

Asceticism: Self-Abuse or Means of Transformation

Asceticism, generally understood as self-discipline in the service of ongoing moral and religious development, plays an instrumental and necessary role in the processes of spiritual formation and contemplative transformation. Asceticism as strict moral self-discipline has long been viewed in the great traditions as an essential foundation for compassionate, selfless action in human relations, as well as for strengthening courageous forbearance in the quest for self-transcendence and enlightenment.¹

In contemporary Western culture, however, asceticism is ignored,² if not outright denied,³ by many persons, including many who are following traditional religious paths. The reasons for this are many. They include positively: 1) an ardent desire among many people to affirm human life and the world we live in, and consequently a legitimate renunciation of those deformative ascetical

¹Mircea Eliade, Patanjali and Yoga (New York: Schocken Books, 1975). Oscar Hardman, Ideals of Asceticism: An Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion (New York: 1924). Margaret Ruth Miles, Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981). Walther Schubring, The Doctrine of the Jainas (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1962). D. T. Suzuki, The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk (New York: University Books, 1965). Word and Spirit: A Monastic Review, No. 13: Asceticism Today (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1991). Edgar W. Thomas argues that Buddhism disappeared from India because its asceticism and monasticism were less appealing than the emerging Brahmanism; "The Disappearance of Buddhism From India," London Quarterly and Holborn Review (1982): 117-25.

²Irving Greenberg argues that American society is moving away from ascetic production to hedonistic consumption, "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic," Tradition 10 (1968): 42-74.

³J. Moussaieff Masson comes to the conclusion many therapists share that the serious ascetic is basically psychotic, "The Psychology of the Ascetic," Journal of Asian Studies 35 (1976): 611-25. Best selling author Marianne Williamson indicts traditional Western notions of moral sacrifice. She asks: "Is there anyone out there who hasn't suffered enough?" She exclaims: "Hey! Get off the cross. We need the wood!" Quoted by Simon Sebag Montefiore, "Marianne Williamson: Who is She & Why Do We Need Her Now," in Psychology Today (July/August 1992): 86.

practices that are self-serving or self-destructive; and negatively: 2) an embrace of a consumerist world view that uncritically rejects traditional wisdom from the great world religions, wisdom that has long stressed ascetical self-restraint, moral discipline, and respect for the spiritual dignity of human beings and the integrity of nature. I will address this latter aspect first.

Consumerism as an Inversion of Asceticism

Consumerism and its expression in the consumption and enjoyment of material goods have become the dominate world view of many persons living in the economically advantaged West. Moral relations, within this view, are understood and configured largely in terms of the exchange of goods and services, the possession of private property, and the satisfaction of individual wants and needs.⁴ The repercussions of such devaluation of life in terms of consumption are becoming more obvious all the time in the social epidemics of violence, oppression, sexual abuse, unwanted children, and human made environmental disasters.

What has been, for many religious formation traditions,⁵ an obvious connection between

⁴Edmund V. Sullivan writes: "Commodity culture . . . is first and foremost a society of 'consumers.' Consumption becomes the predominant motif of that culture's concerns. Consumption in the pejorative sense is to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust. And why not, since it is an essential mechanism for a 'mass production' society? The market mechanism of mass production is incredibly impervious to questions of social justice." "The Scandalized Child: Children, Media, and Commodity Culture," in Toward Moral and Religious Maturity (Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett, 1980), 558. Sullivan cites R. Williams, Key Words (England: Fontana, 1976).

⁵This paper assumes a distinction between faith and formation traditions made by Adrian van Kaam in his Science of Foundational Human Formation. Richard D. Byrne clarifies the distinction by writing: "formation tradition refers to the form directives that have been handed over from generation to generation. They are distinguished from value and faith directives, expressed in faith traditions, that disclose the overall meaning of life and the general direction it should take to acquire consonance. Form directives, on the other hand, disclose how life should be formed concretely in ongoing formation experience." Byrne, "The Science of Foundational Human Formation and Its Relation to the Christian Formation Tradition" (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1982), 197; see

ascetical formation and contemplative or mystical transformation, has in this age been severed in the consumer's market of meditation techniques and popular therapies. Meditation, relaxation therapies and the exploration of one's psychic life are marketed, by some, as nonreligious means to self-actualization and success.⁶ For many others, both in the New Age movement and traditional religions, meditation practice joins an emerging psychospiritual technology in an effort to achieve both spiritual awakening **and** great wealth as the means to realize the cultural myth of unlimited consumption.⁷ Moral consequences of one's actions are often ignored if not denied.⁸ I assert that

also van Kaam, "Provisional Glossary," Studies in Formative Spirituality 9 (1988): 226.

