

TWELVE-STEP PROGRAMS AS PATH

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-Step programs with respect to parallels and similarities with the spiritual path of Buddhism. While there are numerous differences between these disciplines, the object of this article is to highlight some of the similarities: (1) The reality of suffering and vision of new possibilities; (2) Initiation into a new worldview; (3) Practices and disciplines; (4) Communities of practitioners who are living according to these principles; and (5) Connection with a greater sense of the universe that transcends usual egoistic preoccupation.

First, a personal note. I came to appreciate the strength and potency of 12-Step programs quite by accident. I am a psychologist who was trained in the 1970s. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was seen by my teachers as a somewhat useful tool for fundamentalist types who didn't have the ego strength to participate in traditional psychotherapy modalities. Nevertheless, I spent a year as a staff member at an alcohol recovery center scrambling to finish my doctoral dissertation. During this time, the "real world" of addictions helped me to see the kinds of transformations that disciplined participation in a 12-Step program could nurture.

Many people were brought into the facility on police holds and most would leave after 24 to 48 hours. But a street person, such as Conrad,¹ might enter treatment and elect to participate in follow-up care. Conrad was 29 and had been homeless for a couple of years. His introduction to AA and other resources began a process of transformation that was almost beyond belief. He began to engage with the world and to treat himself as a human being worthy of respect and dignity. Although relapse is a fact of life with this complex

disease, it was hard to refute the changes that regular participation in the AA system was helping him to co-create.

While I was working in the recovery center, Shambhala Training² and Buddhism began to seep into my life. I noticed certain parallels between the transformative journey made by disciplined 12-Step practitioners and that taken by students of Buddhism. The 12-Step movement began to take the form, for me, of a mind/body path, sharing certain characteristics with other spiritual ways of life. I use “mind/body” path to refer to the synchronization of mind and body through physical and psychological practices. “Path” refers to a way of life inspired by a vision including specific principles and practices. Paths can take many forms. I would like to focus on five parallels between the 12-Step and Buddhist paths.

THE REALITY OF SUFFERING AND VISION OF NEW POSSIBILITIES

All 12-Step programs view the root of suffering as alcohol addiction: a person’s life becomes unmanageable and out of control as a result of the compulsive use of this drug. They also envision human life as capable of dignity and sacredness. Alcoholics Anonymous, on which all other 12-Step programs are modeled, originated as a peer support network in the thirties, started by two alcoholics who were disillusioned and disheartened by traditional treatment approaches. At the heart of the movement was the sense that people whose lives had been decimated by alcohol did not have to live that way any longer. A set of principles (steps) and guidelines (traditions) was provided to outline this path.

The sole admission criterion for entering AA is a serious desire and commitment to end the suffering caused by the use of alcohol—first for oneself and then for others. The first step on the AA path promotes an acceptance of the reality of life as lived by an addict—that it is unmanageable and filled with suffering.

Step 1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, and that our lives had become unmanageable

A person is then encouraged to renounce the root of the pain (alcohol). The subsequent steps provide a vision of a new way of life, and practices for the cultivation of basic dignity in the person's world.

A striking parallel with AA's general message is found in the most fundamental of Buddhist teachings, the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth, as outlined by Buddha, is the truth of suffering in the world: All beings are born into a state of suffering. The Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering, states that this experience of misery originates from neurotic attachment to self and one's personal situation.

AA's Step 1 and Buddhism's First Noble Truth both describe pain and unmanageability in the individual's life. They both begin by acknowledging the hopelessness of ignorantly continuing with an undisciplined lifestyle. Both offer the renunciation of this lifestyle as the beginning of a more fruitful existence. The subsequent two Noble Truths offer a vision of a different way of life that has striking parallels to 12-Step living.

The Third Noble Truth provides a vision of ending suffering by following the example of Buddha. Anyone can learn to cut pain at its root: One must acknowledge one's situation as it is, renounce previous neurotic solutions, and be willing to participate in certain spiritual practices. The Fourth Noble Truth describes the path that enables one to follow the example of the Buddha.

INITIATION INTO A NEW WORLDVIEW

Many spiritual traditions invite interested individuals to consider a new way of life. For those who accept this invitation, an initiation is begun that welcomes the newcomers and simultaneously allows them to let go of old ways of being. Typically, there is some form of ceremony or demarcation that involves simultaneously surrendering to what is now happening in their lives and renouncing their

old path. The initiation ritual then further defines and refines an understanding of the path.

