# 9 Essays

## Buddhism & The 12 Step Model of Recovery

These essays have grown from the Meditation and Recovery group which began meeting weekly at the San Francisco Zen Center in 2000.

As we have studied the Steps and Buddhism together, sometimes from one perspective, sometimes from the other, our collective experience and wisdom has grown. Each time we have read and discussed the Steps---or the Four Noble Truths or the precepts or the concept of no-self---a bit has been added to our understanding.

Although these essays have been written by one person, they represent the experience, strength and hope of many.

The structure of the group has changed as well. As of this writing, we begin with a short reading on some aspect of meditation. These writings come from a variety of Buddhist teachers in many of the traditions. There is then a short meditation instruction, followed by twenty minutes of silent sitting. We introduce ourselves and the speaker of the week shares for about 20 minutes. (When the group first began, the author led each week. Over the years, a number of others have been invited to be regular leaders of the group. The criteria for leading are five years in a Twelve Step program and having taken Buddhist precepts.) The floor is then opened for discussion for another twenty or twenty-five minutes and we end with a final five minute meditation and offering of merit. The meeting lasts for an hour and a half.

This information is included for those who may wish to start their own groups. The format is, of course, flexible and should be responsive to the needs of the members.

It is also for this reason that we have decided to make these essays available---as a beginning text for those wishing to explore the connection between practice and recovery.

In accord with the traditions of anonymity in Twelve Step programs, the author remains unnamed. And in the spirit of gratitude which marks both paths, these essays are offered to anyone who has use for them, without copyright. They may be distributed free of charge. Our only requests are that the attribution to the San Francisco Zen Center remain, that this introduction be included and that copies not be sold for profit.

*May All Beings Be Happy*

*SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER, AUGUST 2006*

*"Admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable."*

[These essays refer to alcohol, alcoholism and alcoholics for reasons of brevity and not to exclude other addictions from consideration. also because alcoholics anonymous is the original program from which all other twelve step groups derive.]

One of the definitions the dictionary gives for the word admit is "to allow entry." In Step One we allow, or begin to allow, into our consciousness the fact of our powerlessness over alcohol. This essay will suggest a way of looking at powerlessness that will be developed further in the following essays.

Powerlessness can be defined as that state in which something (alcohol in this case) has become the controlling fact in a person's life, the pivot around which all other aspects revolve, often in spite of his or her intentions to the contrary. When we are active in our addiction, alcohol has become the prime mover in our lives. Our thoughts and behaviors are all about getting it, using it, craving it, recovering from the effects of it, hiding our use of it, lying about it, planning when we can use it next. We arrange the rest of our lives around it, often sacrificing everything else to be able to drink: our families and friends, our time and money, our health, our work and our pleasure. Functionally, alcohol has become our higher power, our god—and a malevolent one.

And mostly, we are not willing to acknowledge the scope of our enslavement. Even when we admit the possibility that we are alcoholic, we can continue for a long time to tell ourselves that we are "functioning alcoholics" or "maintenance drinkers." And perhaps we are, for a while. But we usually are not willing or able to face the full cost of our addiction. In other words, we can admit (almost) that we are powerless; but are not willing to admit that our lives are unmanageable. Eventually, though, even this level of control erodes.

Unmanageability comes when drinking has made other aspects of our lives not only difficult, but impossible. It is when we find ourselves doing (or not doing) those things we believed we would never do: missing work, drinking in the morning, losing entire days to drinking, passing out and drinking again, destroying relationships and on and on and on. Our nevers have become not-yets; and our not-yets have become horrible realities. This is the incomprehensible demoralization of which the AA literature speaks.



We are no longer anything but functions of our addiction, shattered selves dancing attendance on alcohol.

[The nature of the self and its transformation is the basic teaching of buddhism. in a very real sense, this is also the concern of the steps—a careful and systematic deconstruction of the alcoholic self and its rebuilding based on different assumptions, reactions, core values and relationships. this will become more clear as we continue to explore the steps.]

None of us starts out with the intention of destroying our lives though alcohol. For most of us, drinking begins as something else: something we do for fun, or to fit in, or because it makes us feel good. Or drinking is actually a survival strategy, delivering us from life situations which are too painful to be faced, especially without other tools for coping. (Some of us can say, quite honestly, that drinking saved our lives.) But it does become, sooner or later, an analgesic for suffering, And, paradoxically, at some point the drinking is what we do to blot out temporarily the suffering caused by the drinking. The fear of suffering is ultimately more terrible than the suffering itself. As Bill W says in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

" *… our lives have been largely devoted to running away from pain and problems. We fled from them as from a plague. We never wanted to deal with the fact of suffering. Escape via the bottle was always our solution.*"

The fact of suffering is the central teaching of Buddhism. In the Buddha's first sermon after his awakening he spoke about suffering, its origin and its ending. The first two of the Four Noble Truths are particularly pertinent to the discussion of Step One:

"*This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering; aging is suffering; death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Association with what you dislike is suffering; separation from what you like is suffering. Not getting what you want is suffering. The five aggregates* [which constitute the person and are form, feeling, perception, formation and consciousness] *affected by clinging are suffering.*

"*This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is desire* [literally "thirst"] *which gives rise to fresh birth, bound up with relish and passion, running here and there, delighting in this and that;*

*in other words, sense desire, desire for existence and desire for extinction." (It is worthwhile noting that drinking till we pass out or go into blackouts is a sort of desire for extinction.)*

Something often heard in the rooms of AA is that we are drinking (or drugging, or eating or shopping or whatever) to fill a hole. This is sometimes described as a "God-shaped hole" in us, and presumably in all human beings. However, Buddhism has rather a different take on this hole. While acknowledging that there is an acute sense of something missing in us, Buddhist teaching denies that this is actually so. Rather, that sense of loss is conditioned by and created by craving itself. So there is nothing that can truly fill that hole. Each new offering merely excavates it more deeply.

Its ultimate cause is ignorance of the nature of reality; and ultimately it is wisdom that can end it. This is wisdom in the sense of a knowing that is deeper than mere knowledge. It is direct experience that has been thoroughly digested until it has become an automatic response of the mind. And wisdom in this case is the recognition of the identity of craving and suffering. It is not that craving leads to suffering; rather that the two are functionally the same. This is the great gift that alcoholism and addiction confer on us. The suffering of craving is raised to such a high pitch that it becomes impossible to ignore. Many who are not addicts or alcoholics can continue in a state of low level anxiety and dis-ease for their entire lives without ever having a clue about its cause.

The initial teaching of both Buddhism and the Steps is recognition of the reality of suffering in our lives. As long as we are not willing or able to admit this, pretending to ourselves and others that things aren't really that bad, there is no possibility for action.

It is only when we become open to the full fact of our suffering (that we are helpless drunks, that old age, sickness and death really do apply to us too) that it is possible to admit hope for healing as well.

In AA this admission is generally called hitting bottom. This phrase is evocative in that it describes coming to a dead halt. To stopping somehow in our tracks. This is what happens to us in moments of great surprise or shock. The mind for an instant undergoes a drastic shift in perspective—rather like looking out your window in the morning, expecting to see your neighborhood, and coming face to face with Oz or Mars. So we are brought somehow, by some circumstance in our lives, to a halt. And if, through luck or grace or karma we can stay there for a moment and not deny what we have seen (the wrecked landscape of our life), we have a chance to seek out change.



These moments can be terrifying and it is not surprising that many of us immediately close the door on them. Perhaps they will come again. Perhaps we will need many such moments before we can somehow find the courage to face the fact of our suffering. Many alcoholics are never able to do this and face instead "the gates of insanity and death."

This moment of stopping is akin to the moment of awakening—in Zen parlance, going beyond delusion and enlightenment—the moment when we face reality unclouded by our conceptions. It seems that for most of us such moments come only under great duress. This is what Bill W calls "ego collapse at depth" in his letter to Carl Jung. It is the experience of having tried every maneuver we can think of to escape the inescapable. The great awakening is in a sense the moment of greatest failure and defeat.

Step One contains the entire program in a very concise form. By identifying our suffering with our craving for alcohol, it shows us both the cause (and by extension) the cure for it. The rest of the steps simply (but not necessarily easily) work this out to the logical end. In Buddhism, the symbol of awakening is the lotus because it grows up from muddy water into the light and the air. And so for us, our regeneration can only begin when we have thoroughly known what lies at the bottom and most dark place in our lives. This is the wisdom of the first step. *SFZC | 2005*

## STEP TWO

*"Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."*

This Step can seem a formidable barrier to anyone who is unable or unwilling to accept any concept of God or spirit or anything smacking of the supernatural. Getting caught in questions and demands for certainty can stall us for a long time, perhaps forever. This difficulty can be seen as lying at least partially in the realm of definition: "What is a higher power? What is sanity? What, for that matter, does it mean to believe?"

The problems multiply as the thinking grows more circuitous: "Is the higher power God?

Whose God? What is God like? If I have my own conception of God, as the Big Book suggests, isn't that merely my imagination—and how can I be 'saved' by something I make up? And what about this sanity? How can I be

restored to a state I don't think I ever experienced before? And whose version of sanity? AA's? And if I accept AA's version of sanity, does this mean I'll be brainwashed into an AA zombie?

Actually, I don't think I should even *consider* believing such a proposition until it is intellectually coherent and understandable, until I can give it my complete rational assent."

