A CONTEMPLATIVE VIEW OF ADDICTION AS EXPERIENCED BY A RECOVERING ALCOHOLIC

Pat Patton

I am a sentient being, a psychotherapist, a 48-year-old woman, a friend, a sister, and countless other descriptions. I am also a recovering alcoholic. The label "alcoholic" comes neither first nor last in importance, but because alcohol almost killed me, it is important that I state that fact, to remember the damage done and to celebrate my power over alcohol gained through the 12-Step recovery process.

It took me 22 agonizing years to stop drinking. This article begins with what happened to me, including my gratitude toward and conflicted feelings about 12-Step groups. I include an exploration of the "God part" of the 12-Step process. Most important, I want to share how Tibetan Buddhism has complemented my recovery through a deeper, more direct experience of the 12 Steps. I conclude the article with my views, as a contemplative psychotherapist, on how to work with addicts.

One Person's Journey With Alcoholism

Viewing addiction as a dysfunction of body, mind, and spirit (defined as the vital principle or animating force within all human beings), I think it appropriate to describe my active addiction in those three areas. I started drinking later than most people, at age 20. Very religious during my teens and with aspirations to be a Southern Baptist missionary, I thought alcohol a sin. "Closeted" alcoholism existed on both sides of my family, and my early diaries reflect an eerie, secret fear of it, separate from religious dogma.

My mother died, following a long illness, when I was seven. I was a bright child, entertaining, popular, and a high achiever. I was also introspective and philosophical; religion was my ally and therapy. I began drinking when I started to doubt the existence of God in

my early twenties. Exploration of numerous wisdom traditions never replaced that earlier healer—drinking did.

I was a "good" drinker for a long time. Drinking served me particularly well as I entered the male world of advertising and public relations in the late 1960s, when a two-martini lunch was the norm. Owing to affirmative action programs I moved quickly (too quickly) up the ladder and through the "glass ceiling" of corporate America. By the age of 27, I was a public relations director for a major *Fortune*-500 company and by age 40 had been a senior officer of several companies, always as the first woman. And always pressured, never feeling "good enough."

Three years after my first drinking experiences, I began therapy. Having never worked with the issues around my mother's death, I found it helpful. My therapists, however, dismissed my expressed concerns about my drinking. Except one: He was a tough-love, fear- and shame-inspiring alcoholic treatment specialist. After three visits, he made me too miserable to return. My last psychiatrist before recovery suggested Antabuse, but as an atheist refused to recommend Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) because he could not accept the "God part." I refused Antabuse.

In my mid-thirties I flirted with AA meetings and by then could accept (yet not embrace) the "God part." My biggest problem with these meetings was that upon leaving I always had an overwhelming desire to drink! The gruff old-timers riding roughshod over the group, talking about drinking and calling each other "drunks," reminded me too much of the sin and redemption themes I had cast away in my youth. And as a feminist, I frankly could not stomach the masculine, exclusive language of "The Big Book,"[1] the basic text of Alcoholics Anonymous.

At 38, I left the fast track of the city, where I had done most of my drinking, to marry, and returned to the South, seeking what 12-Steppers call a geographic cure. It did not work. With a failed marriage and a career held on to by a thread, I sought help through a treatment center intake interview. I heard the counselor say, "You don't look like an alcoholic," and that was all I needed to resist

treatment. Returning home, I felt hopeless. That night I had an intense experience of a divine presence (a conversion experience, if you will) that left me free of the desire to drink. That lasted six months. Then I was back drinking heavier than ever, at almost a bottle of scotch a day.

Various phobias, which had crept slowly into my mind during my drinking years, intensified, particularly the fear of heights, bridges, and close spaces. I was often depressed and suffered severe anxiety attacks. Paranoia loomed like fog. I drank alone most of the time. At 42, I was resigned to an early death. In my judgment, I had tried everything to no avail and felt hopeless.

Again at night—a very dark night—I experienced the second of what I called a conversion experience. This time, it came complete with a white light. I was not hallucinating, nor was I a "new-ager." It was a major wake-up call to life.

With that dawn of hope, but remembering all my past failures, I sought help from a friend, who suggested Narcotics Anonymous (NA). With great fear, mixed with an arrogant anticipation of seeing syringes stashed in hallways, I went. I had reached my low point; I was going to seek help from drug addicts. Paradoxically, I was met by happy, smiling faces. I heard them say that alcohol was a drug, but they did not talk about using drugs. They talked about life, about the joys of living drug-free, and about how to work the 12 Steps. I had found a home.

