

A background image of a sunset over a mountain range, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a lens flare effect. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and grey, and the mountains are silhouetted against the light.

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The Mindful Practice of Alcoholics Anonymous

© George DuWors, MSW, LICSW, BCD

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, and any omissions are due to the author's lack of mindfulness.

Definitions

Thich Nhat Hanh (1975), in his classic *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, defines his subject as “keeping alive in consciousness the reality of the present moment.” His

Greetings

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defining example is given by an American graduate student. This young man (1975!) 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 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 to be 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

It is a no-brainer that sitting meditation can fulfill the Step Eleven “suggestion” for meditation. But the typical AA member is not a Buddhist, and does not seek formal training. Most sponsors do encourage reflective daily reading of a recovery meditation, 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, though meditation skill may develop earlier as more counselors and sponsors engage with mindfulness. Articles such as this may be a small step in that direction. 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 alcoholism," 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 to "wash the dish just to wash the dish" (1975) - to focus on the experience of doing, rather than any future condition of being done.



Twelve Step members are taught to “just do the footwork and stay out of the results,” and even that “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” reigns the sober alcoholic in to the broader boundaries of a full day, this one. Future-tripping and catastrophizing 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. As to abstaining from alcohol or 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% of the “normies” in the world embraced “one

day at a time,” it would likely change the course of history!

Several other AA slogans also 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 “washing the dish to wash the dish” this requires extraction of attention from results lying in the future. It entails 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 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 house 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 CEU’s. On the chemical dependency side of the house, 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 uniformed AA 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 and 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 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. What we have no control over dictates a path of acceptance. And what might we change, if we are to act in the one place? As Thich Nhat Hanh (1975) says, we have “dominion” over 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 and 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.

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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.” Alcoholism, not alcohol-wasm!

Sponsorship

Sponsorship is another side of mindful practice in AA. The Sponsor “gets out of self” and strengthens his own learning by sharing intimately, both what he 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 did not have a meditation practice. And they repeated the necessity and value of self-disclosure in transmitting the technology of acceptance to patients. In accepting the Buddhist path of transmission, they require 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. Program enough, some would say!

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 was insisting 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.



Whence This Survey

The goal of this article was to spell out how mindful practices and principles pervade Alcoholics Anonymous. “Living in the present” seems to be both a tool and a value. No attempt was made to sort out the “higher power” issue, but the implications of “surrender” for mindfulness, were sketched. Hopefully, the article 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.

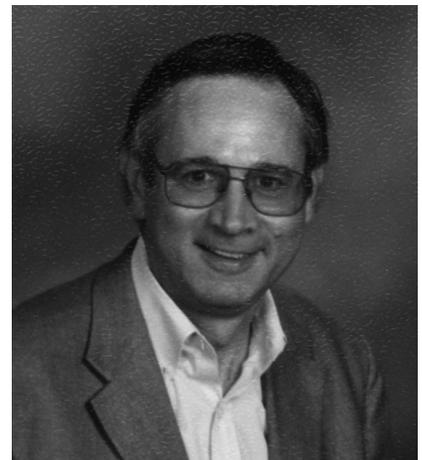
To those in AA, seeing that they have been “doing mindfulness” all along, that mindfulness is inseparable from core values of surrender and acceptance, may help them to embrace a more vigorous meditation practice. To see how precisely - minutely even - that “acceptance is the answer” - and to become ever more effective in embracing that answer. 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. At any rate, the doing of this article is done. Even if not “reading just to read,” the reader has little choice but to look up from the page and seek “the next indicated thing.” Or not.



The author of a well-respected book on addictive relapse, George Duwors,MSW, LICSW, BCD facilitates workshops on “motivation for maintenance.” Engagement with mindfulness began in 1995 with Thich Nhat Hahn’s *The Miracle of Mindfulness* - ultimately changing his job description from “psychotherapist” to “psychosomatic therapist.” A workbook, *“Getting It, Building Motivation From Your Own Relapse Experience”* is in trial run.

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Your Best Brain – March 10, 2012

A Benefit Workshop for The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

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The annual fund drive for the Institute begins this December and as part of our fundraising efforts, we will be offering a four-hour workshop – Your Best Brain – in San Rafael, CA on March 10, 2012. This will be a fun, down-to-earth presentation by [Rick Hanson](#) and [Jan Hanson](#), and will offer ten great ways to change your brain for the better – for more joy, more fulfilling relationships, and more peace of mind and heart.

