

THE MINDFUL PRACTICES OF ALCOHOLIC ANONYMOUS

Mindfulness is Inseparable From Core Values of Surrender and Acceptance

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Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) had its beginnings in 1935 at Akron, Ohio, as the outcome of a meeting between Bill W., a New York stockbroker, and Dr. Bob S., an Akron surgeon. Both were alcoholics.¹ Early in 1939, the Fellowship published its basic textbook, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The text, written by Bill, explained AA's philosophy and methods, the core of which was the now well-known Twelve Steps of recovery.²

As AA gained prominence, the spiritual foundation of the 12-Step process has become tied to many faiths. At least three books (Alexander, 1997) (Ash, 1993) (Griffin, 2004) document the integration of Buddhism

and 12-step recovery. Another (Fields, 2008) refers to the compatibility of mindfulness and 12-step recovery. The AA "Big Book" (Anonymous, 2008) and the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Anonymous, 1981), on the other hand, urge the recovering reader to seek books by those who know far more about meditation and prayer than the founders of Twelve Step Recovery did.

What none of these sources do is spell out that AA, as created in the thirties and practiced today, already cultivates mindfulness in so many direct and practical ways. This article highlights many of those ways.

Definitions

Thich Nhat Hanh (1975), in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, defines his subject as "keeping alive in consciousness the reality of the present moment." His defining example is given by an American graduate student. This young man realized that "all time is my own time" and he determined to "take an interest and share my presence," even doing first grade homework with his



¹Historical Data: The Birth of A.A. and its growth in U.S./Canada, <http://www.aa.org/lang/en/subpage.cfm?page=288>, October 23, 2013.

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son. Western psychologists such as Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) (1990) have defined mindfulness as being aware of what you are doing, thinking feeling, as you do, think or feel it. “Staying present” or “seeing clearly” are also brief Western descriptions. Eckhardt Tolle (1997) avoids the term “mindfulness,” while speaking repeatedly of an experience he calls “presence.”

Thich Nhat Hanh makes it clear that there is far more to mindfulness than sitting meditation. In fact, he declares that sitting for 45 minutes a day is of little value without continuous practice throughout the day. He describes many tools for doing just that, as does Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994). Kabat-Zinn, Terry Fralich (2007) and other author/teachers also distinguish between the “formal” practice of mindfulness (sitting meditation) and the “informal” ones applied during everyday life. Most AA practices discussed here would be considered “informal,” even though they would fit comfortably in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. So we will start with just an observation or two about formal meditation and the Twelve Steps.

Meditation and Twelve Steps

Sitting in meditation can fulfill the Step Eleven “suggestion” for meditation. But the typical AA member is not a Buddhist, and often does not seek formal training. Most sponsors do encourage daily reading of a recovery meditation, reflectively and accompanied by prayer. This is not so far from Thich Nhat Hahn’s “meditation on a fixed object,” (1975) which picks a subject of personal struggle for in-depth reflection. Formal meditation typically comes later in recovery, often drawing on sources outside the program. Meditation skills may develop earlier as more counselors and sponsors engage with mindfulness. And what of the Twelve Step meeting itself? Focusing on the shared struggle to (remember to) abstain, constant emphasis on acceptance, reminders that “it’s alcoholism not alcohol-wasm,” generates a virtual pep rally for giving up egocentricity, practicing loving-kindness and living in the present. The feeling of “we” abates, however briefly, the awful separation which underlies egotism.

Staying out of Results

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches “wash the dish just to wash the dish.” (1975) In essence, he suggests focusing on the experience of doing, rather than any future condition of being “done.” Twelve Step members are taught “just do the footwork and stay out of the results,” and even “the results are none of my business.” Eckhart Tolle (1997) actually traces this practice all the way back to “Karma yoga” of Hinduism. The actual practice appears to consist of withdrawing or setting aside the will for a future outcome as an object of attention and effort, focusing instead on the real-time experience of doing what one is doing. An AA member also learns to “let go and let God” or “turn it over.” The practice of theistic surrender targets the same “evils” of will (to control outcome, to be there, not here) and ego that “washing the dish to wash the dish” would train out of the Buddhist. In fact, living in the present with an attitude of service, is the consistent “fruit” of surrender as an experience and a practice. When we surrender what has already happened and let the same “higher power” decide what will happen, we are left to deal only with the unfolding present. Surrender also replaces both material attachment and aversion with a “higher power.”