The initiation into 12-Step living, for example, involves opening to a new path whose ways are usually unknown to the initiate. Life as the person has experienced it will be completely and unpredictably altered. While the person is immediately asked to acknowledge and give in to present reality (the powerlessness and unmanageability of alcohol), renunciation of old ways is framed as a more gradual process. Nevertheless, the old practices (social possibilities centered around alcohol), traditions (drinking buddies), rituals (bar rituals, holiday celebrations, etc.) are about to die. These deaths, the degeneration or cessation of the previously known, make room for a new way of life with different possibilities. For many, the grief is as harsh and riveting as when a forest is ravaged by fire. The dark charcoal tastes bitter, but the space is also ripe for new growth.

Jerry, a recovering alcoholic of a year, put it this way:

Giving up alcohol was the hardest thing that I ever did. Drinking was part of every piece of my life. I couldn't go to a party unless I was sure there was enough (booze). I didn't think I could ever live without the stuff. When I saw other men in AA who were sober more than 20 years with worse stories than mine, at first it made me mad because I didn't think I would do it. Then I had hope. These men seemed to be at peace with themselves.

The 12-Step programs and traditions provide ritual space in which personal transformation can be cultivated. Meeting space, ritual practices during and after groups, and the steps and traditions themselves are some examples. The addict's life is expanded to include a place for connection to a consciousness broader than self (Higher Power) that facilitates these changes. The alcoholic person is thus initiated into a new community with a different identity: that of a recovering person, with altered social contracts, practices, and commitments.

The first three steps define these aspects of the journey. In addition to the first step described above, they state:

Step 2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity

Step 3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him

The experience of surrendering to “things as they are” and then letting go of old preoccupations is quite in keeping with other sacred traditions as the ground for a new way of life. In Buddhist tradition, for example, the acceptance of the First Noble Truth (the acknowledgment of life as suffering) is a part of the ceremony of Taking Refuge. Taking refuge means giving up one’s individual territory and, in the words of Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, “giving up altogether” (Trungpa, 1980a, p. 56). One gives in to the sense of powerlessness and unmanageability in the life previously lived.

In the refuge ceremony, the student formally opens her/his heart to the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma (the way things are, also the teachings), and Sangha (the community of fellow practitioners). This allows for the initiation of the new member into a community where, working shoulder to shoulder with fellow practitioners, the new path (life possibilities) becomes a reality. The student is also given a new name to signify the beginning of a different life. Taking refuge has been described further by Trungpa, Rinpoche as “giving in to yourself . . . letting yourself be as decent a person as possible” (Trungpa, 1980a, p. 57). The ground has been established to promote the transformative possibilities in an individual’s life.

These are some similarities in the basic initiation philosophies of AA and Buddhism. Both point to the hopelessness of the previous relationship with life; both offer a well-defined path as an alternative with specific guidelines for its cultivation.

PRACTICES AND DISCIPLINE

Specific practices that help the individual to develop the new way of life are central to the success of both 12-Step and Buddhist paths.

In AA, for instance, there is the acknowledgment that life as the person has previously lived it is no longer workable. Meditation is used as a tool for working with obsession. While specific meditation techniques are not prescribed in AA, any practices that provide quiet inner space are encouraged. Here, as in Buddhist teachings, many steps and traditions focus on being present and help the practitioner to participate more fully in the play of the present moment.

It is also important, however, to free the individual from the grip of past harmful acts associated with the addiction. AA has developed a series of practices for the individual to come to terms with his/her personal history, in order to maintain a new way of life unencumbered by negative actions associated with addiction. The beginning AA practitioner utilizes specific methods to let go of old patterns of thinking and acting in the world, thereby opening space for new possibilities. This approach permits the initiate to alter her/his relationship to past events, facilitating movement into a different way of life. Tibetan Buddhism also responds, in a less explicit manner, to these concerns.

AA Steps 4 and 5 call for honest self-reflection and an acknowledgment of past actions that have caused harm to self and others.

Step 4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves

Step 5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs

In Buddhism this process is recognized as “right action.” Step 4 stresses the importance of cutting through the confusion of self while simultaneously recognizing the contradictions of human existence. Such self-assessment requires the proper attitude, namely that of a realistic and loving friend who can see beyond the husk to the seed of basic worth. The Fifth Step focuses on wrong action or behavior committed while drinking, rather than on vilifying the addict. Sharing with another recovering person the “awful secrets”

associated with addiction begins to make the healing journey real. The person is provided a context in which to sense both her/his humanness and further possibilities.

