



Welcome to exploring the use of Buddhist teachings to overcome addiction. First, let's take a deep breath together. When you breathe in, becoming aware of your body and when you breathe out, connecting to your body.

I'm Vimalasara, also known as Valerie Mason-John. Sometimes I'm asked, “What do Buddhist teachings have to do with addiction?” I make the bold statement that Prince Siddhartha was in recovery, and when he became a Buddha, he went beyond recovery. The Buddha's first discourse went something like this. He said:

Monks, there is addiction to indulgence of sense pleasure which is coarse, lowly, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary person. There is addiction to self-mortification, which is painful, low and coarse. Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata, the noble one, has realized the vision, the knowledge, that gives rise to calm, insight, enlightenment, nirvana.

Buddhist teachings explicitly talk about addiction and Prince Siddhartha knew about addiction. He experienced addiction to sensory pleasures when he lived in the palace. When he went forth from the palace, he experienced addiction to self-mortification. In the context of the Buddha's teachings, I define addiction as the concoction and fabrication of the mind, often masked by habitual behaviors like workaholism, alcoholism, drug addiction, sex, gambling, and a multitude of other distractions. In fact, you could see addiction as part of samsara, and the Buddha taught the way out of samsara, the way out of suffering.

The Buddha taught four noble truths: there is suffering; a path that leads to suffering; a cessation of suffering; and a path that takes us away from suffering—the noble eightfold path. When I first heard these truths, it gave me goosebumps, because I used to believe that I was the only one suffering.



Those of us who have had addictions know exactly what suffering is. I believed that my life was suffering and that the only way I could change my life was by taking my life. That was the only way I thought I could get rid of the suffering. Fortunately, I was unsuccessful and lived long enough to learn something different from these truths. I learned that my life wasn't suffering, that all life wasn't suffering. It was how I responded to life that created the suffering.

This week, we explore the first noble truth: facing our suffering. The Buddha taught that birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering. Association to the unpleasant is suffering. Disassociation to the pleasurable is suffering. Not getting what we desire is suffering. We know that if we have addictions, that these can be the cause for us to be on addiction's vicious cycle of suffering. The Buddha knew it was important for us to understand suffering, and to do this, he gave us three definitions of suffering.

The first definition is physical suffering. This is suffering that we experience directly to the body. It could be a headache, a toothache, a stomachache, an injury, or pain due to a disease or terminal illness. There is also physical suffering experienced through our senses. For example, we may taste or smell something foul, and we retch. We may hear a noise that sets our teeth on edge. We may even see something horrific and we flinch. All of this is physical suffering.

The Buddha taught that physical suffering is inevitable. It's said that he even suffered from acute backache. The Buddha also taught that physical suffering is inevitable because, when the senses or the mind have contact with an object or a thought, there will be sensation. Whenever there is contact with one of the senses, sensation is inevitable. Whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, we cannot avoid the sensation. We have to respond to sensation with a kind, calm mind. Many of us with addictions have responded to physical sensations by taking opiates, taking drugs, or drinking alcohol. What we have to do is turn towards this sensation with a mind that isn't agitated.



The second definition of suffering is psychological suffering. This is the suffering that we call our “stinking thinking,” the thinking that beats us up, judges us, criticizes us, tells us we're no good, tells us we're unlovable, tells us, "I hate myself." There is also psychological suffering caused by impermanence. We may be driving our car to work and it breaks down, so we experience psychological suffering. We're going on holiday, we're excited, and we get to the airport and learn that our plane has been canceled. We experience psychological suffering. We come home one day from work and our partner has walked out on us. This too is psychological suffering.

The Buddha taught us a way to deal with psychological suffering. He taught the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*, a sutta to work with thoughts that create this psychological suffering. He said that if an unwholesome thought arises, then cultivate a wholesome thought, or reflect on what the body is made up of. Reflect on the sinews, the bones, phlegm, urine, excrement, skin, hair, nails. If this unwholesome thought still repeats itself, then we can pause and reflect on the misery that these thoughts have been causing us and thus on the danger of these thoughts.

This “stinking thinking” is a matter of life and death. It's the cause of murder, sexual abuse, physical violence, road rage, depression, and at worst, the cause of murder and suicide. When we reflect on its misery, we can reflect on how long we have been carrying these thoughts around with us. Sometimes the thought that we're not good enough or unlovable comes from a childhood experience—yet we still carry it around on our shoulders. We've been carrying it around for 20, 30, 40 years, when we could really put them down.

