

Eight Step Recovery

Using the Buddha's Teachings to Overcome Addiction

By Valerie Mason-John (Vimalasara) and Dr Paramabandhu Groves

Human nature has an inbuilt tendency towards addiction. All of us can struggle with this tendency, but for some it can destroy their lives. Fortunately, recovery is widespread too. What can the Buddha's teachings offer us in our recovery from addiction? They offer an understanding of how the mind works, tools for helping a mind vulnerable to addiction, and ways to overcome addictive and obsessive behaviour, cultivating a calm, clear mind without anger and resentments.

Whether you are struggling to stay off heroin or with obsessive thinking, the Eight Steps here take you away from addictive tendencies to discover a fulfilling way of living.

“The Buddha was in recovery”. Taking this as a starting point, this wonderful book shows how we are all addicted to aspects of life and can all benefit from training our minds and hearts to be free of compulsion. The Mindfulness-Based Addiction Recovery programme draws on a wide range of the Buddha's practical, yet profound, teachings. The eight steps offer you the possibility to gain mastery over your mind and find freedom.’ Vidyamala Burch, author of *Living Well with Pain and Illness*

‘Through Buddhist teachings, personal experiences, and case examples, this book provides a wise illustration of the fundamental processes underlying a broad range of addictive behaviors. Mason-John and Groves offer here a practical and compassionate step-by-step guide to freedom from the deep trappings and suffering of addiction.’ Sara Bowen, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, University of Washington, author of *Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Addictive Behaviors: A Clinician's Guide*

‘Blending Mindfulness-Based Addiction Recovery with traditional Buddhist teachings and personal stories, the authors give us a wise and compassionate approach to recovery from the range of addictions. This comprehensive approach will be a valuable tool for addicts and addiction professionals alike.’ Kevin Griffin, author of *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps*

‘This book provides a spiritual pathway to recovery for people from any faith tradition, as well as for those who are not religious, and for those who suffer from addiction as well as those who are simply aware of the suffering associated with the human condition. This is a book for everyone!’ Professor Chris Cook, Director of the Project for Spirituality, Theology & Health, Durham University, UK

£11.99/\$18.95/€13.95, 304 pages – ISBN: 978 1 909314 02 3

Release dates: January 2014 (UK), March 2014 (North America)

Launch dates: January-February 2014 (UK), March-April 2014 (North America)

 Windhorse Publications

Invitation from Valerie Mason-John (Vimalasara) and Dr Paramabandhu Groves

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We believe *Eight Step Recovery – Using the Buddha’s Teachings to Overcome Addiction* is an important book. Just as the Buddha offered the Noble Eightfold Path as his recovery from suffering to the world, we offer eight steps of recovery to the world of people suffering from addiction, obsessions, compulsive behaviour and ‘stinking thinking’. It is part of the Bodhisattva vow and engaged Buddhism, offering the Dharma to this worldwide community.

During the past ten years in North America we have seen many books comparing the twelve-step programme (originally of Alcoholics Anonymous) to Buddhism. Worldwide there are many Buddhist traditions offering the Dharma to people in recovery and working with addiction. What we do in our book is identify some of the Buddhist teachings that people in recovery can explore to help them overcome their addictions and maintain their recovery. We believe that this will be a landmark book for people in recovery, and for people who are in relationship to people in recovery.

In parallel with the book, we will be offering **training in Mindfulness-Based Addiction Recovery** (MBAR), formerly known as Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention. MBAR is an eight-week course developed by Paramabandhu, drawing on mindfulness-based approaches to depression and stress, to help people in their recovery from addiction and to prevent relapse into addictive behaviour. We are delivering a three-day training at Aryaloka Buddhist centre, 13–15 December 2013, and will run the same three-day training course in London in February, Friday 7 to Sunday 9, 2014. These courses will include handouts for participants, teachers’ notes, and led meditations to download.

We will also be launching internationally a 21-day meditation-for-recovery course as a free download on November 17 to help promote the launch of the book. This is a series of short meditations to go with our book *Eight Step Recovery*. The meditations can be used on their own or in conjunction with the book. The meditations cover mindfulness, metta, ethics, wisdom and the

use of mantras. Each meditation lasts about 15 minutes and is accompanied by musical backing to help sustain attention, especially for people who may find silent meditation more difficult.

