

Buddhists in Recovery
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Informal groups are meeting in cities across the country to help members learn to use their Buddhist practice to overcome addiction.

Reggie, Frazier, Juan and Kathryn knew they were in trouble when they saw their life-conditions spiraling downward, out of control. As practicing Buddhists they thought they could “just chant” and get their lives straightened out, but it didn’t work that way. They were addicted to alcohol and drugs.

Each of these people, and many more, have recovered from their addictions through their practice coupled with guidance and professional help or, in some cases, by forming or joining an informal group of fellow recovering Buddhists.

Reggie lives outside Chicago and attends just such a gathering called the Lotus Group. “I was in and out of abstinence for four years,” Reggie says. “I tried so hard to do it on my own. At one point I had about 18 months clean, but I started drinking beer and it led me right back to drugs. I chanted and nothing happened. I really tried but I couldn’t stay away from drugs. It was terrible but I just couldn’t stay clean. I was very active in young men’s division activities, and I know now that my practice was very superficial. After a while I couldn’t chant, do gongyo or study. My life was crashing as if I were a fallen glass.”

Reggie, who has been clean and sober for more than a year, credits his fellow Lotus Group members with helping him understand how to use the practice to overcome his addictions. “My using wiped out all my relationships,” he says. “I couldn’t even see my children, and I ended up homeless and living under bridges. But Bruce and Al, my sponsors in the Lotus Group, never gave up on me. They always encouraged me to come to Lotus Group meetings, and when I finally chanted sincerely, with their help, I realized that my practice had to be inside me. Once that happened I knew what was meant by *human revolution* and *changing karma*,” he says.

Robert Inatomi, Los Angeles #1 Joint Territory guidance staff, didn’t have a substance-abuse problem, but his son did. Mr. Inatomi had seen his son try to overcome his addiction through various programs, including Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. When Mr. Inatomi heard Frazier, a men’s division member, talk about his recovery from alcoholism at a district meeting, he encouraged Frazier and others to form a support group for Buddhists in recovery.

“I wanted to see them get on with their lives...to enjoy their lives without fear,” Mr. Inatomi says. “I knew that people who share their recovery with others make their own recovery stronger.” Mr. Inatomi’s son has now been in recovery for 18 months, is working, married and has a baby boy.

Frazier was in and out of programs for more than 10 years. He just couldn’t seem to get any sobriety under his belt before he would use drugs and alcohol again. He lost everything, several times over — jobs, his wife, his self-esteem and, worst of all, his 8-year-old son.

He tried AA, and he knew it worked, but he never resolved the God question (One of AA’s 12 steps to recovery is to give yourself over to God “however you conceive him to be”) and found the AA program wasn’t the total answer.

Nevertheless, he told his district last year that he had finally admitted that the obstacle to developing his faith was alcohol and drug addiction.

Once Mr. Inatomi urged Frazier to contact other members, he was so busy phoning

people and making arrangements for meetings that he completely overlooked the fact that he was staying clean and sober. He had 35 people at his first meeting, informally also called the Lotus Group.

He always believed that the 12 steps of AA would work if he could just use them in a Buddhist context, he says. "The first step of AA [admitting powerless over alcohol] is the first step in an alcoholic's human revolution and, I believe, absolutely essential to recovery from any kind of addiction," he explains. As Buddhism teaches, recognizing a problem is the first step in overcoming it. Frazier now has been clean and sober more than a year.

In the early years of AA, alcoholism was not treated as a disease but rather a lack of will power. Science has since discovered through intensive research that some people tend toward addiction because of their inability to properly metabolize chemicals. The AA Big Book (the text of the 12-Step Program) now states that alcoholism is a threefold disease: "a physical allergy, coupled with a mental obsession and a spiritual malady."

Just not drinking or using is not recovery, according to AA, because addiction is a disease of the spirit as well as the body. The spiritual answer in AA is a Power Greater Than Ourselves, which many Buddhists seeking recovery have had difficulty with, since it indicates that God or whatever other Power is outside ourselves, while Buddhism teaches that we each inherently possess the Buddha nature.

