

Addiction and the Cycle of Suffering

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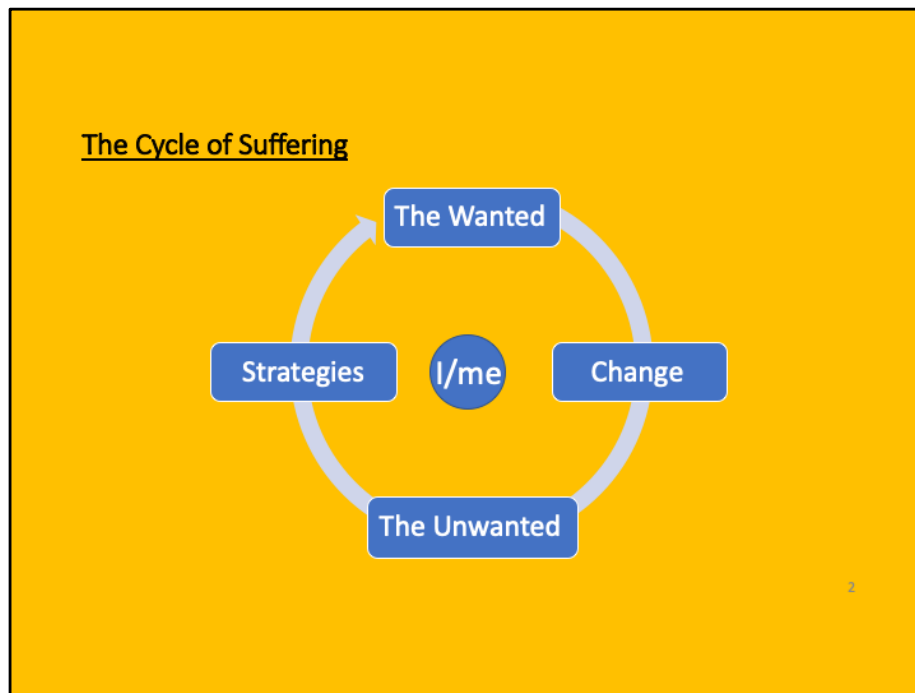
Title and name.

Page numbers to help & questions at the end.

Taboo. Not talked about, especially in spiritual circles, including Buddhism. Stigmatized.

What makes me qualified to talk about this? Someone who knows both addiction and the spiritual path, and who recently has started counseling people with addictions. Friends and family members who died or were put into mental homes, or who lost their families, jobs, etc. I will talk about my own problems with alcohol. (I warning!). Stopping for two years, my father. One every now and then, nice to have one and stop, wasn't able to. No need any more. When things go wrong, illness, loss, etc. I don't need a drink.

To some extent we're all addicted, try a day without your mobile phone or your computer.



To be read as going **clockwise**.

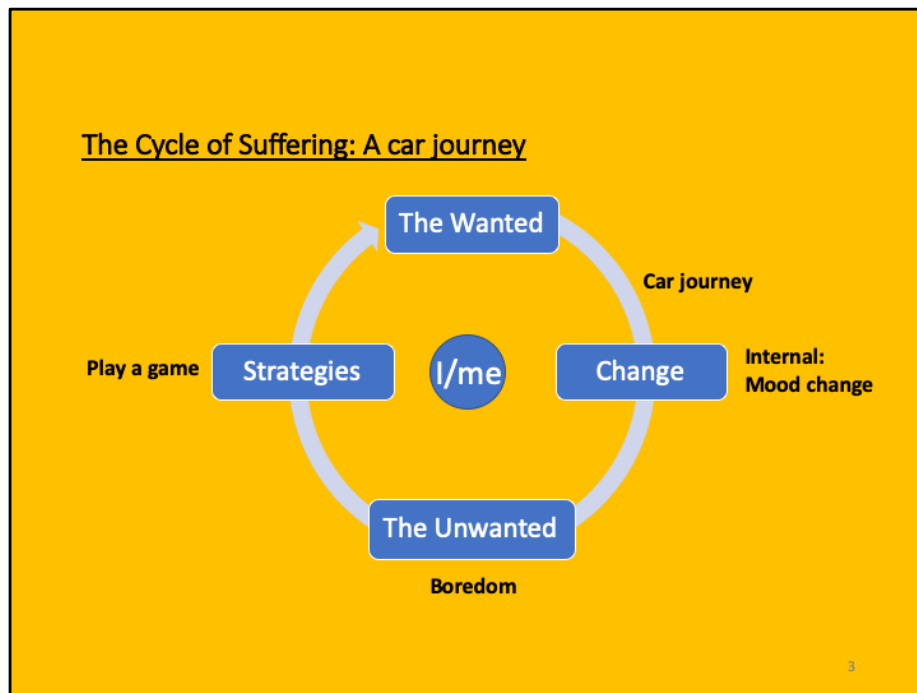
I/me is the driver of this cycle. It thinks it's in control. This feeling of being separate, being disconnected, being incomplete, etc, It is actually a complete fabrication but it feels real. It's who we think we are, what we think we need, etc.

