

Voice of the Amida Order and Friends of the Amida Order: Pureland Buddhism

Absolute Grace, Total Engagement

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RUNNING TIDE



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Issue 33: Twelve Steps Part One

RUNNING TIDE

Running Tide offers a voice for faith and practice, as well as critical, existential and socially engaged enquiry within the broad framework of Pureland Buddhism.

We publish short articles, poetry, pictures, interviews, comment and Buddhist resource materials.

Opinions expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Amida Order, Amida Trust, or other associated organisations.

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Amida Order & School

The Amida Order and Amida School are a religious order and communion, respectively, following the Pureland tradition, established under the auspices of the Amida Trust. In this periodical the letters OAB after a name indicate membership of the Order of Amida Buddha and the letters MAS indicate membership of the Amida School. The Amida School is also referred to as Amida-Shu. All Order members are also School members.

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EDITORIAL

Since the last issue of Running Tide, our new UK temple, Amida Mandala has opened in Malvern. There has been a huge amount of work to get to this stage and I am very grateful to everyone involved. Kasper and Satya, the other residents and the cats have settled in very quickly and it already seems like they have been there much longer than just a few months. If you have not had the opportunity to visit Amida Mandala yet there are some images of the new temple on pages 18 and 19.

This issue was inspired by an e-mail discussion on the Order e-mail group and a discussion-thread on the Amida Ning website (www.amidatrust.ning.com). There seems to be many overlaps between the beliefs of the members of Twelve-Step Fellowships and Pureland Buddhists and this topic has captured the imagination of many sangha members. This issue focuses on the first six steps.

I hope you will enjoy reading each of the articles as much as I have and that they will give you food for thought. I am already looking forward to part two which will be published later this year.

Thank you to all of those who have contributed or helped in any other way to make this issue possible, especially John Croxon, Satya Robyn and Robin Diver.

Namo Amida Bu ■

—Sanghamitra Adrian Thompson

STEP ONE: ADMIT OUR LACK OF POWER

Dharmavidya David Brazier



Amida Nyorai © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The first step of the Twelve-step Programme is “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol.” The admission of powerlessness is one of the most profound spiritual realisations there can be. In Pureland Buddhism, for instance, we admit that we do not have the power to enlighten ourselves. In this there is a kind of despair and a kind of faith and from this chemistry, a huge release of energy.

Buddhism is the belief that beings do get enlightened. Arhants and Buddhas exist. Enlightenment happens, but not by one’s own power. Some enlightenment has already happened—thanks be! Some enlightenment might yet happen—what joy! Buddha is already in the world—how fortunate we are! The Dharma has been declared, the wheel set turning two thousand years ago is still spinning. Even beings such as ourselves are touched by this grace.

When we look honestly at our lives, we see that our mind contains all manner of destructive, lustful, greedy, envious, possessive, and conceited elements. What a disgusting mess it is. Perhaps we got into Buddhism thinking that we could clean all this up and get to a pristine state. Some people think that such purity was our original nature and that when the Zen kōan tells one to study the “face you had before you were born” that it is referring to the



innocence of mankind before the Fall. Others think that we have always been a mess; that is what karma is and if we were not a mess we would not exist at all because our karma would have all been used up. One can make many different kinds of metaphysic out of these ideas. The existential fact is, however, that we find ourselves here in this state. We then, maybe, start to practice with the idea that we will get ourselves sorted out and reach a kind of purity.

There is currently a craze for “mindfulness.” I put the word in quotation marks because it is questionable how closely connected contemporary secular mindfulness practice is to the original that Shakyamuni Buddha taught, but that is by the by. The mindfulness



Photograph courtesy of Moyan Brenn [Flickr] under CC BY 2.0

craze is doing a service by putting many people in touch with something that, however distantly, reflects the light of the Dharma. The key Buddhist text on mindfulness is the Satipatthāna Sutta.¹ It is possible to interpret one of the opening lines of the sutta as “This is the only way for the purification of beings.” If you take it that way then what you understand by the sutta is a training in how to keep eternal vigilance over yourself so as to eliminate all wrong impulses. Is this possible? If it were, would it be desirable? Over the years in which I have studied the Dharma, which are now quite a few, I have gradually come to the conclusion that the answer is negative. I would rather follow the wisdom of Master Dogen who took the meaning of the sutta to be that by investigation of the reality we can discover that body, feelings, and mind are all impure and unreliable and do not provide a foundation for any kind of enlightenment other than that of deeply knowing this reality.

I admitted that I was powerless over the intoxicating effect of greed, hate and delusion. I was only able to do this because somewhere in my being there resided a faith of some kind. The actual clothes that I wrap around this faith and the terms and labels I put upon it have changed over the years. My first

spiritual experiences occurred when I was a young child who had never heard of Buddhism. I came to Buddhism later because it seemed to speak to my condition and talked about things that I recognised from those experiences, things that nobody else (apart from the divinity teacher at school) seemed to be the least bit interested in. This difficult-to-name faith has found a suitable vehicle in the Buddha Dharma, and especially in Pureland, and that has become a great satisfaction to me, even though my view of the Dharma still often seems to be different from that of many of my colleagues and contemporaries.



