



## Dialogue between Joan Tollifson and Arold Langeveld on addiction and nonduality



### Innocence and love need no escaping

#### **Arold:**

This morning while drinking my coffee outside I thought about our intention to write about addiction in relation to nonduality. I was served a biscuit with my coffee that I did not intend to eat. I ate it anyway. I realized that I do things I do not want to do quite often and then I realized how confusing the subject we are going to talk about can be. I know that everything just happens, the way it happens. That nothing can be any different than it is. That nobody has ever done something because we, as human beings, are just happening, like everything else. Even if I do nothing, ‘nothing’ does me!

And even while we realize that it is painful when we do things that are destructive, it seems impossible to fully accept behavior that causes suffering, sadness and fear. What do you think, Joan? What makes it so hard for us people, even people with nondualistic wisdom, to accept that addictive behavior just happens as well ... without anyone doing it?

#### **Joan:**

Perhaps what makes addiction so interesting to people, and especially to those who are discovering the absence of individual volition or control, is that an activity we would normally think of as voluntary (pouring a drink and drinking it, for example) is experienced by the addict as involuntary and compulsory. Also, if we broaden our understanding of addiction beyond drugs and alcohol to include over-working, obsessive thinking and so on, we can see that addiction is basically another word for

a form of human suffering common to everyone. We intend one thing and do another. There is a strong belief that "I" should be able to control myself, but again and again, I notice that I can't.

One neuroscientist referred to free will as a neurological sensation, perhaps stronger in some people than in others, and on some level necessary for functioning. Our whole society is based on this idea of free will. And if we don't look too closely, it seems to be true. The thought arises to turn on the TV and there is an unexamined sense that "I" authored that thought, considered the options, and "decided" to turn on the TV. I did it by my own free will. I could have picked up a book instead. This is how we think. This whole picture is so ubiquitous and deeply engrained that it is rarely questioned or even noticed. We simply take it for granted. Addiction and compulsion are obvious ways in which this belief that we are in control doesn't hold up.

But I think there is some confusion around this notion that everything "just happens." When we pay very careful attention, we can see that everything happens automatically by itself—each thought, each desire, each interest, each intention, each ability, each action. But that doesn't mean that there is nothing that can be done about anything. Because obviously, many things can be done—social change movements, addiction recovery work, and so on. If our car gets a flat tire, we can change the tire. If we want to learn a foreign language, we can take a class and practice the lessons. Our mistake is to think that these things happen through individual volition and that anyone can decide at any moment to do anything they want to do. We even imagine that we can choose what we want!

And in nondual circles, people sometimes get the opposite idea that they can't or shouldn't do anything. But that's not what nonduality is saying. Nonduality is saying everything you want and everything you do is the movement of life itself.

So, Arold, I'm curious--if someone comes to you and says they are drinking excessively or over-eating or whatever it is that feels destructive and out of control, how do you approach this?

**Arold:**

If someone with an addiction problem comes to me I do not label it as something that has gone wrong. I point out that addiction can be seen as quite an urgent invitation to self-realization. If you are addicted (and we all are) there are two ways to approach this: either you try to stop (ab)using to discover who you are. Or you discover who or what you really are and the abuse might stop bothering you.

The first and indirect way is a completely logical attempt to get a grip on addiction. I do not have a problem with that way and often refer people to be hospitalized if they are a danger to themselves or their environment. Sometimes the pattern needs to be broken just to stay alive.

The second way might be referred to as the direct way. It leads to the realization that you are not the source of your actions and thus cannot be held morally responsible for what you do.

The first approach tries to improve the "me". The second way makes you realize that there is no "me" that needs improving. Both possibilities can appear and the one is not better than the other. There is no choice to be made. Opportunities appear before us as perfect expressions of the course of life.

My approach is in guiding people on the second way by inviting them not to fight with what appears. The invitation includes being able to see through every intention to accomplish something. Everything can and may happen. We embrace every possible outcome of this shared adventure. We refrain from judging and we do not need to understand why behaviour happens. We are free from guilt because we are whole. We accept that the here and now is the only workspace we have. We look lovingly at the story of the past and are able to honestly admit that we can see absolutely nothing if we try to look into the future. Everything that we do in this workspace is focused on realizing who we truly are, the answer to the question “Who am I?”