None of these questions is stupid or unimportant and they will bear coming back to. But when we first hear this Step and consider its possibilities and ramifications for our lives, they need to be set aside. If we are desperate enough even to consider the Steps as a means of saving our lives, we must be willing to grasp them whole. If we wait until we have worked out the philosophical questions to our satisfaction (which is, of course, rather difficult to do drunk) we may well die before coming to any answers.

In the early scriptures the Buddha offers a metaphor:

> *Suppose … a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say: "I will not let the surgeon pull out the arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a cross bow; whether the arrow that wounded me was hoof-tipped or curved or barbed." All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die.*

The Buddha is talking about accepting the teaching on suffering and its ending; but the metaphor is apt for the Steps as well.

Perhaps a way out of the philosophical labyrinth is to work with Step Two's function, rather than try to define its terms. To do this we need only attempt the tentative, experimental belief that healing is possible and we neither can nor have to do it alone. If we approach this step as an experiment we may save ourselves both time and grief. And we can always have our misery back if we wish.

We might observe how well this proposition works in our lives when we determine to act as if it could be so, with a willing suspension of disbelief. This is certainly in line with the Buddha's suggestion to examine his teaching for ourselves and only accept it if it works:

> *Do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary lore or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with liking for a view after pondering over it or with someone else's ability or with the thought "The monk is our teacher." When you know in yourselves: "These things are wholesome, blameless, commended by the wise, and being adopted and put into effect they lead to welfare and happiness," then you should practice them and abide in them …"*



Another barrier to acceptance of Step Two is the idea that while it may work for other people, it certainly can't work for me. This proposition can be held either positively or negatively. Positively, we can tell ourselves "I am too different or special or too smart or sophisticated or self-sufficient or independent for AA. And anyway, I'm not a joiner." Or we can tell ourselves "I'm too bad or far gone or undeserving or stupid or unworthy for AA. And anyway, I'm not a joiner."

As Bill W writes in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

> *We have not once sought to be one in a family, to be a friend among friends, to be a worker among workers, to be a useful member of society. Always we have tried to struggle to the top of the heap, or to hide underneath it.*

Why do we do this? Why do we so sabotage ourselves by accepting these delusions? The origin may be impossible to know (and is at least beyond the scope of this essay); but for most of us the mental attitudes and behaviors have been put into place, perhaps unconsciously, long ago—usually to defend ourselves from real or imagined dangers. The idea that we are either too good or too bad to mix on an equal basis with others has the function of separating us from the company of those we have come to see as threats.

It is very useful to employ the experimental mode here, noticing how these beliefs function in our lives without judging them. It is this mode which can allow us both to see more clearly the engine of our behavior and to keep the distance necessary not to become overwhelmed and drawn back into the old belief system. (These are beliefs and it is useful to acknowledge that in Step Two we are trying to exchange one belief system for another.)

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In spite of the above, it isn't entirely unprofitable to look at the terms used in the Step. To find some equivalents in Buddhist language and practice won't be very difficult. Perhaps rather than speak of a "higher" power, we might do better to think in terms of a deeper or broader power in that we are not giving ourselves over to some deity or something somehow more real, or of greater intrinsic value than ourselves.

[This might also be a good place to interject a definition of power as some agency capable of effecting change. The particular power we invoke in this Step is one that can, initially, change our behavior (i.e. drinking) and ultimately change us in fundamental ways.]

In Buddhism this broader power can be our vow to make the effort to live in awakening for the sake of all beings. (It may seem obvious, but it's worth remembering that "all beings" includes ourselves.) This is what is called the bodhisattva vow. The bodhisattva is one who, rather than seek his or her own private salvation (which is ultimately a delusion anyway), resolves to remain in the world of suffering to be of service. [The word bodhisattva is a compound of two Sanskrit words meaning 'awakening' or 'enlightenment' and 'being.'] This is an understanding of spirituality which does not aim at the perfection of the self. One of the mistakes that many of us make is treating ourselves, our lives as projects, as works to be accomplished. This vow can free us from this sort of spiritual greed and unrealistic expectations of perfection.

Another possible understanding of the saving power can be something like what is sometimes called Buddha nature. Suzuki Roshi called it Big Mind. Another expression of this is "original face"—as in the Zen question "What is your original face before your parents were born?" This is the matter stated positively. A negative statement of the same understanding is emptiness, in part understood as the interdependent and unfixed nature of reality. Which terms we use can be largely determined by our basic turn of mind or by the situation.

Or this power can be something as undefined but deeply felt as the process of our own recovery. We can try being comfortable with our own ignorance. The 10th century Chinese Ch'an master Dizang said "Not knowing is most intimate." If we do not know, we are open to learning, open to experimenting and open to not characterizing our experiences as successes or failures. They all contribute information. This experimental mode of holding our higher or deeper power loosely can offer us a great deal of freedom. To be relieved of the bondage of needing to know can be a wonderful relaxation, in its original meaning of "to loosen."

As regards this return to sanity, some of us must wonder how we can be returned to a state we don't believe we ever inhabited in the first place. Another possible way to consider this is that what we are returned to, or rather what is returned to us, is our potential. Alcohol robs of us everything we have—most terribly, hope. It destroys our belief that things can change, that we can change, at least for the better.



It is a fundamental tenet in Buddhism that every being has the capacity for awakening, no matter how obscured at present. Perhaps this return to sanity is simply (or not) a return to this potential, to the place we started from, going back as far as we need to. Every infant, every child exhibits the potential for awakening and a natural movement towards trust and love.

Returning to this Edenic state is, of course, neither possible nor desirable. Innocence must be tempered by experience to be of use in the world. But knowing that the potential for awakening is not dead in us is a sort of return to our basic sanity. The word sanity literally means health. The word health comes from the word "wholeness." This wholeness is the completing of a circle and this circle we complete is a circle of hands. In Zen, it is said that the teaching passes from "warm hand to warm hand."

And with this, we have come full circle to the original premise that healing is possible and we neither can nor have to do it alone. This is enough—perhaps not even a belief yet, but a hope—to get us going. *SFZC | 2005*

## STEP THREE

*Made a decision to turn our will and our life over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

In Step Two we became willing to consider the possibility that we could be restored to sanity by a power greater than ourselves. We undertook this as an experiment, on a trial basis, all down payments returned should we decide we didn't like what we got. We saw that it was not necessary to define too closely or too narrowly the nature of that higher (or broader or deeper) power or even to have too precise an idea of what sanity is. Step Two was basically an exploration of new territory.

In Step Three, we are encouraged to go further by making a decision. The word "decide" literally means "to cut off." In this Step we are cutting off an old way of life and of thinking that was leading us to death. Obviously, such a transformation does not occur at once by a single act of will. We will have to decide again and again, often many times a day, to choose the difficult path of healing over the slide into oblivion. As odd as it may sound to the non-addict/alcoholic, this is not always an easy or obvious choice. It requires a sustained effort which sometimes seems more than we can make. And yet, aided by the Steps, our sponsors, our friends in recovery, by meetings and our spiritual practice, we continue.

We also cut off the idea that we can go back, that somehow we can make the old way of life work. This is an idea that we looked at in Step One when we admitted our powerlessness over alcohol. And we cut off the idea that alcohol can offer us refuge from our pain. This is a seductive voice that will speak to us from time to time, perhaps for a long time after the last drink.

In Buddhism, we go for refuge to the Three Treasures: to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. In language that is perhaps more accessible to the non-religiously minded, we can offer the following meanings:

> The Buddha is that basic ground of sanity we discussed in Step Two, the potential for awakening shared by every living being.
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> The Dharma is simply the way things are. The way things are as opposed to the way we want or imagine or fear things are. More specifically, the Dharma is the teaching of Buddhism which leads to awakening and liberation.
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> The Sangha, which was originally understood as the community of ordained men and women, is basically a group of drunks. It is all of those who practice the way with us. In his play "No Exit" Jean Paul Sartre writes "Hell is other people." In Buddhist practice and in recovery, other people are our only way out of hell.

In the Third Step prayer, we ask to be relieved of the bondage of self. This can take on many meanings. One is choosing freedom from fixed ideas of who we are, and who we can become. It means giving up the illusion of control (moment by moment, event by event) and, more importantly, giving up our fixed patterns of behavior and thought. It means returning to the place of not-knowing. For most of us, what we "knew" was that disaster was imminent, life was a long exercise in agony and defeat and that nothing we could do would change that. Not-knowing can serve as an antidote to such thought patterns.

There is an old Zen story that illustrates this:

> *A monk asked a Zen master: "What shall we do when the 100, the 1000, the 10,000 things come towards us all at once?" The teacher replied: "Just don't try to control them."*

This is just as difficult as it sounds. And we will not become adepts at letting-go and not-knowing quickly, without practice. But we can begin by experimenting with our behavior. If we are accustomed to assuming the worst of any situation, we can make a conscious decision to try out something different. For example, walking into a room full of strangers, we can



ask ourselves "How would I behave if I assumed that everyone in this room was disposed to like me?" What new behavior will this elicit from us? And what will be the results? This is a very practical experiment in letting go of the bondage of self.

It is also worth noting that "turning over" can be a very physical thing. We all store our fears and disease in our bodies. Sometimes just taking a couple of deep breaths when we are disturbed and saying to ourselves "Let go" will be enough to change our response. The practice of bowing, of offering incense, of working or walking with mindful attention is also a physical practice of the Third Step, as is meditation.