Photograph courtesy of Ecstaticist [Flickr] under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

It is certainly possible to read the Dharma as a path to personal purification by the application of conscious and deliberate attention to the elimination of all the stresses and contradictions that a human being is heir to—that is, as a path to spiritual power. The very attention and study that such exercise prescribes, however, has simply given me an ever sharper awareness of just how deeply ingrained human grasping is and how powerless we are over it.

I came upon Pureland by stages, probably I absorbed as much as I was ready for each time. What hidden hand guided this education I do not know. Each time was a great relief. Within it, however, there is a supreme paradox. Innocence is powerlessness. As soon as one has any kind of power, one becomes



responsible for doing or not doing things that have effect in the world and everything that has effect in the world does some good and some harm. So it is not possible to be powerful and innocent. We are all guilty as soon as we have the power to do anything. Consequently, in a simplistic understanding, we are all going to hell. Yet, as soon as one accepts that one does not have the power to prevent oneself falling into hell, one is, by that very act, returned to innocence.

So we are neither inherently innocent, nor inherently guilty, nor are we capable of doing anything about it. Why would we want to? We would want to in order to justify ourselves, to know that we are good and righteous people, worthy of salvation. Although many modern people have abandoned the framework of monotheism, they tend still to live as if engaged in a dialogue with a supreme judge. Perhaps they now think that the judge-critic is part of themselves, but to think so is, of course, an even greater hubris than thinking that one could manipulate the Creator.

Buddha put his finger on it. The root of it all is conceit. We think that we can escape from conceit by being supremely virtuous or totally conscious or returning to our Buddha-nature or something of the kind, but this is itself only a higher expression of the same conceit. It is a case of trying to lift oneself off the floor by pulling on one's own bootstraps. Our very virtue is conceit.

When we see this we realise that we are totally trapped. We do not have the power to get out of this trap. It manifests at the most practical level. Perhaps we resolve to become a better human being. I recently saw a new year message by a spiritual guru who said that each year at least we should ask ourselves "Am I a better human being than I was a year ago?" With a view to identifying possible improvements and implementing them. All this is hubris. We do not have that power. As soon as one thinks "I am going to make myself into a better human being," a shadow is cast across the mind. The mind operates by a balancing mechanism: whatever is accentuated creates an equal and opposite presence in the mind. The Taoists understood this. Jung went some way toward it, too, but he still retained the idea of a super-self as an attainable project. Lao Tzu knew better.



I do not know if I am a better or a worse human being than I was. What would it mean? Whatever I do, I think it is a good idea at the time, but I am a deluded being. I am here, so I have no choice but to act on what light I have, but I know that that light is almost certainly extremely inadequate to the cosmic situation in which we find ourselves. Am I doing the best I could with my life? It surely cannot be so! In all the possibilities that exist in this world, there must always be better ones. Yet if one constantly whips oneself to try harder and search deeper, the whipped animal that one becomes is very likely to turn even more nasty.

When one abandons the self-perfection project, whatever precise detail it takes, there emerges the possibility of genuine acceptance of reality and faith in something beyond self. One can trust more fully in providence. One can look cleanly at where the advantage of this or that truly lies. In practice one makes less mistakes in life by being realistic than one does by idealism.

Always the three poisons spring up as an unquenchable source and are actually multiplied by our spiritual arrogance. True enlightenment is that awakening or rediscovery of faith that is grounded in an honest view of oneself. To sustain this, even for part of the time, it is of immense value to have a sense of humour.

In this respect, the religious profession is a tricky one. As soon as one becomes a monk or priest, the world starts to expect that you will be a super-human being. No longer will one ever be selfish or destructive. One's compulsive habits will all be quelled. One will always have a kind word for everybody and never speak of things that are cruel or unkind. If anyone were really to conform to this expectation, they would have to shut up their demons so tightly that they would probably go mad. In religions that have imposed such



strictures, the practical result has often been great hypocrisy, in which the appearance is maintained for the sake of propriety but illicit outlets become institutionalised.

So what of the precepts? Why do we have a hundred and more rules if we do not have the power to keep them? What a wonderful paradox is this. The precepts are the body of Buddha. They are as much our object of worship as the figure on the altar. We know that we are inadequate to them, yet we revere them. When we see that we or others have conformed to them we rejoice. When we see that we have not, we learn more about our true nature and thus that of others also. From such investigation of Dharma springs compassion.

The true priest, “who will be one among the most respected in all worlds”, in fact, needs to face his own state even more honestly than most do. Genuine humility will encompass all of human nature. A deep contrition recognises things as they are and takes the evidence of life not as a goad but as a broadening of wisdom, knowing all to be in the same predicament, yet knowing that it is only to beings in such a predicament that true spiritual grace comes.

There is a much retold fable of two wolves. It goes like this:

One evening an elderly member of the tribe told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said that the battle is between two wolves that are inside all of us. One wolf is evil: it is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false-pride, superiority and ego-centricity. The other wolf is good: it is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The grandson thought about it and then asked which wolf wins. The old man smiled and replied “The one you feed.”

This is a popular idea of spirituality.

