

**ADDRESSING A.A. AND BUDDHIST PRACTICE
BY DAVE BALDSCHUN
ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR, LIVING BUDDHISM MAGAZINE**

Several years ago, we published a letter in this newspaper's sister publication, Living Buddhism, from an SGI-USA member in Milwaukee, Wisc., asking us to write about the Twelve-Step recovery program used in such groups as Alcoholics Anonymous. We asked other SGI-USA members with experience in these programs to write us. The following article is a result of the response from those members to whom we are grateful. It is hoped that this article stimulates valuable dialogue on the topic. In keeping with the tradition of the program, we have kept individual comments anonymous. The book Alcoholics Anonymous (which has sold over 20 million copies) states: "We of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility."*

No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master." — Bill W., founder of Alcoholics Anonymous

Among treatments for addiction, the Twelve-Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous is one of the oldest and most successful and one that many practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism have used. However, there is a strong emphasis on belief in the Judeo-Christian concept of God or "higher power." Steps two and three of the twelve-step program ask those seeking help to "believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" and that they make the "decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." So how have SGI-USA members experienced the A.A. program and how do they interpret "God as we understood Him?"

The practice of Buddhism in no way precludes one from seeking therapy, counseling or any treatment that has value to the individual in need even if the program emphasizes another philosophy. As long as that teaching is essentially humanistic, there should be no conflict.

In his message to the Sixth International Conference of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies Aug. 5, SGI President Ikeda states: "Both Buddhism and Christianity teach regard for human life and indeed all forms of life in the belief that life is born from that which is 'sacred.' In Buddhism, the dignity of human life derives from the existence of cosmic life within, which is cradle to and essence of the individual self. And since the dynamics of cosmic life play out in all living beings, Buddhism teaches reverence for all life forms. In Christianity, human life's dignity derives from its creation in the image of God. Adoration for the divine in all its forms of expression is then the genesis of love and respect toward all living beings, the products of his creation."

Forces that protect human life

The twelve-step program, as well as any medical or psychological treatment, functions in accord with the concept of Buddhists gods—those forces that aid and protect human life. It is up to individuals to determine for themselves whether to use these programs.

The twelve-step program used first in Alcoholics Anonymous and later in other groups was developed in the mid-1930s in Akron, Ohio, by the founders of A.A., Bill W. and Doctor Bob. Both were chronic, heavy drinkers whose careers, families and lives were threatened by

their abuse of alcohol. Bill W., a successful stockbroker, explains in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* that no doctor or hospital treatment could return control back to him. It wasn't until he was awakened to two truths that are the foundation of A.A. philosophy that he was able to stop drinking once and for all. First, although not a very religious man, he came to realize that without a spiritual basis for his life, he was lost. He came to believe that an alcoholic is unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge alone.

And secondly, he realized that alcoholics could best help other alcoholics. Dr. Bob says in the A.A. book: "Of far more importance was the fact that he (Bill W.) was the first living human with whom I had ever talked, who knew what he was talking about in regard to alcoholism from actual experience. In other words, he talked my language." The trauma of their common affliction formed a bond that enabled them to reach out and help each other.

The twelve steps to recovery founded by the A.A. society have been adapted by other organizations to treat those suffering from drug abuse, overeating and gambling disorders as well as the families of alcoholics.

From the SGI-USA members who responded to our request, two issues emerged most often. The first issue was that of a higher power defined within the parameters of a Judeo-Christian culture. And secondly was whether they could practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and the twelve-step program simultaneously.

A.A. goes to great lengths to point out that one's understanding of God is not limited to the Judeo-Christian definition. Their book devotes "Chapter Four" to agnostics and atheists. But the arguments presented there could be taken as a kind of backdoor entrance to faith in the "...existence of a Creative Intelligence, a Spirit of the Universe underlying the totality of things..." In the September issue of *Living Buddhism*, in "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," Soka Gakkai Study Department Vice Chief Takanori Endo states: "In the Judeo-Christian tradition God created people 'in his image, according to his likeness' (*Genesis* 1.26). If God is viewed as the 'cosmic life,' then there might be some point of commonality with the Daishonin's Buddhism."