People who come to me often come from afar. They have already travelled the first way several times, have been admitted into hospital or clinics more than once and they know more about treatments, therapies and palliative drugs than many a specialist. Since they have not found the much desired liberation they are open to the second and radically different way. When people are tired enough of searching they are often ready to walk the only walk they have not tried yet: to stop searching for a way out, a solution or liberation.

When you realise that there is no free will, everything that happens therefore is the “right” way. All established certainties vanish and there is nothing to hold on to. Not for the addict nor for the one treating the addict. I have been granted the courage to work with addiction from that view: the not-knowing what the other needs. We examine the idea of a “me” who has to or is able to control behaviour in the future. Possibly the persistent idea of being a “me” will be recognized as the source that made us search for the liberation of that same “me”.

By taking a thorough look at myself and my clients I realised that it is the addiction to the experience of “no-self” that is causing the abuse. Because we are so hypnotized by the idea that we are an individual with free will, choices and thus responsibility, we have found ways to free ourselves from the convulsive “me”. Alcohol, drugs, pills, pornography and gaming are examples of ways to get rid of the “me” for a while. The sense of freedom we are searching for is a natural and legitimate one. And it works, because you feel like you are “out of your mind” for a while. That abuse causes more suffering and solves nothing in the long run is no obstacle for the addict. One of my clients told me: “I do not want to think about that at such a moment because I want to be free of MY thoughts, MY feelings, MY behaviour and MY body right then.”

The misconception lies in the fact that actions made by a not-me create an image of a “me”. If an addict feels responsible he or she feeds the identification with the so-called failing, bad or weak “me”. This misconception can keep the addiction going for years and the vicious circle can last for ever.

I totally agree with you, Joan, that addiction is all about the will to do something and at the same time not to do that thing. As long as the imagined self believes that he or she is the owner of these contradictory desires and that he or she is responsible for the right choice between them, the fight starts. That results into the “solution” of falling back on the substance of abuse. Maybe that was what Oscar Wilde meant with “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it”.

That seems true as long as you try to get rid of temptation. If there is something an addict does it is searching: to be in a different state than the moment contains. And an addict that wants to stop abusing is still searching: for non-temptation, for non-abuse.

But what happens if the temptation, the fight against the abuse and the addiction are allowed to be just what they are? What happens if the identification with all of the above moves to the space they appear in?

To break through the vicious circle I guide people to a safe spot on the stands. From there we watch the fighters, who have nothing to do with who or what we really are. Only from that position you can get a little rest when you accept that you have no control over the fight that is going on. If you truly realise that you do not have any influence on the result of the fight, you are able to watch with comfort. Eventually you may zoom out even further until you see that you are the space in which the boxing ring, the fighters, the referee, the assistants and even the spectators appear and the identification is severed.

I point to the possibility that addiction is a guide to rediscover a space that in reality you never left. Like everything in life addiction can bring you into the here and now, just like it is. Do you agree, Joan, that the here and now is the ultimate answer to every situation, even addiction?

**Joan:**

I love what you say, Arold. I also see addiction as potentially a path to self-realization and awakening. As you say, the addict has been looking for peace in all the wrong places, and overlooking it in the only place it can actually be found: Here / Now. For me, the solution to every problem begins with being fully present with the problem itself, fully present to the entirety of this moment, fully present in the body, fully present as the unbound vastness of Here / Now, fully present as awareness. Awareness is the key. But I don't assume this is the only solution in all cases for everyone.

I agree that the thought-sense of being a separate, encapsulated, individual is our most fundamental delusion, and it certainly plays a big part in addiction. But I think many other factors contribute to addiction as well: genetics, brain chemistry and development, brain injuries, trauma, abuse, adverse social and economic conditions, mental disorders, and so on. I don't think there is any single cause or any single cure that works for everyone.

As you say, addiction is a movement that seeks to get away from some feeling, energy, sensation, thought or belief that seems unbearable, and to get something "better" instead. As we become aware that the addiction is a problem, a conflict develops between the desire to stop and the desire to continue—a kind of internal tug-of-war. And both of these desires are a movement away from the present moment, from what is. The desire to stop is in some ways a healthy response. It comes from our natural longing for well-being, and is the recognition that the addiction is not working, which is an important step. But this initially healthy urge to be free of addiction gets hijacked by the thinking mind and becomes another way of resisting what is and seeking something better. Whereas the real solution, as you say, lies in giving up the fight and completely allowing what is to be as it is. Paradoxically, this acceptance or surrender is what allows real change to happen.

But this allowing is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean some fatalistic resignation to being addicted forever, but rather, in this moment right now, allowing everything to be just as it is—not resisting it in any way, not judging it, not trying to change it.