However, I do not agree with this story. Firstly, there are many more than two wolves. Secondly, it is important to feed all your wolves. If you feed one

and starve the others, the hungry ones will eat the one you feed. No, it is better to give each wolf something. They all exist for a reason. Then, thirdly, we are not always well placed to know what those reasons are, nor to judge which wolf is which. I take all my wolves to see the Buddha each day. He likes the wolves. He pats each one and gives it something special. I don't understand what he says to each of them, but they seem to get along. Buddha knows much better than I do what role each wolf has to play and where they all fit in. We all come away happier. Buddha is not Buddha because he has killed half, or ninety-nine percent, of his wolves. He is Buddha because his compassion is universal.



Reflection courtesy of Jeroentieljies [500PX] under CC BY-ND 3.0

I admitted that I do not have the power to control my wolves nor am I in a position to judge them. They are all fine animals and in the spiritual ecology they all do their job. Will this get me enlightened? I have no idea. Do I get to be a better person? I don't know. I know that there are more important things to spend my time on. Those who tell the two wolves story mean well. One of their wolves is telling the story, after all, though it might not be the one they think.

The forces at work in one's life are great and powerful. One does not have control over them. In particular, one does not have the power by one's own will and effort to reach spiritual illumination. Such illumination, if it comes, comes to one who has given up claim to such control. Illumination is not an achievement, it is a light that shines upon us. The Buddhas are always

shining their light and occasionally we glimpse more than we expected, usually in places different from the ones in which we were searching. I am sure that I play my small part, even when I do not know what it is. ■

NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans, *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: Majjhima-Nikaya: New Translation (Teachings of the Buddha)* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995). For a modern translation of the Satipatthāna Suttam with notes see Ñānamoli and Bodhi.



Fushimi Inari, Kyoto courtesy of Robert Harwood [500PX] under CC BY 3.0

STEP TWO: A POWER GREATER THAN OURSELVES

Satya Robyn



Circle courtesy of Daniel Krieg [500PX] under CC BY 3.0

Six years ago I walked into a room full of people who were affected by someone else's drinking. I was terrified.

I was terrified because, by going in and sitting down in a circle with those people, I was admitting that I was one of them. I was so affected by someone else's drinking that I was going crazy. I wasn't in control of myself or the drinker. I admitted that I was powerless over alcohol, and that my life had become unmanageable. The First Step.

Taking the Second Step, "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity", happened much more slowly. As I settled into the group and learnt how things worked, I realised that "getting a sponsor" was a good thing to do. A sponsor would help you work through the twelve-steps on a one-to-one basis. You were meant to choose a person who had qualities that you wanted yourself – and I asked a confident woman called Suzanne if she'd sponsor me. She was tiny and blond and bubbly and to my horror when I went round to her house for my first meeting she talked a lot about God.

I'd always had an ambivalent relationship with religion. I'd been to a religious school and had felt perplexed when teachers, even those I admired



like my Chemistry teacher Mrs Rogers, went up to the front and ate a wafer given to them by the man in the funny clothes. It seemed like such a silly thing to do—why did people do what religion told them, rather than making up their own minds? How could they believe in something with absolutely no scientific evidence?

Suzanne said that she'd felt the same way when she first entered a Twelve-step programme. The "G" word had been a big trigger for her. Over time, she said she started to see it as a signpost to something ultimately unknowable. Using the word didn't mean that she had to swallow Christianity whole. She very slowly experimented with a relationship with something mysterious—something that possibly had more of the pieces of the puzzle than she did.

This is the concept of a Higher Power in the programme. As it says in Step Three, we are told that we do need a Higher Power, but we get to choose a Higher Power of our own conception—"God as we understood God." During Step Two we're not asked to take on a dogmatic belief in a particular kind of God. It's suggested that we "come to believe"—that we enter a space where we are curious about our thoughts and feelings about a Higher Power and to leave some space for the possibility that if we can't do it on our own, there may be something else out there that will do a better job of running our lives.

The Twelve-steps are an experiential programme—we are asked to try them out and to see what happens, rather like Buddha's suggestion that we make our own investigation of the truth rather than relying on the opinions of others (or our own mistaken opinions).¹

This gentle encouragement to try things out allowed me, paradoxically, to hold onto enough of my power to feel safe enough to experiment with letting some of my power go.

Suzanne also said that it doesn't matter what our Higher Power is for the programme to work. She knew of a man who'd had his radiator as his Higher Power—when he was overwhelmed he'd hand his problems over to the radiator, and he'd listen out to see what the radiator might have to say when he was feeling stuck.

I gradually started experimenting with the idea of my own Higher Power, who I christened “Bob.” I would pray to Bob, self-consciously at first, and see if I felt anything when I was in conversation with him. To my surprise, I felt accepted. I felt like I wasn’t alone.



Spring Flowers courtesy of Syota Takahashi [500PX]
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This Step Two work was the perfect preparation for my first visit to The Buddhist House in Narborough as a part of the psychotherapy training programme. I joined the morning services and when I encountered people doing strange things like prostrations I wasn’t scared off quite as

much as I would have been in my old atheist days. I was able to notice the qualities of the people practicing Pureland—they seemed quietly confident, and happy. Just like in the Twelve-step programme where we pick sponsors we want to be more like, these Buddhists had something that I wanted and so I kept going to the services. I was reassured, as I was when I attended Twelve-step meetings, that I didn’t have to swallow any idea of a God-like Buddha straight away. Instead it was suggested that I live with the new ideas and experiences for a while—to “take what I like and leave the rest.”