Twelve Step Slogans

Probably the most obvious and explicit AA mindful practice is the determination to live “one day at a time.” While the bell of mindfulness may call the Buddhist to the living, breathing moment, “one day at a time” guides the sober alcoholic in to the broader boundaries of

a full day. Future-tripping and thinking of worst-case scenarios are short-circuited by: “Wait a minute! What can I do about that today? Have I done it? If the answer is ‘yes’, the rest is irrelevant. If ‘no’, I get to work.” This practice is a simple and powerful way to bring the mind back from the imaginary, high-stress future to its much more manageable present. Abstaining from alcohol, drugs or any other “fix,” the reminder that one only has to deal with one day of “deprivation” greatly reduces the agonizing specter of life as an endless desert with no oasis. This humble tool of coming back to the present day has kept millions of alcoholics sober. If 10 percent of the people not in 12-step programs embraced “one day at a time,” it might change the course of history.

Several other AA slogans also work to bring the recovering alcoholic back to the present. “HALT” (do not get *hungry, angry, lonely* or *tired*) is a simple prescription for self-care and relapse prevention. As a practice, it implies monitoring real-time levels of hunger, anger, loneliness and fatigue and then taking real-time action to reduce the threat. “Just do the next indicated thing,” requires attention to the unfolding of life and what it requires at any given moment. Like Hanh’s “washing the dish to wash the dish,” it entails combining alertness for the present moment, as it develops, with an attitude of service. “Easy does it” implies gentleness, slowing down, not straining obsessively to speed up the future and its desired outcome. “Keep coming back,” repeated collectively at the end of each AA meeting, calls members back. And as we have seen, meetings call them back to the present in a number of ways.

Acceptance and Mindfulness

For one who started on the addiction side of “behavioral health” in 1971, it has been heartening and just a little ironic, to observe the mental health side of the profession increasingly embrace “acceptance.” “Mindfulness-based Stress Management” (1990), “Acceptance and commitment therapy,” (Batten, 2011) “Radical Acceptance,” (Brach, 2003) Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 1993) and “mindful eating” (Bays, 2009) dominate the market for clinical books and continuing education credits. For those focused on substance use disorders, the AA “Big Book” (Anonymous, 2008) proclaimed in the 1930s “we have stopped fighting anything or anybody, even alcohol!”

The Serenity Prayer — “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change....” joined actual meetings and “the 24 hour plan” as a three-legged stool, one which has kept many an alcoholic sober and upright. At an excellent Seattle workshop on integrating “mindfulness and psychotherapy” Dr. Ron Siegel (2001) surveyed issues from anxiety to depression to chronic pain to ADD to PTSD. At times, it seemed like he just kept saying “acceptance is the answer to all our problems,” a sentence that first appeared in the third edition of the “Big Book.” There is probably no principle on which AA and mindfulness are more synchronous than acceptance. This includes acceptance of others and forsaking judgment, “suggested” by Steps Four through Nine and dictated by the lethal impact of resentment on alcoholics and their recovery. Buddhists say, “to resent my enemy is like swallowing rat poison and expecting the rat to die.” Or, as one AA participant put it, “I’ll show you — I’ll swallow a grenade!”

The more general principle of “accepting life on life’s terms” takes the AA member to the heart of mindfulness. As Eckhart Tolle (1997) so eloquently put it, the present moment is not just “the most precious thing there is..... it is the *only* thing.” Alcoholics are not alone in needing to wake up to the fact that the only place we are actually alive is right here, right now. Many of the tools described here help them accept that “life term” and live with it.

