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Addicted to Love

The path to self-acceptance and
happiness in relationships

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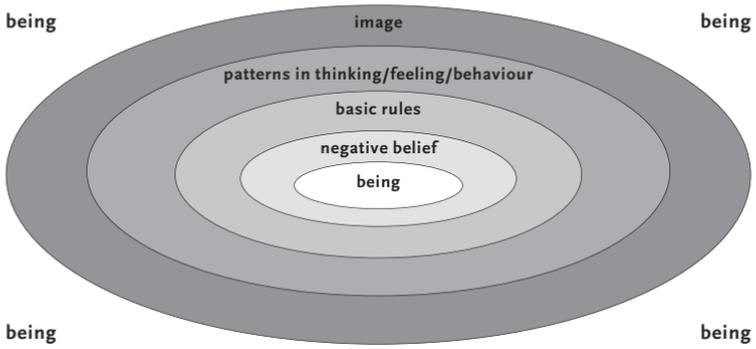


Figure 1: The layers of our identity that cover the natural state of being.

PART 1

Nothing is as it appears

*Know all things to be like this:
A mirage, a cloud castle,
A dream, an apparition,
Without essence, but with qualities that can be seen.*

*Know all things to be like this:
As the moon in a bright sky
In some clear lake reflected,
Though to that lake the moon has never moved.*

*Know all things to be like this:
As an echo that derives
From music, sounds and weeping,
Yet in that echo is no melody.*

*Know all things to be like this:
As a magician makes illusions
Of horses, oxen, carts and other things,
Nothing is as it appears.*

Buddha, born Siddhartha Gautama
(c. 450 BCE–c. 370 BCE)

from: *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche

Introduction: the mother of all misunderstandings

*Confusion is the only suffering.
Confusion is when you argue with what is.
When you are perfectly clear, what is is what you want.
So when you want something that's different from what is,
you can know that you're very confused.*

Byron Katie

from: *A Thousand Names for Joy*

There's something strange about the phenomenon of love: it can take us from the greatest heights of happiness, to the lowest depths of misery and pain. If perhaps, out of the blue, the person you've secretly admired for months has put their arms around you and kissed you, and said they've loved you from the start, then you've known amazing happiness. If you've ever laid in bed with your lover for hours, and dared to talk about and try all kinds of exciting fantasies, then you've experienced ecstasy. If you've been longing for years to have a baby, and one day you and your partner look at the pregnancy test and see that it's positive, then you've known profound joy.

But also, if the person who's starred in your fantasies for months falls into someone else's arms, then you've experienced the most agonising disappointment. And if the partner you've been with for years lies in bed with someone else for hours while you stay home

and mind the children, then you've known excruciating pain. And when the divorce is final and you're living alone again, totally consumed by loneliness and despair, then you know the meaning of loneliness and despair.

In view of this profundity of both happiness and suffering, countless books have been written about love; most of them have been descriptive, admiring or critical, or in the form of a user guide on how to survive in this beautiful and dangerous jungle that we call love.

This book is about love and pain, but more about the part of us that feels love and suffers pain: the mind. Because we don't recognise the true nature of the mind, our understanding of the phenomenon of love is fundamentally flawed. And because of this, we create the painful misery that love is actually supposed to eliminate.

This book examines a misunderstanding that is so vast, so all-encompassing, so completely life-dominating, that I don't know where to start. After all, there might be aspects of it that have never consciously troubled you, and my explanation might seem to be talking a problem into existence. What's more, this misunderstanding depends on how one looks at it, so there are also many misunderstandings about the fundamental misunderstanding itself. Or to put it in more practical terms: a lot of people are very skilled at denying this problem, although in fact it causes many problems, which in turn serve as a further incentive to deny it. In short, this book is about the mother of all problems, which at first will perhaps require some effort to identify. But when you do, you'll experience a thrill of recognition... and then the fun will really begin!