This easy welcome allowed me to gradually find my way towards a faith in Amida Buddha that has changed my life. I am writing this article from my office in Amida Mandala, the temple that Kasper and I run in Malvern for Amida Trust. Spreading the Dharma is right at the centre of everything I do. I’ve achieved things that I never could have dreamed of achieving if I hadn’t taken the Second Step.

In his wonderful book “Recovery—The Sacred Art: The Twelve-steps as Spiritual Practice”, Rami Shapiro says that of all the forms of Buddhism,



Pureland is particularly suited to accompany those following a Step programme.² With its emphasis on bombu nature and on other-power, it encourages us first to acknowledge our powerlessness through contrition, which puts us in a position where we can receive Amida's grace (which is always there). I am personally interested in the strong links between the Twelve-step approach and a Pureland approach, both of which are particularly counter-cultural in this age of "do-it-yourself" and "self-help".

One way of summarising the whole Twelve-steps is—"I can't, God can, let God". The Second Step is the "God can" part—becoming open to the concept that the Buddhas can help us where we can't help ourselves. Maybe we can also summarise Buddhism in this way, especially Pureland Buddhism. We come to some kind of limit, our "rock bottom", and something in our ego is shattered. We lie in pieces on the floor like Quan Yin after her failed attempt to heal all the suffering in the world, and then we call out for help. And then, gloriously, the Buddhas come. Our next challenge is to let them do what they will through us—their will, not ours, be done.

In my experience there is a great relief in this way of approaching spirituality. We don't have to make it all happen. We can trust the Universe, and others, and the Buddhas. We don't have to take refuge in our own selves, and even more than that, taking refuge in the self is a really unhelpful thing to do!

Unfortunately, this knowledge doesn't seem to stick in my mind very well. I have to make the realisations over and over again—noticing when I'm playing God again (or making other people into God), handing that power back to where it belongs, and allowing myself to be shown the way by something bigger than me. That's where the gold is. ■

NOTES

1. "Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability. . . .When you know for yourselves that . . .then you should enter and remain." Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans, *The Kalama Sutta* [online]. Available from: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/ano3/ano3.065.than.html> (2013). Licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

2. Rami Shapiro, *Recovery—The Sacred Art: The Twelve-steps as Spiritual Practice (Art of Spiritual Living)* (Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2009)

STEP THREE: *TARIKI*—Other-power

Robert McCarthy

Commonplace courtesy of David
Hepworth [500PX] under CC BY 3.0



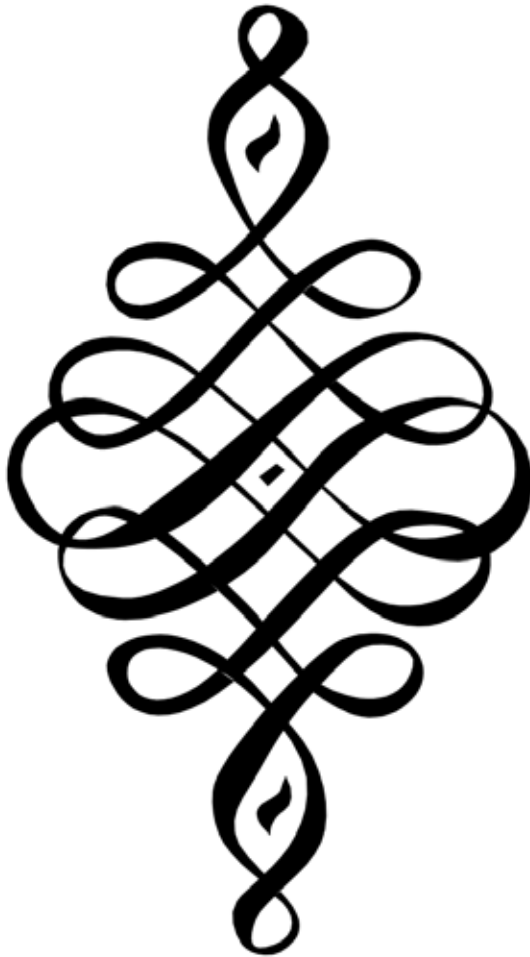
Step Three, “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the Scare of God as we understood Him”, sounds very much like a description of taking refuge. However, the words “made a decision” understate the challenges of the third step. We make decisions every moment of every day. Pureland Buddhists in particular refer to such an involvement as making a vow. The wording also brings a feel of self-power; we cannot simply just decide though, this must come from a process of deep immersion in the subject matter. Furthermore, Buddhists would not see taking refuge as a third step. Buddhist approaches are regarded as sowing seeds and not as following a linear process expected to bear fruit.

A decision to turn our will and lives over to other-power, is rather close to a vow to let go of self-power. These terms, self-power and other-power, are understandable once we are aware of how identification with the self limits our experience of life. They are understandable when we begin to know the mysterious source of wisdom and empathy that guides us, but lies beyond our understanding. This is part of the essence of Buddha’s teaching

The last phrase of the third step, “God as we understood him” is a phrase that could potentially alienate a good proportion of the people who come across the Twelve-Step Programme. The word God is particularly powerful and loaded with conflicting meanings. Sadly the word itself will block many people from looking any further. Religious terms in general have this effect.



