

Buddhism/Twelve Step Group Guidelines

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Buddhism/Twelve Step Group Guidelines	1
Introduction.....	1
Getting Started	3
Intention	3
Leadership.....	4
Membership	7
Form and Content	9
One Example.....	12
Meditations and Exercises	13
Contemplative Interactive Exercises.....	14
Guided Meditations.....	16

Introduction

Since the release of my book, *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps* (Rodale Press), groups have been forming spontaneously around the country to use the book as a study guide for working through the Steps together. This study guide is meant

to facilitate those groups by offering them basic group guidelines as well as specific topics for exploration and guided meditations.

The book makes the point that what Twelve Step groups have that many Buddhist communities are lacking is “fellowship.” This means much more than casual social connection. Many Buddhist groups have monthly potlucks, family classes, or community events meant to encourage personal connections among community members. But what Twelve Step groups offer is a unique environment for “sharing,” the deep personal exploration and revelation that has been so healing for Twelve Step participants. In revealing our demons in a safe, supportive atmosphere, we have the opportunity to deal with them in ways that silent meditation often does not allow. The contemporary Buddhist form which probably most mimics this Twelve Step model is called a *Kalyana Mitta* (spiritual friends) group (more about them later).

Probably an even more common reason for wanting to go through the Steps with *One Breath* though is the opportunity to connect our Twelve Step work with a Buddhist understanding. The canonical Twelve Step literature, *Alcoholics Anonymous (The Big Book)* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (The Twelve and Twelve)* although intending to be ecumenical, is still burdened by the religious/spiritual language of the time in which it was written. With the emergence of Eastern philosophical teachings over the past thirty-five years, many of us longed for another way of hearing the Twelve Step ideas—thus, *One Breath at a Time* was born.

This guide, as they say in the *Big Book*, “is meant to be suggestive only” (I always laugh at this language, since suggestive nowadays has sexual overtones). I realize I “know only a little.” I hope it will open the door for group exploration. Please let me

know about your own experiences so that I, too, can learn about how such groups might be best organized and how they might serve the needs of the community.

Getting Started

Before a group can get off the ground, a few things need to be established:

- Intention
- Leadership
- Membership
- Form and Content

Intention

Setting a clear intention is the vital starting point for someone thinking about forming a group. Is your main focus going to be in deepening your Step work? deepening your meditation practice? dharma study? forming community and giving a place to share?

Answering these and other questions about what you want from your group will help you to decide on the other questions of leadership, membership, form, and content. For instance, if your main interest is in growing the community, you might want open membership, whereas, if you want to focus on deepening meditation and forming intimate connections, you might want a closed membership.

What might be more critical in thinking about intention is in distinguishing the purpose of a Buddhism/Twelve Step group from that of an ordinary Twelve Step group. What I always try to look for in any Buddhist discussion is, How does what we're talking about relate to the dharma? So, if someone is helping a sick relative, to put it in the context of the Buddha's teaching on suffering, that we are all subject to sickness, old age, and death. This doesn't mean that we deny people their need to process grief or any difficult emotions—on the contrary, being fully present with those painful experiences is

vital to the process of moving through them and healing—but it does mean that at some point we remind ourselves of the context of our experience and don't stay stuck in the “story.” This is a common difficulty in any group focused on spirituality and healing—it's so easy for us to stay in the “problem” and forget the solution. While it's helpful to talk about our difficulties, if we don't move beyond examining our pain toward looking at the Path of freedom, we miss the point of the spiritual teachings.

So, whoever is facilitating, be it a teacher or just a member of the group, this focus on intention should be kept very strong. In Twelve Step groups we call this “primary purpose” and in Buddhism “Right Intention.”

Leadership

Leadership can be approached in two basic ways: set facilitators who organize and lead the group, or “group conscience” which is essentially a democracy. The advantage of having set facilitators is that they would be more experienced practitioners who could hold the group together more strongly. Some of the disadvantages are the potential for projection that a leader gets, where people in the group like or dislike things the leader says or does and the tendency for members to not take responsibility for the group, expecting the leader to do all the work. So this form opens the door for the “personalities before principles” issue that Twelve Step groups seek to avoid. The advantage of a more democratic form are that everyone feels fully invested in the group and takes their share of responsibility. The disadvantage can be that if there is no experienced practitioner, the group might find itself going down unproductive paths. Kalyana Mitta (KM) groups can devolve (as can Twelve Step groups) into little more than group therapy sessions, and, without a leader to guide the group back to its foundation principles, this can undercut the

group goals. My preference, then, is for leadership, but I also know that the “benign anarchy” of Twelve Step groups can be very effective. What I think is most important in that case is that the group have a very strong intention—even a mission statement of some sort—so that it can always come back to its core purpose, in the same way that Twelve Step groups emphasize a “singleness of purpose.”