These practical considerations are not meant to overshadow the "spiritual" dimension of Step Three. [Although in Buddhism it is not quite correct to use the word "spiritual." This implies a breach between the spiritual and the mundane, the phenomenal and the numinous. In a Buddhist understanding, reality is not so divided, but rather all of a piece. There is nothing that is hidden. The real can be compared to a Mobius strip: there is only surface; and while part of it may be turned away from us at any time or we from it, it is always available. However, we seem to be stuck with the word "spiritual" for want of a better one.] We often hear alcoholism spoken of as a spiritual disease. This is because it destroys us spiritually. But it is also because alcoholism has at least a part of its origin as spiritual longing.

In his letter to Bill W, Carl Jung wrote:

> *"[the] craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God" and "…'alcohol' in Latin is spiritus, and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison."*

We crave transcendence. As limited human beings, we imagine and long for a state beyond our mundane selves that is inclusive, luminous and peaceful. We want to break the prison barriers of our small self. There are many ways people have sought to do this throughout history and alcohol use is one of them. For us, however, alcohol becomes another, even more dire prison. And the blackout, the passing-out is a negative or shadow transcendence. In fact, it is a rehearsal for death that so many of us crave towards the end but lack the courage to embrace deliberately or somehow find the strength to resist. Only a spiritual awakening can offer us the real thing. And it may, when it comes, be quite other than we had imagined. For how can we, in the darkness of our despair, have any real idea of the light?

One of the ways we search out transcendence and enact the Third Step is meditation. In meditation we take on the posture (both physical and mental) of awakening. And it doesn't matter if we are sitting in perfect full lotus or on a chair or even lying down. The Buddha spoke of four noble postures: standing, sitting, walking and lying down. It is the intention and the attention that matters. In meditation we are giving ourselves over to the process of awakening. [It is worth noting here that the word usually translated as "enlightenment" might more accurately be translated as "awakening." The former gives the impression of some grand, cosmic opening available only to the few. Awakening is an ability inherent in everyone.] When we sit, we assume the body of the Buddha, the awakened one. We make a decision to investigate this life, and we turn ourselves over to whatever we discover which cannot be imagined ahead of time or controlled. Meditation is always an experiment and a surprise. We just let go, sit down for the ride and observe the scenery of the undiscovered country of the self.

Finally though, the Third Step requires faith. This is true both for the believer in a personal God and for the Buddhist who doesn't acknowledge one. To believe that we can be restored to sanity by entrusting our lives to the process of recovery or awakening, to our essential Buddha nature or to the bodhisattva vow can be daunting. It can seem equivalent to throwing away the oars and letting the river take us where it will—never mind that we were always rowing ineffectually against the current.

Faith, though, is an attitude of mind rather than a belief in a specific set of propositions. It can be entered into experimentally with the assurance that others have done so to good effect. And our faith, in the program and in practice, is one which can be verified by observing the lives of others who have undertaken the experiment. We can daily see many men and women whose lives have been changed for the better by doing so. All we have to do is admit the possibility that it will work for us as well. If someone we know has a headache, takes aspirin and reports that the pain is gone, we likely believe him. We have a pretty good idea that it will work for us as well, for after all the bodies of all people are pretty much alike. It is also true for spiritual maladies. We are all more similar than we are different and the way to health is the same for us all. Once again, the answer lies in looking to the function rather than the definitions. Step Three is a necessary, life-saving and effective movement towards spiritual health for everyone regardless of particular spiritual or religious belief or lack of it. *SFZC | 2005*





## *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*

In Step One, we made an initial incursion into reality when we admitted the nature of our relationship to alcohol. We began examining our denial and magical thinking. In Step Four we further map the real geography of our lives beyond that single area (although, as we find, almost all parts of our lives have been affected by alcohol).

As we have been unwilling to confront the nature of our drinking, so most of us have been in denial about cause-and-effect. Although we would argue otherwise, our behavior has been marked by an inability or unwillingness to recognize that we too must suffer or enjoy the consequences of our actions.

Buddhism calls this cause-and-effect karma. The word itself in Sanskrit means "deed." In Buddhist understanding, it refers to volitional activity, acts that are preceded by will and that have consequences for the actor. These consequences can either be immediate and obvious [If I throw the glass against the wall, it will break.] or accumulative and subtle. The second sort is sometimes described as environmental karma—actions that create an atmosphere in our lives. For example, if I habitually tell lies, I come to live in a world in which nothing can be accepted as certain, no one can be trusted, I am constantly juggling my different versions of reality and no one else can believe what I say. If I am violent in word and deed, I attract violence to myself. On the other hand, if I behave in ways which are honorable, reliable and ethical, I attract other such people to myself. Obviously, this is not 100% true 100% of the time, but as a general rule of thumb, it can keep us out of a lot of trouble. (In one of the early scriptures, the Buddha is quoted as saying that only a Buddha can fully understand the workings of karma.)

So, in Buddhist terms, the Fourth Step is about acknowledging karma as the basic engine of our lives. And this in turn means acknowledging our own participation in the creation of our lives, for good or ill. When we take Step Four, we see that our actions have weight in the world, gravity and mass. What we do literally matters. We have often denied this, preferring to cast ourselves as victims, to absolve ourselves of responsibility for what we experience. Or we think that what we do doesn't matter because we don't matter. In a sort of reverse ego-mania, we negate our effect upon our own lives, on others and on the world. We are not accountable because we don't count.

There is an old Buddhist tale about a Zen master named Hyakujo. He would give lectures to the monks in his monastery and for several days no-

ticed an old man in the back of the lecture hall. One day, after the lecture, the old man stayed and asked to speak with Hyakujo.

> He said, "I am not really an old man. I am a fox. In the past world system I was the abbot of this monastery and someone asked me, 'Is an enlightened person bound by cause and effect?' I answered 'No.' And for that answer I was condemned to the body of a fox for these past 500 lifetimes. Can you give me a turning word to release me?"
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> Hyakujo said, "Ask your question again."
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> The fox-man said, "Is an enlightened person bound by cause and effect?"
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> Hyakujo replied, "An enlightened person does not ignore cause and effect."
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> On hearing this, the old man was released from his fox body.

This story serves to illustrate the nature of karma—that our past actions are neither negligible nor deterministic. We create the environment of our present through our actions in the past, but we are free to choose our response to the current situation. The Steps teach us this as well: we are conditioned by our alcoholism and by the decisions we have made, but our future is not condemned to endless repetition. We can interrupt the pattern at any point by taking positive action: by admission of the nature of the situation to ourselves and to another, by redressing our misdeeds to the best of our ability, and by the decision (or in Buddhist language, the vow) to live differently in the future with the help of good spiritual friends.

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Having looked at the basic structure of Step Four, let's now examine the mechanics more closely. We are asked to take a "searching and fearless moral inventory." The language here may give us pause. For many of us, there have been years of nothing but self-loathing, failure and despair. Are we now being asked to add to the mire by making a list of our various moral crimes and failings? If Step Four is approached in this way, it is very unlikely to be helpful. Let's examine some other options for understanding it.

The word "moral" can be off-putting to some. It may suggest the avenging deity that many of us grew up with, ready to catch us in any transgression, more familiar with punishment than love and who expected no less than perfection from us. This probably does the God of Christianity and Judaism a disservice, as this is certainly far from the understanding of the more spiritually sophisticated members of those communities. But, leaving aside a deity, what is a Buddhist understanding of the basis of morality? Without a God who determines right and wrong, how shall we judge our behavior?



In Buddhism, morality (or ethics, as it is usually translated) is one of the three foundations of practice, the other two being meditation and wisdom. It is impossible to practice the other two successfully when an ethical basis to one's life has not been established. If we are worried about being caught stealing money from our workplace, or cheating on our spouse, if our minds are full of hatred and envy and greed, we will not be able to gather the mind in concentration (which is meditation) or see into the nature of reality (which is wisdom). So ethical conduct is essentially pragmatic. It is the means to the end of awakening.

The Buddhist precepts can be seen as something like training rules and are intimately connected to the concept of karma: *if this is present, that arises; if that is absent, this does not arise.*

Buddhism employs two methods of training the mind through precepts, ways that aim at the same end, but come at it from different directions. The first, usually, but not exclusively, associated with the Theravada or Old Wisdom school works from the outside in. In this method, the practitioner undertakes to observe many, and often minute, directions, covering almost every aspect of his or her life. The awakening mind is thereby formed through behavior. This is not so very different from what we see in the AA slogans: *fake it till you make it; act as if; bring the body and the mind will follow*. Monasticism of all sorts (even in the supposedly iconoclastic Zen tradition) is based on this model. And it works. It works better for some than others, depending on personality; but it is a very effective path of transformation for anyone who can sincerely give him or herself to it. What is necessary is understanding the aim of the discipline rather than clinging to the rule as an absolute.

The other method of precept training is to treat the precepts as questions, or koans, to be continually held before us as something to be examined. In other words to work from the inside out. This direction is usually associated with the Mahayana or New Wisdom schools. In this tradition, most schools have some variation of the precepts as follows:

- A disciple of the Buddha does not kill.
- A disciple of the Buddha does not take what is not given.
- A disciple of the Buddha does not misuse sexuality.
- A disciple of the Buddha does not lie.