The wanted might be things (a new car, dark chocolate, more money), states (calmness, peace, a feeling of wholeness), emotions (happiness), events (someone praises us, or we succeed), etc.

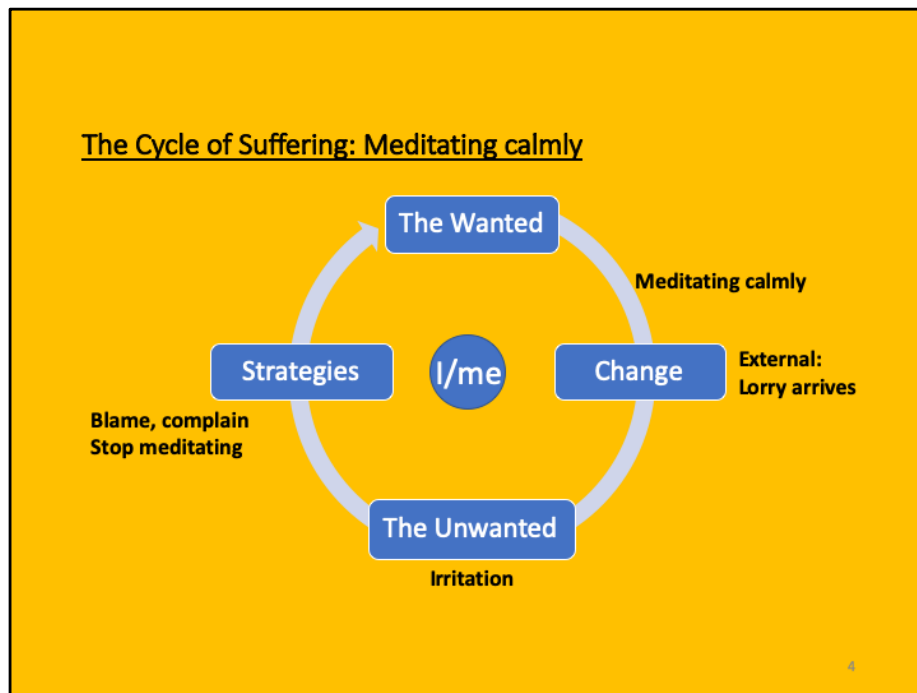
Change can be internal (mind, body, feelings) or external (circumstances). Of course it can occur anywhere in the circle, eg between the Unwanted and the Wanted on the other side of the cycle.

The unwanted could be sensations, sounds, thought, feelings, events, etc.

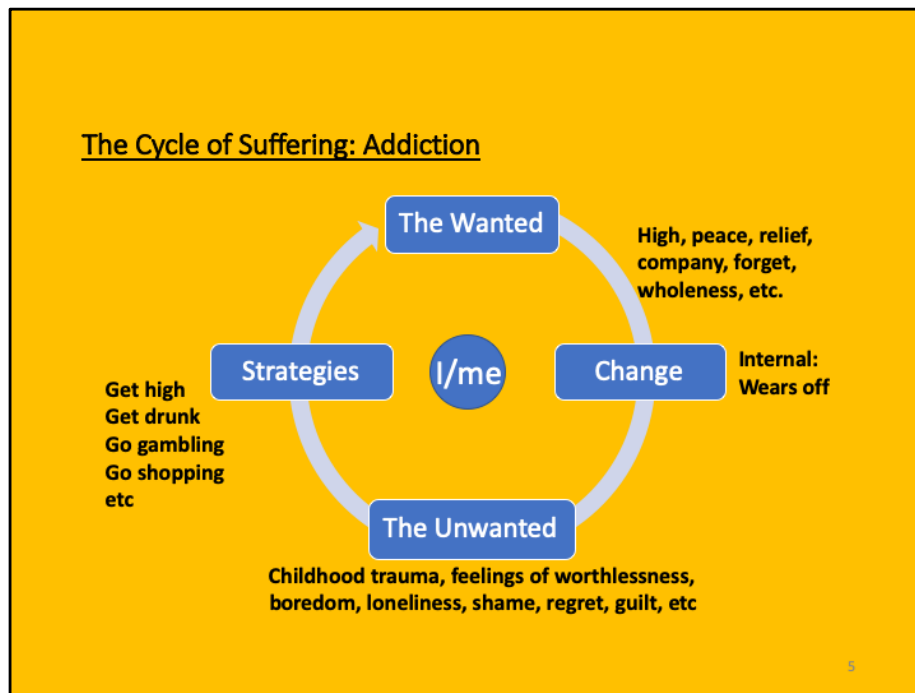
We have all kinds of **strategies** to repair, fix, manipulate, our experience. It isn't good enough (dukkha). For example, going shopping, turning on the TV, becoming angry, daydreaming, getting drunk, listening to music, reading, etc. Two quick examples.