If you live in the Bay Area, we hope you will consider joining us for a morning of practical, research-based ways to develop your own brain for the better. Your help spreading the word will also be a wonderful contribution to the good work of the Institute. For more information and registration, visit <http://www.wisebrain.org/your-best-brain-benefit-wellspring-institute>.

If you cannot attend, we hope that you will consider making a pledge during our fund drive. Your donation is tax-deductible and the Institute tax ID is 26-0328057. To offer your pledge, visit <http://www.wisebrain.org> and click on the Donate button.

We Thank You.

Creating the Space

© Marguerite Manteau-Rao

Amazing things can happen with folks who are living with dementia. They can start speaking intelligible words after months of muteness. They can start relating and smiling again. They can move their previously frozen limbs. They can sing entire songs. They can show flashes of insight. So many possible surprises.

However, the conditions have to be right.

First and foremost, the person needs to be given the time, and the mental and emotional space to BE. That means no rushing, no outpacing, no talking over, no ignoring, no assuming. Instead, we are to practice being present for them.



How does that work?

First, I take a chair and I sit . . . down. Down at the person’s level, mirroring her own sitting. And I take the time to relax into my body, and to let my mind settle. Becoming aware of the sensations in my body, and of breath. Dropping below the habitual level of discursive thinking and emotional reactivity. I create space within my own mind. Sitting with her, I practice what is commonly called mindfulness.

Something usually happens then. Mindfulness starts working its magic not just on me, but also the person I am sitting with.

I notice my friend’s body starts to relax, and I can feel her mind loosening as well. There is an overall sense of joint resting within a vast expanse. For her this is especially important, as the newly created space and stillness gives the tenuous connections in her brain a chance to take again. She can ‘re-ment’. She was mute and now she tells me “thank you”.

If electrodes were taped on my friend’s brain, I am pretty sure, we would see dramatic changes in her brain’s activity and connectivity. Mindfulness by proxy . . . Maybe a new avenue for neuroscience research?



Marguerite Manteau-Rao, LCSW, ATR, is the co-founder of the [Presence Care Project](#). She is a consultant for communities and individuals involved in dementia care, a licensed clinical social worker and registered art therapist with a mindfulness-based psychotherapy private practice in Palo Alto, CA. She is also a student of mindfulness meditation, a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) instructor, and Zen Hospice volunteer. Marguerite shares her mindfulness practice in the [Mind Deep](#) blog and also writes for the Huffington Post on aging, end-of-life, dementia care, and mindfulness practice.



Skillful Means

The [Skillful Means](#) wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more. The following meditation practices can assist in centering oneself in a natural state of calm and contentment.

Do Nothing Meditation

Purpose / Effects

Many respected spiritual traditions, including Buddhism and Hindu Advaita just to name two, claim that the highest state of spiritual communion is actually present in our minds at all times. And yet many meditation techniques focus on creating some special state that wasn't there before the meditation, and which goes away at some point after the meditation. If the highest state is actually present all the time, shouldn't it be possible to simply notice it without inducing some change, or special state?

That is exactly the purpose of the Do Nothing Meditation. This technique (which is really an un-technique) will allow you to contact the highest spiritual state without actually doing anything.

Method

Summary

Each time you notice an intention to control or direct your attention, give it up.

Long Version

1. There is no need to get into any particular posture, unless you feel like it.

2. Do not position your attention in any particular way.

3. Let whatever happens happen.

4. Any time you notice yourself doing anything intentionally, stop.

Doing anything intentionally means something you can voluntarily control, and therefore can stop. If you cannot stop doing something, then it's not intentional, and therefore you don't need to try to stop doing it.



Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

So. Anything you can stop doing, stop doing.

Some examples of things you can stop doing are:

- Intentionally thinking
- Trying to focus on something specific
- Trying to have equanimity
- Trying to keep track of what's going on
- Trying to meditate

Let go of doing anything like this.

5. Keep doing nothing for at least 10 minutes, or as long as you like.

History

The Do Nothing meditation is a way of experiencing “contentless awareness.” It has many analogues in many traditions. For example, this leads to roughly the same experience as Krishnamurti’s practice of “choiceless attention.” It is related to meditations in the Tibetan tradition of dzogchen, as well as many lineages of Hindu Advaita, such as practiced by Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, and so on.

Do Nothing meditation is considered to be an advanced or difficult meditation in many traditions. However, it has been noted by some teachers that beginners are capable of doing it.