When I led a KM group, I was asked to lead it by a senior teacher. This is the typical way that one takes a teaching or leadership role in the Buddhist community, through the aegis of an established teacher. One could say that Buddhism is hierarchical (which is true), but the hierarchy isn’t supposed to be based so much on *power* as on *wisdom*. What this means is that a teacher or leader’s authority grows out of their realization, out of the depth of their practice and their understanding, and not out of some personal “leadership qualities” which might make them popular or powerful, nor out of their own desire to be a leader. Traditionally the person who certifies this depth of practice is another, more senior, teacher. In this way, the Buddhist tradition has kept alive a “lineage” of enlightened (or at least wise and trustworthy) masters through two and a half millenia. It’s a system that, although it doesn’t fit so well with our culture’s current concerns about consensus, democracy, and egalitarianism, has, nonetheless *worked*, and success like that, I believe, needs to be respected and at least considered as a legitimate criteria. After all, if our spiritual leaders were elected on the basis of their popularity we’d have teachers with great personalities, but perhaps not a lot of wisdom (like our political leaders?).

So, what I’d suggest is that if a group is forming around some leaders, that those leaders should be certified or supported in some way by more senior teachers. If they are

taking a leadership role, then that suggests that they have a depth of practice, which in turn suggests that they have studied with a teacher or teachers who they could call on as support. Anyone in a leadership role in a spiritual community needs such mentoring and support—the difficulties and risks associated with these roles are too great to handle alone. Specifically, if you are thinking of starting a group, I suggest that you contact a teacher with whom you have studied and ask for their support and mentoring in your new role.

Typically, KM groups have two facilitators. This is a good idea for many reasons. (Check out http://www.spiritrock.org/html/km_guidelines.html, on the Spirit Rock website for a discussion of KM groups).

If, on the other hand, a group decides to form without a leader, a different approach will be taken. What I would suggest is a revolving facilitator role, where at the end of each gathering, one or two people agree to be facilitators for the next meeting. The group could keep a list of guidelines which the facilitators would follow. Such guidelines should be simple, but specific so that the group meetings are consistent. This is essentially the *secretary* role that is held in most Twelve Step groups. This person keeps track of the time, stays sensitive to the needs of the group and the individuals in the group—for instance, making sure that one person doesn't dominate or that a quieter person doesn't get left out of the discussion. They lead the group through the session, ringing the bell for meditation, reminding people of the structure of the session, and so on. Structure and a sense of orderliness are important for allowing people to relax and feel safe in the group.

Membership

How should you determine membership? How many members should you have? Who decides who can join? Or should it be a drop-in group, like a Twelve Step group, which is totally open to anyone who is interested. All of these questions need to be addressed by the facilitators and/or the members. While some KM groups require a certain meditation practice experience (like two years or a ten-day retreat), for a Buddhism/Twelve Step group, this seems unwise, because such groups are going to be especially appealing to Twelve Steppers with little or no meditation experience who want support in their practice. So, my suggestion is that groups have no requirement for meditation experience. On the other hand, if what you want is a group of experienced meditators who are also sober (clean, abstinent) then by all means, set a practice requirement. What any group will want to do is suggest that members establish a daily (or as close to daily as possible) meditation practice.

Do you want to have a sobriety requirement? Again, this is a decision for your group and/or leaders to make. If you are a closed group, you might want to have a suggested sobriety length (six months or a year?) and then take other applications on a case-by-case basis. If someone is completely new to meditation, slipping a lot, and perhaps detoxing, they might not be great members of the group. However, your group might want to reach out to such people, in the same way Twelve Step groups welcome people so openly. The only problem is that the nature of a meditation group is one of more quiet and a bit more serenity than a typical Twelve Step meeting, and any disruption could really have an adverse effect. Another person might want to join who

had previous meditation experience and is newly sober but seems stable in their recovery. They might be a welcome addition to the group.

Typically a KM group is closed, as opposed to drop-in. This allows for the development of community and closeness among the members and a feeling of safety and support. Buddhism/Twelve Step groups might want to consider this structure. However, you might feel that it's more important to be welcoming to the community than to keep the group closed. There are advantages and disadvantages to both.