⁶Transcendental Meditation, despite its obvious ties to Sankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta, is widely marketed as a thoroughly secular practice for social and self-enhancement. See "What is Transcendental Meditation?" in What is Meditation? ed. John White, (New York: Anchor, 1974), 84-109; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, The Science of Being and the Art of Living (Los Angeles: SRM Publications, 1966). Arthur J. Deikman states: "Linking mysticism to religion is not essential and is in fact a hindrance in a modern culture whose approach to nature and human experience is through the physical sciences and psychology," The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy (Boston: Beacon, 1982), vi.

⁷One very popular therapy called "rebirthing," developed by Leonard Orr, brings together a faith in the biological immortality of the body and the belief that anyone's "connection to Infinite Being and Infinite Intelligence is adequate enough to yield a huge personal fortune." See, Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, Rebirthing in the New Age (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1983). Shirley MacLaine declares openly: "I want to prove that spirituality is profitable," in an interview with Nina Easton, "Shirley MacLaine's Mysticism for the Masses," Los Angeles Times (6 September 1987), 7. A number of popular Christian televangelists promise economic prosperity to those who support them generously; most blatant among them has been Robert Tilton exposed in recent months on ABC's "Prime Time Live."

⁸Jack Underhill, for instance, declares: "You are the only thing that is real. Everything else is your imagination, movie stuff you've brought into your screenplay to help you see who you really are. . . . There are no victims in this life or any other. No mistakes. No wrong paths. . . . Accept that and then take responsibility for making your life what you want it to be." "New Age Quiz," Life Times Magazine 3, quoted by Russell Chandler in Understanding the New Age (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), 28-8. Leonard Orr, in his "Spiritual Interpretation of the Ten Commandments," states: "*VI. Thou Shalt Not Kill*. It is impossible to kill. From the standpoint of murderers and victims, you have to have victims in order to have murderers. So if the victim is a person who

there is an intrinsic connection between the spirituality of unbridled consumption and the demise of ascetic discipline. Self-interested consumerism is an inversion of authentic asceticism.

Growing numbers of people are seriously questioning the "ethic of abundance" in the face of limited natural resources, the regular extinction of endangered species, mass starvation and the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, just to name a few of the serious problems stemming, in part, from the consumerist view of life and world. Peter H. Van Ness, in his recent book Spirituality, Diversion and Decadence, argues convincingly, that,

Spiritual regimens should be enlisted . . . for the sake of one's own spiritual well-being, but also on ethical grounds; solidarity with persons oppressed in this or any other way is a moral obligation as well as a social prerequisite for attaining the fullest measure of spiritual well-being. . . . [S]piritual discipline must be understood as an intellectually critical form of political resistance.⁹

Many environmentally concerned persons now question humanity's presumed lordship over nature and the belief that we have the right to consume, exploit and destroy both resources and people without regard to social, spiritual and ecological consequences. There is a growing consensus among people concerned for the future of our planet that we must embrace an "ethic of scarcity" and perhaps

desires to be killed, then the murderer is victimized by the victim. The murderer is the servant of the victim. . . . If you are destroying something that wants to be destroyed, you are giving *life* to the desire to be destroyed." Orr and Ray, 254. Jim Leonard and Phil Laut, in a section entitled "How to Create Your Reality," provide a number of, what they believe are, axiomatic positive self-statements: "I am now my ideal self. In every moment I have absolute power to choose my reality and my behavior.

. . . Everything I do is always good enough, approved of and accepted." In Rebirthing: The Science of Enjoying All of Your Life (Hollywood, CA: Trinity Publications, 1983), 111. Marianne Williamson tells her audience: "You've committed no sins, just mistakes." Apparently, there is no moral culpability in making mistakes. Quoted by Montefiore, 86.

⁹Peter H. Van Ness, Spirituality, Diversion, and Decadence (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 90-1.

even a renewed asceticism.¹⁰

Rejection of Pathological Asceticism

Ironically, one reason asceticism has so often been rejected, even by members of formation traditions that have long advocated ascetic discipline, is because of the perception that it denies life and world.¹¹ Contemporary Western sensitivities find much about traditional forms of ascetic renunciation curious if not repugnant and inexplicable, including fasting and abstinence, celibacy or sexual continence, poverty or renunciation of wealth, disregard for personal hygiene, sleep deprivation and any form of intentional production of pain.