The cause of this fundamental misunderstanding lies in our mind, and especially our relationship with ourselves, or more exactly, in the way we relate to and react to our own thoughts and emotions. This book is about the deeper layer of the mind where the cause of much suffering – both in and outside relationships – occurs. Learning to understand that cause won't be easy as it requires an open mind that is willing to conduct research before making judgement. Yet even just researching the reality behind the misunderstanding is

more interesting and inspiring than simply remaining trapped in it. As you read this book, one can learn many new things about the mind, and learn to look at it in a completely different way. And the great thing is that you don't have to believe anything or accept anything on anyone else's authority. You can verify the accuracy of everything in this book, using practical exercises that it presents, which will help to develop a clear view of your mind and reality. In this book, the mind is simultaneously the researcher and the subject of the research. This research into the mind will inevitably lead you to a resolution of the misunderstanding, and hence to the real nature of yourself and all that exists. This reality is so incredibly profound, joyful, and obvious, that it's almost impossible to explain. But only almost!

I'd like to start by explaining how I became aware of this problem and its solution. After a life filled with both happiness and misery – including various love relationships, raising four children, quite a few addictions, a lot of hard work in several jobs, a massive burnout, a divorce, boring and interesting studies, and a variety of therapies and training courses – basically, after a very ordinary life, at the age of 45, I started to help people stop smoking. I had recently broken the habit myself, and was naturally delighted to have done so. I was also taking a course to become a qualified trainer, so it seemed a good idea to set up my own stop smoking course. This was an immediate success, and a year later I wrote a book on how to stop smoking (Dutch title *De opluchting*, published in the USA as *Quit Smoking in One Day*), which soon became a bestseller. The publicity resulting from this eventually led to requests for help with other addictions. Then I started to see a pattern in addiction problems: each was the consequence of striving for more happiness and less misery. But the very means used in attempting to become happier were causing the misery of addiction. The means used in the attempt to eliminate painful feelings were in fact multiplying those painful feelings.

When the effect of an action is precisely the opposite of what was intended, we call it a counterproductive reflex. A frequently cited example is scratching an itchy mosquito bite: it actually makes it itch

more. An addiction is a classic example of a counterproductive reflex: the aim of the drug is to get rid of an oppressive feeling and create a good feeling instead; this works very briefly during each ‘high’, but at the same time, the use of the drug strengthens the negative feelings one was trying to escape. If you drink alcohol in order to lose your inhibitions with other people, you’re going to feel increasingly inhibited and will increasingly need alcohol if you ever want to do anything spontaneous. If you use pep pills in order to overcome chronic fatigue and gain a more energetic approach to life, you’re going to feel increasingly tired and eventually won’t even be able to clean the house without the pep pills. In short, any apparent advantages of the drug turn out to be merely fleeting moments in a gradual downward slope towards more and more misery. The drug becomes increasingly necessary as a means to occasionally escape from that misery, at least briefly. I wrote about these findings in a book on addiction (Dutch title *De verslaving voorbij*, not yet published in English; the title translates as *Beyond Addiction*), and many people discovered that ending an addiction is much easier than it seems when you’re still addicted, and even much more pleasant. In other words, the idea that it’s extremely difficult to stop is an illusion created by the addiction itself. This fear of stopping is precisely the essence of being addicted. It’s a self-fulfilling fear: the only thing sustained by a counterproductive reflex, such as an addiction, is itself. As soon as the addicted mind sees through its own misunderstanding, it is free. Then stopping turns out to be a joyful liberation and a relief: the opposite of what you – as an addict – were afraid of.