Usually a KM group tries to maintain a range of membership, typically between 5 and 12. I'm not at all sure a Buddhism/Twelve Step group needs to stick to these relatively low numbers. Again, consider the pluses and minuses. It's amazing how intimate a Twelve Step group can be even when there are dozens of people there—still, there's no doubt that a smaller number allows for more of a sense of safety and support.

If you are starting a group, how will you attract members? If you're in a large urban area, you probably won't have much problem. You might even know a dozen people already, or at least by inviting a couple friends and seeing if they know anyone who might be interested, you might quickly fill the group. In a smaller area, or one in which Buddhist practitioners are more scarce, you might need to do some outreach. Clearly the first place to go is your Twelve Step meeting. If there's an Eleventh Step meeting in your area, that would be a likely starting point. You might also consider putting up a notice at a health food store or independent bookstore. Of course, the Internet gives us almost unlimited resources in terms of connecting with people.

Once the group is formed, you'll want to consider how new members are added. Can anyone in the group nominate someone or should everything go through the

facilitators? In either case, any decision to confirm a new member should be contingent on their visiting the group and seeing how they fit in. Once someone's in, it's tough to get them out, so you don't want to make mistakes at this stage.

The KM model is obviously a restrictive one and one which Twelve Steppers used to the benign anarchy of meetings may find too rigid. In fact, I know of two very successful groups in the Bay Area which are completely open. They do have fairly strong leadership, but they don't seem to have any restrictions on membership. These groups tend to be full of energy and inspiration and are allowing people of all levels of sobriety and meditation experience to come together to form a strong community. My perspective as someone who is used to being the "teacher" and having more control over the setting probably biases me toward more restriction, but, the truth is that both models are completely valid and, again, the important question is, what do you want from your group? So, it comes down to intention. It's likely that a KM model will provide more opportunity for structured meditation practice, study, and development. The more 12 Step open model I think fosters more connection, service, and opportunity for new people. Ideally, it would be nice if both could be available to people.

Form and Content

Now we get to the meat of the group: what's going to happen when we get together? There probably aren't that many different things that a group will do: meditate, talk, read, socialize. It's just a matter of finding the form and content that is most helpful for your group.

In most meditation groups, the sitting, or meditation, period comes first. The reason for this may be that the meditation itself makes us more sensitive and open and

allows us to both speak and listen with a clearer attention afterwards. It helps bring calm and stillness to the group and to give people a break from the busyness of their lives.

So, I recommend that once everyone is settled, that the group do some meditation. If you are an open group with drop-in members, it's probably best to do give at least a little bit of meditation instruction. You can use the guided meditations in my book or any of a number of other books (see my booklist on <http://www.kevingriffin.net/booklist.htm> for some suggestions), or, if your leader is an experienced meditator, they might want to just give their own instructions. The following section of this guide includes additional meditation instructions. These instructions should be spoken slowly, giving people time to try to do what you are suggesting, and with a calm voice that will be pleasant for people to listen to.

Generally it's recommended that a meditation period be at least 20 minutes. For new people this might seem long, but it seems to be a widely accepted period. In fact, regular Buddhist meditation groups often sit for 45 minutes or even an hour. Obviously, each group will want to decide on the length of the meditation period.

Most groups end meditation with a bell. These can be purchased at spiritual bookstores, futon shops, meditation centers, health food stores, and online. A bell is a pleasant way to end a period of silence non-verbally. Some groups do chanting at the end of the meditation period, and, of course, a group might want to use a prayer, like the Serenity Prayer. In any case, it's nice to have a ritualized way of ending meditation. It allows for a smooth transition out of the silence.

After the meditation, depending on how long the meeting is going to last, you might want to have time to stretch and have tea. It's best not to have this social time go

on too long because the quiet developed during the sitting will be dissipated with too much chatting. You might, in fact, want to save social time for afterwards.

Now you begin the interactive part of the session. If you are simply an open group, then you might just go right into sharing. A KM group often has a time for check-in where people talk about what's going on in their lives right now before going into a chosen topic. Or the leader/facilitator might want to begin by talking on a topic as a way of stimulating conversation and sharing some dharma understanding. Any of these models can be effective.

Some groups find it helpful to read some literature together, following the 12 Step "Book Study" model. If it's a KM group, you might suggest that people read a chapter of a book before the group meets so people can go right into discussion. A drop-in group might read aloud from the study book during the gathering. And, of course, a discussion would follow. Besides *One Breath at a Time*, a couple books that I think are suited for this kind of study are Jack Kornfield's *A Path with Heart*, Sharon Salzberg's *Lovingkindness*, and Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart*. I'm sure members of your group will have their favorites as well.