Our **Eight Steps Project** on thebuddhistcentre.com is where you can find the latest on our work, including resources and support if you want to get involved. You can also comment on posts we make there or get in touch with us directly: www.thebuddhistcentre.com/eightsteps

We will be doing book tours, January and February 2014, in the UK, and in North America later in 2014. If you would like us to come and launch the book, give a talk, workshop or retreat please contact us at eightstepsrecovery@gmail.com The following pages are extracts from *Eight Step Recovery*, copyright © Windhorse Publications 2013.

The Eight Steps

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Step One: Accepting that this human life will bring suffering

Step Two: Seeing how we create extra suffering in our lives

Step Three: Embracing impermanence shows us that our suffering can end

Step Four: Being willing to step onto the path of recovery –
and discover freedom

Step Five: Transforming our speech, actions and livelihood

Step Six: Placing positive values at the centre of our lives

Step Seven: Making every effort to stay on the path of recovery

Step Eight: Helping others by sharing the benefits we have gained

Who Is This Book for?

These Eight Steps are aimed at anyone who is struggling with an addiction or compulsive behaviour. As well as drug, alcohol and gambling addictions, the book is for people who experience compulsive or addictive aspects to eating, sex or other behaviours. Although we recognize that recovering from addiction can be a matter of life or death for some people, this book is also for people who do not think of themselves as having an addiction, but who have habits that are harmful in their lives. We hope the book will be of value to professionals working in the field of addiction, as well as those caring for someone with an addiction, or in relationship with a person struggling with addiction.

We can't avoid suffering if we open our eyes to it. Suffering is all around us. However, freedom from suffering is in front of our eyes too. Some of us, who realize our difficult human predicament, reach a crisis and turn to a spiritual path, faith or religion to deal with the shock. Others turn to an addiction for answers to the meaning of life. Fortunately, addiction itself and its suffering can lead people into the doors of a Buddhist temple, a church, a mosque, a synagogue, and many other places that offer some type of solace.

Nevertheless, sometimes our suffering can seem too overwhelming, or the possibility of freedom from it can be so painfully close that we refuse to see it. We may know there are places we can go for help, but choose to stay in our suffering. Many people caught up in addiction are afraid of recovery.

They are afraid of the institutions that could help them.

One such institution that has helped people with addiction has been the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, and many other programs in this tradition. It has saved many lives, helped many families, and outlined 12 Steps and 12 Traditions to the path of freedom. If the Steps are followed diligently, there are 12 Promises ranging from having a new freedom and happiness, to having no fear of people or fear of financial insecurity. However, 12-step programmes are not for everyone, and many have turned away, desperate for another way of recovery.

These Eight Steps can be used by people who have not responded to the Twelve Step approach, as well as those who are in Twelve Step recovery. But it can also be used by people in a 12-step programme who are perhaps trying to understand their 11th Step more fully. This step is 'Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.'

In the 12-step tradition, God can be interpreted as the God of your understanding, 'Good Orderly Direction', or 'Higher Power'. Although the Buddhist tradition has no place for God as a creator divinity as understood by the theistic traditions, there is nevertheless a clear and definite understanding of a supra-personal dimension, an 'Other Power' in Buddhism. This dimension is available to every human being, and for those interested, we are including the supra-personal in the Eight Steps, providing the groundwork for people to readily connect with it, beginning with the breath. However, the Eight Steps can equally be practised without reference to or belief in a higher power or supra-personal dimension.

Our book draws on the teachings of the Buddha, but the Steps can be used by someone from any religious or spiritual tradition or from none. In the spirit of the Buddha's advice to some of his disciples, we encourage you to test out the teachings here in your own experience and utilize those you find helpful.

How to Use This Book

To be able to write a book and explain our Eight Steps, we need to put them in an order. The order has a certain logical structure that can be helpful to follow. While we recommend working through the book sequentially, we realize that in the messiness of our everyday lives, some of us may prefer to move back and forth between different steps and stages. Depending on what is happening in our lives, the challenges and opportunities we are facing, and

how inspired we are feeling, we may respond to and want to practise different steps. Moreover, we are likely to need to revisit different steps again and again as our understanding deepens and as we ourselves change.