While working with addicts, it became clear to me that the negative feelings they were trying to eradicate by using drugs were acquired during their upbringing. I discovered that the way in which parents try to raise their children to become happy and successful adults actually gives them the belief that they’re not good enough as they are, and need to learn how to fulfil countless conditions first. This creates in children a fundamental insecurity and self-rejection, which as adults they try to suppress at all costs, i.e. sometimes by using drugs. Here too, a counterproductive pattern is at work: the very way in

which parents try to achieve their children's happiness in fact causes them the greatest misery in adult life. I wrote a book on this subject (Dutch title *Het einde van de opvoeding*, not yet published in English; the title translates as *The End of Parenting*), which gave me the opportunity to talk to parents about their problematic children. In most cases, I found that the child's 'problem' had been created – or at least exacerbated and sustained – by the parents, in the manner in which they were trying to resolve it! As soon as the parents understood this, and switched their focus from correcting the child to accepting themselves and their fear of not being good parents, the child's problem often immediately disappeared! The counterproductive nature of good intentions is thus always connected with fear: precisely by running away from that fear, we create the very consequences that we feared.

As a result of writing these books, I also received requests from readers to help in a relationship crisis. And yes, you guessed it, I found the same counterproductive reflex operating in relationship problems: the way partners try to save relationships actually increases their relationship misery, until a break-up is inevitable. And behind this mechanism there appears to be an even deeper and more astonishing reflex: precisely the way we strive for love and security intensifies our loneliness and dependence, and – if we ever have a chance to find happiness – causes us to unintentionally and unconsciously destroy that happiness. The way we strive to find and maintain a love relationship already carries the seeds of that relationship's failure, as well as the pain of loneliness and abandonment. And this deep pain that we feel when a relationship fails only strengthens the craving to find a new love relationship, or conversely, sometimes to avoid such relationships altogether. Either way, however, we again fall into the same trap and sow the seeds of the next painful crisis.

Once you've noticed it, you'll start to see this counterproductive reflex all the time in a whole host of smaller problems. The poses we adopt to hide our insecurity from strangers actually create more insecurity. Our little strategies for getting others to admire us actually

intensify our lack of self-esteem. The white lies we tell to avoid rejection actually reinforce our fear of rejection. The tricks by which we try to retain or repeat pleasant feelings actually ruin the pleasure. The methods we use in the attempt to protect ourselves from distress actually create all kinds of suffering. In other words, every form of protection against emotional fear and pain gradually turns into oppression. Our whole identity, all the patterns and automatic responses we've acquired in order to function as a woman or man, as a mother or father, among friends or colleagues and even when we're alone, all those patterns result in precisely the opposite of what we're aiming for. We curtail or spoil our happiness by the way we cling to it. We increase or prolong our misery by the way we try to eradicate it. In the words of the Buddhist sage Shantideva (8th century CE):

*Although wishing to be rid of misery,
(All beings) run towards misery itself.
Although wishing to have happiness,
Like an enemy they ignorantly destroy it.*

This is the problem addressed by this book, and it's a rather stubborn and deep-rooted problem. The good news is, however, that it can be solved. After all, it's based on a misunderstanding, and on a merely self-sustaining one at that. It's a vicious misunderstanding: it arises time after time as a result of our reaction to the consequences of the previous misunderstanding. Time after time we create our suffering and destroy our happiness. This book will show you how you can stop this, how you can learn to do nothing instead of creating misery, how you can learn to give instead of continuing to feel want and neediness, how you can learn to embrace what you now condemn and reject. In short, you'll learn to recognise the patterns that come into play when you try to eradicate your negative feelings, which actually only lead to those negative feelings being repeatedly evoked. You'll see that happiness is much nearer than you ever imagined. You don't need to find that prince on the white horse, or that super sexy lover; you don't need to get rich, or find a fantastic job, or acquire a new house; you don't need to achieve that far-distant state of enlight-

enment before you can find this happiness. It's very close to home, and is found when you see through the fundamental misunderstanding and recognise the essence of your own mind. This will automatically lead you to let go of the causes of suffering and develop the skilful means that will lead you to unconditional happiness. You will then, and only then, be able to engage in truly loving relationships. And if you happen to get that fantastic job or that new house, then great – but your happiness will no longer depend on it.