This is perhaps why informal Buddhist recovery groups are springing up around the country. Buddhists in recovery know they, too, need support groups. And sometimes even well-meaning SGI-USA friends or leaders, little experienced with the pathology of addiction, offer support that isn't helpful. Being among other Buddhists with the same problem, Buddhists in recovery can find the support they need.

Kathryn from San Francisco is another example, clean and sober for 12-and-a-half years and a practicing Buddhist for 13-and-a-half years. She tried going to NA meetings but didn't like them. "There was so much talk about God and a power outside of myself," she says. "It just seemed to me that if the people who were Buddhists had their own group, we could go to the Gohonzon together and get the strength we needed to recover."

The San Francisco group was formed a little more than a year ago, and they have anywhere from five to 15 people at their meetings held every two weeks. Meetings are structured: gongyo, a half hour of chanting and a half hour of discussion.

Flowers and Seeds is the recovery group in the Minneapolis area. Tom, a Buddhist for 15 years, helped start the group two-and-a-half years ago. Clean and sober for five years, Tom felt there were others in the SGI organization who needed a support group. They meet once a month, and their meeting dates are published in the territory calendar.

Josefina from Sacramento, Calif., who has been sober a year and Buddhist for two years, was introduced to a 12-Step Program in Mexico City five years ago, but had trouble with the God concept once she became a Buddhist. She helped start the On Prolonging Life Group because she wanted to stop drinking. "I have gotten wonderful benefits, and I understand that recovery is not external. Buddhism is empowering," she says.

Of course, not everyone needs a special support group to overcome their addiction. Juan from New York had problems with alcohol for many years and credits Brass Band with helping him stay in recovery.

Although he managed to stay sober on his own for months at a time, he still ended up with drunken driving arrests.

"I only visited my mother to get another beer from her refrigerator, and I took advantage of girlfriends, using their money so I could drink," he says. "The low point came in my life when I yelled at my mother to leave me alone about my drinking. The next day I told my mother I would quit drinking as a Mother's Day gift to her, and I haven't had a drink since

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1990.”

He sought guidance, and it was suggested he seek professional help, chant and perhaps attend AA. “I didn’t like AA with its emphasis on Christianity and determined to use the Gohonzon for recovery,” he says.

Juan has been active in the Brass Band and credits this activity with helping him stay in recovery. “This experience is not only about how I quit drinking and changed my negative tendencies, but more of a realization of how I was able to pull my life out of a condition that is highly prevalent among young men my age,” he says. “I have a much greater appreciation of President Ikeda and the SGI for the guidance I have received.”

On the other hand, not everyone has a problem with the 12 steps. In Kansas City, Mo., Carolyn Newman, a Buddhist for 11 years, is a counselor for drug addicts and alcoholics and is very strong on 12-Step Programs. “I don’t have any conflict between Buddhism and the 12-Step Program,” she says. “When I counsel people I talk about spiritual principles. I want to find the best way for people to get into recovery and stay there. Each person has to find peace to stay in recovery. Many of the people I counsel know I am a Buddhist, but the main concern I have for addicts and alcoholics is for them to recognize their illness and know they will have to change their behavior.” She is in charge of a recovery house for alcoholics.

In the end, the important thing is for people to be honest and admit when they have a problem. As Ms. Newman says: “It is important for people with addiction problems to seek help. I encourage anyone who even thinks they might have a problem to see a counselor.”

According to Ted Morino, the SGI-USA Study Department chief: “Addiction is a life tendency in which the life-condition of Hunger, one of the lower six worlds, holds sway. This tendency stems from delusion innate in one’s life, and Buddhism teaches the importance of tapping one’s inherent Buddhahood or nature of the Law to shed light on this fundamental darkness within.”

Since this is a disease, Mr. Morino states, it makes sense to get professional help. “Institutions like AA can function as Buddhist gods,” he says. “We can capitalize upon techniques available in society to overcome our addiction. Ultimately, however, as long as we depend upon some force outside ourselves, we will not see the true solution. Buddhism focuses on how to generate the life-condition of the Buddha so that we can truly enjoy our existence in accord with the Law.”

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