To rewrite the third step in Buddhist terms must involve using another term beside God, but I wonder whether the name Buddha or Amida should appear. Should we consider whether to write in Buddhist language or to be inspired by Buddhism but write in a more secular tone? I am hesitant to attempt to rewrite the third step in a Buddhist way, but here goes, “I was moved to live in deep trust of being held by a power I sense beyond myself that guides me into wisdom and compassion for all other creatures.” ■

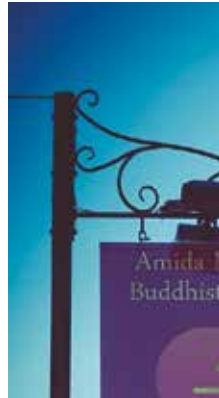


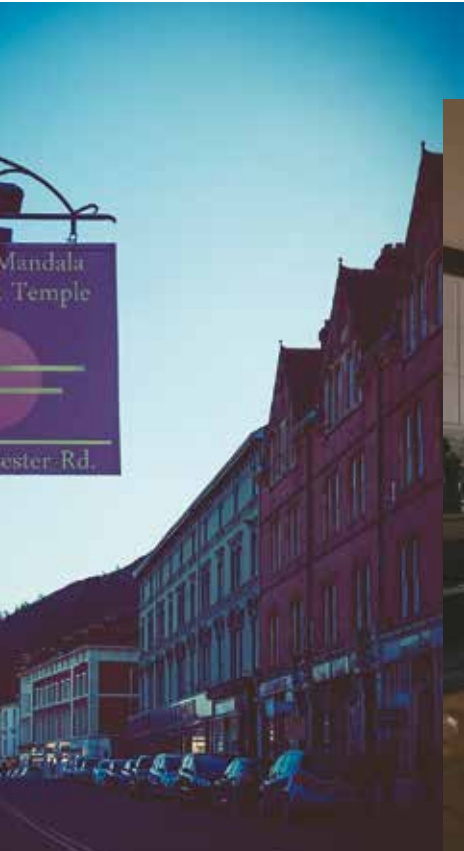
Amida Mandala Buddhist Temple



The new UK temple, Amida Mandala, opened in December 2014. For more information about Amida Mandala see www.amidamandala.com.

Photographs courtesy of Sanghamitra Adrian Thompson





STEP FOUR: NEI QUAN

Acharya Modgala

When you can bear your own emptiness. . . courtesy of Benjamin Balazs [500PX] under CC BY 3.0



As I wrestled with the decision whether to become Amida Trust's first apprentice I had a strange and powerful dream. I was sitting in front of a Japanese Zen teacher who instructed me to do "Nei Quan." Around the same time Dharmavidya was talking about possibly holding a Nei Quan retreat in the coming Spring. So when I did ask if I could become a full time apprentice one of my requests was to take part in this five day retreat.

I knew I needed help in facing myself. I had started to avoid reality at a young age. My early life held a lot of suffering. I hid from the painful memories psychologically via repression and depression and took comfort in food; and from fifteen until I found Amida, drank rather too much alcohol. In my fears of the present and of the future I learnt many protective behaviours that could get me into trouble and hinder my full interaction with the world. And because of fear, especially in groups and when I should have spoken out, I lost my voice.

The Nei Quan retreat was intense. Every waking hour we wrestled with three questions initially concerning our primary care giver: for me that was my mother. "What did she do for me? What did I do for her? What trouble did I cause her?"



We sat on mats in absolute silence; six of us spread around the borders of the room. The mats delineated the space in which we could sit, stand, lie down or pace. Caroline brought our meals and water and plenty of tissues. The only things we possessed were a piece of paper, and a pencil to record our journey. Dharmavidya came round once a day to silently listen to our findings and when the time was right he moved us onto investigating our relationships with other significant figures. We heard each other's struggles and I treasure the love and silent holding we offered to each other.

For me it was a big and very particular struggle. I spent three and a half days focussing on my mother. Even ten years after her death, I was still very angry with her. I did not really know her, I had shut off any emotional connection to her when I was very young, never listened to her much as I was growing up, and ignored her in adulthood.

However by using the first question to focus in fine detail on all she had physically done for me while I was young I started to see her in a new light. As an older mother she must have struggled to cope with running the guest house and bringing up a small child. With the second question I realised how relatively little I had done for her in return. I wept as I saw all the opportunities forever lost to love and to help her; especially in her older years as she battled with serious mental health problems. The third question opened my eyes to how much pain I must have caused her from soon after my birth, in childhood, and in later years as I rejected her and focussed on my father.

I melted. As I cried, I at last began to truly know and understand my mother. I could imagine her living in fear during World War Two hiding under the stairs with my toddler



Road between Oberalppass and Nätischen courtesy of Milky-Way [500PX] under CC BY 3.0

sister during the London blitz and then again in the Southampton blitz. In understanding more about her life I could guess more about events that led to her being mentally ill. Finally I started to let go the blame I attached to her for the abuses I suffered as a child. At last I could love her. I cried an ocean of tears and in those tears healing took place. I was then able to start opening up to the other realities and possibilities in my life.