No one way works for everyone

Writing on the twelve-step program in the November/December 1990 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, Charlotte Davis Kasl observes, "Yet no one way works for everyone. The steps were formulated by a white, middle-class male in the 1930s; not surprisingly, they work to break down an over-inflated ego, and put reliance on an all-powerful male God. But most women suffer from the lack of a healthy, aware ego, and need to strengthen their sense of self by affirming their own inner wisdom... I believe that spiritual power is neither higher nor lower but all pervasive. I would replace the passivity implied...that something external will magically restore us to sanity—with 'affirmative action.'" She writes of an awakening to the healing wisdom within.

Since the 1970s, several self-help programs have emerged as an alternative to A.A. Women for Sobriety was founded in 1975 by Jean Kirkpatrick. In *Newsweek*, July 8, 1991, she explains that where the A.A. "philosophy is to turn over our will and our lives," WFS advocates "taking charge."

The founder of Rational Recovery, Jack Trimpey says that A.A.'s notion of powerlessness is another irrational idea. "It perpetuates the addictive cycle. It says, 'I have no choice.'"

In 1986, James Christopher founded Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS). In the July/August issue of *Health*, he says: "Our group focuses on self-empowerment... We're not anti-religious, but we believe that religion and sobriety are separate issues."

The majority of SGI members who responded to our request for their experience with A.A. found that replacing the Christian concept of God with that of one's inner Buddha nature or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo worked for them. This universal law exists within the cosmic life and is strengthened within each individual by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the object of devotion, the Gohonzon.

In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, we don't rely on the object of devotion as a power outside ourselves. The Gohonzon is an external cause to stir our internal Buddha nature. We are, in effect, relying on our true selves. The power to change our lives comes from within us. In his letter "On the Treasure Tower," Nichiren Daishonin says to his disciple Abutsu-bo, "Abutsu-bo is therefore the treasure tower [Gohonzon] itself, and the treasure tower is Abutsu-bo himself. (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 299).

One reader from Texas said: "It is common for alcoholics not to recognize the destructiveness of our drinking, and to blame our suffering on everything and everyone else in our environment. Even the few daimoku [Nam-myoho-renge-kyo] I was able to chant in my scattered state of mind were sufficiently powerful to make me perceive the true cause of my misery for the first time...."

"In A.A. I learned that my will power and knowledge about alcoholism were not enough to keep me sober for long. They said I had to find a power greater than myself to keep me sober. For me, that power is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and the strengthening of my Buddha nature...."

Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra

Another member from Massachusetts wrote: "A.A. does not claim that you have to believe in God—only a higher power. For that 'higher power' I substitute Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.... It is an alcoholic tendency to plot and scheme and try to do things all on one's own. It would be much better to forget about the precious ego and employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra.... For an alcoholic, there is no enlightenment without sobriety. Alcohol thrusts the alcoholic into the lowest portion of the lower worlds.... Once sober, SGI is a vehicle for enlightenment."

And a reader from Mexico stated: "In my first years of practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I was counseling recovering alcoholics and addicts. My husband also suffers from the disease of alcoholism. I recommended the twelve-step program to all my clients. Later I began attending Al-Anon (a similar program for relatives of alcoholics) for my own benefit.

"In the beginning of my practice ten-and-a-half years ago, I too questioned the strong emphasis of the Christian male-God concept that the organization uses throughout its program. As I grew in my practice of Buddhism, I came to realize that the great benefits of the program far outweighed the personal religious contradiction. So, rather than throw the baby out with the bath water, I took what was useful to me from the program...."

Some people overcome their alcohol or substance abuse without a twelve-step program or outgrow the program, and others find value in continuing.

A Los Angeles member said: "I went to one A.A. meeting and hated it. First, they told me I had an incurable disease that would be with me for the rest of my life. And, that I would have to keep coming back to them to remain sober. As far as I was concerned, I had an addiction and I could become un-addicted. That meeting did scare me to the point of really bearing down in my Buddhist practice and I have regained control of my life. Alcohol abuse is no longer a factor in my life."

An Ohio member wrote: "I myself was intensely involved with twelve-step programs for

five years before encountering this Buddhism in 1986.... I also would attend both activities. However, as I continued to practice and study, I realized more and more the immense profundity and unexcelled results of this Buddhist practice in comparison.

“I have a great appreciation for how twelve-step programs have helped many people, and I’ve always admired their sense of warm support and fellowship. It’s often said that a twelve-step program can work when all other attempts have failed. Still, I remember hearing that of those who are introduced to these programs, it’s only a small percentage who stay on the path of continually ‘recovering.’ My belief is that it works best of the programs people know of so far.