With one exception (in the midst of rage), I have had no desire to drink since that April night six years ago. Physically, I was lucky—I had little or no withdrawal and no liver damage. Mentally and spiritually, however, my luck had run out: I was a wreck.

For three years I worked the program religiously. The group suggested 90 meetings in 90 days; I attended 120 in 90 days. I immediately got a sponsor. I started working the Steps. I seldom talked those first weeks because I knew the language too well and was too slick; I wanted to "walk the walk, not talk the talk." When I did share, I cried more than I spoke; my shame was enormous. But for

the first time I did not feel alone; great comfort came from hearing others say, "I'm an addict."

Unless one has been an addict, one cannot fully appreciate the shame and low self-esteem that most of them suffer. I once informally surveyed 365 meeting topics registered in a 12-Step group's daily log. Only 17 of the 365 listed were repeated more than five times. Of these 17, the most frequent topic was self-esteem (56%), followed closely in popularity by "gratitude."

Grateful was I, for sure. My life began to change, slowly. After three years of recovery and knowing I could no longer live on the edge in the field of advertising and public relations, I decided to change careers and become a psychotherapist. (Now I see that I just exchanged edges.)

My lifestyle, friends, and home base (the heart of the Bible belt) afforded no entree to Buddhism. Finding The Naropa Institute was a most improbable coincidence. I fully expected on my interview to see a campus of people with shaved heads and flowing robes. Not to be: There were others like me—middle-aged, even, returning to school to study contemplative psychotherapy.

Within weeks of my first Buddhist practicum, I was struck by the similarities between my 12-Step program and Buddhism; I was also struck down by silent stares of incomprehension from my Buddhist associates when I voiced positive comparisons. In all fairness to Naropa, I should note that the Institute did not force Buddhism upon me, nor did I ever feel censored for my belief in a "higher power." The college welcomes all wisdom traditions for contemplation and spiritual expansion.

Soon I was introduced to the rewritten Buddhist 12 Steps, devoid of the word "God," the obvious obstacle as interpreted in traditional religious usage. Like my psychiatrist, my Buddhist friends could not get beyond the implied theism to the underlying strength of 12-Step recovery.

The "God Part" of 12-Step Recovery

Since God, for many nontheists, is the major obstacle to acceptance of the 12-Step recovery process from addiction, I want to give

evidence here of the inspirational intention of the God aspect of 12-Step work, an intent shared by all spiritual paths, theistic and nontheistic. I hope readers can see beyond the "God part" to the intrinsic healing possibilities of 12-Step recovery when it is reframed in this way.

The 12-Step program is not a religion. It *is* a spiritual path, with three indispensable spiritual principles which represent the "HOW" (how it works) of the program: Honesty, Openmindedness, and Willingness. The understanding of a higher power is up to the addict. Some call it "the group" or "the program," and most understand God, or Higher Power, as simply whatever force keeps them sober. Gerald May (1988), in his book, *Addiction and Grace*, quotes Paul Tillich, who said that whatever we are ultimately concerned with is God for us (p. 29). During the early days and years of sobriety, staying sober is the addict's ultimate concern. This ultimate focus becomes God for the addict, by whatever name or image given, to enable the addict to achieve sobriety.

For many 12-Step members this focus is easily translated into the traditional belief in God: a being of supernatural powers or attributes, especially a patriarchal deity, thought to control some part of nature or reality and believed in and worshipped. Yet there are people with successful recoveries who do *not* believe in such a being.

I was not a traditional believer in God at the beginning of my recovery, nor am I now. However, I saw ample evidence of a responsive creative force, answering cries for help, that was beyond the ordinary. Trusting this force opened my eyes to countless "miracles" of synchronicity, coincidence, and extraordinary human transformations.

Deepak Chopra (1993), in his book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, suggests that ". . . the material world is an expression of an unmanifest, overriding intelligence that responds to human desire" (p. 108).

Julia Cameron (1992), writing about the existence of God in *The Artist's Way*, says, "Whether we conceive of an inner god force or an other, outer God, doesn't matter. Relying on that force does"

(p. 64). This force, or God or Self or group, that extends beyond the individual to a larger reality, which is obtained by a definite, conscious process, is a necessary part of 12-Step recovery.