Au commencement... courtesy of Laurent Rouschmeyer
[500PX] under CC BY 3.0

Nei Quan is for me the practice that enables me to take this moral inventory of myself that the Fourth Step Twelve-step Programmes call for. The wording “Fearless and searching moral inventory” describes very well the process we undergo if we give ourselves to the Nei Quan process.

This process continues as I use Nei Quan in a daily check of the previous twenty-four hours. This helps me to face the shadows that lurk and could trip me up in my day to day life. I can feel and face the anger rising, see the fear that lies behind it, and either prevent or own my actions that sometimes are not so wise. I can then use that energy to do all I can to encourage peace and understanding wherever I can.

This amazing practice does help me see many things more clearly. For example, Nei Quan also helps me to see how so many others help me to exist: The people that grow the food that I eat and the people and machines that transport it to me. I owe many people and this beautiful planet so much. My heart fills with gratitude and love.



That first Nei Quan retreat still lives with me. I can see myself on my mat underneath the picture of Amida flanked by Quan Shi Yin and Tai Shi Chi. I can see Ronald pacing on the mat diagonally across from me and remember the wordless connection we had as we faced our demons. I remember this especially when I need to find courage to face the dark side of myself. Facing ourselves honestly does need courage because nobody likes to fail, yet the truth is, we fail again and again. On every journey with Amida whether far afield or in this country I have had to face my frailties and yet still carry on.

Nei Quan, over the years has helped me know more of my points of weakness so I have been less likely to make bad decisions, avoid an issue or commit wrong actions. It has also made me more able to make reparations quickly when I do fail. However I must remind myself that I still have blind spots. *Avidya* (not seeing) dogs me as it does us all. Nei Quan is for me the antidote. It helps me see even some of the things I would rather not see. After all I did have forty years of avoidance practice!

The journey of my life onwards from that Nei Quan retreat and the ordination a few months later helped me find my voice, live this life, and live up to my name of Modgala (which means someone who sings out in spiritual joy). In honestly facing my past, and facing my fears I have found freedom. I have found the liberation the Buddha teaches. I have found the Pureland that can exist here and now. Even in the midst of this suffering world. ■



STEP FIVE: ADMITTING OUR WRONGDOING

Kusumavarsa Hart

Long Dark courtesy of Hannes Flo [500PX]
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Step five of the Twelve-Step Programmes is “We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” When you have done something wrong, to whom do you turn to when admitting your behavior, and is the process always about seeking forgiveness?

To steal a line from Elton John, “Sorry seems to be the hardest word.” Right from our early years as children, admitting our wrongs to another can be painful. Admission of wrong behavior means coming to a place of acceptance that you have carried out actions that have consequences. While we cannot go back and change the behavior and actions that culminated in our wrongdoing we do have the power to affect the past with our actions in the present. Thich Nhat Hanh suggests “Touch the present deeply and you touch the past.” All our lives are touched by moments from our past, both good and bad. How we live our life now is influenced by every past moment and encounter with another. In a sense there is no point in regrets, because in the present we can draw on the experiences of the past and learn from them so that our actions of today can be positive and transformational.

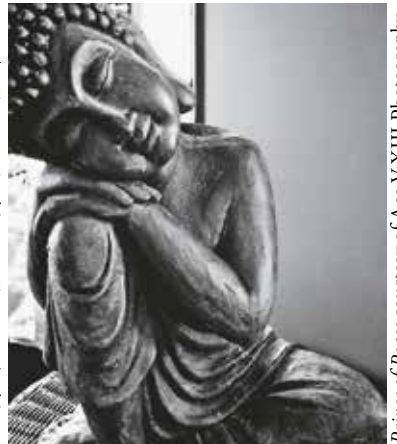
So in acceptance there is the ability to transform our old habits, should we so choose. Step five of the twelve-step programme is about saying “I know I



have done wrong, but I am determined that I will not do it again.” If we say this to ourselves then we are remaining self-reliant. Admission of guilt either to ourselves or a friend brings with it many strings of emotional attachment. We become preoccupied with morality, guilt, and judgment by ourselves or our friend. Often when we know we have done wrong we anticipate that there will be some sort of punishment for our actions by another, or we find a way to punish ourselves. But what if there was no need for punishment? What if admitting the wrong deed was in itself an act of cleansing? Is it not better to move forward with a greater awareness of what caused your negative actions and try not to make the same mistakes again? Such achievements cannot easily be maintained though if you rely on your own self.

The admittance of wrong doing to God opens a door to support from something outside of us. We are in a way, accepting our foolishness and telling ourselves that we can't do it all alone. It may take many years to get to this point. But at the moment we recognize our delusional behavior, we open up ourselves to an opportunity to cleanse our heart and mind. This is the precise moment in which we can find faith in an “other” such as God or Buddha. We have learnt how to be humble; we have learnt how to trust another.