- A disciple of the Buddha does not intoxicate mind or body of self or other.
- A disciple of the Buddha does not slander.
- A disciple of the Buddha does not praise self at the expense of others.
- A disciple of the Buddha is not possessive of anything.
- A disciple of the Buddha does not harbor ill will.
- A disciple of the Buddha does not abuse the Three Treasures.

At first reading, these may seem simple or even obvious. For example, not killing. We can all pretty much agree that taking a gun and shooting someone can be detrimental to our spiritual growth. But what about eating meat, wearing leather, killing insects, abortion, paying taxes that go to war? When we begin to examine the precept closely, it is anything but simple. What compromises are we willing to make and under what circumstances? What level of discomfort are we willing to undergo in our lives in applying this precept? Can we realize both the relative existence and the absolute non-existence of killer, killed and killing—without using the absolute as permission for the relative? The practice of precepts from this point of view demands a rigorous honesty and a regular self-examination. We don't get off the hook by not having some fixed rule.

This is the approach taken by Bill W. in the Big Book regarding sex:

> *We do not want to be the arbiter of anyone's sex conduct. We all have sex problems. We'd hardly be human if we didn't … we tried to shape a sane and sound ideal for our future sex life. We subjected each relation to this test—was it selfish or not? … Whatever our ideal turns our to be, we must be willing to grow toward it.*"

This is a far cry from a commandment-based moral teaching. A basic principle is defined (i.e. lack of selfishness) and from there we are asked to pay careful attention to our actions to see how closely they adhere to our professed intention. This is ethics from the inside out.

The Fourth Step also asks us to look at our fears. In Buddhist understanding, fear is based on protection of the self from imagined threats to its integrity. There are three basic strategies the ego uses to guard itself: greed, hate and delusion (the unholy triad underlying all impediments to awakening). With greed, we try to protect ourselves by accumulation: money or sex or new cars or fame or food can be used to erect a wall between ourselves and fearsome reality. Hatred or aversion creates a scorched earth perimeter,



allowing nothing close enough to hurt us. Delusion cannot deal with the external world at all, and retreats into fantasy. All of these maneuvers are the attempts of fear to keep the unknown at bay.

Often our fear is so great that it rejects even help and healing. We continue to be willing to suffer in predictable ways rather than take a chance on something new. We live in basic distrust of the world beyond our control and cannot seem to stop the activities that continue to turn the wheel of suffering for others and ourselves.

This is what Step Four asks us to examine: how we continue to create and sustain suffering. Often "our part" has more to do with ignorance than ill will. Lacking other coping mechanisms, we respond to the world with what is at hand. Those tactics can work for a while, can work somewhat, can be better than the alternatives. But when the pain becomes too great and we are driven to change, then this Step offers us ways to examine our lives. And, having examined our lives in this Step, the others go on to show us how to change.

*SFZC | 2005*

## STEP FIVE

*Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*

Once a month, either on or near the full moon, here at San Francisco Zen Center we gather in the Buddha Hall for what is sometimes called the Bodhisattva Ceremony, the Full Moon Ceremony or, in Japanese, *Ryaku Fusatsu*. This later means something like "simplified [ceremony] to continue good practice." Whatever the name used, the ceremony itself is a descendant of what is likely the oldest ceremony in Buddhism, itself based on pre-Buddhist practices.

In ancient India, the four quarters of the moon were marked as special days devoted to spiritual practices. During the lifetime of the Buddha, they are the times when the ordained community would preach Dharma to lay people. Eventually these days (sometimes reduced to the full and new moon days) became times for the Sangha of monks to come together to recite the *pratimoksha*, the rules of training. If a monk had transgressed the guidelines, he would make confession of his fault, receive whatever corrective was considered necessary and the Sangha would be pronounced pure. A version of this ceremony continues in countries which practice the Theravada school of Buddhism (Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, etc.)—the so-called Southern School.

The version of this ceremony that we practice at Zen Center is a collective one. Each person does not confess his or her individual faults, but each of us joins in a general confession of failing to live up to our ideals. The verse chanted goes like this:

*All my ancient, twisted karma,*
*From beginingless greed, hate and delusion,*
*Born through body, speech and mind,*
*I now fully avow.*

We then go on to renew our vows: taking the three Refuges (in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and the precepts.

Thus, even in a non-theistic tradition such as Buddhism, the efficacy and necessity of confession is acknowledged.

In both Buddhism and the Steps, confession is essential for further spiritual growth. It not only relieves us of the burden of our secrets, but—just as importantly—creates or deepens the intimacy we have with our sponsor or teacher. This relationship is of great importance in both traditions. In the *Lotus Sutra*, it is said that "Only a Buddha together with a Buddha can fathom the true nature of reality." And specifically in Zen, the teaching is said to be passed from warm hand to warm hand, through the succession of ancestors. In AA, all of our recovery work can be traced to the initial conversation between Bill W. and Dr. Bob, in an unbroken line from drunk to drunk. In both traditions we enact this central relationship—of teacher to student, sponsor to sponsee.

We cannot proceed on our own without risking grave dangers to our recovery and our spiritual life. Even with the best intentions, the tendency to cover up, rationalize and give ourselves over to imagination is "cunning, baffling and powerful." The eye cannot see itself. We need someone else, someone we trust to be on our side, who will give us accurate and loving feedback. As Bill writes in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

> *Hence it was most evident that a solitary self-appraisal, and the admission of our defects based on that alone, wouldn't be nearly enough. We'd have to have outside help if we were surely to know and admit the truth about ourselves … Only by discussing ourselves, holding nothing back, only by being willing to take advice and accept direction could we set foot on the road to straight thinking, solid honesty, and genuine humility.*



For most of us this is a huge undertaking as we have spent a long time hiding, lying—directly or by omission—covering up and pretending. It is a risk we are sorely tempted to pull back from. And yet, we have to ask ourselves how well our lives have gone without trusting another person, without being willing to be known. To deny ourselves this basic human need for intimacy leads to spiritual death as surely as to deny ourselves food leads to physical death.

To quote *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* again:

> *What are we likely to receive from Step Five? For one thing, we shall get rid of that terrible sense of isolation we've always had. Almost without exception, alcoholics are tortured by loneliness. Even before our drinking got bad and people began to cut us off, nearly all of us suffered the feeling that we didn't quite belong … There was always that mysterious barrier we could neither surmount nor understand. It was as if we were actors on a stage, suddenly realizing that we did not know a single line of our parts … Until we had talked with complete candor of our conflicts, and had listened to someone else do the same thing, we still didn't belong. Step Five was the answer.*
>
> [Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to expand on this, it is important to point out that we are told it is not enough to find relief for ourselves through the Fifth Step. It is also necessary to be the one who listens—lovingly, carefully, and with no agenda other than to be of service. To be asked to hear a Fifth Step is a great honor and trust and demands our full attention and all that we have to bring of our own recovery.]

This Step talks about admission of our wrongs. In many cases this is true. We need to look at and take responsibility for the actions that have caused harm to self and to others. However, this isn't the whole story. In the Fourth Step we have also looked at our fears and often will find it necessary to talk about things which are not included in the categories provided by the Big Book. We will need to talk about our suffering, no matter the origin of it. For many of us, it is easier to talk about our wrong behaviors. At least we are the actors there, and not passive. To discuss our suffering seems somehow shameful or weak. Anger, as expressed in resentments, is a response to the world that can seem stronger than revealing our hurt. To be vulnerable in this way is something new and frightening for many of us; and often with

good reason. We have not always been met with understanding and support in the past. Nor, to be fair, have we been able to offer it to others when we were active in our addictions.

As with so much in our recovery, we are driven to this by suffering. Until the burden of our pain becomes unbearable, it is difficult to let another in. By and large, we are not people who have much experience in trust. Can we tell another person our most painful and secret hurts? How can we know that what we say will not be used against us? These are not trivial concerns and must be addressed. As much as we have been hiding until now, it is important not to go to the other extreme and indulge in compulsive disclosure with just anyone. And yet, if we are to remain sober and have any chance at reasonably happy lives, we must take the risk. Sometimes what makes the gamble possible is the experience that holding back has not relieved, but rather increased our suffering. Many people in recovery have told us that doing a Fifth Step has helped them. Why not try it ourselves? There isn't that much left to lose.

Having made the decision to go forward, we need to determine who will receive our history. The process of choosing a sponsor is not all that different from choosing a spiritual teacher. First, we look and listen. In Buddhism, we may want to listen to many different people speak, usually at first in public lectures. Do they seem to know their subject well? Do they explain things in ways that we can understand and that seem pertinent to us? Is the path they describe one that attracts us? Do we feel some warmth from them? Humor? Humility? The next step in the process might be to schedule an individual conversation, telling them a little about ourselves and what we are looking for and listening closely to what they have to say in response. It is probably well to think twice about someone who seems to know all the answers, what we should do and how we should do it. Perhaps we should listen to someone who shares his or her experience with us, rather than his or her opinion. It is also good to know what the expectations are on both sides. If you are looking for a relationship that is regular and close, and the teacher already has fifty students and travels a great deal, you will need to decide what compromises you are willing to accept. If we have carefully and slowly gathered information, listening both to our head and our heart, and the match seems a good one, we can ask to be a student of that teacher and see what happens.