That process is also present in nontheistic traditions. To quote Sogyal Rinpoche (1992) from his book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying:*

> All the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and enlightened beings are present at all moments to help us, and it is through the presence of the master that all of their blessings are focused directly at us. . . .
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> All we need to do to receive direct help is to ask. . . . And yet asking is what we find hardest. Many of us, I feel, hardly know *how* to ask. . . . The turning point in any healing of alcoholics or drug addicts is when they admit their illness and ask for aid. In one way or another, we are all addicts of samsara; the moment when help can come for us is when we admit our addiction and simply ask. . . .
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> There is no swifter, more moving, or more powerful practice for invoking the help of the enlightened beings, for arousing devotion and realizing the nature of mind, than the practice of Guru Yoga. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche wrote, "The words Guru Yoga mean 'union with the nature of the guru,' and in this practice we are given methods by which we can blend our own minds with the enlightened mind of the master." Remember that the master—the guru—embodies the crystallization of the blessings of all buddhas, masters, and enlightened beings. So to invoke him or her is to invoke them all; and to merge your mind and heart with your master's wisdom mind is to merge your mind with the truth and very embodiment of enlightenment.
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> The outer teacher introduces you directly to the truth of your inner teacher. The more it is revealed through his or her teaching and inspiration, the more you begin to realize that outer and inner teacher are indivisible (pp. 143-144).

Let's examine what Ken Wilber (1991) calls "self power" and "other power" in his book *Grace and Grit:*

> "You know, you're actually describing perfectly what the Japanese Buddhists call 'self power' and 'other power.' All meditation breaks down into those two types. Self-power is epitomized by Zen, by vipassana, by jnana yoga. Here, one relies strictly on one's own powers of concentration and awareness in order to break through the ego to a larger identity. In other power, one relies on the power of the guru, or on God, or simply on complete surrender."
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> "And you think they both come to the same end?" Treya looked unconvinced.
>
> "I do. Remember even Ramana Maharshi [generally regarded as India's greatest modern sage] said that there are two ways to enlightenment: either inquire, 'Who am I?,' which undermines the ego completely, or surrender to the guru or God and let God strike down the ego. Either way the ego is undone and the Self shines forth. Personally I'm hooked on the self inquiry, 'Who am I?,' which is also a famous Zen koan. But I'm convinced they both work" (pp. 97-98).

So am I. The concept of a higher power allows the addict to reach out for help in order to let go of entrenched belief systems rooted

in self-centeredness. I have experienced this power in the two personal "conversion" experiences mentioned earlier, and I have seen it many times in the transcendence of 12-Step practitioners: an awakening to an unexplainable dynamic beyond verbalization that allows an addict to break through normal ego formations, thereby changing his or her view of self and the world.

Asking for help, letting go of one's control, one's ego, is difficult enough without the added burden of addiction. For most, the concept of a higher power affords the inspiration to move forward. The magic of 12-Step recovery—and I think the major reason for its recognized success in comparison to other treatment forms—is the surrender to a higher intelligence. Wisdom traditions throughout history refer to this higher power both internally and externally, regardless of the name, over and over again. So, yes, I believe in a higher power. You might say I think of God as a verb, and I see that active concept moving the mind, the body, and the spirit away from addiction. For me, to focus on God as a reason to dismiss 12-Step recovery is invalid and is more often an excuse rather than a reason not to join. To argue whose dogma is right misses the point. The inspirational and active part of the program works. I refer again to Sogyal Rinpoche, who during a workshop was asked by a perplexed Christian student, "How can I be both a Christian and a Buddhist?" Sogyal replied, "Be a Christian; practice Buddhism." In this God/12-Step query, I suggest, "Be a nontheist; practice 12 Step."

The Twelve Steps are not the Only Way Out

The 12-Step program, however, is not the only path out of addiction. Charlotte Davis Kasl's (1992) insightful and courageous book, *Many Roads, One Journey,* speaks to this point. In this work, Kasl confronts the mystique of 12-Step programs. With less courage than Kasl, I also question the absolutism of the program. Alcoholics Anonymous did not work for me as Narcotics Anonymous did in early recovery, although I can attend and benefit from AA meetings now. In truth, to say anything against the 12-Step process scares me

and smacks of betrayal. But it is not perfect. Buddhism created a more spacious view for me, and it complemented my ongoing recovery. However, without the take-action form of the 12-Step program, I doubt I could have received the insights I have from Buddhism or any other wisdom tradition.

In Ari L. Goldman's (1991) book *The Search for God at Harvard,* the author quotes a religion professor's declaration, "If you know one religion . . . you don't know any. . . . It is unfair and unwise to try to understand one religion by the yardstick of another. Each religion is unique" (p. 33). I agree. Loosely defined, the 12-Step process can be termed a religion; however, I do not wish to compare it to Buddhism. Rather, I want to share with you how Buddhism deepened my belief in the 12-Step process.