The special place of the Serenity Prayer, often referred to as the AA prayer in spite of its earlier origins, also strengthens mindfulness in AA members. Repeated in unison at virtually every meeting, often more than once, this elegant formula cuts to the existential chase of virtually any problem a human being can have. It is a consummate tool for both calming down and for looking. So, what do we have no control over, dictating a path of acceptance? And what might we change if we are to act in the one place Thich Nhat Hanh (1975) says we have “dominion”: the present moment? The serenity prayer is an ad hoc practice for facing the present moment clearly and knowing how to respond to it.

Mindfulness and Maintenance

Turning our attention back to the Twelve Steps, the so-called “maintenance steps” also call for mindful practice. Step Ten, “to continue to take inventory and when we are wrong promptly admit it,” involves monitoring real-time reactions, specifically looking for faulty thinking and/or action in self, taking corrective action “promptly.” “Moral inventories” at the end of each day reinforce this practice, as do “spot-check inventories” when upset about anything, while still upset. Step Eleven is the “prayer and meditation step,” seeking to increase “conscious contact” with the “higher power.” Whatever your position on theism, does anyone doubt that “conscious contact” is an experience that can only be had in real time? And is it possible that the experience of conscious contact is like “pure consciousness” or “no mind?” Eckhart Tolle, for one, urges “conscious contact” with your inner body as the pathway to “Being.”

The second part of the step seeks “knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry it out.” Again, how could one recognize an “order” from any source if one is not mentally present to receive it, here and now? When else would it arise? Jon Kabat-Zinn, an avowed atheist, lauds the practice of “stopping,” (extracting one’s will for results) by imagining one has just died. He alleges that this cheerful practice gives us “guidance.” No Twelve Step member who “pauses throughout the day,” practicing both Steps Three and Eleven, would argue with him.

Finally, Step Twelve calls for “practicing these principles in all our affairs.” This application of principles puts life on a highly intentional basis, one that is only possible if consciousness is focused on the present “affair” and the principle it may call for. The second part of the step, to take this message to those who still suffer, embodies the practice of compassion. At the same time, the very suffering of the newcomer reminds the “messenger” what awaits if s/he forgets s/he is alcoholic for one moment. To paraphrase Thich Nhat Hanh, the function of AA as a whole is to “keep alive in consciousness the reality of still being alcoholic, still being in recovery, still needing to practice these principles in every moment.”

Sponsorship

Sponsorship is another side of mindful practice in AA. The Sponsor “gets out of self” and strengthens his or her own learning by sharing intimately, both what he or she has learned, and the suffering from which it arose. The “guru” in mindfulness/Buddhism is one who has practiced “the way” and been transformed. Dharma teachers introduce themselves by listing their “Masters.” That, and personal practice and experience are the credentials. The late Dr. Alan Marlatt and his colleague, Dr. Sara Bowen (2011) would not accept clinicians into their mindfulness-based relapse prevention course who do not have a meditation practice. And they repeat the necessity and value of self-disclosure in transmitting the technology of acceptance to patients.

In accepting the Buddhist path of transmission, they required the therapist be someone who has “been there.” Not necessarily an alcoholic who has “worked a program.” Rather, a human being, someone who shares his/her own struggle with the ultimate challenge for each of us, the mind. The boundary between Twelve Step helping and mental health treatment, may be coming down, not because AA is coming out, but because therapy is coming in. At the very least, mindfulness-based therapy appears to move even further away from the “blank screen” of psychoanalysis. Marlatt insisted on a mutual transparency found among Twelve Step members and precious few other places. It is sometimes referred to as “sharing your thought life,” and gives rise to much of the laughter in meetings.

Conclusion

The goal of this article is to spell out how mindful practices and principles pervade Alcoholics Anonymous. “Living in the present” seems to be both a tool and a value. The implications of “surrender” for mindfulness will help the clinician who practices and encourages mindfulness to see more clearly how to help AA clients build on the skills and experience they already have. To those in AA, seeing that they have been “doing mindfulness” all along, that mindfulness is inseparable from core values of surrender and acceptance, may help them to embrace a more vigorous meditation practice. For those interested in recovery and mindfulness, perhaps “turned off” by theistic words of AA, a “middle path” may appear. And for those 12-Step-oriented counselors who dismiss “mindfulness” for any reason, may this article be a bridge.

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