In each Step there are exercises to practise. It may seem like it is breaking your flow, but we want you to slow down and reflect before moving on to the next idea. We also encourage you to pause after each Step, and we introduce a three minute breathing space (AGE) to help you do this.

The book can be used alongside other help, whether professional or peer. In particular, if you are dependent on a substance, it may be dangerous to stop it abruptly without some medication, so we recommend that you seek medical advice if this applies to you.

The book can be used in a facilitated or self-facilitating group context where each step can be discussed among you.

Recovery can be hard and is often thought of as a life-long journey. We would encourage you to seek out whatever you may find helps you – we offer the Eight Steps as aids and support to accompany you on your journey.

A great ally on the path of recovery is our breath. We carry our breath around with us all of the time. Connecting to our breath can help us to pause and slow down, which makes recovery possible. The breath underpins all Eight Steps. We will be learning to slow our lives down by working with our breath and short meditations in the book. In Tibet the word for meditation is Gom, which means ‘to become familiar with one’s Self’. That is what this book will help us to do. Through short meditations, meditative exercises and reflections, we will begin to understand the nature of our thoughts, feelings, actions and mind. Breath is one of the most common ways to help us calm the mind. So let’s connect to the breath before we begin exploring the Eight Steps of recovery.

If meditation brings up anxiety, we have lots of other tools to help you slow down. The Resources section at the end has additional exercises, as well as further resources, such as led meditations that you can also find online.

Three Minute Breathing Space, AGE

The breathing space is a way to put a pause in what you are doing. It can assist you to notice and break your unhelpful, automatic habits. It's also a chance to slow down for a few moments. Having paused and caught up with yourself, you can decide what to do next. There are three stages to it: awareness, gathering and expanding (hence AGE). A typical length of time for the breathing space is three minutes – one minute per stage – and so it's sometimes called the three-minute breathing space. However, you can make it longer or shorter depending on the circumstances.

Once you have read the instructions, put this book down, and take three minutes to practise the breathing space:

1. First, assume a gently upright posture. Bring awareness to whatever is happening right now. Become aware of your thoughts: what are you thinking right now? Allow your thoughts to be there, without pushing them away.

What are you feeling right now? Let your feelings be there too. Acknowledge them as they are, even if they are difficult.

Become aware of sensations in your body, especially any strong physical sensations. As best you can, just allow them to be there and bring an attitude of friendly curiosity toward them.

2. Then, gather your attention on the breath (becoming aware of the breath in and out of your nostrils and the movement of your chest and belly). Focus on the physical sensation of the breath. When you breathe in, it may feel cool, and when you breathe out, it may feel warm. Physical sensations of the breath can be tickling, throbbing, pulsating, hot, a dull ache or sharp pain. If you feel something in your belly or in your nostril, or upper lip, no matter how slight, this is sensation.

3. Finally, expand your awareness to include the whole body. As best you can, feel the physical sensations in the whole of your body. If you wish, to sense the body as a whole, you could imagine the breath going in and out of the pores in your skin, as if your whole body was breathing. If you notice any areas of tension or tightness, you could direct your attention there. You could imagine directing your breath to these areas, breathing into and exploring the sensations with the breath.

Step One: Accepting That This Human Life Will Bring Suffering

'Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult – once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.'

– M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, published January 1st 1980 by Simon & Schuster (first published 1978), 'Problems and Pain', (p. 12).

The First Step highlights the teaching of the First Noble Truth. That there is suffering. Everything will one day come to an end. That delicious dessert will satiate us for a moment and in the next moment we will want more. Good news will excite us, and sooner or later we will be feeling flat. Step One may seem all doom and gloom, as if life is hopeless. That is how the First Noble Truth can appear to some people. However, the Buddha is just highlighting that nothing will give us everlasting satisfaction. He isn't saying there is no joy or reason to continue living our lives. So what we are saying is that there will be dissatisfaction, frustrations, unmet needs and desires in life.

Although suffering is inevitable, many people are not in touch with their suffering or don't want to know about it. Some people live a life of sex, rock 'n' roll, or work morning, noon and night and are not in touch with the pain that is lurking deep inside them. And why would they want to be? They have found a way to live, and keep a lid on all their pain, until one day they are unable to control their life with external stimulants. Others are unable to hide from their pain.