In choosing a sponsor, we follow a similar path. We listen to the person speak in meetings. Perhaps we have heard his or her story and found it like our own. When the person speaks, does he or she seem to have a good grasp of the principles of the program? Does he or she have significant sober time?



And, having made our choice and asked someone to sponsor us, we can also make clear that at first it is a trial. We can proceed in the spirit of experimentation. If after a time the fit doesn't seem to be a good one, either party can withdraw with gratitude for the time spent together.

A sponsor can help us to see the patterns in our lives—the habitual behaviors that contribute to our suffering. And he or she can also point out where we are carrying blame that is inappropriate or misplaced. Too often we give ourselves responsibility for things which are beyond our control.

Speaking our Fifth Step to a sponsor can create a new context for self-examination and help us to exit the solitary confinement of internalized guilt and shame. Telling somehow objectifies the behavior, the history, and allows us to begin to see it clearly—what actions of ours (more often caused by ignorance than malice) create or continue the cycle of suffering. Often our own view is warped by the stories we tell ourselves and we cannot recognize what our part actually has been, either denying any part in our own suffering, or piling on a load of blame that is too heavy for anyone. Bringing these feelings and histories into the light is absolutely necessary for healing.

This healing is not only of ourselves, but of our relationships with others. And in experiencing this, we begin to develop a new understanding of who we are. This is the essential work of recovery: deconstructing the addicted self, just as in Buddhism we deconstruct the self based on greed, hate and delusion. What happens, whether we are conscious of it or not, whether we can articulate it or not, is that the boundaries of the self expand. We are no longer prisoners of the small, dark cell with walls of fear and shame and anger that we have inhabited for so long. Rather who we are begins to stretch beyond our customary definitions to include the other as well. Others become, in American writer Carson McCuller's phrase, "the we of me." As we will explore in greater detail in Steps Six and Seven, the concept of the self becomes more fluid and our experience less heavy, solid and immovable.

Our stories—true or imagined—are the stuff of us and by sharing them with another we can begin to retell them in a fashion that returns us to the world. In Step Five we really begin to be restored to sanity as we are promised at the beginning of the path. *SFZC | 2005*

*Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.*

Steps Six and Seven signal the turning point in our recovery. In the first five Steps we have been concerned mainly with getting and staying sober and establishing a solid foundation in recovery. In Six and Seven we begin preparing ourselves for a life of service. As the Seventh Step prayer says:

> *" … remove from me every single defect of character that stands in the way of my usefulness …"*

In this prayer we are not asking that the characteristics that are bothersome, irritating or inconvenient to ourselves be removed, but only those which make us less effective in our service to others. We may find such traits as messiness, too great a fondness for sweets or neurotic anxiety about being on time to be personally unpleasant. But they do not necessarily bar us from helping others. In fact, some of the things we like least about ourselves may actually be the very characteristics that make us more effective in working with others. For example: though it may be distressing to always worry about being punctual, it does allow others to have trust that we will be where we say, when we say.

In these Steps we become willing to give ourselves over to the process of recovery without being able to either predict or control the outcome. If we declare our intention to be of service, we must let go of how that service may present itself. Of course, we have already done this in a general way in Step Three. But here we declare our readiness to let go of specific characteristics. In effect, we become willing to let go of portions of our personalities, our habitual and ingrained behaviors—in short, parts of our selves.

It is at this point that the Steps can be illuminated by the Buddhist teaching of *anatta*—literally no abiding self or soul. This is taught as one of the three marks of conditioned existence (along with *anica*—impermanence, and *dukkha*, which is variously translated as suffering, incompleteness, or unsatisfactoriness). It is the most radical of the Buddha's teachings in that it contradicts not only most religious philosophies, but the way in which we experience the world and ourselves. *Anatta* means that there is nothing of us that is not subject to change, nothing that is permanent, nothing that is not contingent upon causes and conditions. We are the sum of our characteristics, physical and mental, and only that.



This teaching is sometimes called emptiness, in that all things are said to be empty of independent existence. Another name for this is interdependence, because all things are dependent upon each other for their existence. The simple Buddhist formula is "That is, so this arises. That is not, so this falls away." Such a simple thing as a flower, for instance is the sum total of all the causes and conditions which comprise it: sun, air, soil, water, nutrients, pollination by insects, the seed that came from a flower, that came from a seed that came from the unbroken line of life back to the first simple cells. Take away one of these and there is no flower. (There is a story that once the Buddha came to give a lecture to an assembly of monks and held up a flower in silence. Of all the monks, only Mahakashyapa smiled his understanding. Perhaps he was, at least in part, acknowledging this chain of being.)

What the teaching of *anatta* means for our recovery is this: as change is constant and unavoidable and at least in part determined by volition (which is the definition of karma), we are not necessarily stuck in our suffering. There is a way out. Both the literature of recovery and of Buddhism assert this as a primary axiom. It is the basis of all that follows. We are not hopeless and helpless. In Step Three we make a *decision* and in Step Eleven we strive for *conscious* contact—both acts of will. In Buddhism we recognize the power of the vow. Release from suffering can be learned and taught; and the process of change is, at least to some degree, in our hands. First we must realize that our thinking and behavior has turned everything upside-down. In Buddhist terms, we have sought the permanent in the transitory, pleasure in what can only cause suffering and the nature of the self in a distorted view of the self.

For most alcoholics, one of the problems is over-estimating just how much control we have, or should have. We have tried to control all the aspects of our lives and to freeze the world into a mold of our choosing. We approach our lives as though they were a cross-word puzzle: if we only fill in the right words in the right spaces, everything will be fine and will stay that way. And when it does not, we drink. Learning the balance between where we can effectively use our will power and where it will lead only to frustration is not an easy lesson. It is, however, a necessary one if we are to maintain sobriety and useful lives.

This teaching of no-self has a number of facets, like a jewel held to the light. To say "no-self" is emptiness. To say "all things are self" is interconnectedness. And it is just this interconnectedness which we, as alcoholics, must grasp as an essential part of our recovery. In our active using, we narrow and narrow our vision of who we are, what we are and can become.

The boundaries become claustrophobic. Desperately trying to control and minimize our suffering, ignorant of its cause, we only create more and more for ourselves and those around us. In recovery, in practice, the nature of the self is seen differently. Study of the Way opens our minds to other potentials. Practice of the Steps, of Buddhist principles, actively engages us in real behavioral and perceptual change.

Another way of understanding *anatta* is as humility. The word itself is related to the word humus, earth. Humility recognizes the common nature we share with all beings. Sometimes we call this Buddha nature or awakening, sometimes restoration to sanity. A frequent depiction of Shakyamuni Buddha shows him sitting in meditation posture, with one hand touching the earth. This comes from the story of his awakening. Sitting under the bodhi tree, he was challenged by Mara the tempter, to abandon his quest. Mara tried the Buddha-to-be with desire and with fear. When neither of these was effective, he played his trump card: "Who are you to sit in this seat of awakening? You who are not worthy?" Shame, a sense of worthlessness, a negative obsession with self—these were the final weapons.

Shakyamuni then touched the earth and the voice of the earth proclaimed his worthiness. The voice of the earth goddess spoke of his many lives spent practicing compassion and selfless service to others. Worthiness, then, is not a matter of divine election, of intelligence, even of meditative absorption, but rather of cultivating the connection with others based on the commonality of earth.

This no-self is not a negation of something we had and have to get rid of, but rather an acknowledgement of who and what we really are: beings who are joined to other beings. Neither higher nor lower, of greater or lesser value. This teaching puts aside the measure of relative value. Humility is a declaration of absolute value.

Step Seven particularly concentrates on humility. An illuminating exercise is to read the chapter on this Step in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, substituting the words "connection," "communion" or "community" wherever the word "humility" is used. The following two selections will demonstrate:

> *It was only by repeated humiliation that we were forced to learn something about humility. It was only at the end of a long road marked by successive defeats and humiliations, and the final crushing of our self-sufficiency, that we began to feel humility as something more than a condition of groveling despair.*



And:

> *So it is that we first see humility as a necessity. But this is the barest beginning. To get completely away from our aversion to the idea of being humble, to gain a vision of humility as the avenue to true freedom of the human spirit, to be willing to work for humility as something to be desired of itself, takes most of us a long, long time.*

And now with the substitutions:

> *It was only by repeated humiliation that we were forced to learn something about connection. It was only at the end of a long road marked by successive defeats and humiliations, and the final crushing of our self-sufficiency, that we began to feel communion as something more than a condition of groveling despair.*

And:

> *So it is that we first see community as a necessity. But this is the barest beginning. To get completely away from our aversion to the idea of being in communion, to gain a vision of connection as the avenue to true freedom of the human spirit, to be willing to work for community as something to be desired of itself, takes most of us a long, long time.*

The delusion that we are separate from others, can live as our whim inspires us, and act as if we are not contingent on myriad causes and conditions is a primary cause of our suffering. And this delusion is one into which the alcoholic falls ever more deeply as long as he or she is drinking. We deny that we are part of a community, that our actions have consequences, and that we are beholden to anyone else for our behavior. Only through the sundering of this delusion do we have any possibility of health or happiness.

Once we are ready to undertake this radical change in our lives, we can begin to look at the mechanism of transformation. As we maintain both physical and emotional sobriety, we find that the gap between impulse and action becomes longer. In our active addiction, it was all but non-existent. We were creatures of simple reaction and our reactions were almost always born of fear (in a popular acronym in AA circles, that is: False Evidence Appearing Real).