A rejection of asceticism understood as a perverse practice antithetical to healthy mindedness is especially true of those who have embraced modern psychology and psychotherapy, which have tended to view asceticism, like mysticism, merely as repressive, regressive and pathological.¹² There

¹⁰See particularly Van Ness; also John B. Cobb, "Ecological Disaster and the Church," Christian Century 87 (1970): 1185-87, and Paul Anders and Rosalie Anders, "Asceticism and the Environment," Religious Humanism 10 (1976): 72-6; see also: Alan Thein Durning, "Long on Things, Short on Time," Sierra 78 (1993): 60-2; Durning, "Are We Happy Yet? How the Pursuit of Happiness is Failing," Futurist 27 (1993): 20-4; Nathan Keyfitz, "Consumerism and the New Poor," Society 29 (1992): 42-7; Mike Mallowe, "Is There too Much Stuff in Your Life?" US Catholic 57 (1992): 14-21; Max L. Stackhouse, "John Paul on Ethics and the 'New Capitalism,'" Christian Century 108 (1991): 581-83.

¹¹Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals (bound with Ecce Homo), trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdal (New York: Random House, 1969), cited in Van Ness, especially "Chapter Six: Nietzsche's Negation"; see also Edward C. Knippers, "Hellfire of the Banalities," Christianity Today 33 (1989): 26-7; and Babbage S. Barton, "Literature Has Its Manichaeans," Reformed Theological Review 22 (1963): 13-22.

¹²See, for instance, Marilyn May Mallory's critique of John of the Cross' teaching on asceticism as an "annihilation" and "irradiation" [sic] of human nature that has little or nothing to do with contemplative development, in Christian Mysticism: Transcending Techniques (Assen and Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1977), 13, 146-7; see also Julia Saville, "Of Fleshly Garments: Ascesis and Desire in the Ethic of Psychoanalysis," American Imago 49 (1992): 445-65.

are grounds for such rejection of course. The history of asceticism, East and West, is replete with stories and examples of repressive, self-destructive behavior. Masochism disguised as holy means to spiritual awakening is not new.¹³ One has only to recall Origen (185-254 CE) who interpreted all too literally Jesus' words: "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 19:12 RSV)¹⁴

In Medieval Christianity, there are numerous accounts of severe fasting, mostly by women mystics, many of whom might be described as anorexic.¹⁵ It appears, for instance, that some of them

For mysticism as merely regressive, see: Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (GAP), Committee on Psychiatry and Religion, Mysticism: Spiritual Quest or Psychic Disorder? (New York: Mental Health Materials Center for the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1976).

¹³Several traditions in the early Christian period advocated ascetical practices deemed to be extreme and heretical by the mainstream body of Christians. These "encratites" tended to be metaphysical dualists and generally condemned any satisfaction of the senses. They included some Syrian anchorites, who submitted to extreme deprivations, the Marcionites, who forbade marriage, the Donatists, who advocated martyrdom to the point of suicide, the Messalians and the non-Christian Manichaeans; see: Irenaeus, Adversus haereses 1.28; Clement of Alexandria, Stromata 7.17; and Hippolytus, Philosophumena, 8.20; also Jean Bribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism: I. Eastern Christianity," Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century, vol. 16, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, eds. Bernard McGin, John Myendorff and Jean Leclercq (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 89-112; and D. J. Chitty, The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire (Crestwood, NY: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press, n.d.).

¹⁴Rowan A. Greer, "Introduction," Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works, trans. and Introduction by Rowan Greer, Preface Hans Urs Von Balthasar (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 3.

¹⁵Rudolf M. Bell, Holy Anorexia (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Martha J. Reineke, "'This Is My Body': Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics," Journal of American Academy of Religion 58 (1990): 245-65. Reineke asks: "Were women's deaths from starvation indicative of asceticism run amok or did they break at the borders of late Christendom, which came to expression in women's bodies but did not originate with them?" She goes on to suggest that they "were living with their bodies a contradiction of the larger social body" in its victimization of women. (254 ff.)

may have suffered from anorexia which, at the time, would have been viewed by their peers as holy asceticism. Some cases of early death bear all the marks of anorexic starvation. Self-starvation is not restricted to Christian circles, but is known in India as well, especially among the Jainas, some of whom have refused to eat as an act of nonviolence (ahimsa).¹⁶ Even today, studies of anorexia nervosa¹⁷ suggest a possible link between the self-destructive behavior of the subjects studied and the intensity of religious and ascetical attitudes.¹⁸

Asceticism either as an excuse or simply the means to self-abusive, self-destructive behavior usually masks some deeper social or personal pathology. Masochism and the corresponding sadism that fosters it, disguised as pious ascetical practice, only deforms human life, relationship and world. The question must be asked then: Can there be a healthy, life-giving, integrating asceticism?

¹⁶Geoffrey Parrinder, "Jainism," World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1983), 249.