Working the 12 Steps from a Buddhist View

When we say "working the 12 Steps," we mean studying them, writing about them, and discussing each one with a sponsor as well as in meetings. Most important, we attempt to live what we learn about each one. For purposes of form, I will take each step and add to it my newly acquired Buddhist insight.

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction and our lives had become unmanageable: Perhaps the most fundamental of Buddhist teachings is the Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha formulated as a summary of his realization. When I contemplate the First Noble Truth, which speaks to the nature of suffering in life, my appreciation of Step 1 is deepened. When I remember my powerlessness over alcohol, I am reminded of my suffering; in fact, Step 1 was originally written, "We knew we were whipped." That is suffering, certainly. Meditation practice led me to a deeper encounter with my suffering, beyond just the pain resulting from alcohol abuse.

One day on my cushion, after weeks of meditation, I felt emotional pain more acutely than ever before. It had no story line. It was just pain. For once, I did not give it excuses for being, such as

my mother's death or failed relationships or slights to my ego. I just felt it. And because I did not grasp it or push it away, I touched it fully, and the pain disappeared. I am sure I had known such pain before, but meditation practice allowed me to experience its depths and accept it as a condition of existence. I had always pushed pain away, first with my religion, then with anesthetization through alcohol.

Abstinence does not produce a manageable life. Buddhism influenced my interpretation of "unmanageability" in terms of samsara, the struggle to survive through habitual patterns. Through the *shamatha* (dwelling in peace) practice of mindfulness meditation, I am learning to be more present, to see my mind more clearly, to see the vicious and distorted cycle of my thoughts. In early recovery, I experienced what might be called corrective-surface manageability, such as attentiveness to cleaning closets, or to paying bills on time. Sitting practice has created a perception of manageability in terms of *mental clarity*. Just by assuming the posture of meditation, by taking my seat, on the spot, I get a sense that my life is workable.

Instead of focusing on problems, which revolve around "me," "ego," I can let go of habitual patterns and egotistical preoccupations such as denial, rationalization, justification and, most important, self-aggression. I may recognize *feelings* of powerlessness, but I am not powerless. Rather than magnifying habitual feelings and obstacles, which blur seeing things as they are, I can simply acknowledge and denounce them.

Working with samsaric mind, I have learned also how my body and mind become desynchronized. Through meditation and Raja Yoga, I gain manageability from an awakened sense of body/mind as one, rather than as separate entities.

When I had been sober about six months, I remember talking on the phone one morning, holding a cup of coffee and catching sight of a pen rolling off a table *behind* my back. I caught it in mid-air, effortlessly. I cried happy tears over that. Why? Because during my addiction, my sense perceptions were so drugged that I could not

have done that. With that simple feat of coordination, I felt a keen sense of dignity and oneness with the universe.

Back then, the extreme contrast of sobriety with my previous drugged state was obvious. Today, that contrast is not so great, but when my mind and body are desynchronized, a certain fuzziness occurs, alerting me to question the manageability of my life. When I recognize these body signals, I make a conscious effort to develop what Buddhists call "mindfulness of body." Simple tasks—such as washing dishes, feeling the water and the cup, or feeling my feet touch the ground as I walk—become therapeutic. I have found a path out of most of my anxiety around heights, bridges, and close spaces. Through body/mind synchronization in the practices of meditation and yoga, I have developed a sense of groundedness and presence through breathing practices in both disciplines.

Step 2: We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity: I have already stated my conviction in the existence of a vast force beyond human comprehension. Also incomprehensible in my early days of Buddhist studies was the fundamental teaching of "basic goodness." This teaching proclaims that all beings possess an intrinsic and undeniable wakefulness, called Buddha-nature. As Ösel Tendzin (1982) wrote in *Buddha in The Palm Of Your Hand,* "This fundamental, intrinsic wakefulness in us is both the starting point and the fulfillment of our human life. It is the cause of trying to achieve something and the achievement itself" (p. 47). Addiction is a distancing journey away from our true self, our basic goodness. Coming home to that is the ultimate path—again and again.

Coming from "basic badness" and a spiritual background infused with original sin, I find that embracing the concept of my own basic goodness has become a power force from within, rather than from "out there." To me, it is the God *within.* To view my basic, true nature as one of peace and gentleness restores my sanity, and it eases my paranoia by allowing me to see that quality in myself, thus allowing me to see it more clearly in others. Bowing regularly to that goodness reinforces the sanity in self and other.