If a Christian must confess their wrong doings to God, does a Buddhist need to confess all to the Buddha? In Amida Buddha's eyes there is no need for us to confess because he does not discriminate between good and evil. He accepts us just as we are. Amida knows that our wrong actions come from our delusions and until we recognize our behavior the cycle of delusion, craving and suffering will continue. Even though a confession does not hold any great significance to Amida, one might argue that the act of admitting you have done wrong to either the Buddha (or God), yourself or a friend can help you to break the cycle of wrong doing. Hearing your own confession out loud can be a real awakening to the seriousness of a situation and the suffering that has occurred as a result of your delusions. Admitting that you have done wrong to the very people you have hurt drops down the barrier created by



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one's ego, and comes from a place less clouded by delusion. Being ready to admit your wrongdoing also means that you are finally at a place where you can listen to another. Hearing a friend or work colleague tell you what they really think of your behavior can leave a bitter taste, but as painful as it might be to see yourself through another's eyes, it is at that precise moment that you can untangle yourself from some of your deluded self.

More often than not we are too quick to act without thinking, we form a judgment about a situation based on our own delusions. If only we could take a step back and pause, our negative actions might not even manifest in the first place. Anger is a brief moment of madness, but in that moment it can be a destructive force. Many a harsh word is spoken in times of anger and it is only after the dust settles and we take time to reflect that we realise our wrongdoing. Meditation is a wonderful transformational tool to help us in breaking through our delusions. In deep concentration we can see in our mind a situation more clearly because we have taken our self out of the equation. During the meditation practice we see the other person with eyes of compassion and can build a greater awareness of our response to the person in real life. Often we reduce our feelings of anger towards someone having contemplated our anger in a meditation. Stress and fear causes us to rush in to harmful actions, so if we take time to work on our behavior during meditation then we are able to reduce our quick responses to situations in every day life.

Sometimes our wrong doing to another is fuelled by our frustration that the person does not meet our own expectations. Our perception of ourselves once again gets in the way of really seeing the other person. If only we spent time sitting in meditation observing our mind and cultivating compassion for the other person we would be less inclined to become angry and commit a wrong action towards that person.

The second we take our self out of the equation we become more compassionate and caring for those around us, life becomes less muddled, and we awaken to a life that flows a little lighter. Set aside the self you think is so important, and through humility you will become free. Faith in the Dharma is your path to selflessness and if you just focus on this, nothing else is required.



Follow the precepts: I pray that I may not take life. I pray that I may not steal. I pray that I may not fall into sexual misconduct. I pray that I may not fall into wrong speech. I pray that I may avoid intoxication. Within these precepts we use the word “may” to remind us that we are foolish beings and so can at any time fall back in to wrong speech, action or deed. But with faith in the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and recitation of the precepts we can pull our focus towards a more humble and enlightened existence.

It is our ego-centredness that blocks our path to contrition. As we develop our practice and cultivate a greater awareness of our foolishness the opportunity for an act of contrition arises. If we recite the precepts and practise Nembutsu, calling out to Amida, the love and compassion of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas enters our hearts. Some might be mistaken for thinking that Buddhism is a practice for the mind when it is just as much a practice for the heart. To be a practitioner of Buddhism is not easy; it requires us to feel our fears and let them go. When we do so, we are able to see and feel everything with deep meaning. By keeping a simple faith, by dedicating ourselves to the practice, by feeling every part of the Nembutsu in our being, we shall be released from our wrong actions. ■



Somewhere Beyond the Sea courtesy of Jesús Ignacio Bravo Soler
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STEP SIX: THROWING THE TOWEL IN

Adam

Tired Daisy courtesy of Pablo Hernandez [500PX] under CC BY 3.0



In Twelve-step literature the sixth step seems grossly neglected—“We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

Some of the steps have whole chapters written on them. For example, the first step has four chapters devoted to it. The sixth has just one short paragraph: less than six whole lines. Although the awareness gained in the previous steps is useful, it by no means provides the skill required for this level of change to be effected. To me, this was suspiciously inadequate. After all, how is it possible to let go of so much personal material after just five stages of a spiritual process which I'd only been engaged in for a matter of weeks?

My first attempt at recovery ended in relapse because I failed to appreciate the seriousness of my predicament, neglected the program and after eleven months of abstinence reverted to my default setting of using substances to manage my life.

After this hellish dive into the realm of suffering that is addiction, which chewed me up and spat me out, minus my dignity and my self-esteem, I rebounded back into the fellowship a truly shattered man. It would be fair to say that by this point I was little more than a breathing, talking character defect. Although I had no idea of the depth of my defectiveness, I did have a burning desire to survive, and subsequently a shed-load of willingness. My body and mind were destroyed but my resolve was high. I was, and still am, blessed with a support network which seemed to easily bear the weight of my neediness. A neediness that I wasn't particularly aware of. My sponsor



breathed enough spiritual nourishment into me to sustain me through six months of cataclysmic life changes. As my life changed, I clung desperately to the sturdy structure provided by the twelve-steps.

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My understanding of step six is born out of the experience of wrestling with myself over several years and realizing the futility of trying to remove the parts of me which I find objectionable by my own power. The problem is deep. . .very deep and very complicated.