¹⁷There is a tremendous tension for many young women caught in the contradiction of a culture obsessed with consuming high fat food, on the one hand, and the high fashion demand for "ultra" slimness in figure, on the other. The conflict that many women find themselves forced into cannot be fully understood, however, without a discussion of the sexual, economic and political dynamics fueling this not so subtle oppression. Although a critical issue, such discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁸While this may be true for anorexia, at least one study indicates that bulimia corresponds with the weakening of subjects' beliefs, and that conversion protects against weight loss; see Neil Joughin, Arthur H. Crisp, Christine Halek, and Heather Humphrey, "Religious Beliefs and Anorexia Nervosa," International Journal of Eating Disorders 12 (1992): 397-406. See also Caroline G. Banks, "'Culture' in Culture-bound Syndromes: The Case of Anorexia Nervosa," Social Science and Medicine 34 (1992): 867-84; Deirdre Barrett and Harold J. Fine, "The Gnostic Syndrome: Anorexia Nervosa," Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy 4 (1990): 263-70; David Rampling, "Ascetic Ideals and Anorexia Nervosa," Journal of Psychiatric Research 19 (1984): 89-94; and Stephen W. Sabom, "The Gnostic World of Anorexia Nervosa," Journal of Psychology and Theology 13 (1985): 243-254. This link between asceticism and self-starvation, however, is progressively giving way to a concern for body image and slimness among anorexics; see Tilmann Havermaas, "The Psychiatric History of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa," International Journal of Eating Disorders 8 (1989): 259-273.

Origin of the Term Ascetic

The term "ascetic" comes from the Greek asketikos meaning "athletic" or "exercised" which in turn derives from askein, meaning "to exercise" or "to train."¹⁹ The asketes was "the one who practices or exercises," and askesis originally referred to intense athletic training aimed at peak physical fitness and athletic performance. Ancient Greeks adapted these terms to describe methods of discipline aimed at self-realization (arete in the Cynics) and self-mastery, particularly over one's passions (apatheia in the Stoics). Ascetic practice reached fruition in the perfection of the virtues, personal happiness (eudaimonia) and well-being (euthymia), although this meant for some a rejection of the body and the world.²⁰

Asceticism in the Apostle Paul

The word askein enters the Christian faith tradition with the Apostle Paul, who is quoted in Acts 24:16, when he explains to Felix (Roman procurator of Judea) that he always "strives" (NAB) or "takes pains" (RSV) (i.e., he exerts himself) to keep his "conscience clear before God and humanity." Although this is the only time that a cognate of askesis appears in the New Testament, Paul goes on to use the image of the athlete to describe his own ascetical practice: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I (treat my body severely) and

¹⁹"Asceticism," The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. F. L. Cross, Second Edition, eds., F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 95-6.

²⁰I. G. Kidd, "Cynics," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 2, ed. in chief, Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1972), 284-85; and Philip P. Hallie, "Stoicism," Ibid., Vol. 8, 19-22.

subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." (RSV 1 Cor 9:25-27) Paul states that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Gal 5:24) In this way, the Christian is freed from a slavery to sin and freed for a slavery to Christ and to justice (dikaiosyne). (Rom 6:6, 16-22) This also means that Christians become through their love (agape) servants to one another (Gal 5:13; Phil 2:1-5). This self-denial, on the one hand, is the fruit of metanoia--the converted heart transformed through grace. On the other hand, it opens the Christian to the bountiful gifts of the Spirit, including, not only love, but also "joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control," (Gal 5:22) all of which bespeak the absence of spiritual dissonance, indicating a transformed, loving heart.

While Paul's asceticism might sound harsh, it is not based upon any gnostic dualism that opposes body to spirit. For Paul, the Christian finds salvation **in the flesh**, yet not according to the sinful desires of the flesh. (2 Cor 10:3; Rom 8:3) Flesh (sarx) in Paul designates, not primarily the body (soma), but instead those self-serving or sinful tendencies of embodied existence such as drunkenness, gluttony, lust, lewdness, and debauchery, which work, not for the welfare of others, but against the body of Christ that is the church, and by extension, all of humanity. Paul's antagonism is against neither human bodiliness nor desire. Rather, Paul takes aim at those disordered passions and desires that incapacitate one for loving action in the world, on the one hand, and limit one's experience of peace, joy, patience, and gentleness, on the other.²¹ In this way, Paul's asceticism becomes a freeing exercise of self-discipline; never an end in itself, it serves as an instrumental means for reforming disordered desire and opening the human further to the

²¹Alois Stöger, "Flesh," Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology: The Complete Sacramentum Mundi, ed. Johannes B. Bauer (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 273-78.

transforming power of the Spirit as the gift of grace.²²

The Teaching of the Buddha

In the life of the Buddha, ascetic moderation (dhuta), specifically articulated in the middle way (between extremes; Skt. madyama-pratipad), is a central theme in his enlightenment and teaching.²³ After years of extremely rigorous and self-abusive practice, he remembers one day the detachment from desire he experienced as a boy sitting in the cool shade of a tree, watching his father plow in the fields. He asks himself, "Could this be the way to enlightenment? And I saw that this indeed was the way to enlightenment." Understanding, at last, that he needed not only to discipline but to care for himself and nourish his body, he took refreshment, sat in the shade of a tree