But as our minds attain to some sort of occasional serenity, we have the option of acting on our first impulse or of restraining our behavior. This is the moment of grace. And it comes as a result of, in Buddhist terms, our vow to be rid of whatever cripples our efforts to be of service, to be in commu-

nion with our fellows. (As a tool, meditation is incomparable for this work as it allows us to observe the activity of our minds in quietude, free from the necessity of response.) This is also the work of faith, faith in the possibility of transformation, faith which we have seen work in the lives of others.

When we initially receive Buddhist precepts, we say "In faith that we are Buddha …" In the work of Steps Six and Seven, we can have that same faith in our recovery. We can keep our character defects before our consciousness, and when they arise, in the gap between impulse and action, we can choose to behave as though they have already been removed. We are Buddha when we enact Buddha. We are in recovery when we enact recovery.

It is said that all the Buddha's teachings have but one flavor, as the ocean has but the one flavor of salt. And this is the flavor of liberation. The Noble Eightfold Path, the Twelve Steps conspire to relieve us of the bondage of self and to open us to the world in ways that we cannot imagine at the beginning of the process. If we could imagine them, they would be grounded in our disease. The path of recovery is one which leads us away from disease and into health, the original meaning of which is wholeness, like the wholeness we form when we join hands at the end of a meeting. *SFZC | 2005*

## STEPS EIGHT, NINE AND TEN

*Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*

> *Once the disciple Ananda spoke to the Buddha, saying, "It seems to me that half of the holy life is association with good and noble friends."*
>
> *The Buddha replied, "Not so, Ananda. The whole of the holy life is association with good and noble friends, with noble practices and with noble ways of living."*



As mentioned in the essay on Step Three, in Buddhism there is no statement of belief, but rather going for refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The refuges are not listed in descending order of importance; they are all on a plane. This makes the community of practitioners as important to individual awakening as the teaching or the teacher. In the same way, we do not recover from our addictions alone, but as sober members of a sober community.

These three Steps are designed to bring us back into harmony with Sangha: the Sangha of family, friends, workmates, and all of the communities of which we have been poorly functioning members.

These Steps also actualize the work we have done in Steps Four through Seven.

In Step Four we wrote about and began to face our fears. In *these* Steps, we confront our fears in the person of those we have harmed. We develop the virtue of courage by behaving courageously.

In Step Five we shared our resentments, fears, sexual misconduct and harmful actions with one other unaffected person. We can rely on our sponsors to be compassionate and on our side. In *these* Steps we face those who have been hurt by us, without any guarantee of forgiveness or understanding.

In Steps Six and Seven we declare our willingness to be changed by acknowledging our destructive characteristics and asking that they be removed. In *these* Steps we take the action that turns this willingness into reality.

Steps Eight, Nine and Ten make our intentions fact.

In Step Eight, while we are listing the wrongs we have done another, it is also useful to list the wrongs we have done ourselves at the same time. If we have stolen from someone, we have affected his or her security and material well-being and we have turned ourselves into thieves. Lying turns us into men and women who cannot be trusted; constant ill temper creates a personality that pushes others away. These are concrete examples of what we saw earlier as the Buddhist doctrines of karma and interconnectedness. It is impossible for us to live and act in a vacuum. Every mental, verbal or physical action that we perform changes us as much as it changes the apparent object of those actions.

As we read in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

> *In many instances we shall find that though the harm done others has not been great, the emotional harm we have done ourselves has. Very deep, sometimes quite forgotten, damaging emotional conflicts persist below the level of consciousness. At the*

*time of these occurrences, they may actually have give our emotions violent twists which have since discolored our personalities and altered our lives for the worse.*

Step Nine addresses our past karma and its results. In Buddhism, recognition and confession of wrongs done, followed by restitution, goes a long way in mitigating the effects of previous actions. There is a wonderful story in the Old Wisdom Tradition about a robber and murderer named Angulimala (the name means "finger necklace"). After he killed his victims he cut off their fingers and threaded them onto a cord he wore around his neck. To condense the story: he met and was converted by the Buddha who ordained him as a monk. And although he suffered to some degree for his past crimes, he was still able to attain awakening in this life time, becoming an arhat. We are not condemned to continue to suffer and cause suffering with no way out of the terrible cycle. But in order to be free, we must make restitution to the greatest degree we are able. Only then the past stops being a chain and anchor and we "see how our experience can benefit others."

In Step Ten we arrive at the present. As the Big Book says, "Sanity will have returned." And the word "sanity" we have seen, means "health"—which means "wholeness." Balance has been restored and the break between us and others has in large degree been mended. Step Ten helps us to tend this newfound communion with others.

It also is a method of creating and increasing intimacy. Others may admire us for our talents or skills or native abilities (or they may dislike us for them); but it is vulnerability which allows others to love us. When we go to another person and admit our mistake and ask forgiveness, we display trust in him or her. Often trust is met with trust and the chance we have taken brings us closer to each other. It is as though we are saying, "I am making myself open to you and I have faith that you will behave kindly and compassionately." This is the gift of generosity: we behave generously in admitting our fault and we provide the other person with an opportunity to practice generosity towards us. Most people, sincerely approached in this fashion, will rise to the occasion.

Forgiveness, then, is an essential part of each of these Steps: we ask forgiveness from others, we offer our forgiveness and we learn to forgive ourselves. A dictionary definition of forgive reads: "to cease to feel resentment against" and "to give up resentment of or claim to requital for an insult." Thus forgiveness has two parts: the inward movement of letting go and the outward relinquishing of a debt. In both cases we give up resentment— which



literally means to "feel again." When we practice resentment we are reliving a situation which has caused us pain in the past. We run it though our minds again and again, each time feeling the pain from the original event. The event need not even be real. It may be a perceived slight or an entirely imaginary conversation. The emotional charge is the same. The difference between this and slamming our head against a wall repeatedly is minimal.

Forgiving ourselves for our past actions or derelictions is also important. Guilt can tell us where we have gone wrong and that may be its only healthy function. If we dwell on our flaws and failures, we continue in our self-obsession and become unavailable to others. And becoming ever more open to, connected with, and available to others is the purpose of these Steps. To hold our sins in a tight fist, unwilling to let them go, is to clench a handful of broken glass.

There is another form of forgiveness which, though not explicitly addressed in recovery literature, is also important to consider. If we are to have peace, we must learn to forgive the world for what it is. For a theist, this would amount to forgiving God. Old age, sickness and death, natural disasters, drought and famine—the world hurts us and those we love and eventually takes everything from us and kills us. To forgive the world, to forgive God, is perhaps something we don't think of in those terms. Acceptance is another word for it.

Acceptance does not mean approval. It simply means no longer hiding from reality. We began the process in Step One, when we accepted our powerlessness and the unmanageability of our lives. This is perhaps the easiest. As we continue practicing the Steps, we face the challenge of accepting and forgiving others and ourselves. Finally, in some way or another, we must come to terms with the world as we find it. This later sort of forgiveness (other words are acceptance and patience) must be based on faith. In order to have serenity in the midst of the inevitable falling-apart of things, a firm basis in a higher power is the only thing that will serve us.

To look at the harms we have inflicted upon ourselves and others and to make restitution can be a fearful enterprise. It means to examine the nature of who we think we are and perhaps to find someone else, quite different.

Eihei Dogen, the 13th founder of the Soto Zen lineage in Japan, wrote:

*To study Buddhism is to study the self.*
*To study the self is to forget the self.*
*To forget the self is to be awakened by the myriad things.*

Both Buddhism and recovery work demand a thorough and honest examination of the self. A Buddhist understanding of the nature of the self can help us face what we find with some equanimity.

As Dogen suggests, when we study the self intensely, when (to use another phrase of his) we "take the backward step that turns the light inward" our notions of what and who we are can change radically. We see that we are formed by all that has gone before us—our parents, their parents, our culture and language and history, and on and on back to the Big Bang. We inherit not only the results of our own karma, but of generational karma as well—the karma of uncountable lives before our own. Whether or not we really believe this, whether or not it is true, we can experiment with this way of looking at ourselves. This viewpoint is perhaps as objective a one as we are likely to achieve. To study ourselves this way allows us to do so dispassionately, to evaluate our behaviors in terms of cause and effect, rather than good and bad. Ideally, this can relieve us of some of the fear and shame that can come in the wake of considering those we have harmed. We do not disclaim responsibility, but stand back enough from our history that the pain of the memories is somewhat blunted. This allows us to move forward.

In Step Five, we undertook to have no more secrets. In these Steps we make a complete offering of ourselves. All that we are, all that we have become is open. There is nothing more to hide. And with nothing to hide, there is nothing to protect. "To be awakened by the myriad things" is to be in harmony with ourselves, the world and our fellows. Obviously, this states the ideal and "no one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles." Still, we approach this state of openness, lack of fear and shame, ability to be comfortably with everyone in our lives—to whatever degree—as a direct result of working Steps One through Ten. Our freedom shall be in direct proportion to our honest efforts in this direction.

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*Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God* as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*

Step Eleven entails a quantum jump from Step Three. This movement of the heart and mind is a transition from a lower to a higher level of commitment, all the while maintaining its essential identity. It is an elaboration of the initial decision made to turn our will and life over to a higher power.