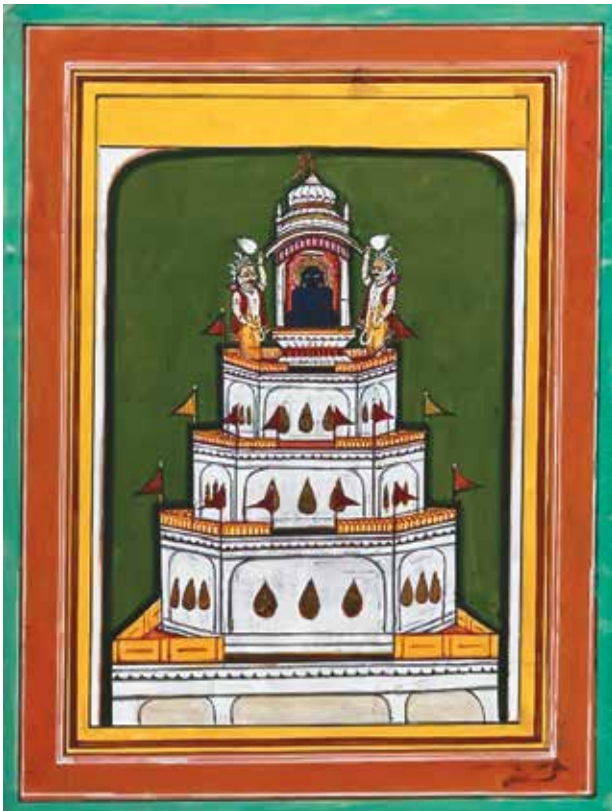
I was born into a hell realm, of that much I am sure! My circumstances in childhood deprived me of the basic requirements which enable a human to

grow in a healthy way. I was conditioned to dysfunction. Out of an array of deeply rooted insecurities and a mass of raw scar tissue, I constructed a personality consistent with a character which didn't actually exist. This character, however, was vastly more confident than I was. He was stronger and less sensitive. He didn't ask questions, he just did what he needed to do to survive. If you were to take all of my defects, roll them all into one big, imperfect mess, what you would get is this guy. The guy that stepped in as substitute when I threw the towel in after being beaten into submission by myself, family, my friends, the world at large and last but not least, the drug culture.

My character defects are profoundly embedded into my fragile sense of self. This impossible situation is probably the reason for the lack of emphasis on Step Six in our literature. The lack of words pointed to a strategy of no action on my part. To apply myself in an attempt to eradicate such a tangled web of problems, would have been an exercise of a hopeless nature. The Sixth Step puts an emphasis on willingness and hope, because for a problem of this magnitude, hope is all we've got.

There is something that I can do though. What I can do, is try to get out of the way and let the Buddha have a go. By sidestepping the self perfection project and proceeding directly to the source of power (Buddha, God, Allah. . .) we increase our chances of being imbued with the limitless Love and Light of Amida, who is hopefully slightly less daunted by the issue!

I'm afraid I don't feel as if any of my defects have been removed, even lessened. In fact, I'd say that certain ones have seemed to increase in their potency. But what I do seem to find, is a change of attitude towards myself and the world in general. The idea that I need to justify my relationship with Amida is deeply ingrained, probably as a result of my dark history, but my experience shows me that Amida doesn't discriminate between my virtue and my foolishness. He loves me for both. When I repeatedly (on an hourly basis. . . at least) take my mess to the Buddha, the light which is reflected back is visible to all. ■



Buddha on top of a tiered pavilion courtesy of Wellcome Library, London used under CC BY 4.0



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<http://amidatrust.ning.com>

UNITED KINGDOM

Amida Mandala (Malvern) is the headquarters for the Amida Trust in the UK and also the home of the UK Amida Order. It holds several regular services each week and occasional special events.

Telephone: 01684 572444
hello@amidamandala.com
www.amidamandala.com

Amida NorthEast meets monthly in the Durham area. Contact Kuvalaya for details.

Kuvalaya.abel@gmail.com

Amida London meets weekly on Tuesday evenings from 7–9pm. Contact Padmaghosa for details.

Tonydanford@phonecoop.coop
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Amida Birmingham has monthly meetings on the second Saturday of every month at 10am–12pm.

Sanghamitra@AmidaBirmingham.com
 Telephone: 07527 480974
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REST OF EUROPE

Amida Belgium has regular meetings, and events for Buddhist practice and Buddhist psychology.

<http://zuiverlandboeddhisme.be>

Amida Israel meets on the 3rd Sunday each month, 20:30–22:30 for practice & sharing.

ymatri@gmail.com

NORTH AMERICA

Amida USA is a non-profit church based in Hawai'i created to further the spread and practice of Amida-shu Pureland Buddhism.

<http://www.amidausa.org/>

Amida Mosaic (Ontario, Canada) is a community of spiritual friends. Amida Mosaic Sangha activities are held in London Ontario under the leadership of Prajnatara T. Bryant, Minister in the Order of Amida Buddha..

amidamosaic@gmail.com
<http://amidamosaic.com>

Mount Fuji

reflects in Lake Kawaguchi



Katsushika Hokusai, *Kōshū Misaka suimen*. Public Domain

The original and sacred vows
Are the unique and essential path
To enter the Pure Land.
Therefore, with body, speech and mind,
We are devoted to the teachings
That all may attain the state of bliss.