Besides someone giving a talk, group sharing, reading, and discussion, a group might be interested in doing interactive exercises for working with specific Steps and concepts for bridging Buddhism and the Twelve Steps. The following section of this guide will offer some suggestions in this regard.

For a KM group, it's helpful to have a "check-out" time where people can mention what was beneficial and what not so beneficial for them in the gathering. The facilitators can then adjust things according to people's needs.

It's nice to end any group with a blessing, prayer, or short lovingkindness (*metta*) meditation—less than five minutes. This puts a nice closing energy into the end of the session. One group I visited did both a “dedication of merit” and then got up and held hands to say the Serenity Prayer, just like a 12 Step meeting. That seems like a nice combination of the two.

Whatever of these suggestions you might adopt, I think you will find that a meditation group of any kind will be of great help to its members. When we practice together we strengthen our practice in a way that solitary meditation can't. The support and insight of others is invaluable in developing our practice. Everytime I join with a group to meditate my practice is inspired and energized. I wish you great joy, happiness, and awakening through your inner work.

One Example

The San Francisco Zen Center has been offering a Buddhism and Recovery session every Monday night for several years. They were kind enough to describe in detail the way their group runs:

They meet from 7:30 to 9 pm every Monday night.

The first 5-10 minutes or so, the leader speaks about some specific aspect of meditation (posture, breath, doing “mini-meditations” throughout the day, etc.), followed by a short general instruction.

They then sit (silently) for 20 minutes.

Following that, people introduce themselves (the leader always says that it is not a Twelve Step meeting, so people are free to introduce themselves as alcoholics, addicts,

whatnot, or just say their names--there are no requirements to attend). They do respect anonymity and confidentiality.

Then the leader speaks for about 20-25 minutes on some aspect of dharma and recovery. (they've spoken on the Steps, the paramitas, the 4 noble truths, etc). Generally, they will bring in literature from both traditions which is read at the beginning of each talk. They always work to tie Buddhism and recovery together--and to let the teachings speak for themselves. They find it especially helpful to speak about non-theistically based spirituality, as that is what a lot of people go there to find.

They then open the floor for sharing, as in Twelve Step meetings.

They end with another 10 minutes (or so) of meditation and a dedication of merit.

This is a format the leaders and members have worked out over the past 4+ years, and they find that it works pretty well.

Most of the time the same teacher leads the group. Now and again they have a guest speaker--the criteria for such are at least 5 years of recovery and to have received Buddhist precepts.

For more information about this group, you can email the San Francisco Zen Center at ccoffice@szc.org or call the front office at 415 863 3136.

Meditations and Exercises

The following meditations and exercises are simply examples of things that a group might want to use. I suggest you make up your own once you get the hang of it.

Contemplative Interactive Exercises

These exercises are meant to be done in some kind of small group configuration. You might use “dyads,” two people facing each other, or three, four, or the whole group. Try different forms and see which ones are most helpful. I’ll give one suggestion for each Step. You can make up more.

One nice structure to use is based on Right Effort. This structure uses two sides of the same question, such as, “How do I undermine my own meditation practice; how could I support my meditation practice.” In this way, we look honestly at difficulties, but we don’t stay stuck in the problem. We also look at the solution.

STEP ONE EXERCISE

What are the negative thoughts I have which get in the way of doing meditation which I could let go of? What positive thoughts do I have about doing meditation that I can nurture?

STEP TWO EXERCISE

What thoughts do you have that stand in the way of Faith? What thoughts could support constructive belief?

STEP THREE EXERCISE

Have you “made a decision to turn your will and your life over”? How have you done that? Could you deepen this decision? How?

STEP FOUR EXERCISE

This can be spoken or written:

Do an inventory of your meditation practice based on the five hindrances:

1. Desire – where do I see desire in my practice? How do I work with it?

2. Aversion – same question
3. Restlessness and worry – same question
4. Sloth and torpor – same question
5. Doubt – same question

STEP FIVE EXERCISE

Share the hindrance inventory.

STEP SIX EXERCISE

How can I understand “defects of character” in a way that isn’t harming to my self-esteem?

What does being “entirely ready” to let go mean to me?

STEP SEVEN EXERCISE

How do you let go? What allows that to happen? What stands in the way of that? How could you nurture that ability?