In both Steps we are faced with a deliberate choice: to make "a decision" and to carry on a "conscious contact." Steps Three and Eleven both also contain the idea of surrender: in each we endeavor to subordinate our will. These two poles of will and surrender of will are emblematic of the entirety of the Twelve Step program. Both, though seemingly moving in contradictory directions, are essential and must exist at the same time. These are also found in Buddhist meditation. Whatever the particular style, it always contains two elements—in Sanskrit, samatha and vipassana—calming/concentration and insight.

It is written that when the Buddha-to-be left home in his search for truth, he first studied with two of the most famous teachers of his day. Each taught a version of calming/concentration practice, which he mastered. However, he found these to be ultimately unsatisfactory. After experiencing the bliss and serenity of the meditation state, the practitioner always returns to what he left behind—himself. As a means of complete awakening, *samatha* by itself is inadequate.

There must, though, be a firm base from which to proceed to insight, and this is *samatha*. Calming and concentration are not ends in themselves, but are indispensable for the path leading to awakening and liberation. As Bill W. writes in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

> *And let's remember that meditation is in reality intensely practical. One of its first fruits is emotional balance.*

Buddhist practice is often divided into three parts: ethical conduct *(sila)*, meditation *(dhyana)* and wisdom *(prajna)*. In order to practice the sort of meditation that brings us emotional balance, it is necessary that our minds not be overburdened with guilt and remorse for our past actions. In the language of recovery, it is necessary to have cleaned up to the best of our ability the wreckage of our past. At this point, we can sit down in quiet to practice

calming and concentration. (It is also true that sometimes our efforts to practice meditation can lead us to understand the necessity of these actions. We should not defer practice until we feel perfectly at ease in our lives. Most of us can't wait that long.) Our results will depend largely on our ability to cease or diminish those behaviors that cause suffering. This is how ethical conduct (and Steps Four through Ten) affects meditation.

*Samatha* is that half of the equation in which we surrender. We let go of our busyness and "accept the things we cannot change." Sitting with the breath or other object of concentration, we allow the rest of our mental activity to subside, returning again and again as the mind wanders.

It is the practice of *vipassana*, insight—the unique contribution of Buddhism to the meditation tradition— which the Buddha identified as the way out of suffering. To quote from one of the most important and frequently studied scriptures of the canon, the *Satipatthana Sutta:*

> *Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nirvana—namely the four foundations of mindfulness.*

This is not the place to go into a full description of the meditation techniques outlined in this teaching. It is available in many other places. But briefly, the four foundations are mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of states of mind and of mind objects. Insight meditation consists of allowing thoughts, feelings and sensations to arise in the mind and to fall away. We do this without judging them, without trying to suppress them, without holding onto them, without embroidering them. Just watching. Just noticing. Just returning to the breath.

At first, this will seem a task that is well nigh impossible. Our minds seem chaotic and untamed. In fact, our minds are chaotic and untamed; and it is only when we try to sit with them quietly that we really begin to notice just how much so they are. We can easily become discouraged by our attempts at meditation. It doesn't help that many of us are perfectionists with unrealistic expectations of ourselves. We can perhaps find some comfort in the analogy of other disciplines: we would not expect ourselves to speak flawless French after two lessons, or to be able to understand auto mechanics merely by opening the hood of a car. Our minds are much more complicated than an automobile. And the language of practice demands at least as much from us as does French.



It is ideal to expect nothing from meditation, but very difficult to do so. As with recovery and Buddhist practice in general, we originally come to meditation because we are in pain and looking for an end to pain. To sit without expectation of achievement is something that comes further down the line. We can also be confused by the literature on Buddhist meditation which, on one hand, urges us to make effort, and on the other encourages us to let go of everything. (It may be useful to remember that both Buddhism and the Steps only ask us to let go of that which causes us suffering.) The reason that the language of Buddhism (and especially the Zen school) is sometimes paradoxical is because it accurately reflects the nature of our experience.

Eihei Dogen (quoted in the essay on Steps Eight, Nine and Ten) writes:

> *The zazen* [literally: sitting meditation] *I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the dharma gate of repose and bliss, the practice/realization of totally culminated enlightenment. It is the manifestation of ultimate reality. Traps and snares can never reach it. Once its heart is grasped, you are like the dragon when he gains the water, like the tiger when she enters the mountain.*

When Dogen writes of "learning meditation" he is referring to the idea that meditation is a sort of ladder we climb rung by rung until we reach enlightenment. Rather, he says, our meditation is an expression of our innate awakening, the basic sanity we talk about in Step Two. This is why he uses "practice/realization" as a single term. To practice in this way requires the same sort of faith we encounter in Step Three—a sort of willing suspension of disbelief in the idea that we are irretrievably flawed, and that we deserve the worst that life can throw at us. How would it be if we behaved as though we believed we were Buddha? When we sit down for meditation, we enact Buddha and we need nothing more.

Meditation is actually quite simple. All we have to do is calm down and pay attention.

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At first glance, prayer can seem problematic for a Buddhist. In Buddhism, there is no god to whom we can direct prayer, no omnipotent and benevolent father who is listening. Why, then, should we pray? Or should we at all? Isn't prayer really an expedient device for those who can't accept the rigors of meditation and the responsibility for their own awakening? For after all, the Buddha's final words are reported to have been:

*Monks, all that is composite is subject to decay. Work out your own salvation with diligence.*

There are several ways in which to address the subject of prayer in a Buddhist context. First of all, we can accept that prayer is an action complete in itself. To quote Dogen again:

*Birth is an expression complete this moment. Death is an expression complete this moment. They are like winter and spring. You do not call winter the beginning of spring, nor summer the end of spring.*

Just so, prayer is an expression—of our hope, of our fear, of our gratitude—that needs nothing more in the moment it is uttered. It does not matter whether or not it is heard. To give words to something is to reify it and to allow us to grasp and understand it. Often in the program it is suggested that we write about our difficulties and doubts, about the troubles and triumphs of our lives. Just putting the words down on paper, knowing no one else will read them, is often enough to provide relief. Prayer of this sort can also be an affirmation of our intention: "I ask today to remember to treat others as I would be treated" or "May I be given the strength to stay sober another day." Such language has power in and of itself and does not require an outside context to be efficacious. It establishes a point of view (an intention). And like all points of view, proceeds to collect evidence to support itself.

At the end of Buddhist ceremonies, there is a dedication of merit. The teaching is that in performing a ceremony, through the chanting and offerings (of light and incense, flowers and food) merit is created. This merit has the same effect on our lives as does other positive karma in that it sets up the conditions for future well-being. In the dedication we give away the accumulated merit to others, often to "all beings in the ten directions." Is there really such a force as transferable merit, or is this simply a pious fantasy? It doesn't matter. What does matter is our intention. We behave as though this merit is actually something that can be generated and given away as a gift to others. This is an example of Buddhist prayer in its essence: it re-forms the mind of the practitioner through generosity and it offers whatever it is that can be offered for the benefit of suffering beings.

Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva of compassion, the personification of that energy that acts in the world for the good of others. One translation of the name is *the one who hears the cries of the world*. [In female form, the bodhisattva is known as Guanyin (Chinese) or Kannon (Japanese).] Avalokiteshvara



can be imagined as a celestial being to whom we pray. But in actuality, our prayer is to *become* the one who hears the cries of the world and responds with appropriate action. The bodhisattva vow, mentioned in the essay on Step Two, and which will be examined more thoroughly in Step Twelve, is to change our mind into the mind of compassion (which empathizes with the suffering of others) and wisdom (which allows us to respond in ways which are of real help). This is the true nature of prayer in a Buddhist context.

Looking closely at the literature of recovery, we find that the understanding of prayer is not so different. On page 77 of *Alcoholics Anonymous* we read:

*At the moment we are trying to put our lives in order. But this is not an end in itself. Our real purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us.*

There are also the Third and Seventh Step prayers:

*God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!*

And:

*My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen.*

In these passages we see clearly that our prayer in recovery and our prayer in Buddhism is essentially the same: to be of service to others. The understanding of how that happens is different but the desired result is the same.

Prayer can also be understood as an act of obedience. In a theistic system, the worshipper is concerned to bring herself into harmony with the will of God *(praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.)* In Buddhism, we use prayer to bring ourselves into a right relationship with things as they are, with the truth beyond our liking or disliking. "Things as they are" is a synonym for Dharma, one of the Three Treasures in which we take refuge. That our obedience is to a non-personal reality rather than to a personal deity is less important than the movement of the heart and mind toward union with a higher (or broader or deeper) power than ourselves.

We pray with the body as well as with the mind and the tongue. When we bow silently before an image of the Buddha, when we offer incense and flowers, light and food, when we put our hands together to greet another—all of these are a form of prayer as well. Another prayer of the body is mindful attention. Going through our day, it is easy to become anesthetized to our surroundings, doing two or three things at once, experiencing the world only as object, full of *things* whose value is determined solely by their use to us. Mindfulness offers each thing as *itself respect* and gratitude. Picking up a cup, for instance, watching the hand, the cup and the motion is not the same as reaching for a cup out of the line of sight while talking on the telephone. The former (as well as the other prayers of the body) is an act of devotion. In these silent actions we reaffirm our vow to live in the world as bodhisattvas—attentive, grateful and of service.