So, is your life currently in a crisis? A relationship crisis? Or the opposite: a loneliness crisis? An identity crisis, burnout or depression? However painful that may be for you, it's actually a favourable circumstance for learning to recognise the entire self-sustaining crisis system, and breaking out of it for ever. But even if your life is currently running smoothly, and you have a good, loving relationship or are enjoying life to the full as a single person, that's OK too! You can still use this book to see how you're limiting your own happiness, and already creating future misery. And also learn how to stop doing that, and instead create happiness for yourself and others.

Because beyond the whole cycle of longing for love, finding love, losing love and anguishing over that loss, there's a state of being that is totally free from the desperate striving for love and approval, for the simple reason that this state of being is love itself. It's possible and practicable to liberate yourself from striving for love, by realising that this love has always been there, within yourself. In this state of being there is never again a want of love, the idea of needing love is inconceivable. It's an effortless state of unconditionally giving and receiving love. Really, it's possible. And now I'd very much like to explain how you can achieve it.

The first layer of our identity: the negative belief

*All suffering is caused by our clinging
to a wrong sense of self*

Buddhist teaching

My first experience in the area of love was called Maartje, and occurred when I was in the first year of high school, aged eleven. The experience consisted of fantasising about her, gazing in deep melancholy at the class photo she was in, and nervously avoiding her proximity in class. The idea of actually saying anything to her was just too scary to imagine, and so it remained a secret love, which had an unhappy ending on the school trip to the Han Caves in Belgium just before the summer holidays that year. The class was walking through the dark subterranean tunnels, where weak light bulbs positioned at 50-metre intervals provided faint glimmers of illumination. I was walking behind Maartje, and next to her was one of the coolest guys in the class. As we walked, I saw they were holding hands. Each time we approached the dark section between two lights, their heads moved closer together, and when it got brighter again near the next light, they moved apart. I don't remember now whether I found it very painful to see this, but I do still remember that the movement of the two heads towards and away from each other seemed to be almost mechanically controlled by the changing

light level in the tunnel. Presumably, I was already repressing painful feelings with a rational observation. In any event, this love didn't last very long after that.

Anyone who's been through one of those tender adolescent infatuations will recall the intensity of fear and hope: fear that your feelings will be discovered and ridiculed, and hope that they will be reciprocated. In this interplay of hope and fear, the stakes are high: total rejection versus complete acceptance. And if you don't dare to join in the game, and keep your feelings a secret, the result is frustration and self-rejection. In short, the whole situation surrounding infatuation seems to mainly derive its incredibly high level of tension from the chance of both absolute acceptance and utter rejection.

While this tension is clearly visible in adolescent infatuation, it also continues to operate in later and more 'adult' forms of amorous longing, though often in a covert form. For example, the man who tells his new girlfriend about his earlier love adventures, but fails to mention his occasional visits to a sex worker, is giving in to his fear of rejection. And the woman who tells her husband that she'd like to go on holiday without him sometime will be afraid of his rejection. If you look closely at your own behaviour, you'll see that in both the initial phase of a relationship and the subsequent stable phase you're almost constantly trapped in this interplay of hope and fear. Not that you constantly feel hope and fear; especially in the stable phase of a relationship, you're usually so accustomed to the situation and to your partner that you can successfully steer clear of those feelings. You already know what behaviour is best avoided and what behaviour will almost certainly result in praise, and as far as possible you live within these safe paths of preventing rejection and generating praise. It requires open, honest self-analysis to discover these mechanisms within yourself, but they're always there, even when you think you have 'a good relationship'.

That we keep to these fear-avoiding paths is manifested most clearly in the interaction with a lover, although we do it with everyone. The strength of the hope and fear, however, is proportionate to the inten-

sity of your feelings for someone, so you'll generally find this much less of a problem at the baker's shop, for instance. But if you've waited for a considerable amount of time, and it's nearly your turn, then a customer who just walked in is served before you, then the interplay of hope and fear immediately jolts into action. You hope your rights will be respected and you fear rejection. Not expressing your anger for the sake of peace and quiet usually makes you feel as if you're weak, which is a form of self-rejection. So we're caught in a dilemma of hope for respect and fear of rejection on the one hand, and self-rejection on the other.