AA Steps 6 and 7 ask the person to participate in a cleansing ritual with regard to her/his shortcomings.

Step 6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character

Step 7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings

Although this is expressed in a theistic manner (“. . . to have God remove all these defects of character”) (World Service Office, Inc., 1987, p. 32), fundamentally this step is a cleansing ritual that prepares and allows the person to participate in the ongoing development of new ways of being. It is very important that the subsequent steps and practices in the program and in the person’s life be approached from a nonreactive, centered position, in contrast to an impulsive, aggressive, or ignorant stance. The addict is therefore directed to avoid helter-skelter action, which could add further garbage to the already overburdened heap. The cultivation of proper motivation is also encouraged. Before action is attempted, the alcoholic is directed to connect with her/his higher power, in order to establish the “right attitude” required for further progress.

Steps 8 and 9 allow for atonement and release of the burdens of past negative action. The harmful acts have been acknowledged, and the context established for “right action.” The person is encouraged to make proper amends.

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

The Tenth Step allows for the continuing release of self-blame and therefore the continuing possibility of living in the present moment, making addictive solutions less compelling.

Step 10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it

In this way, 12-Step programs provide a direct and explicit format for releasing negative deeds and moving the individual more fully into the present. Harmful actions are neutralized, and ongoing practice prevents the development of further harmful situations.

Buddhism works differently on explicit and systematic treatment of personal history. Buddhism is a religion that is centered around various practices and disciplines that cultivate a basic awakened state of mind. Certain foundation practices, for example, nurture the commitments made during the refuge ceremony. The basic practice of *shamatha* (taming the mind) meditation offers both beginning and advanced Buddhist practitioners in the Tibetan tradition a time-honored vehicle for being in the present moment. In this particular meditation practice, the person develops mindfulness of body, speech, and mind. Sitting on the meditation cushion, the practitioner can begin to experience a sense of well-being and connect to a "seed of basic goodness" (Trungpa, 1984). Attention is placed on the breathing, while the person develops openness to experiences of the mind that arise. In order to avoid being captured or captivated by these "mind phenomena," they are labeled as "thinking" and allowed to dissolve naturally. An increasing sense of openness to the present moment is cultivated in the face of habitual "mind chatter" and other recurrent obstacles and difficulties that arise. The person begins to develop a sense that all situations are workable.

It should be noted that certain formats for neutralizing and reversing the negative effects of harmful past actions, as well as for ceasing the creation of additional harmful actions, are central to Buddhist teachings. Karma is defined neutrally as "action," or the chain of cause and effect, action and reaction. The individual ceases

to create more “bad karma” and can also continue to change, undoing the results of previous negative actions as well. Practices such as “sending and taking” help to purify body, speech, and mind from the grip of harmful past actions. In this practice, the practitioner is trained to generate positive energy for all beings in the universe, while absorbing the pain and suffering of others. He/she operates from a sense of continuous wealth, rather than from the “poverty mentality” inherent in the continuation of harmful actions and consequences. The accumulation of merit through moment-to-moment presence also begins to dissolve the solidity of habitual patterns and accumulations that block compassionate and insightful action in the world.

The cultivation of “right action and intent,” central to Buddhism, can be nurtured in conjunction with various practices, including *shamatha* practice and sending and taking. Meditation allows the person to reconnect with her/his basic Buddha-nature (basic goodness), and to cut through the harmful mind creations and patterns that maintain and preserve grasping, ignorant, and aggressive actions. As the solidity of conceptual frameworks continues to dissolve, shedding and cleansing can take place, making room for spontaneous, present connection and greater compassion for the benefit of others. *Vipassana*, or insight into how the mind works to create harmful situations, spontaneously begins to develop as the meditator continues these basic practices. Hence, the practitioner can more freely and compassionately participate in present life.

Although the specifics of 12-Step programs and Buddhist practices are different, both have prescriptions for developing basic centeredness and reducing the harmful effects of negative habits. Both also present a new way of life that the initiate accepts in the initiation ceremony.