“As always, actual proof is the most persuasive.... The anxious emptiness I used to fill with food, or alcohol or people has been replaced by a deep sense of mission so that I’m no longer struggling just to live through ‘one day at a time.’ My supposedly mundane activities even of eating and drinking have become purposeful, each action an important cause toward the highest possible dream of kosen-rufu.”

Another Southern California member said: “I feel no conflict in being a member of a twelve-step group and also a Buddhist—in fact, I feel that they complement each other beautifully, and both enhance my life greatly with their truth and wisdom.”

A predisposition to alcohol or drug addiction, to cancer or frequent colds is the result of our karma. From the viewpoint of the Buddhist concept of the nine consciousnesses, this vulnerability to exhibit addictive behavior arises from the eighth level of consciousness where our accumulated causes are stored. The first five levels of consciousness are associated with the five senses, forming our awareness of the outside world through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. The sixth consciousness, our conscious mind, integrates that information into a single picture. The seventh consciousness is our unconscious mind and the origin of our self-awareness. This is where we deal with abstract concepts that are beyond the information provided through the senses.

The eighth consciousness is called the *alaya* consciousness. *Alaya* means repository. This is where all our actions or causes throughout many lifetimes are stored as our karma. When there is a corresponding external or environmental cause present, these internal causes exert their influence on the seven lower levels of consciousness.

Impulses that emanate from the depth of the eighth level are hard to control. We may temporarily curtail our desire for alcohol, drugs or food, but as long as the seed for addictive behavior planted so deeply in our lives continues unabated, that potential is always present.

Fixed karma can be changed

But the Daishonin declares that even the most difficult or fixed karma can be changed through faith in the Gohonzon. In his letter “On Prolonging One’s Life Span” to the lay nun Toki, he writes, “It is as natural for a woman to change her fixed karma by practicing the Lotus Sutra as it is for rice to ripen in the fall or chrysanthemums to bloom in winter” (WND, 954–55).

Our karma accumulates in the *alaya* consciousness through the law of cause and effect. And it is through the very same law that we can change our karma. Our most profound and ultimate level of consciousness is the ninth or *amala*. *Amala* means “pure or undefiled by the actions of lifetime after lifetime.” This is the part of our being where the fundamental law of the universe, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, exists. This is our connection to the pure, universal life force in all of us—our original Buddha nature. By strengthening

the power of our Buddha nature, we can overcome the negative karma stored in the eighth level of consciousness. The key is that the power to transform our lives exists within us, not in some external higher power.

We, for example, know the physical qualities of a glass of wine through our five senses. Our conscious mind (the sixth level) identifies it as in fact, a glass of wine — based on its color, odor, taste, etc. From our seventh level, we determine whether we like or dislike it. And from the eighth level of consciousness emerges our susceptibility to behave in a destructive or addictive manner when confronted with this external cause. The urges originating in the eighth level influence the other seven levels. So even if we “know better,” we find ourselves unable to control our behavior except within the boundaries contained in our karma storehouse.

The cause of invoking the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is so awesome that we can change our karma. President Ikeda explains: “The concept of karma was not developed in order to persuade us to resign ourselves to hopeless suffering. If we understand the notion of karma correctly, we automatically come to recognize that we are responsible for whatever problems we might face in life and that we, ourselves, must strive to overcome those problems. This recognition enables us to establish true independence. In the case of karmic disease, then, we can act to eradicate the negative karma that is causing the illness, and by so doing, we can cause the illness to disappear” (*Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death: Buddhism in the Contemporary World*, pp. 78–79).

When we realize our own responsibility for life’s problems and take action to eradicate the causes of those problems, we can achieve true independence as a human being. Buddhism views illness as an opportunity to attain a higher state of life. This is what Nichiren Daishonin means when he states, “Illness awakens a great seeking spirit” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1480).

Buddhism teaches us the concept of “earthly desires are enlightenment” (see “Back to the Basics,” June 23 *World Tribune*, p. 2). Through our faith in the Gohonzon, our thirst for drink becomes our thirst for enlightenment. In “Reply to Kyo’o,” the Daishonin states: “Believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?” (WND, 412)

*The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous:

- (1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
- (2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- (3) Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.
- (4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- (5) Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- (6) Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- (7) Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.
- (8) Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- (9) Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- (10) Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- (11) Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and power to carry that out.
- (12) Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.