The cause of this fundamental hope and fear lies in the nature of our relationship with ourselves, i.e. our self-image, our identity; and the structure of this is entirely determined by self-rejection. In the chapters that follow, I will first explain this structure of our self-image, plus some other counterproductive mechanisms that we use in our quest for happiness and approval. See also Figure 1 on page 7. After that, I will illustrate how these mechanisms mean that love relationships are mostly destined to fail, because they create the very misery that we're trying to escape by engaging in such relationships. The second half of the book then deals with how we can let go of these counterproductive mechanisms, and how we can live – with or without a relationship – in love and independence.

The core of our self-image is self-rejection and aversion to self-rejection, which I summarise with the term 'the negative belief'. I call it a belief because it isn't true, and negative because it causes suffering. No one is born with a negative belief, yet everyone has one. We learn it during the first ten years of life. If you observe babies and very young infants, you see that they have no image of themselves at all, and therefore, no negative or self-rejecting image. Their behaviour is uninhibited and spontaneous: when they're angry, they yell; when they're hungry, they cry; when they're happy, they shout with joy. This natural, spontaneous behaviour of small children is sometimes regarded as a higher state of being, a natural state of being that we, as adults, have lost and need to find again. This is a misunderstanding. The natural state of small children is not a 'higher state of being', for

the simple reason that the child is not actually aware of it. Children are at the mercy of their own spontaneity, and this can also make them feel very unsafe, powerless and frustrated.

These very young children are thus in a pre-self-image stage, but when they reach the age of about one year to eighteen months, a mental self-image starts to develop, at about the same time as the first language development, and also the parents' first attempts to set limits for the child's behaviour. As soon as parents notice that functional communication with the child is becoming possible, the actual 'parenting' starts: attempts to teach the child to do certain things and to stop doing others, in her/his future interest. The child perceives (at first unconsciously) that she is no longer unconditionally admired, cherished and cared for, as in the womb and during the first year of life, but needs to change her behaviour to make sure she continues to get that care and praise. Emptying the bottle results in being praised, not emptying it results in feeling the mother's anxiety. Peeing in the potty is a great success, but peeing somewhere near the potty increasingly causes disapproval. Running around the house singing in the middle of the night might seem funny when you're very young, but if a four-year-old does it, most parents aren't amused. But this is not a mistake on the part of the parents; on the contrary, it's very normal to gradually set limits for the child's behaviour, otherwise she wouldn't develop any language or self-image at all. There are well-known cases of children being raised by animals, or locked up by a psychotic mother and only given food, with no further contact. These children grew up like animals, with no language skills or self-reflection. This is another indication that small children, in the same way as animals, are not at a higher state of being, even though they live in the 'here and now'. The formation of an ego or self-image is evidently a necessary step in human development, and only after this is it possible for spiritual development beyond the ego to take place.

A child's first moments of 'self-consciousness' arise when the initial unconditional and total acceptance comes to an end, and the rejection and correction of undesirable behaviour begins. The child

learns that she's not good enough as she is, and needs to fulfil certain conditions in order to feel that she's good or wanted. So although this is a very normal developmental process, we should not underestimate the deep fears that can be involved for the child. The deep feelings of dependency that we can sometimes feel as adults, for instance when a love relationship breaks down, originate in this initial stage of our upbringing. In an adult they are in fact illusory, they don't correspond with reality. Adults can, after all, take care of themselves, however strong the 'I can't live without you' feeling might be. But for a small child, the feeling of dependency does indeed correspond with reality. If you can't walk, can't do anything with your hands, can't talk, have no money or house or other possessions, then you're really very dependent on your mother's kindness. So if she's angry because you didn't empty your bottle or missed the potty when you peed, then the fear that this evokes is actually related to true dependency. For the same reason, children who had a difficult or premature birth or insecure early childhood show an above-average tendency to suffer from anxiety disorders in adulthood.