If I were working with someone who wanted to quit smoking, for example, I would invite them to give complete, open, nonjudgmental attention to this behavior as it unfolds. To notice the first urge for a cigarette, and, if possible, to pause and fully experience that urge as bodily sensations. To see the mental images and thoughts.

And if they still want to light up, then I would encourage them to give careful, open, nonjudgmental attention to every step along the way—reaching for the pack, lighting up, taking the first puff, inhaling, exhaling—really noticing how each moment feels in the body. By going right into bodily sensations and the energy of the moment, what is often discovered is the spaciousness and wholeness that has no self center.

And like you, I would emphasize that this process will unfold in its own time and cannot be forced. We're not in charge; life is. And none of this is personal in the way we think it is, neither our apparent successes nor our apparent failures. It is all a movement of life, and life is always in perfect order. That larger order includes the mistakes, the backslides, the false starts. It's all part of how life unfolds and discovers itself.

Some addictions and compulsions may never end. I just finished reading a book by a psychiatrist about people whose compulsions are very extreme—a woman who compulsively and repeatedly swallows razor blades, bed springs, nails and broken glass, for example. The psychiatrist found no cure for her. As I see it, nonduality is not a promise that everything can be fixed according to our ideas, but rather, a recognition that life is one, whole, undivided happening. None of it is personal. We don't control it, and we can never really understand it conceptually.

It is as it is. And that's never how we think it is!

We do what life moves us to do. Maybe in working with addictions we use a model of free choice, or maybe we use a model of powerlessness. Maybe we invite people to focus on sensations and thoughts, or maybe we invite them to focus on the larger sense of being present as boundless awareness, our already inherent well-being.

Which of these approaches attracts us, and whether any of them “works” or “doesn’t work” in any given situation is not in our control. We do what we are moved to do, and it is all the doing of life.

**Arold:**

I’m glad to see that we discovered the same things about addiction Joan. It takes courage to look at addiction through non-dualistic glasses. During my meetings people are often afraid to look through those glasses because they fear that if an addict realizes that he or she is not to be held responsible, they will lose touch with boundaries and start abusing even more. We need great faith to let go of our control over the other person. I see that people can change but cannot BE changed. But everything changes if you don’t have to change yourself!

It has been proven to me many times that the fear of losing touch with the last boundaries is uncalled for. Whenever the illusion of moral responsibility, and with that guilt and shame, is recognized, innocence and love take over. Guilt and shame were the fuel for escaping reality but innocence and love need no escaping. It seems that abuse loses its function when that happens.

Whoever is ready to take it one nondualistic step further sees that the concept of addiction can only exist if you accept the concept of time being true to life. The concept of addiction is based on the idea that you abused substance yesterday and will do so again tomorrow. But if time does not really exist, but merely as a concept, there is only “now”.

If you see past and future as a story with no true meaning in the here and now, you are left with a stunningly simple reality: you abuse now or you do not abuse now. In both cases you do not do it and thus it can never define who you truly are.

For who now thinks it all is without hope: the illusionary “me” has as little influence on addiction as it has on a possible rehabilitation of said addiction. Abuse happens and stopping to abuse happens. And during meetings I often get the question if there is any sense in helping an addict at all? Ha-ha, now the same principle applies: Just as you are helpless over the desire to stop being involved with a destructive person, so you are helpless over your desire to keep on helping this person. Helping happens. Or it does not. And what is help anyway? And who is helping whom?

**Joan Tollifson** has been writing books and holding meetings about nondual awareness since 1996. She has an affinity with Buddhism and Advaita, but she belongs to no particular tradition. She is the author of *Nothing to Grasp; Painting the Sidewalk with Water: Talks and Dialogs about Nonduality; Awake in the Heartland*; and *Bare-Bones Meditation: Waking Up from the Story of My Life*. She has written extensively about addiction, and her work is informed by her own personal experiences with addiction, depression, anxiety, and other human difficulties. She is known for her honesty, clarity, and sense of humor.

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**Arold Langeveld** grew up in a family with two brothers addicted to heroine. He has worked in several addiction clinics with nonduality as a basis. As a counsellor he receives groups as well as individuals, he holds lectures and organises meetings. Several times a year he accompanies advaita retreats in Holland and abroad along the theme of ‘Surrender to What-is’.

Arold’s website is [www.alheel.nl](http://www.alheel.nl) (English translation available)