STEP EIGHT EXERCISE

Look at how your relationships have been a source of pain. What negative idea about your relationships would you like to let go of? What positive idea would you like to nurture?

STEP NINE EXERCISE

Are there real-world problems which stand in the way of my spiritual development?

What would it take to solve them? Am I willing to do that work?

STEP TEN EXERCISE

When do I tend to lose my spiritual center in my daily life? How could I nurture that center through those situations?

STEP ELEVEN EXERCISE

How do I seek to improve my conscious contact? How could I improve that contact?

STEP TWELVE EXERCISE

In what aspects of my life do I “practice these principles”? In what aspects do I not? How could I nurture my practice of mindfulness, kindness, and wisdom in more of my activities?

Guided Meditations

These guided meditation were written for my book, *One Breath at a Time*, but there wasn't room to include them. They can be read aloud slowly by a member of the group, or read to yourself. They can also be taped, then played back. For other exercises, see my book *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps*.

Calm and Concentration

The three exercises below are all useful for deepening relaxation and quieting the mind. With concentration practices you try not to pay attention to anything else. When you realize the mind has wandered, immediately return to the object, without any noting or reflection. This repetition will help develop one-pointedness. Experiment with these practices and see if one of them fits. Concentration practices aren't always the right thing, but they can be very helpful at times. Be sensitive to your own response to the practice: is the effort involved helping you to become more calm or more tense?

Each of these practices involves paying attention to the sensations of the breath while repeating phrases in the mind. The phrases act as anchors, guides, and, in the case of the

Gathas, potential triggers for certain mind states. As you do these practices, it's important not to strive or struggle. Just trust in the practice to have the positive effects it is meant to develop—calm and concentration.

GATHAS

Speak these phrases silently in the mind with an in breath and out breath:

IN – OUT

DEEP – SLOW

CALM – EASE

SMILE – RELEASE

PRESENT MOMENT – WONDERFUL MOMENT

COUNTING BREATHS

As you follow the breath, count each out breath up to 10. If you lose track of where you are, return to 1. You can also say “In” on the in breath, so it goes like this:

In, one

In, two,

In, three

etc.

BUDDHO

This is a traditional monastic practice from the forest tradition.

On the in breath say “**BUD**” (pron. “bood”) on the out breath say “**DHO**”

Repeat for duration of sitting or until calm arises.

Mindful Listening

Experiment with using this exercise in different contexts: sitting in a business meeting; in a Twelve Step meeting; standing on the sidewalk talking to a neighbor; working with a therapist. It's also a good practice to use when listening to a Dharma talk. Anytime when you are listening to someone else speak is an appropriate place to use Mindful Listening. If you have time, go through the whole exercise. If not, just zone in on your body for a moment.

First, take a discreet deep breath, not drawing attention to yourself, but allowing the breath to go further into your body. As you exhale, relax.

Now, find a place in the body where your attention can rest. This might be the arms or legs; the belly or back; your hands or feet; even your face. You might prefer to just feel your breath.

As your attention rests on this part of the body, be aware of the sensations happening there. Don't try to get too meticulous, just get a general sense of the constellation of sensations in that area of the body. Once in a while, take another deep, calming breath.

Keeping a large degree of attention on the body sensations, notice that you can still listen to every word being said. Having attention on the body doesn't diminish your ability to hear and comprehend.

As you listen, notice your own thoughts. Are you commenting on what the person is saying? Planning a response? Wishing you weren't here? Whatever is appearing in your mind, just be aware that this is a passing thought, and come back to body sensations and listening.

If you have a response to the speaker, see if this response appears in the body as well as the mind. How does judging feel? How does it feel to agree with someone? To disagree? All of these thoughts have corresponding physical manifestations. Instead of following the thoughts, follow the body, and drop the thoughts.

Continue to listen in this way until it is your time to speak.

Mindful Speech

Speaking mindfully is very similar to listening mindfully—only harder. It's very difficult to separate spoken words from thoughts, and thus from ego. This work requires great determination.

Before you speak, make the inner commitment to try to be as mindful as possible as you are talking.

Again, take a deep breath before you start, relaxing the body and trying to bring some calm to the mind.

Use awareness of the body to ground yourself in the present moment. Some people like to pay attention to a more or less neutral place like the arms and legs, while others find that watching the sensations in the belly and chest where emotions are most evident is more helpful. Experiment for yourself and see what works for you.

