

The Courage to Smoke

by Charley Cropley, N.D.

I just returned from 45 minutes of yoga, an invigorating dip in Boulder Creek, and 15 minutes of “go for it” chin-ups, pushups, dips and squats. Then I took a comfortable seat in my chair on the front porch with a cup of hot, sweet Yerba Mate tea and a smoked a cigarette. A little contradictory? **No kidding! Right?**

What am I, a man who strives to embody healing, doing smoking cigarettes? This is flagrant hypocrisy! My mind goes nuts trying to explain it. But the mind is insanity itself. Contradiction and hypocrisy have always had their way with me, only previously I tried to hide it... mainly from myself. Perhaps the cornerstone of my work has been teaching people how to resolve the contradictions between their behavior and their ideals.

I just returned from six weeks in Peru studying with two “mystics” named Gayle and Americo; men I admire as much as any I’ve ever known. They are teaching me to live free from the mind’s anxiety and contradiction; to “chop off my head” and live from my heart. One of the ways I learn from them is by imitating them. I eat what they eat, drink what they drink, walk the way they walk and yes, smoke what they smoke.

When I first began working with Gayle and Americo I took pride in having freed myself from many behaviors I now find myself doing again. At night sitting under a starry sky I now light up a smoke and watch my mind. “What are you doing? This is stupid. You’re going to regret this. I can’t believe even you are doing this. You’ve worked all these years to free yourself from such behaviors. You are going to get addicted again.” Etc. etc.

Gayle strongly encourages this art of witnessing my experience without any attempt to alter it; allowing my thoughts, emotions, and sensations to flow like a river. . . grasping for nothing and avoiding nothing.

I take another hit, exhale the smoke towards the heavens and observe intently this inner drama. I fully feel my bodily sensations: the dizziness, the ascending energy, my hands sometimes trembling, the burning sensations and acrid taste in my mouth growing as the cigarette grows shorter. Often the trees and sky melt visually into each other . . . and a misty, surreal glow permeates all I see. The lines between me and “not me” blur as thoughts, bodily sensations, and the outer world all become parts of one experience.

Smoking in Peru is one thing. Smoking in Boulder raises a whole new dialogue. “What will my friends think about this?” There is a certain pride in this dangerous new freedom I espouse. It has a certain shock value. I feel like a rogue, a wild man . . . breaking all the rules. Then again, “Now come on, Charley. This is plain self-centered, egotistical indulgence . . . a bit perverted at that. You have a responsibility to maintain your professional image.” This whole idea of me maintaining any pretense of “having it together” now seems so comical to me that I often burst out in laughter.

At times I find myself genuinely enjoying smoking. Ahhhh, I completely kick back and relax, take a big hit and allow myself to fully drink of this dangerous pleasure.

I witness the mind judging my actions . . . and its proud plans for self-correction that smoking stimulates. Previously I would have become captured by these thoughts because I could not bear their contradiction. Now I see these are constantly changing

thought forms, which only mature into fruition when I desire them or fear them.

Smoking is a great spiritual practice for me. It offers a direct engagement with the contradictions between my ideals and my behavior. A living meditation in which I discover myself to be free from these compelling and frightening urges that previously grew uncontrollably into actions. And this is my point. Witnessing smoking (or anything) is a new edge of freedom and this freedom has real requirements. It requires that I live with the fear of becoming addicted, ruining my health, the concern about my self image, the questioning of my motives... all that. It also requires that I allow the fullness of the pleasure and enjoyment that smoking brings me. Including not censoring my enjoyment of my egotistical hopes for a new, more wild me; my love of the relaxation and calm of the ceremony. This new discipline requires that I open to ALL of myself. It is a deliberate engagement with all my fears and desires without indulging or avoiding any of them.

I am finding I am not so certain of who I am as I previously thought I was. Charley seems to be as utterly wild and hopelessly unmanageable as the wind. He may smoke, he may not. But in this very moment, even as I take another hit I enter a dimension of experience for which I've always longed. I am unshakably happy and grateful. And I know with certainty that from this happiness comes only good. I trust myself enough to smoke. In an odd sort of way it is good for me. You know what I'm sayin'? It requires a certain courage, a confidence, not to merely smoke, but to smoke fearlessly.

Will "Charley" continue to smoke? I don't know anymore than you, dear reader, know if you will continue your contradictions. I have found something that interests me much more than this petty drama of whether Charley Cropley smokes or not and what that means about him.