We all spent our first years of life in a state of true dependency and existential fear of rejection. That fear is thus originally a fear of abandonment, and in essence a fear of death. Therefore, it is no wonder that we have this fear for the rest of our lives, and try our best to keep it hidden. Fear is the deepest force behind our lifelong striving to gain the love and approval of others.

Is it now clear that our negative belief, our deepest feeling of not being good enough, is the basis of our self-image and hence love relationships? This is not a denial of the beautiful and loving aspects that are also part of most relationships. It's a starting point from where you can identify and solve your present and future relationship problems. Think about the relationship crises you've experienced in your life. Try to feel that misery again, that distress, that fear of losing the other person, that excruciating hope and uncertainty about whether they really want you. Observe the agonising feeling of need, of the inability to live without them, the frustrating powerlessness, the feelings of failure and weakness, of guilt and reproach. If you

analyse those feelings carefully, you'll see that within the pain, all sense of self-esteem disappears. That is the negative belief, your deepest self-rejection.

The negative belief is therefore not the rational view that you have of yourself as an adult. You probably know quite well that you're not completely worthless, that you're good at sports, or intelligent, cultured, polite and socially sensitive, that you can love, and can take care of your loved ones. But when your lover abandons you, or you've been alone without love and approval for too long, then that feeling of being worthless can suddenly be activated; the feeling of fear, inferiority and failure. At that moment, the knowledge that you're probably quite a good, kind person is of no help whatsoever, because the feeling of self-rejection is simply much stronger. That is your negative belief and the core of your self-image.

It's very important that you learn to name this negative belief. You don't need to learn what it feels like: you know that already, you've felt it often enough in your life – or at least felt the fear of feeling it – so you know what we're talking about. But you've also always tried very hard to run away from it, to keep it covered with the other aspects of your self-image, so it's a good idea to stop running away from it, and start focusing your attention on it. Think back to crises in your life, to times of abandonment and loneliness, or when you lost something very precious, or when something very important went wrong. Try to describe that deep, self-rejecting feeling in a few words. A list of the most common descriptions of the negative belief is given below. Perhaps you'll find one or more that match the way you sometimes reject yourself. If not, then start by crossing out all the descriptions that couldn't possibly apply. When you've found one or more that matches, reflect for a while on the idea that this is your deepest belief about yourself, even when you're not feeling it.

I am worthless

I am stupid

I am pathetic

I am weak

I am bad
I am selfish
I am insignificant
I am ordinary
I am not good enough
I am a failure
I am a loser
I am dull
I am mediocre
I am cowardly
I am lazy
I am nothing
I am odd
I am ugly
I am inferior
I have no right to exist
I don't matter
I don't fit in
I am a nuisance

Have you found one or more? Well done! This is the illusory basis of your illusory identity. The term 'illusory' does not mean, however, that the resulting misery doesn't feel very real. It just means that it doesn't bear any relation to what you really are, only to what you've learned to believe you are.

Now that you've found the basis of your identity, I suggest that you do the mirror test and turn this possibly interesting theory into an actual experience. I mentioned this test in my previous books, and have received many remarkable responses from readers. I will give an explanation of the mirror test later in this book, but you must have already done it before then.

This is the mirror test: stand in front of a reasonably large mirror. Make sure you're alone and can't be disturbed. Look at your mirror image, with no positive or negative intentions, i.e. as neutrally as possible. And then say your negative belief out loud, without introduction or explanation, without mitigation or condemnation, with-

out understatement or exaggeration, without any other words around it, just as if it were a simple fact: I am stupid, I am worthless, I am weak, or whatever your negative belief is. And then look carefully at both your mirror image and your inner world. Just give it a try; don't miss this opportunity for an extraordinary experience! After you've done this, stay focused on yourself for a while, in a quiet place where you're alone and feel comfortable. Good luck!