soul finds complete fulfillment in the supremely lovable all-attractive person, who personally reciprocates with his love. In fact, the Vedic texts state: *eko bahusyam*. The Supreme has expanded into infinite subordinates for the purpose of loving reciprocation. The Vedanta Sutra explains: *raso vai sah*. The Supreme is the reservoir of all divine loving emotions. The Srimad Bhagavatam confirms that this Supreme Person is all-attractive and is therefore best known by the name Krishna, which means all-attractive in Sanskrit. In the spiritual world, Krishna is the pivot of all relationships and the soul continually relishes ever-intensifying and ever-expanding ecstasies of love in relationship with Him there.

Love necessitates freedom; only when the object of love freely chooses to reciprocate one's love does the experience of love become truly satisfying and fulfilling. The soul is therefore endowed with a minute free will to enable him to experience the joy of loving Krishna. But when the soul misuses his free will and

becomes causelessly unwilling to love Krishna, he has to find a substitute in whom he can repose his loving propensity. Of course, by definition, there can be no substitute for the Supreme. And, by his very constitution, the soul cannot find happiness in loving anyone other than the Supreme. But for those souls who insist on making that attempt, the world of matter (where all of us currently reside) provides the necessary arrangement for experimentation and rectification.

The Enemy Within

As soon as the soul comes to the material world, his love for Krishna becomes perverted into lust. Lust is a formidable illusory force that offers the soul various surrogate objects of love to experiment with. Lust creates and perpetuates the misidentification of the soul with the material body that he is given. Lust causes within all living beings the overpowering drive for gross sexual enjoyment in specific, and all forms of material enjoyment in general.

Modern civilization with its media, social environment, culture and overall values aggravates lust disproportionately. Especially the celluloid promises of unending sexual bliss provoke wild erotic fantasies. But the actual experience of sexual enjoyment is heartbreakingly brief; dreams cherished for years vanish within moments. Though what people experience is so pathetically little as compared to the hype, the media blitz goads them on. Sexual enjoyment, especially illicit, is a complicated affair; it involves money, time, intense emotions, interpersonal relationship dynamics, risk for prestige and so on. And the attempt for such enjoyment, even if somehow successful, leaves one feeling disappointed and cheated - and craving for more. And if unsuccessful it creates great anger. Either way the victims are soon so enslaved by lust that the more they try, the more they get frustrated, and yet the more they become impelled to keep trying. Eventually, the accumulated enormous

frustration makes instant relief a desperate necessity. Such people easily fall prey to the lure of quick pleasures offered by addictions.

Lust is thus the internal enemy, which causes all self-destructive behavioral patterns. The Gita (18.39) describes vividly the nature of all perverted pleasures: they appear to be like nectar at first but poison at the end. Srila Prabhupada comments, "While one enjoys sense gratification, it may be that there is some feeling of happiness, but actually that so-called feeling of happiness is the ultimate enemy of the sense enjoyer." Why? Because it reinforces the illusion that true happiness can be found in this world.

Lust is present in everyone in varying degrees. That is why everyone, no matter how materially successful he may be, has some tendencies towards self-destructive behavior. People generally become concerned about such tendencies only when it exceeds socially acceptable limits. But actually lust throttles the ability of everyone to make meaningful contributions toward society and even towards their own future; the difference is only in degree. From the spiritual point of view, lust is inherently self-destructive; it strips the soul of the unlimited spiritual happiness that is his birthright and forces him to labor for paltry material sensations of pleasure that can never satisfy his immortal longing.

The Only Way to Conquer Lust

Lust being a perversion of our original, essential nature, cannot possibly be annihilated, suppressed, repressed or even sublimated. But it can be reverted to its original nature by redirecting our loving propensity back to Krishna through the scientific process of devotional service. Action on the spiritual platform is what Lord Krishna recommends to Arjuna as the key to overcoming lust, "Therefore knowing oneself to be transcendental to the material senses, mind and intelligence, O mighty-armed Arjuna, one should steady the mind by deliberate spiritual intelligence (Krishna consciousness) and thus – by spiritual strength – conquer this insatiable enemy known as lust." (Bhagavad-gita 3.43)

The channeling of consciousness from matter back to Krishna is most easily and effectively executed through the medium of divine sound. The Supreme Person Krishna being omnipotent is fully present in His Holy Names. Chanting of the Holy Names therefore connects one immediately with Krishna, who is the supreme pleasure principle. Regular meditation on the Holy Names enables one to experience happiness streaming down from the spiritual dimension. This spiritual pleasure is so satisfying that it soon frees one from the craving for perverted mundane pleasures like drugs, alcohol etc.

Millions of people all over the world have experienced the purifying potency of the Holy Names of God. During the period of the counterculture in the US in 1960s and 1970s, Srila Prabhupada propagated the congregational chanting of the Holy Names and saved thousands of young people from a condemned life of drug addiction. All over the globe ISKCON devotees who practice mantra meditation – chanting of the maha mantra Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare - everyday for two hours are easily able to eschew intoxication (of all forms), gambling, meat-eating and illicit sex, which are the primary self-destructive activities impelled by lust. Because these four activities greatly obscure the original consciousness of the soul, abstaining from them helps to accelerate the purification of the chanting. However chanting is so powerful that, even if one is initially unable to give up these activities, if one just continues chanting, soon one will experience spiritual pleasure and get the inner strength to get rid of them. When many people in the modern times are so captivated and enslaved by lust that they consider life without these activities an impossibility, devotees lead lives that are natural, peaceful, satisfying, meaningful and constructive, protected as they are by their mantra meditation.

But the benefits of chanting do not stop at freedom from addiction, nor is chanting meant only for those victimized by self-destructive behavioral patterns. Chanting the Holy Names of God is a universal, time-tested, non-sectarian method of bringing about the blossoming of consciousness to its highest bloom of pure love for

God and all living beings. Chanting frees one from all selfish desires, which throttle the flow of the fullness of life. It enables one to experience within oneself continuous happiness, which is absolutely independent of the state of the body and the external world. Chanting thus heralds the advent of a life of selfless spiritual service to God and all His children. This selflessness within individuals alone can form the basis of lasting world peace and harmony.

The world-famous Beatle, late George Harrison, a diligent practitioner of mantra meditation, sings:

*If you open up your heart,
You will know what I mean
We've been polluted so long
But here's a way for you to get clean
By chanting the name of the Lord and
You'll be free
The Lord is awaiting on you all to awaken
And see.*

- 'Awaiting On You All'

From the album '*All Things Must Pass*'

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