THE COMMUNITY

In Buddhism, taking refuge involves relinquishing personal territory and accepting the community (*sangha*) as spiritual compan-

ions (Trungpa, 1980a, pp. 54-57). Within this community, practitioners help each other to stay more clearly on the path of increasing openness, developing grounded awareness, maintaining practice, etc. Community meditation sessions, in which practitioners sit on individual cushions but remain in the context of the community, encourage the regular practice of meditation.

Fellowship with other addicts or alcoholics is also at the heart of 12-Step programs. Peer support from other addicts provides ongoing, living examples of sober and vital lives. People share personal experiences in an atmosphere of support in the ritual space of meetings. As in the tradition of Buddhism, the place of the community is established in the initiation ceremony. AA is presented to new members as a *fellowship* with traditions and steps. The first tradition in AA reads: Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on AA unity. And as the primary NA³ handbook states: "We strengthen our own recovery when we share it with others who ask for help" (World Service Office, Inc., 1987, p. 54).

Another way the AA community helps its members is by providing many down-to-earth, practical reminders to help participants remain grounded in the present. Aphorisms such as "one day at a time," "living just for today," etc. are reminders that individuals can cut through "the burden of the past and the fear of the future," and focus on the possibility of "now."

One woman who has had a lifelong history of compulsive eating described her connection with Overeaters Anonymous in this way:

When I'm there, everything seems simple. I don't have to worry so much about the future. I can relax and concentrate on today. Overeaters Anonymous helps me to know that this is possible. And I know that everyone there really understands me. (Personal communication, 1987)

Dharmic reminders, easily remembered and shared by participating meditators, are also found in the Buddhist traditions. The practitioner is helped to develop a sense of discriminating awareness and, ultimately, greater sympathy towards self and others. Through slogans like "Regard all dharmas as dreams," the person is re-

mindful of impermanence and meditation practice, and can connect with a deeper trust that the mind is always workable. These aphorisms are daily reminders that help to center the practitioner on his/her path.

Both Buddhist and 12-Step devotees are supported by a community of fellow practitioners. The group, in each case, pulls the individual away from her/his small world of obsession/compulsion (AA) or self-preoccupation (Buddhism) into a larger arena. Both have some similar practices to work with mind and its manifestations.

GREATER CONNECTION THAT TRANSCENDS USUAL EGOISTIC PREOCCUPATION

The 12-Step path emphasizes a connection with something larger than the person's usual egoistic preoccupations. These programs offer a unique set of principles that successfully invokes and invites the cultivation of a spiritual state of mind, from which sane action flows.

Step 11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only of His will for us and the power to carry that out

The acceptance of a higher power, in whatever form, allows everyday pettiness and the usual preoccupation with self to continuously dissolve. The person is able to connect to a larger sense of universe and purpose. People in AA report that in reflecting on their spiritual connectedness, greater clarity becomes part of the picture, and the importance of impulsive thoughts diminishes.

In the words of one man who has been with the program for three years:

I used to like to have a lot of distractions when I was driving; the radio turned up full blast, and a lot of things going through my head. Now I take the drive time to meditate and connect with my Higher Power, when possible. (Personal communication, 1990).

Meditation allows the addict to develop her/his own spiritual path. In the Narcotics Anonymous handbook, meditation is referred to as "quieting the mind," the preliminary practice "aimed at stilling the mind, and letting the thoughts that arise die a natural death" (World Service Office, Inc., 1987, p. 43). Prayer is also advocated: Prayer "helps a person live a life that is free of fear and distrust" (ibid., p. 44). When selfish motives are removed, space is made for "feelings of peace and serenity. An awareness and empathy for other people becomes possible" (World Service Office, Inc., 1987, p. 44). The Eleventh Step helps to prepare the ground for truly altruistic service to others that is embodied in the final, or Twelfth Step.

Step 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs

This final step in AA stresses commitment to others. The spiritual tradition in AA embodies a principle that one must give away the riches of the program in order to sustain them. Spiritual wealth can only be enjoyed if it is freely shared. However, without a spiritual awakening that allows the transcendence of individual pettiness, the proper attitude is not present to carry the message to others. Sharing by example comes from a place of selflessness and humility. The NA handbook discusses the proper attitude for this step: "We don't set ourselves up as gods. . . . It is a privilege to respond to a cry for help" (ibid., p. 47).