Caution

It may be difficult for some people to notice any difference between the Do Nothing

meditation and gross “monkey mind,” that is, the ceaseless, driven and fixated thoughts of the everyday neurotic mind. If this seems to be the case for you, it may be helpful to do a more structured technique.

Notes

This meditation is closely related to the Advaitic practice of neti-neti (“not this, not that”) and to the practice of Self Inquiry as taught by Ramana Maharshi. The techniques are somewhat different, but the intention and outcome are very similar.

Easy Rest

Purpose / Effects

Easy Rest is an excellent introduction to Vipassana (or “insight”) meditation. Easy Rest is very good for people who have never meditated before, because it focuses on pleasant experiences. It will bring an immediate sense of calmness and clarity (like you might get from a shamatha technique), yet will simultaneously build the core meditation skills of concentration and equanimity. Repeated practice of Easy Rest 20 minutes every day for even a few months will bring a marked positive change in your level of stress, anxiety, or depression.

Method

Summary

Alternate between noting “Blank,” the darkness behind your closed eyes, and “Relax,” any sense of relaxation in the body.

Long Version

In the Easy Rest technique, you allow your attention to move back and forth between two soothing experiences that can be easily found or created, hence the

name Easy Rest. The two experiences are “Blank” and “Relaxed.”

Blank means the background field of darkness/brightness that you see in front of/behind your eyes after you close them. For most people this takes the form of a marbled mixture of dark patches, bright patches and grays. But for some people it tends to be more pure darkness or more pure brightness (hence the description darkness/brightness). This background field represents a blank mental screen—something you can focus on to clear your mind.

Blank is nothing special or fantastical. It is just what you see when you look at the inside of your closed eyelids, nothing more.

Relaxed is just an abbreviated way of saying “physical relaxation.” Relaxed refers to any level or any spatial extent of muscle relaxation as well as any sense that you are physically settled into your posture. Notice that, by this definition, you don’t need to eliminate all tension, discomfort or agitation in order to experience



being relaxed. Something as simple as dropping your shoulders will create enough to focus on. Do not struggle to create a large amount of relaxation, or worry that you are not “relaxed enough.”

To do Easy Rest, you close your eyes, settle into your posture and let your attention freely float between Blank and Relaxed. If both of these restful states are present at the same time just choose one to focus on for that moment (to keep things simple). It doesn't matter which one. As you note these restful states, other sensory experiences will probably occur—mental images, internal talk, external sounds and physical

or emotional body sensations. It is of the utmost importance that you not try to get rid of or shut out those experiences.

Let them happen in the background while in the foreground of attention you are fascinated with and enjoying the restful states. This is usually not difficult because restful states are by nature pleasant and interesting.

Noting: You can get added benefit from



Easy Rest by doing it with “noting.” Noting is a Vipassana technique that means to label your experience. For example, when you concentrate on Blank, you mentally say the word “Blank” to yourself. In the same way, when you focus on the Relax sensations, you mentally say the word “Relax” to yourself.

Noting is a strong aid in developing concentration. The labels help you to keep your attention on the Blank and Relaxed sensations. Noting can be used in many other Vipassana techniques as well, so it is a useful skill to develop.

There are some hints to make your noting more effective. First, always use an extremely calm, soft, gentle (mental) voice when noting. Talk to yourself in a voice that a mother might use when softly waking a baby. You want to be very gentle with yourself.

Second, maintain a slow, even pace when noting. You should not be noting more



than once every few seconds. No matter how much is going on, consider this one label every few seconds to cover all that has happened during that time. It is crucial that you not allow your noting to become frantic, hectic, or impatient.

Third, use noting as part of a sequence or “rhythm” of attention. For example, in one “round” of this rhythm of attention, you notice the Blank, then make the label Blank, then actually concentrate on the blank for 3-5 seconds. Then you repeat the sequence. This is a very effective way to concentrate.

History

This technique is a kind of Vipassana (or “insight”) meditation, based in the teachings of Buddhism. The language and format of this specific practice come from the teachings of American Buddhist master Shinzen Young. You can learn more about his many techniques at [Basic Mindfulness](#).

Caution

Some people find meditating on their bodies to be unsettling at first. If you are having this experience, then just meditate on Blank and leave the Relaxed for another time.

Notes

Blank and Relaxed are naturally present anytime you close your eyes and settle into a posture, whether standing, seated or lying down. In fact, relaxation can even be experienced as you move around if you “relax into the movement.” Indeed relaxing into a movement is the essence of grace. If you can consciously tune into the actual sensation of relaxing into your movements you can experience a kind of bliss as you go about ordinary activities.

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.