Buddhism taught me to see not only the neurotic or pathological condition of addiction, but, as outrageous as it sounds, the sanity as well. In the 12-Step world, we talk frequently about insanity, defining it as "doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results."[2] That *is* insane. But from a perspective of basic goodness, I can also see the sanity: Alcohol did relieve my pain. Instead of self-revulsion, I feel compassion for the alcoholic I once was, who tried desperately to ease the suffering. I have laid down the sledgehammer of the "insanity" judgment.

Step 3: We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of god as we understand him: "Letting go" was a term frequently expressed during my early exposure to Buddhism. In its similarity to "Let go; Let God," it provided my first comparison to 12-Step philosophy. Learning to let go is vital to recovery. And you feel really good when you do, and really bad and obsessive when you do not. I learned many action steps in recovery for living my life better, but heard no tips on *how* to let go. Timidly, I would wonder, "Let go of what?" The Buddhist answer was "Let go of ego"—ego viewed as a solid, unchangeable, permanent self. Again, to quote Sogyal Rinpoche (1992): "We are terrified of letting go, terrified, in fact, of living at all, since learning to live is learning to let go" (p. 33).

Buddhism taught me this lesson gently and with patience on the meditation cushion. For hours I watched my mind hold on to thoughts. Then thoughts would disappear. I could not recall them. Just thoughts. Experientially, I saw my mind let go. I saw the power of my ego, just as I had seen the power of alcohol, and I saw how by letting go of ego, I was able to let go of alcohol, as well as of other deeply ingrained habitual patterns.

On the cushion, letting go is not an intellectual construct. It is practice. In the meditation that I do, thoughts are labeled as "thinking." I will never forget the shift that came when I replaced the label, "thinking, goddamn it, again!" with just a gentle reminder of "thinking."

That gentleness evoked more gentleness and allowed me to see

my own basic goodness more clearly. Letting go was simply that: letting go of my attachment to thought, to desire, to pain and suffering. And there was no right or wrong way to do it. Just let go. I am learning this through practice, not dogma.

I can even let go (most of the time) of the irritation provoked by that ambiguous, choiceless wording of Step 3: "God as I understand *Him*." They gave me a choice, then defined my choice as male. Let it go. Let it go. (Maybe I will not let go of the insight I have concerning the limitations and damage that such language can cause, but I can let go of my aggression toward the exclusive language.)

Step 4: We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves: With this step, I came to appreciate *maitri*, as explained by Ösel Tendzin (1982):

> We have to accept negativity as part of our path.
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> In order to do that we have to make friends with ourselves completely, by developing what is known as *maitri*, or loving kindness, kindness to ourselves. Kindness to ourselves means kindness to whatever negativity arises and to whatever seems to be outside our discipline. We have to learn to relax and readmit chaos, which means having an open heart. (p. 46)

Step 4 included some goodness along with the bad, but there was no *acceptance* of the bad. It was something to be rid of. Making friends with myself was the hardest friendship I have ever forged. My self-talk was merciless, and the experience of *maitri* has bubbled up slowly. I am learning to accept those unacceptable parts of myself through direct experience. That does not imply complacency, but rather compassion for me as I am now.

Step 5: We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs: Through Buddhism, I learned the story of the great yogin Milarepa, whose guru, Marpa, was the father of the Kagyu lineage in Tibet in the 11th century. He labored many years to relate to his past actions and the chaos he had created by using sorcery to wreak destruction. It was necessary for him to take full responsibility for the harm he had caused, before

he could receive instructions that led to his liberation. The same is true for receiving 12-Step instructions leading to liberation from addiction. From the Buddhist view of karma as cause and effect, I now have a greater appreciation for the need to acknowledge not only the nature of my wrongs, but of my intent, as well. While the 12-Step process suggests a need to get *rid* of my wrongs, I now have space to own it all—the good, the bad, and the good intent gone awry. I have come to think of enlightenment as Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck (1989) describes it, "bringing in more light" (p. 137). Like mushrooms, defects grow in the dark, and die in the light of exposure.

Step 6: We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character: My Buddhist thinking leads me to interpret this step in a totally new way. I no longer expect to be permanently rid of my defects. Take patience, for example. Through practice, I have increased this virtue tenfold. But impatience will come back. I have merely learned better to accept it, and myself when it returns. I am less afraid to touch it, recognize it, and relax about it. As I increase awareness of my numerous states of mind and behaviors, I am able to work more skillfully with them when they do arise. I no longer view them as setbacks to my recovery. Rather, my journey in this life is more focused on learning the art of being a better human being, than on being a perfect one. Defects are human and connect me with my heart.