Buddhism views altruism in a slightly different light than do the 12-Step programs. After the individual works with her/his personal suffering, in many Buddhist traditions the practitioner may become inspired to take the Bodhisattva (enlightened being) vow and move onto the Mahayana path. Here, practitioners vow to work for the benefit of others, putting the welfare of others before their own. The motivation to take this vow arises from a grounded sense of compassion that stems not from guilt but from the space of egolessness

that has been cultivated in previous practices. This position evolves from an awareness that openness and enlightened mind can only continue to develop from such a ground.

COMMENTARY

A few words of explanation are in order about the use of the term "Higher Power" in 12-Step programs. This concept has created unnecessary difficulty for some who might be considering this helping method. A broader reading of "Higher Power," supported by most 12-Step insiders, tends not to be a fundamentalist religious doctrine, but an emphasis on the connectedness to something greater than the tiny world of self-preoccupation. Connection with a greater spiritual center that transcends the individual's sense of "little self" can then be cultivated.

Twelve-Step programs offer a total way of being that involves mind/body participation in an essential fellowship of individuals united by common suffering. Mind/body refers to the treatment of the person as a whole entity, going beyond the usual dichotomy of viewing mind and body as separate. Ordinary personal boundaries are surrendered to a higher power or spiritual center, allowing for a life-changing spiritual awakening. The person is able to cut through preoccupation with the past or future and focus on each day. The slogan "one day at a time," similar to the Taoist "one step at a time," emphasizes the "nowness" of each moment.

Practices that involve the cultivation of mindfulness and awareness are important foundations on the Buddhist path, as well. Mindfulness of body, for example, emphasizes complete and full body awareness in the present as the person sits on the meditation cushion. A greater sense of life, moment by moment, is aroused and nurtured.

Both AA and Buddhist teachings stress the interconnectedness of being and doing, where process (being) is related to but supersedes performance or goal-orientation, and mindful actions (doing;

“skillful means,” in Buddhism) tend to flow naturally from this position.

Dichotomizing being and doing in any system leads to certain difficulties or obstacles. For example, overfocusing on the form or performance aspects (doing) of any practice can lead to a parody of the actual path, just as overemphasizing the “being” qualities with no connection to action fails to provide a sound basis for compassion and altruism. People in AA sometimes refer to those who “talk the talk, rather than walk the walk.” These are individuals who go through the right motions but who don’t actually integrate the practices into their lives.

Buddhist practitioners can fall into the same trap. In one Tibetan Buddhist psychological typology, the downside of “just being” is described as a tendency to abandon intelligent alertness in favor of a disengaged style in the world. This stance can create the same obstacles as “not walking the walk” for 12-Step practitioners.

A simplistic reading of 12-Step fundamentals might lead to a misinterpretation of the insider’s experience. The elegant simplicity of this way of life might be unnecessarily reduced to a narrow-minded, goal-directed set of clichés designed to help the person “not drink.” Although the desire to end addiction is certainly grounds for entering AA, the path of recognizing and working with suffering is very much an unfolding process of simultaneous being and doing. AA’s success in changing lives is ultimately more connected with these deeper issues than with the performative ideas popularized by the mainstream press.

In his book, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, Chögyam Trungpa describes some of the traps that instrumentally-oriented Westerners encounter in maintaining a spiritual discipline. High on the list are the various ways of doing one thing (taking refuge vows, participating in spiritual practices, etc.) in order to achieve another: fulfillment, peace of mind, happiness, among others. Some practitioners even have the goal of achieving enlightenment. Paradoxically, this achievement-oriented attitude defeats the possibility of letting go of ego that results in an eventual enlightened state.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on some similarities of Buddhism and 12-Step programs at the heart of the transformative process of each. Initiation into the 12-Step path invites the individual onto a path that stresses living in an integrative manner. The person is able to drop the habitual action of addiction. A new and different person approaches life with altered commitments and possibilities. Practicing with others becomes important, resulting in a deepened connection to life—a life more present-centered, less self-preoccupied, and ultimately more spontaneous. Similarly, Buddhist practitioners also experience transformation as they are initiated into a new way of life which includes participation in spiritual practices with others. Buddhist practitioners continue to cultivate basic awareness and mindfulness in their lives in a disciplined manner. Finally, both Buddhism and 12-Step programs stress the interconnectedness of being and doing in the world.

NOTES

1. All names in reference to clinical examples have been changed, as have the actual case histories.

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