

One Breath at a Time –

Excerpt

Step One: *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.*

A Bottom

June 6, 1985

Every alcoholic or addict reaches a bottom, a moment when the misery of addiction becomes so overwhelming that it's impossible to ignore any longer. Unfortunately, for me it took another three years after the Cambridge wedding to reach that point. My bottom didn't come in one of my many blackouts, or incidents of driving drunk; it didn't come during the violent fights with my girlfriend in my twenties, or when I was arrested for possession of methadone at nineteen. It came quietly in a "moment of clarity" at age thirty-five.

Step Two: *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

Coming to believe in the Path

January 2, 1993

Three of us were sitting in front of Ruth Denison, the grande-dame of Western Buddhism, as she's known. We'd been part of her annual holiday retreat in Joshua Tree. Because we were leaving that day, she asked us to meet her after the morning meditation period. The other retreatants were outside doing walking meditation in the cold, high-desert morning.

I was over seven years sober then, seven years when I'd rebuilt my life. I was a senior at UC Berkeley, and the other two people with me, Jennifer and Dave, were also students there-only twenty years younger than I was. They were also both sober; we'd met at Twelve Step meetings on campus. Each of them had been involved with the Twelve Steps since they were teenagers. I was forty-two, and my recovery was allowing me to go back and live the experiences I had missed twenty years earlier-and to get them right this time.

After asking the others about their retreat, she turned to me.

"And what about you?" she asked. "What did you learn this week?"

I smiled because I was hesitant to claim I'd "learned" anything at all. Sometimes it seemed I just kept getting the same lesson over and over. But

something had happened on that retreat.

"I really see that this is the path for me," I said. "I've never had such confidence in these teachings before. I'm ready to commit myself to my practice."

"Good. You're at the Third Noble Truth," she said.

Wow, the Third Noble Truth. Wait a minute. What is the Third Noble Truth? I'd been practicing Buddhist meditation for twelve years, but all these lists still eluded me. Let's see: First, the Truth of Suffering; Second, the Cause of Suffering; Third, the End of Suffering.

The three of us bowed to Ruth and left the hall. We crowded into my ten-year-old baby blue Datsun 210, and began the drive back to Berkeley. To avoid the freeways around Los Angeles we cut through the mountains.

"What did she mean about the Third Noble Truth?" asked Jennifer as we swept down a broad valley. The surrounding hills were tipped in white.

"It's about faith," I said. "The Third Noble Truth is when you recognize that you're on the path, that this practice can work, you can get enlightened."

"It's like 'coming to believe,'" said Dave. "Like the Second Step."

Step Three: *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

In Step Two we begin to break down the resistance to the Higher Power and start to build faith. In Step Three we "turn our will and our lives over" to this power. There's nothing mysterious about this process; it's not a magical ritual and doesn't require special grace to accomplish. What it requires is commitment.

When we "make a decision" we are committing ourselves to our spiritual life, committing to placing that at the center of our lives, as the guiding principle. For me, this happened in stages. First I committed to sobriety itself; then I committed to the program and the Steps; finally, as I was healed from my addictions, I committed more deeply to my Buddhist practice. This commitment, this "decision," is what I think is most important about Step Three. It may not matter what we use as a Higher Power, but our commitment to follow a higher purpose does.

Step Four: *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*

Buddhist Inventory

Inventory is a process which happens in Step One, Step Four, and Step Ten. In other words, it permeates the Steps. It also permeates the Buddhist path.

In Buddhist meditation we take different kinds of inventory: we might inventory ourselves in relation to the Precepts, the Hindrances, or the Eightfold Path. This inventory can be quite personal, as when we look at how we harm others through actions of speech; or it can be impersonal, as when we see how thoughts of desire and aversion appear in the mind unbidden. Here we see how much of our mental activity is generic, human output—nothing unique to us, just patterns of neural impulse. In fact, the Buddha says that even those who are fully enlightened "in virtue, concentration, and wisdom" still do unskillful things, still break the precepts, and that they must be honest about this. The Theravada tradition includes a monthly "confession" in which the monks describe for their preceptor any rules they have broken that month.

Step Five: *Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*

Noble Friends and Noble Conversation

Although I'd practiced a lot of meditation before I got sober, I didn't have a broad understanding of Buddhism. I thought of Buddhist practice as the heroic work of the individual—hidden away in a cave or monastery, practicing in silence and isolation. I was many years into sobriety before I began to learn about how connecting with others fit into the Buddhist path.

One night, my teacher was talking about a sutta where the Buddha's cousin and attendant Ananda comes to him and says, "Venerable sir, this is half the holy life, that is Noble Friends and Noble Conversation." When my teacher read this, I thought that the Buddha was going to correct him, saying that these things weren't that important. Instead, the Buddha responds, "Not so, Ananda! Noble Friends and Noble Conversation are the whole of the holy life."

I was shocked. I'd always considered meditation to be the "whole of the spiritual life." How could friends and conversation be so important? As my teacher talked about this sutta, I looked around and realized I only knew three or four people in the group, a group I'd been attending for several years. I noticed around this time that my teacher began to use more interactive exercises and integrate questions and dialogue more in his teaching.

Up to this time, I'd always thought of my Twelve Step program as a little bit of a poor stepchild to the "real" spiritual work of Buddhist meditation. But I realized then that "Noble Friends and Noble Conversation" exactly describes Twelve Step programs. That's what they're all about. Of course, the benignly anarchic form of these programs means that many less-than-noble conversations and friends will appear, but it's nobility which is the heart of recovery. Sharing and sponsors; inventory and newcomers; going for coffee with the group after a meeting. These are all examples of noble friends and noble conversation.

sand alcoholics and addicts to keep me on track day to day.