Step 7: Humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings: Here, also, I seek my better self, my basic goodness, my Buddha-nature. I think of shortcomings as the clouds that impede the view of my true nature. Humility, to me, means being teachable. I want to be more spacious, more open to the transformation of destructive behavior into positive behavior. That happens, too.

Step 8: We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: We made direct amends to such people whenever possible except when to do so would injure them or others: A student of his told me that Chögyam Trungpa once defined enlightenment

as "compassion with self and skillful means with others." I know that during my active addiction I harmed a lot of people, but I hurt myself most of all. I have made amends to myself now, as well as to others. I have found I can ease my shame and guilt through developing *maitri*. My search for authenticity and my basic goodness and resulting openheartedness lead me away from harming others, and to painful awareness when I do. This deepening interpretation of these two steps has helped me realize the possibility of egolessness and to realize that we humans are not unchangeable, but ever-changing and growing. This realization, according to Trungpa, allows us to develop a sense of sympathy with ourselves, to trust ourselves. Only then is the mind workable.

In the *lojong* (training the mind) teachings of Buddhism, slogans are used in the Kadam tradition to assist one in working with the phenomenal world. The false perceptions arising out of mental creation are most apparent to me in my unskillful acts toward others. My favorite of these slogans is "Drive all blames into oneself." Beginning with the story of Adam and Eve, I have observed a world quick to blame others (even a snake!) for all discomfort. This slogan, when applied to Steps 9 and 10, demands that I come back inside myself and realize how my preoccupation with self allows me to sacrifice others. It demands an immediate search for how I am projecting my pain outward and results in a clearer vision of both self and other.

The next slogan is "Be grateful to everyone." Not only am I quicker to make amends, but I have come to know that the anxiety and frustration that emerge in relationships are my most direct route to self-awareness. I not only want to make amends, I am consistently grateful for the irritations.

Step 11: We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it: Embracing the concept of basic goodness has decreased the toxicity of being "wrong." It has allowed me to replace the shame of being a "bad person" with compassion, knowing that sometimes I make bad choices and respond in unskillful ways. As I work toward conscious action, awareness

of poor choices cuts through denial and is acknowledged more easily.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs: A "spiritual awakening" previously had a religious connotation to me. Today I see it as a powerful glimpse of my basic goodness, my Buddha-nature. That is what my conversion experiences were. If I view my mind as a continuum from full consciousness to ignorance, most of my thinking dwells in the ordinary mental state somewhere near the middle of the continuum. Conditioned responses come from lack of consciousness. As I break through to consciousness, I have what this step refers to as a "spiritual awakening."

"Unconditional love" is a term heard frequently in meetings. And practiced. It is an uplifting view of others that I have never witnessed outside those 12-Step meeting rooms. I remember an NA meeting called "Moon Dog." It was held on Friday night, a night when the 200-plus people in this group traditionally liked to "howl." The meeting was mixed: whites, blacks, gays, straights, rich, poor, homeless, ordinary, and famous. At the end of the meeting, arms—some with hands held, others woven around each others' backs and over shoulders—wound like snakes around the crowded room. Quietly all 200 voices recited, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." And then came a deafening final roar: "Keep coming back!"

Was the sense of joy and renewal after that meeting just some sort of emotional release? Maybe, in part. But today I believe that associating with people from vastly different social and economic strata, *without judgment,* affords a release from the life-deadening force of conditioned response. In those moments of intense awareness of the present, with gratitude for lives almost lost, we were given a glimpse of clarity, and of basic goodness in others and ourselves, that ordinary associations do not afford. The "Moon Dog" meeting never failed to provide a "spiritual awakening."

Over the years I have watched hundreds of people pass through the doors of 12-Step meetings. Many come back—most do not. The ones who do and who practice the 12 Steps wake up spiritually. This awakening is evidenced by the changes made in hopeless lives and arises, I believe, from the Buddhist principle of basic goodness. These people realize their own dignity. They realize they have the strength to practice a set of disciplines. As compassion is felt within, there is a strong desire to share it with others. For many, this is the first time they think beyond self.