The change can also be **external**, eg a puncture!



We are driven round and round, getting what we want, things changing, getting what we don't want, trying to get rid of it, trying to get what we want or keep hold of it. **This is suffering.**



The **strategies** are things which make us feel better (at least in the short run and initially), which is one of the things we all want. It is an unskillful way of dealing with suffering. Often there is a pattern from childhood starting with feelings of worthlessness, meaninglessness, which are replaced by the addiction, which are escaped from by the addiction, but the addiction often causes a downward spiral, more feelings of worthlessness and therefore more need for the substance or action. In a sense then, **drug abuse and other addictive behavior is a symptom not the problem itself!** (David Sheff, on booklist)

What is addiction then?

- **A way of self-medicating, a strategy for dealing with our suffering, dealing with 'The Unwanted'**
- **A form of compulsive behavior**
- **Often driven by deep psychological factors**
- **Costly & cyclical.**

A way of self-medicating, of dealing with our suffering. Addictive behaviour is one of many choices we can make to escape suffering, to escape the things we don't like about ourselves, the emotions we don't like, the thoughts we don't like, the events in the past that caused us trauma, to escape what's Unwanted in our experience. It may not be a conscious choice. We want to move towards The Wanted!

A form of compulsive behavior. Compulsion, the act is repeated and persisted with despite it not necessarily leading to reward or pleasure, although it may have started as pleasurable, as a movement towards what's Wanted. The person is trapped in the behaviour. We can (and people often do) replace more dangerous addictions with less dangerous ones, but the underlying cause is not being seen and understood.

It is driven by psychological factors. We feel bad. We don't want to feel bad. This feeling bad may be chronic and may have been formed in childhood, eg if we were abused, or suffered from some other trauma. (Our own trauma may not make sense or seem trivial to others.) Feelings of a lack of self-worth, hopelessness, guilt, loneliness, boredom, extreme sadness, pessimism, etc, often arise as a result of the trauma. Are addictions always trauma driven?

We want to do something that makes us **feel better**, to stay in the Wanted box. We develop a habit, whether it's a cookie, a drink, a pill, a cigarette, a credit card, an electronic device, or a romantic encounter. The brain then expects it to make us feel good whether it does or not. This becomes wired in in a sense, it becomes a pathway in the brain. Once your brain builds the pathway, you keep expecting to feel good, even if you end up with harm. After a while we do the habit without even being consciously aware of it.

Substance abuse can exacerbate the original feelings and lead to a negative feedback loop. Lack of self-worth, take substances, become addictive, confirm the feeling of a lack of self-worth, take more substances, etc.

The issue of co-occurrence, eg depression and substance abuse,

Costs. To the individual, to friends, family, to society. Addictive behaviour, guilt, reinforces feelings of worthlessness, more addictive behavior, vicious cycle, lies, stealing, lack of self-worth. Different addictions, different substances, have different costs, eg gambling, shopping, alcohol, heroin, cigarettes. It is here, in terms of the costs and who bears them, that addictions are most different. It takes an incredible toll on families, just to mention two aspects, the inability to understand what's happening, a tremendous feeling of loss, which includes a loss of the future and a loss of sense. It doesn't make sense. (The Nic Sheff book is an attempt to describe it and discover what drives it.)

Similarities and differences between addiction and our ordinary minds

- Strategies to escape from suffering, from The Unwanted
- Driven by the I/me that thinks it controls our mind
- Costly and cyclical.

Escape from suffering. See previous slide. Our ordinary minds will do anything to avoid things which caused us suffering in the past. Ways we do this, distraction, anger, depression, fighting, blame, projection, etc. Addicted to thinking, to Facebook, to our mobile phones. Distractions. 5 Invitations, page 87, 'We have become masters of distraction ...' Distraction would be all that people usually regards as addictions, plus a lot of other things we do. What they share is that they are all an attempt to escape from uncomfortable situations, unpleasant feelings, etc, to escape from what's Unwanted. They are all a way of escaping dealing with our stuff. Some are more harmful and expensive than others but all, since they are all forms of resistance, are a form and a cause of suffering to self and often others.

The power of the mind. Your mind, your I/me knows you. Therefore it's very good at rationalizing, persuading and saying things to you that you find plausible. Like **just one more**. Will power alone is often not capable of dissuading mind, otherwise we wouldn't need things like meditation!