²²Paul's asceticism is an elaboration on the ascetical life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was an ascetic, but in moderation. Unlike his more rigorous contemporary John the Baptist, Jesus appears "eating and drinking," and for this is condemned by some as "a glutton and a drunkard." (Mt 11:19; Mk 2:18-22) He is often involved in feasting and celebrating, and in his first public miracle changes nearly 150 gallons of water into fine wine. (Jn 2:1-12) He excuses his disciples when they break the Sabbath by harvesting grain, indicating that the law is made for humanity, not humanity for the law. (Mk 2:23-8) Jesus' moderation is not without serious ascetical discipline, however. He counsels fasting and the simplification of worldly possessions, especially as a means of aiding the poor, sick and the dispossessed. To those who can remain celibate (as he himself was) he encourages them to do so. This asceticism is a response to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. (Mt 10:7-10; 19:21; Mk 10:21; Luke 9:1-6; 10:3-9)

²³Looking back upon his own overzealous embrace of ascetic discipline, he states: "For I was an ascetic, and the foremost in asceticism; and I was loathsome, and the foremost in loathsomeness." Mahasihanadasutta [The Great Lion's Roar], in Majjhima-nikaya [Collection of Medium Discourses], gen. ed. Bikkhu J. Kashyap (Bihar: Pali Publication Board, 1958), Sutta XII, 1:109, in The Buddhist Experience: Sources and Interpretations, ed. Stephan Beyer (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1974), 169.

and awakened.²⁴ In a great gesture of humility, he touched the earth as his witness.²⁵

The Buddha teaches that neither the unrestricted indulgence of the senses nor the deprivation of extreme ascetical practice can bring one to the transcendent peace and happiness that can be found in nirvana--"the supreme refuge" that is free of decay, death, suffering and sorrow.²⁶ In the Dhammapada, "self-restraint and subjugation of the senses" serve instrumentally the contemplative transformation of aspirants, bringing them an "amplitude of bliss."²⁷ These "wise ones, contemplative, ever-striving sages of great prowess, realize nirvana, the incomparable bliss of yoga."²⁸ Here we see the classical meaning of asceticism as sensual restraint aiding spiritual transformation, a transformation that integrates, not rejects, the sensory and affective dimensions of bodily existence. The Buddhist practitioner seeks not more suffering (dukkha), but release from the pathological suffering generated by either hedonistic indulgence or masochistic self-abnegation.²⁹

²⁴Mahasaccakasutta [The Scripture of Saccaka], in Majjhima-nikaya, Sutta XXXVI 1:301-06, in The Buddhist Experience, 173.

²⁵Humility is a foundational disposition in contemplative formation. Words closely related to humility are "human" and "humor" which are cognates of humus, meaning soil, earth. Here we have a constellation of themes that are part and parcel of authentic ascetic practice.

²⁶Ariyaparyesanasutta [The Great Quest], Majjhima-nikaya, Sutta XXVI, 1:216-17, in The Buddhist Experience, 173-74.

²⁷Dhammapada, "Appamadavaggo Dutiyo [On Vigilance--Canto II]," no. 27, in Dhammapada: Wisdom of the Buddha, English-Pali ed., trans. Harischandra Kaviratna (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1980).

²⁸Ibid., no. 25.

²⁹In Mahayana Buddhism, the Bodhisattva embraces ascetic practice as an instrumental means in contemplative transformation with the compassionate goal of leading others from the deluded suffering of conflicting thoughts and desires. In the Vajrayana, ascetic tantric methods do not reject the world or the body and its sensory life. Instead, demanding, yet powerful, psychotechnical meditations empower the practitioner to transmute base psychic energies into

Asceticism as the Reformation of Desire

How does ascetic discipline work to reform sensory desire and make possible the contemplative transformation of religious aspirants? Sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite, John of the Cross, well known ascetical-mystical doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, offers an in depth analysis of the purgative and illuminative process of contemplative transformation.³⁰ He draws upon the faculty psychology of scholastic philosophy to describe the mystic's journey to union with God.³¹

bodhicitta, the compassionate mind of enlightenment. In The Life of Milarepa, trans. Lobsang P. Lhalungpa (Boulder: Shambhala, 1984), we hear the great Tibetan ascetic make clear the compassionate, moral goal of ascetic discipline in the contemplative path:

Selfish desires stir up the five poisons.

Temporal desires separate the dearest friends.

Self-glorification evokes resentment in others.

Keeping silent about oneself will prevent conflicts.

By maintaining tranquillity and avoiding distraction,

In solitude you will find your companion.

Humility leads to the highest goal.

He who works with care will quickly achieve results.