Reading about the Buddhist bodhisattva vow, I have experienced a deeper understanding of the desire to "save all sentient beings." As Chögyam Trungpa (1979) said, "Taking the bodhisattva vow is different from converting people into your faith. . . . This is a very personal feeling: you have seen Buddha-nature so vividly, witnessed it so vividly, and you wish you could share it with others" (p. 82). This is the spirit of Step 12: One purely wants to share it, to actualize it with others.

An Addict's Therapeutic View

My story of active addiction is filled with many therapeutic questions: Was my early religion a drug? What was I trying to anesthetize? Did I inherit my alcoholism? Did therapy help me? Should I have been treated for depression? For anxiety? Why did I first reject a form that later worked? What was different? How did the dynamics of one group differ from another? As a woman, did I have special needs to be met?

I am not a certified addictions counselor. Most of the questions in my story are adequately answered in traditional research literature. Nor do I want to cover here the traditional assessment and diagnostic tools that can be helpful in determining alcohol/drug dependency and abuse. I do, however, want to address those questions that form my views of treating addiction as a contemplative therapist, a recovering alcoholic, and a woman. My story is, of course, not definitive. What worked or did not work for me will not

necessarily apply to anyone else. That is the maddening reality of addiction. This is only my experience and the resulting view.

First, was my religion a drug, and what was I trying to anesthetize? Yes, I think my religion was a drug. I used it to keep from feeling intense pain. The problem was that while it eased my suffering, it kept me from accepting pain as a condition of existence and from learning to work with suffering. Religion did keep me off drugs until early adulthood, however; I doubt I would have lived if I had started drinking in early adolescence. Also, my religion taught me compassion for others, if not for myself, and laid a foundation for introspection and contemplation.

I do not believe that religion of any type is specific enough to cut through the denial of most addicts. Treatment needs to be addiction-specific. Religion, as I have suggested, complements recovery. In addition, most wisdom traditions are too complex to be understood until one can work through and accept the effect drugs have on the mind.

Did I inherit my alcoholism? I will leave this question to the geneticists; it is not an issue for me. As a therapist, however, I know that it always raises a red flag when assessing family history. If alcoholism is not genetically passed on, then the patterns for dealing with suffering most often are.

In fact, substance abuse is so insidious that, regardless of the problem a client presents, it behooves the therapist to consider its possible presence. Most people do not connect their abuse to the problems in their lives. They have no idea that alcohol, for example, is a depressant. I am convinced that if anxiety or depression is presented, a therapist needs to rule out substance abuse before proceeding with treatment. I have had countless clients describe their alcohol use as "no problem," until they tried to stop it and could not. So my answer to the question, "Should I have been treated for anxiety and depression?" is no, that the treatment would have failed until I stopped drinking, regardless of the therapist's skill.

This leads to the question, "Did therapy help me?" The joke among addicts is, "You pay your therapist to sit and listen to you

lie." If a client is actively using drugs, that person is not capable of being truthful. Therapy then serves to mask the addictive process. Using insight therapy on an addict is like trying to teach a pig to sing: It wastes your time and annoys the pig.

Early in my practice of psychotherapy I had a client who had relapsed after two years of strong recovery. In his one year "back out," he refused to go to meetings and used the AA lingo to assure me he was in control. The truth was he was destroying his life. At first, because of my own addiction experience, I thought I could help. Very soon, however, it was apparent that he was using therapy to cut his anxiety about drinking and, thus relieved, went out and drank more. I terminated treatment until he would admit his addiction, agree to go to meetings, and make an effort to stop drinking.

I believe I was correct in that intervention, and will not work with addicts except in concert with group work and in absence of denial. Addiction is more than an individual process—it is a social and systems process as well. Groups with structured programs to deal with addictions can cut through the system where individual therapy cannot. Nor can individual therapy provide environments of shared suffering and shame, peer support, and unconditional care as group meetings can. Furthermore, groups provide a set path of action to deal with specific chemical or psychological/process addictions (such as gambling or sex) that is without parallel.

As I have said, the 12-Step model is not the only one that works. But due to the abundance of 12-Step meetings, and because the 12-Step method is the model of choice for most treatment programs, it is worthwhile for therapists to develop treatment plans inclusive of the 12-Step process and to expand on its view. Twelve-Step programs provide simple guidelines that most people can understand. It is a strong enough structure to contain the upheaval inherent in moving away from addiction.

So why did I first reject a form that later worked? What was different? How did the dynamics of one group differ from another? I finally hit bottom and accepted the 12 Steps as my last hope. I was willing. Also, I found a group that talked about living life, not

about drinking. All AA or NA meetings are not the same; different groups form different norms. I did not know this. Today, there are broader choices available.

