

Buddhist Oriented Recovery
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November 8, 2009

Would you like to know whether a dog is enlightened? This drawing may help. [Walk up and down the aisle with a drawing of a sleeping dog dreaming of a bone.] This, my friends, is a dog dreaming of a *medium* sized bone. ;) It is not a small bone; that would be asceticism. It is not a large bone; that would be indulgence. This is an enlightened dog. It has found the Middle Way. It is dreaming of a *medium* sized bone.

By my reckoning, human beings who are satisfied with enjoying medium sized pleasures and tolerating medium sized discomforts are enlightened also. However, it is not enough for many of us to enjoy medium sized pleasures, nor is it enough for many of us to tolerate medium sized discomforts. We want to enjoy big, juicy, over the top pleasures. We want to tolerate only little itsy bitsy discomfort. This dynamic holds true for many of us, and it is especially pronounced for those of us who are addicted to substances or to behavior patterns.

It is as if addicts view their favorite pleasure through a magnifying glass, exaggerating how good they will feel and how long the high will last. It is as if addicts view the painful consequences of addiction through a microscope, minimizing the impact of addiction on themselves and on others. As I understand it, there are so called “reward pathways” in the brain. In comparison to people who are *not* addicted to substances or to behavior patterns, the addict is chasing higher highs (imagine a dog who dreams of a huge, juicy, outrageously delicious bone). In comparison to people who are *not* addicted to substances or to behavior patterns, the addict is seeking to avoid experiencing even medium sized discomforts.

People struggling with addiction (and their loved ones) know a thing or two about suffering. People in recovery from addiction know a thing or two about an ending to suffering. Last month, about 100 Buddhists, therapists, and academics gathered for the very first conference of the brand new Buddhist Recovery Network. Some of attendees were in recovery themselves, and some were not. As a member of the Pacific Southwest District’s Addiction and Recovery Ministries team, I was eager to learn about Buddhist oriented addiction recovery.

I joined the Addictions and Recovery Ministry team of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Pacific Southwest District in part because I wanted to make sure that there was a voice advocating for recovery that is not necessarily abstinence based. People working in the addiction recovery field sometimes disagree with each other over the approach to use. In addition to supporting an abstinence-only approach, I support what is called a "harm reduction" approach regarding recovery. Many times, total abstinence from substances or behavior patterns is the best or the only way for people to live in recovery. I believe that sometimes controlled use of substances or controlled expression of behavior can also be a worthwhile way to live in recovery.

The insert in the Order of Service summarizes the philosophical underpinnings of various approaches to addiction recovery and shows how relapse is viewed in each approach. The summary was presented by G. Alan Marlatt, Ph.D. of the University of Washington Addictive Behaviors Research Center.¹ The 12 Step approach is characteristic of *one* of the four approaches.

My interest in non-abstinence based recovery can probably be traced back to my college years, when I had trouble with compulsive overeating. For a while, I attended Overeaters Anonymous meetings. OA is a 12 Step program, similar in approach to Alcoholics Anonymous. Obviously, no one can abstain from food. For a compulsive overeater, recovery has to mean healthier behavior around food, not abstinence from food. In the past year, I have made similar changes in how I behave around alcohol. I changed my behavior pattern from enjoying the big, juicy "bone" of wine to the medium sized "bone" of light beer when I drink alcohol. I believe that additional millions of people in this country might lead healthier lives if they were in recovery based on controlled use of substances or based on controlled expression of problem behavior.

Buddhism, with its valuing of the "Middle Way," has much to offer those who are struggling with addiction. The Middle Way is the path which runs between the extremes of asceticism and indulgence. Siddhatta Gotama walked that trail some 2,500 years ago. Religious scholar Karen

¹ The insert in the Order of Service showed Brickman's model of helping and coping applied to addictive behaviors, as well as the website for the Addictive Behaviors Research Center: <http://depts.washington.edu/abrc>.

Armstrong observes that “Like Jesus, Muhammad, and Socrates, the Buddha was teaching men and women how to transcend the world and its suffering, how to reach beyond human pettiness and expediency and discover an absolute value. All were trying to make human beings more conscious of themselves and awaken them to their full potential.”²

The Buddhist approach to awakening our full potential is one that is based upon directly experiencing the “Four Noble Truths:”

1. Life means suffering.
2. The origin of suffering is attachment.
3. The cessation of suffering is attainable.
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.³

To make a long story short, we suffer because we have a hard time tolerating discomfort – physical discomfort, intellectual discomfort, emotional discomfort, spiritual discomfort. Yet our self *itself* is not particularly stable from one moment to moment. Our attachment to the concept of a self which persists over time delivers to us a good measure of the suffering experienced by our doused and bedraggled egos. We want the good times to roll on -- and on and on. If bad times are on the way, better they should happen to someone else – or so we may feel some of the time.

However, taught the Buddha, we can cultivate a different attitude, and we can cultivate different behavior. We can treat each other (and ourselves) with loving kindness. We do not need to look to an external God for permission, inspiration, or blessing as we go about our modest, practical, and daily efforts of loving kindness. Discomfort is a part of life. Discomfort is mandatory for all living beings, but the ego’s suffering is optional.

The non-theistic Buddhist approach to a life with less suffering appeals among others to those Unitarian Universalists who are not theistic. 12 Step groups work well for many people in

² *Buddha* by Karen Armstrong, published by the Penguin Group, 2001, New York, p. xxiv.