Renunciation brings great fulfillment. . . .

Compassion abolishes the difference between oneself and others. (172)

What good is the virtue of renunciation?

Without learning to love others more than oneself. (166)

³⁰The following exposition of John's asceticism receives greater attention in my dissertation, Keith Reeves Barron, "A Study of St. John of the Cross's Theology of Transformation from the Perspective of Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory," (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1989), 140-51, 333-51; see also Susan Muto, "Asceticism in St. John of the Cross: Wisdom for Every Person of Good Will," Word and Spirit, A Monastic Review: Asceticism Today, 61-9.

³¹John's psychology is derived from Aristotelian philosophy through the synthesis of Thomas Aquinas, but not without significant Platonic and Augustinian influence. See Kieran Kavanaugh, "General Introduction," John of the Cross: Selected Writings, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, Preface by Ernest Larkin (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 34; see also: Bede Frost, Saint John of the Cross: Doctor of Divine Love: An Introduction to His Philosophy, Theology and Spirituality (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937); Jacques Maritain, Distinguish to Unite, or the Degrees of Knowledge, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

For John of the Cross, to be human is to be incarnate spirit in which the sensory and spiritual parts form one whole harmonious unity.³² Human beings have an infinite capacity for knowledge and love in their spiritual faculties of memory, intellect and will. Only that which is infinite, transcending all finite, created realities, can ultimately satisfy the human longing for lasting fulfillment.³³ Each person is, thus, ordered to a divine end that infinitely transcends every temporal satisfaction as it is realized in a divine likeness and union with God through love. This is the essence of the mystical experience for him.³⁴

Appetites and desires in themselves are morally neutral.³⁵ They can and often do become the disordered source of so much suffering and affliction, however, as they lead the will in a search for lasting, but finally unattainable, temporal fulfillment. Seeking satisfaction in any temporal reality only leaves the will and affections tormented as they hunger for more.³⁶ Appetites become disordered as they inordinately fix the will on relentless consumption--craving more, consuming

³²Dark Night 2.11.4; Spiritual Canticle 16.5,10; Living Flame of Love 3.7. All references to writings of John of the Cross are from The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, 2d ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1979).

³³Living Flame of Love 3.18-22.

³⁴Spiritual Canticle 39; The Minor Works, Letter 12.

³⁵Ascent of Mt. Carmel 3.5.1.

³⁶Ascent of Mt. Carmel 1.7-1.12. The habitual search for ultimate satisfaction in any substance or relation and the subsequent disappointment followed by the frantic quest for more would today be called addiction. See Gerald May, Addiction and Grace (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

more, but never really being filled.³⁷ Such appetites, he tells us, are "like leeches" that suck life from one's veins, leaving one weak, weary and blind.³⁸ What is most important, they incapacitate one for receiving the union and likeness to God in contemplative transformation.³⁹

John does not denigrate either the world or human desire. Rather, through ascetical practice,

We are dealing, with the denudation of the soul's appetites and gratifications; this leaves it free and empty of all things, even though it possesses them. Since the things of the world cannot enter the soul, they are not in themselves an encumbrance or harm to it; rather, it is the will and appetite dwelling within it that causes the damage.⁴⁰

Ascetical formation in the service of contemplative union recollects the will in one desire alone, the desire for God,⁴¹ and for John, this means also the desire to love and care for one's neighbor.⁴² One prepares oneself for contemplative transformation by ascetically renouncing, detaching and mortifying these inordinate appetites and desires. They are withdrawn from the compulsive consumption of life and world and reordered toward the God of love.⁴³ This asceticism is not the repudiation of desire in some perverse self-rejection, but instead a denial of one's purely self-serving, willful grasping out at people and things without regard to the moral consequences. For John, such moral disregard is the source of suffering in conflicted hearts; it is the source of oppression and

³⁷Ascent of Mt. Carmel 1.6.3-7.

³⁸Ibid., 1.10.2.

³⁹Ibid., 1.4.2; 1.9.3.

⁴⁰Ibid., 1.3.4.

⁴¹Ibid., 1.1.4; 1.14.2.

⁴²Ibid., 3.23.1.

⁴³Ibid., 2.15.4; Living Flame of Love 3.46-7.

injustice.⁴⁴

John condemns asceticism motivated "by an appetite" for masochistic pleasure as a "penance of beasts" that serves only to increase vice, not virtue.⁴⁵ The task of ascetics is to foster harmony between flesh and spirit and consonance between self and world.⁴⁶ Out of this comes a deep joy and tranquil heart that are the prerequisites of full contemplative transformation,⁴⁷ and they come only when the sensory self has been "accommodated and united with the spirit" in love for God and neighbor.⁴⁸

Alain Cugno, reflecting upon John's ascetical teaching, makes clear that asceticism is not a means of reaching God, it is a consequence of the relationship with God,"--a relationship of "love for the suffering body" of humanity.⁴⁹ Cugno sums up well John's asceticism:

Mortification is not a way of increasing my suffering, but of lessening it, by making my body feel the pain that is bearable as opposed to the suffering that is unbearable. . . . Mortification quietens suffering--not intellectual or moral suffering, but spiritual suffering, that is to say of the whole [person], body and spirit together. . . .

