

CHALLENGING ADDICTIONS EXPERIENCE—CAROL ANN WEST, DENVER FREE AT LAST

Carol Ann West liberates herself from a 30-year addiction to alcohol and drugs based on her Buddhist practice and A.A.

I would like to share some of my experience regarding my lifelong struggle with drugs and alcohol. Today I am making a living as a private chef, caterer and cooking instructor, practicing my culinary craft as freely as I wish. I enjoy warm and loving relationships with my family, friends and fellow SGI members. This is a direct result of my renewed dedication to my faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. One of the ways I have achieved this renewal is by maintaining sobriety from alcohol and all mind-altering drugs. The peace and serenity have been hard-fought and hard-won.

On Halloween night 1966, my mother packed me, age 12, and my four younger siblings into our 1964 Ford station wagon and moved us to Golden, Colo., a small town on the outskirts of Denver. We were once again fleeing from the alcoholic and abusive environment we had endured with my father in California. We followed my new stepdad to his home in Golden, where we were to begin what we thought was a new life. Our hopes were short-lived, however, with the quick discovery of my stepdad's own alcohol and drug addiction and abusive behavior toward my mother.

This was the beginning of an oftentimes troubling youth, characterized by pain, anger, terror and rebellion. We moved many times throughout my teens, each time believing that our situation would be bettered, only to realize one more time the futility of changing "scenes and faces" but not the karmic pattern.

It was during my teens that I began my own abuse of alcohol and drugs. Also during this time I was first introduced to Buddhism. I was 15, and even though I liked chanting, I didn't take faith right away. It was a couple of years later when I was again told about Buddhism that I decided to try. I practiced my firmly established drug and alcohol habit and the Daishonin's Buddhism concurrently for the next 25 years. In some sense, I abdicated my responsibility, praying in a way that somehow magically my addiction would just end. My attitude is what stopped me. Much of my struggle to do my human revolution consisted of an internal battle between manifesting my highest self and simultaneously seeking to destroy that self.

During the early years of my practice, many young women's leaders showed me so much love and care despite my frequent lashing out and confrontational, negative behavior. At activities even though they saw me drunk, stoned or hung over, they encouraged me to "stick with the practice, no matter what!" It is to those women, and many more since, that I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude. I believe I would not be here now if it were not for their seemingly never-ending compassion and strength.

In May 1997, a week-long trip to Mexico included consumption of massive amounts of alcohol and marijuana, an arrest for theft and a near-arrest for assault. I was almost jailed and prevented from leaving the country. After chanting desperately, however, I returned home safe but shaken. Finally, on June 17, 1997, I determined that I had drunk my last beer and smoked my last weed.

On June 18, I attended what was to be the first of many A.A. meetings. I cannot

emphasize enough the benefits membership in this organization has afforded me. I must say, I did not attend that first meeting with any desire to gain deep knowledge of the A.A. Twelve- Step program. My only intention was to find a way to live a clean and sober life. At that point, I had given up any resistance that I may have previously had to the idea that I may have to say the G-word—God—or that I may have to hear discussion of God. If someone had told me I would have to speak in tongues, I would have done it—anything to achieve sobriety. I had “bottomed-out,” as we say in A.A. It was time for a big change.

In A.A., I found many comrades with amazingly similar stories and experiences. I knew from the first meeting that I had found a home among my fellow alcoholics and drug addicts. I had a deep, instinctive awareness that I was in the right place at the right time, and my longtime faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism had brought me there. The basis of recovery in A.A. is the development of a spiritual foundation and I felt fortunate to have mine already in place.

With this knowledge and an ever-deepening faith in my own Buddhist practice, I proceeded to learn about the twelve steps of the A.A. program. The principles outlined in these steps have become for me a tremendous blueprint for living. I have said many times in A.A. meetings that the combination of the twelve steps and the practice of Buddhism is like rocket fuel for my life. I have also come to a deeper understanding of the concept of “higher power” and God.

I am finding true freedom by opening my heart and mind through my faith to the hearts and minds of others. I have found myself able to listen openly and lovingly to descriptions by others of what God means to them. I have heard many people describe their relationship with their higher power in a way that parallels my relationship to the Mystic Law. It has been a journey of indescribable joy, pleasure and revelation.

Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, says: “It is not enough to respect individual human beings. We must also respect different cultures, different ways of life and different belief systems. The danger lies in our becoming competitive, in believing that ours is the only way and the best way and attempting to impose our way on others. To assume that our way is the best is to say that we ‘possess’ the truth. When we accept that others could also be right, then we join others in an honest search for truth. When we come to understand religion properly, we reach an understanding of spirituality, that is an acceptance of and respect for different ways of worship.”

Dr. David Chappell, Buddhist scholar and author of an article in the June 1999 *Living Buddhism* titled “The Global Significance of the Lotus Sutra,” states: “Today, however, the Lotus Sutra belongs not just to Nichiren Buddhism, nor even to Mahayana Buddhism, but to the world.”

I feel that many people believe similarly to what we in the SGI believe—the universal law of cause and effect. As an example, I quote Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935. Regarding his first encounter with the concept of God, he writes in the A.A. Big Book: “I could go for such conceptions as Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind or Spirit of Nature but I resisted the thought of a Czar of the Heavens, however loving his sway might be. My friend suggested what then seemed a novel idea. He said, ‘Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?’ That statement hit me hard. It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning.” This resonated with me from the first time I heard it.

My own understanding of a “power greater than myself” is rooted in my belief in the fundamental law of life, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. My “higher power,” or greater self, is the

power I reveal through my practice of Buddhism. The Daishonin himself says: “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 832).

SGI President Ikeda clearly illuminates the concept of universal prayer: “As far as we know, only human beings pray. And we have done so from ancient times. We have prayed to the sun, to fire, to the mountains. Our species has long pressed its hands together in prayer to Nature, asking it for safety and happiness. Pressing one’s hands together in prayer is one of the most noble human acts” (12/10/98, *World Tribune*, p. 9). I feel that this ‘human act’ is ‘most noble’ regardless of the form it takes.

The journey has been incredible and wondrous at best and terrifying and difficult at worst. I believe that the brutal facts that lay at the “primordial” bottom of my addictions were co-dependency, anger, resentment and fear of absolute happiness. I believe that the currently trendy term *co-dependency* succinctly describes the state of seeking our happiness outside ourselves, be that with drugs, alcohol, people, rage, work, exercise or any number of facets of human life which we can experience.

In his book, *Addiction and Grace*, Dr. Gerald May says: “Addiction attaches desire, bonds and enslaves the energy of desire to certain specific behaviors, things or people. These objects of attachment then become preoccupations and obsessions, they come to rule our lives.” So it was for me with drugs and alcohol.

These past three years of continuous abstinence from drugs and alcohol have been the longest period of total sobriety that I have experienced since my teens, some 30 years ago. The freedom of spirit and clarity of mind that I have gained are immeasurable. My deepest prayer is to continue the recovery work and share what I am learning with others. My life has been propelled, through challenging my disease of alcoholism, onto the exciting path of a greater spirituality. Finding this path through my practice of Buddhism has been the key for me to establish lasting freedom from drug and alcohol addiction. I am determined to continue to fight with all of my might for the achievement of world peace, utilizing all of my life experiences. I have an inestimable gratitude for all of my fellow members of the SGI, to President Daisaku Ikeda and to the many men and women who have guided me throughout the years.