Now that you've paused and grounded yourself, begin to speak, keeping as much attention in the body as you can. As you speak, take time to select your words. Before you say something, quickly consider whether the thought you're having is one which can be communicated usefully. Is there a way to modulate your words for better effect? Try not to rush, just keeping some attention in the body and some on the mind, noticing how your mindstate changes as you speak. Notice how speech itself becomes a driving energy, and try not to be swept along by it. At any time you can stop speaking. Take a breath, re-center your attention in the body.

Often when we are speaking, others interrupt us. If this happens, see how that feels. Is there a physical sensation that comes in response? A sense of incompleteness? Of frustration? Can you let go of that and move into mindful listening?

With mindful speech, compassion and love are aroused, and these qualities stimulate the deep, intuitive parts of the mind, allowing a free-flowing wisdom to manifest. Because we aren't speaking out of the place of asserting our identity, but rather from a place of openness and calm, mindful speaking becomes a form of investigative meditation.

Forgiving others

As I've described, forgiveness is a vital quality to develop as we deepen our practice. Forgiveness is done *in this moment* and *for this moment*. It's a practice, not a commitment. You can take back your resentment any time you want (and you probably

will). The point of forgiveness isn't to let someone else off the hook. The point is to drop the painful feelings we are carrying around inside ourselves.

Begin by taking some calming breaths and focusing on the heart. Sit quietly, following the breath for five or ten minutes, until you feel relaxed and centered.

Now think of someone who has hurt you. Let their face or their name or just the sense of their presence come into your mind. As soon as you think of this person, check with how your heart is responding. Breathe again into your heart, trying to keep a balanced and calm state.

Now use some phrases to offer forgiveness. "I forgive you." Think of the person and what was driving them. Did they act out of their own suffering? Their own ignorance? Remember how painful it is when you are angry or when you hurt someone else. "Just in this moment, I offer you my forgiveness."

Continue on, thinking of other people who have hurt you, and offering forgiveness to each of them in turn. Stay with your heart and your breath. Watch how your mind tries to latch on and tell stories. Drop the stories and come back to the phrases.

Now think of someone that you have hurt, again seeing their face or sensing their presence. Check how your heart responds to the thought of them. Breathe and release any tension.

"May I be forgiven." Think of what was driving you when you hurt them, the suffering which prompted your unskillful words or acts. "For any way that I have harmed you, may I be forgiven."

Now, as you breathe deeply, accept this person's forgiveness. You might imagine them smiling or nodding or even embracing you. Take in this kindness.

Continue thinking of people you have hurt, and asking forgiveness of each of them in turn. Keep centered in the moment with your breath, your heart, and the phrases.

Forgiving ourselves

If we are going to make amends to ourselves, we must forgive ourselves first. How many ways have we hurt ourselves? How can we make up for that? Only in this moment.

Begin by taking some deep, centering breaths, relaxing into your posture. Let your mind settle, your body become stable and still.

Now, imagine that you are a child, perhaps four or five years old. See yourself—feel yourself—being held in the arms of a trusted grownup. Being held and comforted. Take in the warmth of their care and the sense of safety you feel being held by them.

Feel your own innocence, your own purity. This quality lives inside you, even though life has drifted it over. Open yourself to that felt sense of innocence and purity.

Now, bring to mind a moment of kindness you performed in your life. Perhaps you cared for a sick child; or sat by a dying parent; maybe you helped a colleague meet a deadline or stopped to give a stranger some help changing a tire. Our lives are full of small, unnoticed kindnesses. A smile; a kind word; let other moments of kindness, or just the feeling of those moments come to you.

Now think about your relationships, how you wanted the best for others, even if you weren't always able to give it. Remember what that innocent child wanted to create in life. The pain you caused others and the pain you caused yourself was out of confusion. The Buddha said that the most amazing thing in the world is that everyone wants to be happy, but so few people do the things which bring happiness. Our harmful and unwholesome actions came out of this ignorance. Can you forgive someone who didn't know any better? Can you forgive yourself, just in this moment—just *for* this moment—for the ways you hurt yourself and others? The child in us really doesn't want to cause harm. She may be scared or needful; he may not understand what brings happiness, or be driven by compulsion and addiction. Once we let go of these feelings and these behaviors, beneath the surface is this pure, loving child's heart, seeking only to touch others with kindness.

When we open ourselves to these childlike qualities in ourselves, letting down a lifetime of armor, forgiveness flows naturally. And once we can forgive ourselves, it becomes easier to forgive others as well. With forgiveness, the possibility of amends becomes more real; the barriers of resentment fall, leaving us ready to take the next step.