It is possible to continue our prayer and meditation throughout the day. We can train ourselves to do so if we wish. While standing in line at the grocery store it is possible to return to the breath. When eating or drinking, we can offer a short, silent prayer of gratitude. In *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill writes:

> *If … our emotional disturbance happens to be great, we will more surely keep our balance, provided we remember, and repeat to ourselves, a particular prayer or phrase that has appealed to us in our reading or meditation. Just saying it over and over will often enable us to clear a channel choked up with anger, fear, frustration, or misunderstanding …"*

Whether we call such a practice meditation or prayer, it serves the dual function of calming the mind and body and replacing unwholesome thoughts with wholesome ones. In Buddhist terms, it re-forms and trains the mind in *bodhicitta*, the thought of awakening. This thought of awakening, or vow to recovery, is what guides us on our way from alcoholic insanity to the grateful acceptance as things as they are and the willingness to live for the benefit of all beings. SFZC | 2005





*Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

This final Step is comprised of three parts: experiencing a spiritual awakening, carrying the message of deliverance and practicing these principles throughout our lives.

Step Twelve can be understood as embodying the Three Treasures (or Jewels, or Refuges) of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The word Buddha literally means "the awakened one." And each of us is first of all attending to his or her own awakening. The Dharma is the teaching (the message); and the Sangha is the community of those who practice together or, in a wider interpretation, the community of all living beings—those with whom and for whom we practice the principles of awakening.

In a spiritual awakening we come (back) into contact with our potential for intimate connection with our own lives, with others, with the world. The inherent message in the language of this Step is that this awakening is something which is based on cause and effect. It is not the result of the caprice of a deity who bestows grace upon some and withholds it from others. It is available to anyone willing and able to undertake the necessary work. It can be learned and taught. In this, both Buddhism and the Steps are in agreement. It is more accurate to say that the Steps themselves are the spiritual awakening.

Awakening is an on-going process wherein we meet the same situations again and again, although each time on a slightly higher level. As long as we practice with right effort and right view, we are able to see into our behaviors and attitudes with more subtlety and therefore with better chances of adjusting our behavior. We spiral around and around, but upward with each revolution, sometimes so slowly we are unaware of the motion.

It is also useful to note that the word "awakening" is used rather than the word "experience." An experience such as Bill W. had, or which is reported in many Buddhist (especially Zen) stories, can be catalytic. But it is not something that can be coerced or guaranteed. In truth, it should not even be aimed for. [As an aside, it should be noted that those monks in the stories who have a great awakening at the sight of a flower or the sound of a pebble striking a piece of bamboo have usually been practicing already for many years. After such opening experiences they typically continue to practice for years longer before teaching.] Dogen-zenji (quoted earlier) in his essay on meditation says "Have no designs on becoming a Buddha."

There is an old Zen story that illustrates this very well:

*Ma'tsu was sitting in meditation when his teacher Nan-yueh passed by and asked, "What are you doing?"*

*"I'm meditating," said the monk.*

*"Why?" asked the teacher.*

*"In order to become a Buddha."*

*The teacher picked up a broken piece of tile and began to rub it vigorously.*

*Ma'tsu asked, "What are you doing?"*

*Nan-yueh replied, "I am rubbing this tile to make it into a mirror."*

This story can be understood in a number of ways. One sense of it is that we cannot (and do not need to try to) change our basic nature. A spiritual awakening is, at least in part, accepting who we are. Neither recovery nor practice is about polishing the tile, turning our efforts into Project John or Project Mary, recreating ourselves as the preconceived, perfected version we have envisioned. Rather, by Step Twelve, our effort is to turn toward the next suffering alcoholic and to find our practice not in personal spiritual adornment, but in service. Dogen defines enlightenment as effort without desire.

Buddhism expresses this in terms of the four bodhisattva vows:

*Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.*
*Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.*
*Dharma gates are endless; I vow to enter them.*
*Buddha's way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.*

Of course, these are at first glance (and at many subsequent glances) absurd and impossible. The task is endless and overwhelming. How can *I* save all beings? Isn't this the sort of absolute, perfectionist thinking that our sponsors often warn us against? And yet, these vows represent the essential understanding and practice of Buddhism.

To save all beings is not so much a task or even a vow as it is an on-going question and practice. What can this possibly mean? Who am I? Who are all beings? What is the relationship? What is this vow and what is salvation? To give ourselves over to this (and the other) vows is to accept for a long time a level of discomfort and a great deal of work: searching, discarding, experimenting, admitting at times to the discovery of fool's gold. In a sense it is only a vow that can be taken by one who does not understand the full extent of what she has undertaken.



Delusions and dharma gates are both without end, because every delusion is a potential dharma gate. "We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others." Each of my delusions and desires, each of my failings can be a great teaching when so approached. The courage to accept my karma without complaint or blame opens the door to understanding and forgiveness. This means the radical acceptance of everything that comes into my life as being somehow generated by me. It doesn't matter whether this is strictly true or not—at any rate it can't be proven or disproven. But to act as if it were true can help to release me from bondage to resentment.

Buddha's way is not somewhere else. It is right here. It is unsurpassable because there is nothing beyond this. Dogen quotes an old Chinese *tenzo* (monastic head cook) as saying, "Nothing in the world is hidden." This does not mean that we understand or even see what is right before our eyes. It takes practice and work and renunciation to become Buddha's way, which is to live in this moment, just as we are, just as it is. Just as in Step One we begin to renounce our delusions, in this vow we renounce all that stands between us and our life as Buddha. And Buddha is Buddha because she is awakened for the sake of all beings. This is the ultimate enlightenment. (There are those in Buddhist teaching, *arhats* and *pratyekabuddhas*, who awaken only to their own salvation. But this is understood as a partial, inferior enlightenment which is to be transcended.)

In Steps One through Five we address our own most urgent, life-threatening situation. If our lives are not ransomed from our addictions, anything else is meaningless. And yet, if we go no further than this in our recovery, we are living only half a life. It is in Steps Six through Twelve that we are reintegrated into the human community and are prepared to be of service. Step Twelve is the culmination of our work in this direction. It is the manifestation of our own recovery and of the bodhisattva vow.

"To carry the message" is the activity of the bodhisattva and of the recovering alcoholic. This is not to proselytize, but rather to model with our lives the possibilities available to all who wish to put an end to their suffering. In a way, it's almost a come-on. There is a story in the *Lotus Sutra* about children playing in a burning house. When they refuse to come out, their father calls in to them promising toys to tempt them away from the flames. On emerging, they find treasures. So it is with us. We are lured into recovery, into practice, by the promise that our suffering will be reduced. But, having taken the bait, we find an entirely new life waiting for us on the other side of our addiction.

Standing outside of the fire, it is our turn to call out "Come out. Come out. Olly-olly out's in free!" and to lure as many out of hell as we can.

This is called *upaya*, skillful means, in Buddhism: the ability to present the teaching to people at the level they are able to receive it. In our Twelfth Step work as sponsors, we are also called upon to exercise this skill. We must, through what we say and what we do, manifest hope to the newcomer—not pretending that a lot of hard work is not ahead, but also not making the work seem so arduous as to kill the desire to attempt it. Mostly, we must simply be there. The bodhisattva does not desert beings in their suffering, even if all she can do is be a witness and a companion in it. And thus, her own suffering is rendering bearable. Because of her own suffering, she understands the suffering of others. This is the original meaning of the word "compassion"—to suffer or to bear with.

In order to continue along this path, we need to "practice these principles in all our affairs." There are various versions of what "these principles" are. Some informal lists circulate within AA, attaching a principle to each Step. In Buddhism, we have the precepts, quoted in the essay on Step Five.

More specific to the bodhisattva path in Buddhist literature, are the six perfections of generosity, ethical behavior, patience, energetic effort, meditation and wisdom. While they are necessarily listed in some order, the understanding is that we practice them simultaneously, with ever increasing skill, and that each includes the others.

For example, the practice of generosity must first be extended to ourselves. In taking the First Step, in coming to admit the universal presence of *dukkha*, we are actually giving ourselves a tremendous gift—the gift of a reality-based view of our lives. In a sense, generosity covers everything. Another translation of the Sanskrit word *dana* might be charity, or *agape* in the Christian sense of a sort of universal benevolence. We must also extend this charity to ourselves in forgiveness. "We are not saints." We are unlikely to become perfect, however much our alcoholism demands perfection or oblivion from us. The generosity of releasing ourselves from the prison of our own demands is the prototype of all that follows.

Generosity towards self and others is essential for ethical behavior, patience (which is almost synonymous with generosity), effort and meditation. Wisdom is the broad, encompassing, generous willingness to see things as they are, rather than through the lens of a narrow self-referential point of view. It is thus with all of the perfections.



Finally, it is important to point out that the Twelfth Step is not about self-sacrifice. Rather is a about a new understanding of the self which comes naturally with practice. When we first come into recovery, we are so empty we can only take. And for a long time we take and take and take—like babies who need to be fed and loved. Eventually, "sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly" we are so filled up that just as naturally we give. The self is no longer an isolated body in space, bumping into other isolates—like ping-pong balls in free fall—but a point along the continuum of interconnectedness. This experience of self and other as one (or as Suzuki Roshi would say "Not one, not two") is the profound essence of Step Twelve and the way of the bodhisattva.

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