What is mortification? A drop into the great darkness at the heart of the night itself, where pain is summoned as a remedy for suffering. Anyone who mortified himself to suffer, instead of to suffer less, would be perverse indeed.⁵⁰

⁴⁴Ascent of Mt. Carmel 3.25.6; 3.28.9; The Minor Works, Maxims 28.

⁴⁵Ascent of Mt. Carmel 2.7.5-12; Dark Night 1.6.2; 1.7.3.

⁴⁶Ascent of Mt. Carmel 3.2.8-12; Dark Night 1.13.15; Spiritual Canticle 40; Living Flame 4.4-7.

⁴⁷Ascent of Mt. Carmel 3.5.1-2; 3.16.6.

⁴⁸Ascent of Mt. Carmel 3.5.2; 3.6.1-4; 3.13.1; 3.16.6; 3.23.3; Dark Night 1.13.3; 2.3.1; Sayings 54.

⁴⁹Alain Cugno, Saint John of the Cross: Reflections on Mystical Experience, trans. Barbara Wall (New York: Seabury, 1982), 126.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 126-27.

Contemporary Psychology and the Ascetic Quest

These views of ascetic moderation hold common ground with contemporary psychology when asceticism is understood as self-discipline aimed at removing pathological suffering from one's life and world. Radio, TV and the print media are filled with articles and testimonies of people who advocate proper diet, regular exercise, daily meditation, monogamous sexual relationships, and the elimination of damaging addictions from one's life.

Psychoanalytic theory, for instance, claims that primitive psychic powers (drives or instincts)⁵¹ can be life-giving or life-taking, depending on their expression. Constructively, these powers should be sublimated and redirected into activities that transform archaic destructive tendencies by enhancing cultural life and nurturing interpersonal relations.⁵² Contrary to popular opinion, psychoanalysis counsels a well-disciplined life as a prophylactic against psychopathology and a cure of neurotic suffering.⁵³ Both psychoanalytic theory and John of the Cross critique

⁵¹The German trieb in Freud's writings has been translated both as "instinct" and as "drive"; see Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 22. In classical psychoanalysis, a drive is an innate quantity of psychic energy that empowers psychological processes which facilitate gratification of organismic needs.

⁵²Object relations theory, a broad revision of Freudian psychology, argues that human fulfillment comes, not from mere libidinal satisfaction, but from the investment of one's energies in life-giving relationships. The ascetic love of the mystic has much in common with the self-giving love of parents for children. Asceticism of love forgoes immediate satisfaction for the benefit of another. See Michael Eigen, "The Area of Faith in Winnicott, Lacan and Bion," International Journal of Psychoanalysis 62 (1981): 414-33; Jack Engler, "Vicissitudes of the Self According to Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: A Spectrum Model of Object Relations Development," Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought 6 (1983): 29-72; and Harry Guntrip, "Religion in Relation to Personal Integration," British Journal of Medical Psychology 42 (1969): 323-33.

⁵³Philip Rieff, in his book Freud: The Mind of a Moralist (New York: Viking Press, 1959), contends that Freud was himself a strict moralist who thought that instinctual drives have to be

religious practices that are, in reality, nothing more than a masquerade for destructive motives.⁵⁴

From the perspective of physiological psychology, chemical addiction can provide a false, but intensely convincing, illusion of satisfaction and freedom from suffering, while always actually intensifying the addicted person's sense of dissatisfaction, depth of pathological suffering and alienation.⁵⁵ I assert that addiction is an inversion of the ascetical-mystical quest, since what the addict longs for, the saint has found, the saint being one who actualizes a high degree of satisfaction, personal integration and freedom from pathological suffering. Typically, this is realized through the life-giving wisdom of an ascetical-mystical tradition.

From this psychophysiological perspective, both meditation and ascetical practice can produce significant neurochemical changes, including the release of neurotransmitters such as endorphin.⁵⁶ Changes in neurochemistry induce corresponding changes, however subtle, in

mastered and controlled for the benefit of culture and society. Not unlike John of the Cross's teaching concerning appetites and desires, Freud believes that the drives should be subject to reason (for John, this means reflecting on the moral quality of one's actions). Beyond this, their views diverge considerably. For instance, Freud contends that Christ's commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," is impossible to obey and that the instincts can never be fully mastered; see Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 90.