For those people for whom a male God is too great an obstruction to overcome, there are other options, such as Women for Sobriety, Secular Organization for Sobriety, Save Our Selves, and Rational Recovery, as well as Charlotte Davis Kasl's 16-Step program. Examination of these alternative programs is beyond the scope of this article; however, these methods are all worthy of consideration.

As a woman, did I have special needs to be met? Yes. Patriarchy has taken its toll on all of us, men and women. And I have played according to its rules as much as any male peer. However, I am not male, and gave little attention to my true female nature. Neither did most treatment programs. I cannot stress enough the importance of women recognizing the impact of patriarchy on their recovery. Therapists can play an invaluable role in helping women find their own voice, both in the groups they join and in working the 12 Steps, or any other treatment model.

Women, especially dependent and minority women and those with low ego strength (in the Freudian sense, not to be confused with earlier Buddhist references to ego as a solid, permanent mind state), need encouragement and empowerment, which many 12-Step groups do not foster. What is required is an ego infused with mindfulness, awareness, wisdom, and compassion. Originating as a model to work with white, middle-class males, the 12 Steps' negative, patriarchal, hierarchical approach is generally not ego-affirming to women. Our culture, which is reflected in most 12-Step groups, traditionally robs women of their own self-worth. Since building self-esteem is central in the treatment of addiction, great care must be taken to avoid further denigration of women.

AA founder Bill Wilson's approach worked for him and for many men whose overinflated egos reduced all circumstances to absolute issues of right and wrong. Most women *and* men enter 12-Step programs "whipped," and cannot function because of crushed,

nonexistent egos. These people carry Step 4 to the extremes of self-abuse. They need assistance and nurturance in working this step, to include the positive as well as the negative. The World Service Office's "Blue Book" (1987), the basic text of Narcotics Anonymous, provides compassionate guidelines:

> Step four is to sort through the confusion and the contradiction of our lives, so that we can find out who we really are. . . . Some of us make the mistake of approaching the Fourth Step as if it were a confession of how horrible we are—what a bad person we have been. In this new way of life, a binge of emotional sorrow can be dangerous. This is not the purpose of the Fourth Step. We are trying to free ourselves of living old, useless patterns. We take the Fourth Step to grow and to gain strength and insight. (pp. 26-27)

Therapists can help women working and writing this step by pointing out thought distortions, particularly as outlined by David Burns (1980) in his cognitive therapy book, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. Many acts of wrongdoing included in this step derive from a clearly distorted female view of selfishness, such as, "I was a terrible wife, I rarely cooked dinner for my husband."

I had greater ego strength than most women I encountered in 12-Step groups. But I rarely questioned the rigidity of the program. Therapists can serve a valuable role in encouraging people to trust their own inner wisdom as they interpret the steps. Or they can assist clients in rewording steps to fit the particular needs of the individual, thus helping the client view the fundamental tools of recovery in a more palatable and less literal context.

Body/mind disciplines, such as yoga, breathing exercises, and various meditation and visualization practices, can help open the door to healing and recovery from still other sources. For most addicts, staying with direct experience, whether mental or physical, is very difficult; that difficulty is a prime reason for using drugs in the first place. This is also a major area where therapists can help. Once free from the numbing effects of drugs, addicts need clear, pointed techniques to experience both pain *and* pleasure. Fundamental to my view of treating addiction is helping a person uncover his or her own basic goodness. People might stop drinking or join

a recovery group out of fear, but true healing cannot evolve out of condemnation. It comes from gentle, loving self-acceptance. That is the underlying wisdom of 12-Step recovery, which is often distorted by interpretation and polarized thinking. A therapist can help move the clouds that distort the wisdom of the 12 Steps, as originally inspired.

Working with addicts is hard work. What is effective for one client will not be effective for another. Treatment requires enormous patience and constantly creates doubt within the therapist. One needs to do more than simply *help* an addict uncover their basic goodness; one needs to *inspire*.

I trust that, at a very deep level, "God within" exists and that addicts can come to awareness of and compassion for their own innate wisdom.

NOTES

1. "The Big Book" is the commonly used name for the text published by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. As anonymity is an essential aspect of the AA program, and articles in the book have been written by many authors, the authorship of the book is attributed to the same organization, as well.
2. This is a phrase commonly heard in 12-Step programs, whose source is unknown.
3. This is the common designation for Narcotics Anonymous' main text. The actual title is simply *Narcotics Anonymous*.

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