Costly and cyclical. Just in case you don't think it's costly, look at the state of the planet as a result of desire and selfishness!!

How can a spiritual practice help
(everyone concerned)?

- Increases our awareness (of actions, consequences, etc)
- Allows us to take more responsibility (for feelings, actions, etc)
- Increases our understanding of desire and craving
- Increases our understanding of our motives and strategies
- We take things less personally (and therefore stay calmer)
- Increases our open-endedness, willingness to experiment and learn
- Reduces black-and-white thinking (and labelling and stigma)
- Increases our understanding and acceptance of ambivalence and change
- Increases our kindness, understanding and empathy

It's not a panacea. It should be part of a comprehensive individualized plan.

These apply to everyone, the one using or behaving in a compulsive and often self-destructive manner.

It's part of taking care of ourselves, obtaining some distance, not applying our usual strategies to things that we don't like.

What else can help?

- Full Behavior Analysis and Change Management plan
- Detox/Rehab
- Pharmaceuticals
- Therapy / Counselling
- Reframing our habits
- Support.

As part of a comprehensive individualized plan. Quite often people recover on their own.

Behaviour Analysis and Change Management plan. See Foote et al, Beyond Addiction

Rehab, provides a safe space & support, but it doesn't finish there! Need support afterwards as well!

Pharmaceuticals, medicine, helpful for some people, for others makes the symptoms worse. They may be useful and necessary in dealing with substance abuse withdrawal.

Therapy / Counselling, individual or group, work on underlying issues (working on The Unwanted)

Reframing our habits, changing friends, seeing through our destructive tendencies (meditation), building new habits

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-neurochemical-self/201702/your-power-over-addiction>

Support, who? What? When? Love, kindness, helping others (important for everyone!)

A Note to Loved Ones

- You can help!
- Educate and inform yourself (substances, treatment options, etc)
- Keep communication channels open
- Look after yourself!
- Develop understanding, skills, resilience
- Problems are treatable the earlier they are caught.

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You can help! You can care for the person without enabling.

Educate and inform yourself (substances, treatment options, etc), Educate/inform your children.

Keep communication channels open, learn required communication skills.

Look after yourself! Looking after my wife. 'Put your oxygen mask on first.' Chronic worrying doesn't help them. Separate your business from their business! (Byron Katie) It's not your fault!

Develop understanding, skills, resilience. Understand their point of view, understand change, treat them with kindness (however hard that is), learn problem-solving skills, learn patience.

Problems are treatable the earlier they are caught. All research points to this!

Addiction and the Cycle of Suffering

Questions?

Contact: ewenarnold@gmail.com

Being sober isn't just about not using. Being sober is about the joy a life of clarity and living by spiritual principles can bring.

Nic Sheff

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Addiction and the cycle of suffering: Bibliography

- **Byron Katie** *Loving what is* (the best book I know on sorting out our stuff, our suffering from other people's, recommended for parents, friends and relatives, and those suffering directly, ie all of us!)
- **Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens and Nicole Kosanke, with Stephanie Higgs** *Beyond Addiction: How Science and Kindness Help People Change* (Great on helping your loved one change with kindness and love and self care)
- **David Sheff** *Beautiful Boy: A Father's journey Through His Son's Addiction* (Very personal and moving, full of insights)
- **David Sheff** *Clean: Overcoming Addiction and Ending America's Greatest Tragedy*
- **Nic Sheff** *Tweak: Growing up on metamphetamines* (honest and harrowing personal account from David Sheff's son)
- **Noah Levine** *Against the Stream* (Noah's account of how Buddhist practice saved him from addiction)

Addiction and the cycle of suffering: Useful websites

- Psychology today website, especially
 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-neurochemical-self/201702/your-power-over-addiction> (reframing your habits)
 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/topics/compulsive-behaviors/essentials>
 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201605/is-fear-emotion-driving-our-addiction>
- Narconon (Lots of useful information, ideas, ways of coping, etc)
 - <https://www.narconon.org/blog/drug-addiction/dos-donts-dealing-addict-life/> (useful for families, friends, partners)
 - <https://www.narconon.org/drug-abuse/rules/> (14 rules you must never break when dealing with an addict!)
- Others
 - <https://naturalrestforaddiction.com/> (using spiritual practice to reset our lives!)
 - <http://tarrantworks.com/2014/05/01/the-world-catches-us-every-time/>
 - <https://www.homeofgrace.org/the-emotions-of-addiction-and-what-drives-addicts-to-use-part-1-of-2/>
 - <https://www.homeofgrace.org/the-emotions-of-addiction-what-drives-addicts-to-use-and-strategies-to-combat-them-part-2-of-2/>

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