⁵⁴See David M. Wulff, "The Perspective of Sigmund Freud," Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991), especially 271-81; and John of the Cross, Ascent of Mt. Carmel 2.7.5.

⁵⁵Gail Winger, Frederick G. Hofmann and James H. Wood, A Handbook on Drug and Alcohol Abuse: The Biomedical Aspects, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵⁶There is little specific research on the direct link between ascetical practice and endorphin release, although there is a fair amount on its connection with exercise, pain and meditation--all of which can be related to religious asceticism; see: H. Akil, S. J. Watson, E. Young, M. E. Lewis, H. Khachaturian and J. M. Walker, "Endogenous Opioids: Biology and Function," Annual Review of Neuroscience 7 (1984):223-55; Felicitas D. Goodman, Ecstasy, Ritual, and Alternative Reality: Religion in a Pluralistic World (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988; and Solomon H.

consciousness and awareness.⁵⁷ Such shifts can increase one's sense of well-being and consonance with others and life itself,⁵⁸ although evidence suggests that one can become addicted to the "natural high" as well.⁵⁹ Addiction to an endorphin "high" might even help explain the lure of self-abusive asceticism.⁶⁰

Ascetics for Today

For ascetic masters, like the ones we have addressed here, meditation and ascetical discipline should be a primary concern of spiritual guides who want to alleviate their students of pathological suffering induced by disordered passions and desires.⁶¹ As we have heard, this does not have to be a denial of the embodied self, affectivity or desire, but a regime of spiritual practice specifically

Snyder, Drugs and the Brain (New York: Scientific American Books, 1986).

⁵⁷Richard F. Thompson, "Chapter Five: The Chemistry of Behavior and Awareness," Introduction to Physiological Psychology (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975), 154-89.

⁵⁸A number of things effect endorphin release, including primarily pain, but also fasting, exercise, meditation, caffeine, music and sex, among others. One only need think of the Tibetan monk who drinks copious quantities of tea (caffeine), prostrates several hundred times a day while meditating, visualizes a deity in sexual union with consort, while chanting melodic mantras--and all this designed to release psychic energies to be harnessed in the quest of the compassionate mind of enlightenment (bodhicitta). No wonder these monks seem so joyous. (No simple reductionism to this intended however!)

⁵⁹The "natural high" of fasting could play a factor in anorexia and bulimia; see Katy Williams, "Deadly Dieting," Women's Sports and Fitness 8 (1991):22-3; see also: Leigh Dayton, "Spicy Food Eaters Are Addicted to Pain," New Scientist 134 (1992):14; and Peter Jaret, "Addicted to Exercise: A Healthy Habit or an Unhealthy Obsession?" Self 13 (1991):136-137.

⁶⁰W. G. Jelik, "Altered States of Consciousness in North American Indian Ceremonies," Ethos 10 (1982):326-43;

⁶¹John of the Cross tells us that, "the chief concern of spiritual directors with their penitents is the immediate mortification of every appetite. The directors should make them remain empty of what they desire so as to liberate them from so much misery." Ascent of Mt. Carmel 1.12.6.

geared toward their healing and transformation. The discipline, training and exercise of ascetical-mystical paths, from this perspective, are not meant to increase suffering but to lessen it. The mystic finds what the substance abuser desperately searches for but can never find in the pseudosatisfaction of such abuse.⁶²

Asceticism, as a practice manipulating body, self and world, can become one more form of addictive abuse. It can become an end in itself and stand together with consumerism as destructive of life and relationship. Both our planet earth and the global human community stand today in peril before human excesses. Authentic ascetic discipline as found articulated by the masters of the great faith and formation traditions can provide wisdom for dealing with these crises. Ascetic moderation disciplines the self in service of life and relationship. Its meaning lies in the reformation of desire from pure autarkic self-seeking to compassionate care for others as the path to spiritual awakening and contemplative transformation. I will close with a quote from "The Perfection of Contemplation" ("Dhyana-paramita") in the eighth century Buddhist text Entering the Path of Enlightenment, the Bodhicaryavatara of the master and poet Shantideva:

Bodhisattvas, the compassionate,
having transformed their mentalities,
delighting in the tranquilizing of another's sorrow,
plunge into the deepest (Avici) hell,
like wild geese into a cluster of lotus.

When Beings are delivered
it is for them an ocean of joy which overwhelms all;

⁶²May, Gerald. Addiction and Grace. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); McCormick, Patrick. Sin as Addiction. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989; Miller, J. Keith. Sin: Overcoming the Ultimate Deadly Addiction. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

What good is deliverance for oneself alone? (107-8)⁶³

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⁶³My adaptation of Marion L. Matic's translation, Entering the Path of Enlightenment: The Bodhicaryavatara of the Buddhist Poet Santideva (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 203.