If this doesn't work, the Buddha says that we should pay no attention to these thoughts and just become aware of ourselves walking, standing, sitting, lying, or having mindfulness of our bodily actions. If this doesn't work, then the Buddha says we must go to the root of the thought. The root of the thought is a physical sensation, because the mind produces thoughts in response to sensation. If we pay attention to the sensation, without getting caught up into the fabrication and concoction of the mind, maybe these unwholesome thoughts will dissipate. If all else fails, the



Buddha says we must clench our jaw, put our tongue to the roof of our mouth, and crush the thought. This practice is like screaming at the demons.

A couple years ago, I was leading a devotional practice for my Buddhist community. It was on my birthday and I had an expectation of certain people being there. There was one person who didn't turn up. As I was leading this practice in call and response, my mind kept being sucked away into this person who hadn't arrived. It was becoming so much that I was distracted and almost unable to lead the practice. Then I just shouted inside my head, "Stop!" The thoughts shattered and my mind stilled, and I was able to continue leading this devotion practice. I encourage you to try one of these practices to work with your psychological suffering.

The third definition is existential suffering. This suffering is all pervasive, because everything that arises is dependent on the next condition that arises. We suffer in this way because we are made up of the five aggregates—the five *skandhas* of form, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness—and we try to grasp. This suffering can be a feeling of unsatisfactoriness, even when we are having a pleasurable experience.

The Buddha suffered from existential suffering. When he was living in his palace, he had every sense indulged, but there remained a feeling of unsatisfactoriness, and he wanted to go beyond the four walls of the palace. This suffering can be quite subtle, and you can see this existential suffering as a culmination of physical and psychological suffering.

For example, we could be driving a car and we're driving on the highway and another car cuts us up and we flinch, and we feel it in the body. That is physical suffering. But we want to move away from physical suffering because it feels so uncomfortable. The brain has released a chemical and there's a rush through our body, and we want to move away from it. We move away from it by beginning to scream at the driver. The other driver can't hear us, because we're in our car saying, "You idiot!" and so on. Some people even begin to chase the driver, thinking that this will make us feel even better. This is psychological suffering. But when we do this to



make ourselves feel better, still we feel this unsatisfactoriness. We still feel this existential suffering, this suffering because of the fragility of life.

We can begin to work with this suffering by reflecting on the first reminder. There are four reminders, and the first is our precious birth. We can reflect on some of the ten endowments. One of those endowments is that we are born into the human realm. Because we're born into the human realm, we can receive the dharma. We can reflect on the endowment that we have the faculties to hear the dharma orally or through sign language. We can read the dharma by reading books or through braille. We can also reflect that we have been born into a favorable state, because we've been born into a country where the Buddhist teachings are flourishing. This will help us to work with existential suffering.

The Buddha knew it was so important for us to penetrate this first truth of suffering, to begin to truly understand suffering. As I said earlier, once one of our six senses has contact with an object, feeling arises. This is sensation. When this feeling arises, we move into perception and we begin to label the feeling. Then, out of the perception, we move into formation and we begin cognizing it. Once we begin cognizing it, we move into consciousness, where the ego begins to identify with it and begins to cling onto it. Hence, the suffering emerges.

Today, we will do a practice to face our suffering called AGE: A for awareness, G for gathering the breath, E for expanding the breath. Become aware of your body and aware of feeling in your body. The body produces sensation. Develop awareness of whether you feel pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, or a mixture of all three in your body.

Feeling gives rise to thought, so have an awareness of these thoughts that arise out of your feeling. We work with our thoughts by gathering the breath. Gather the breath in your abdomen by becoming aware of your abdomen rising and falling. You can also gather the breath on your upper lip and inside the nostrils. When you breathe in, it will be cool, and when you breathe out,

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it will be warmer. We continue to work with our thoughts by taking a deep breath in and expanding the breath throughout the whole body.

If you would like to explore more of how to face your suffering, you can look at the first step of the eight-step model, accepting that this human life will bring suffering. These eight steps are in my book, *Eight Step Recovery: Using the Buddhist Teachings to Overcome Addiction*.

May all blessings be yours.