³ See <http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/fourtruths.html>.

recovery. The 12 Step approach requires surrender to a Higher Power, which some people call God and other people consider to be wisdom of the group itself. The Christian “Lord’s Prayer” is recited at the end of many groups. Someone who is not a theist or not Christian can feel out of place there.

A recurring theme at the Buddhist Recovery Conference was how Buddhists can relate to 12 Step groups. Some attendees advocated for having a Buddhist perspective on the 12 Step approach to recovery. Others want to create a distinctly Buddhist approach to recovery, perhaps one based upon the Buddhist Noble 8 Fold Path (right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration).⁴ Noah Levine, author of *Dharma Punx* and *Against the Stream* is working on precisely that. By the way, I have a dozen pages of notes from the conference, and I will be glad to share them upon request. This morning, I will share a few practical tips from the conference.

Mindfulness meditation was not presented as a “cure” for addiction. However, several speakers emphasized that mindfulness can be helpful in relapse prevention. In mindfulness meditation, a person pays careful attention to what is going on inside them and around them, from moment to moment. Mindfulness means turning off automatic pilot. Relapse prevention is a critical aspect of recovery because with addiction, relapse is fairly common. According to Dr. Ann Bolger of Santa Cruz, with mindfulness, we can give passing attention to cravings but not react in an automatic way.⁵ We can remember the acronym SOBER, which is printed in the Order of Service. We can stop, observe, breathe, expand our awareness, and respond mindfully.

We can enter the spaciousness between a situational “trigger” and addictive behavior. Negative emotional states will come and go in our life. Negative emotional states are like the changing weather around a mountain. We may not want things to be the way they are, so the prospect of escape is appealing. Through mindfulness, we can learn that thoughts (especially judgmental thoughts) affect our feelings, but we are not our thoughts. We are not puppets at the mercy of

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path.

⁵ See <http://www.drbolger.com/>.

our thoughts. We can watch thoughts come and go. We can focus on the mountain, not on the weather.

By watching thoughts come and go, we can “step out of the story line of thought.” The ability to step out of the story line of thought is important in relapse prevention because relapse is not an event but a process. There is a time known as “working up to a relapse.” We can sabotage that process and can short circuit this matter of working up to a relapse.

If we are mindful, we can see the impermanence of the high that we think we are about to get. Chasing a high is an inability to accept impermanence in our life. “This, too, shall pass.” Wonderful times will pass, and awful times will pass. The Serenity Prayer says “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. Sometimes the idea of accepting things grates on our activist, consumerist, impatient sensibilities. Dr. Bolger noted that “let things be” is more user friendly language than “accept things.” We can let things be and let go of them instead of resisting them. We don’t have to suppress or avoid. Just let it be.

We can gain skill at letting things be, and letting them go by meditating each day. This time I mean by sitting still and paying attention to what is going on inside us, as well as what is going on outside of us. How long to meditate? If we work up to 45 minutes per day, we will be better equipped to *respond* to triggers and not *react* to them. The goal is greater *tolerance* for discomfort in our lives rather than the absence of discomfort.

Addiction affects the entire family system. Trudy Goodman and Beverly Berg presented a workshop on the “Anatomy of Emotional Recovery for the Sober Buddhist Family.”⁶ Their goal is to show families how to sustain connection despite the discomfort they feel. In terms of addiction and recovery, the couple as a unit has not had enough support and training. In the first 90 days after people are home from rehab, there are a lot of premature divorce and separation. They say that a skillful counselor or therapist can “bridge” the couple into what they may not

⁶ See <http://www.insightla.org/about/trudy.asp> regarding Trudy Goodman. Beverly Berg, Ph.D. may be contacted at beverlyberg@mac.com. She leads an eight-week group for sober alcoholics and their partners, whether sober or non-alcoholic.

have experienced before. Talk therapy does not typically make a difference, but mindfulness and breathing exercises can help.

With a newly sober partner, you think you know them, but you do not. How do you start over together? This is the essential relationship question. Unfortunately, to be good at *concentrating* in meditation is not an advantage, according to Trudy Goodman and Beverly Berg. To be good at concentrating in meditation helps you “white knuckle” through things, but it does not help you to ask for forgiveness. In relationships, we need forgiveness. We need to be able to ask for it, and we need to be able to give it.

In conclusion, “positive psychology” draws from Buddhism. Positive psychology focuses healthy dynamics, not unhealthy dynamics. On a scale of health and wellbeing, they say that Western psychology goes from zero to five. Buddhism takes you from 5 to 10. What if you are at zero or below zero? Try a forgiveness practice. “The gift of desperation will fuel your practice,” say Trudy Goodman and Beverly Berg. Be honest about where you can and cannot forgive. Reestablish the integrity of keeping your word.

When cravings for a substance or for an unhealthy behavior pattern arise, we can try “urge surfing.”⁷ We can focus on our breathing. Our breath is the surfboard. We can surf the wave of craving until the wave subsides. We might “wipe out” a few times as we learn to surf. With practice, surfing the urges gets easier.

May this congregation nurture recovery. May we support each other’s efforts to live in healthy relationships with ourselves, with others in this congregation and in the world beyond these walls. May it be so!

⁷ See <http://www.addictioninfo.org/articles/2878/1/Urge-Surfing---Relapse-Prevention/Page1.html>.