The Buddha said that birth, ageing, sickness and death will bring about suffering. And of course he was right. As soon as we are born we are old enough to die. As soon as we are born we will begin to age, and inevitably will become sick. How many of us ignore or brush aside these basic facts of life? How many of us turn to alcohol, food, drugs, sex, work, or another coping mechanism when we are faced with an illness, with the death of a loved one? How many of us fear our death or death of a loved one? Or fear ageing, sickness and the inevitable suffering in life? We cannot escape this reality.

Three Types of Suffering

The Buddha identified three sorts of suffering: physical, psychological and existential.

1. Physical Suffering

This is direct suffering of the body: a headache, stomach ache, toothache, a wound to the physical body. As human beings with a body, we cannot help feeling physical pain. However, how we respond or react to the pain will exacerbate or diminish our suffering. Some of us have developed addictions because of pain and physical suffering. Others have become meditators and/or Buddhists because of physical pain. Through meditation we discover that pain is always changing; that physical pain does not remain at a constant intensity. We learn that responding to it with a calm mind really has an impact. It may not take away the pain, but it gives us a creative way to work with it.

We have learned that responding to physical pain with an agitated mind can increase the intensity of pain, rendering us at risk of becoming addicted to inappropriate use of painkillers or dependent on alcohol.

We're not saying that we should never take painkillers, because, as we know, a painkiller can help to restore the calm in our minds we need to work with the physical discomfort. We can work with pain by becoming aware of what is going on when we are in physical pain.

Have you ever been under the hands of a masseuse giving a deep tissue massage? If they catch a knot it is excruciatingly painful. We become agitated, wishing we had a painkiller, and the masseuse gently says 'Take a deep breath. Breathe in and out slowly.' Hey, presto – the pain feels much more bearable.

Physical pain is real. We cannot get rid of all physical pain, but we can let go of mental, emotional and psychological pain, which so easily develops in the wake of physical pain.

2. Psychological Suffering

This is our stinking thinking, the stories we tell ourselves. Have you ever told yourself you know something is not going to happen? You have angst about it, convince yourself there is absolutely no way it will happen. And, lo and behold, it does happen.

Have you ever told yourself that somebody didn't turn up to meet you because they don't care about you? Later, you learned that a mini-crisis occurred in their life that had prevented them from arriving.

Have you ever told yourself that you didn't get the promotion because 'There is something wrong with me', or 'I'm not good enough'? Later, you found out that the job was given to someone with much more experience. This is psychological suffering.

Then there are our expectations. For as long as we have expectations we

will suffer. As soon as something does not live up to our expectations, we will be disappointed.

There are more subtle forms of psychological suffering that many of us experience daily. When we are clinging to a happy experience, there can be a background disquiet because somewhere deep down we know this pleasurable moment will not last. Have you ever held on to a memory of a meeting with a friend, and next time you meet, feel disappointed because it did not live up to the memory? This too is psychological suffering.

It is so typical for our lives to seem to be going well, then something changes. A partner leaves us, or the washing machine breaks down. A friend cancels a meeting, or our cat dies. We are fearful of change. We get a new phone, but we are anxious about it being stolen. We worry that our partner might leave us or find someone they are more attracted to. The good things in our life are tinged with an awareness that they won't last forever.

Of course suffering can lessen, especially psychological suffering. We create the dramas in our lives. In a life of addiction, there will be great highs and great lows, continually swinging from craving to hatred. It's not possible for suffering to lessen while in the throes of an addiction. We have to stop moving away from our suffering, and do what the celebrated American author, teacher and Buddhist nun in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, Pema Chodron, suggests, 'Lean into the sharp points and fully experience them. The essence of bravery is being without self-deception. Wisdom is inherent in (understanding) emotions.' *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*. (p. 75) Look at it, accepting that it is there; don't identify with it; and let it go. It's possible for suffering to become part of the subtle ebb and flow of the mind, rather than the overwhelming emotions that we get hooked by and need to self-medicate or act out. When we become aware of the subtleties of suffering and trust, suffering will arise and cease. Without us going into panic or fear, it will not overwhelm us with strong emotions.

3. Existential Suffering

At a deeper level, the unstable, changing nature of all experience means that we cannot find lasting satisfaction in anything, because nothing will stay the same. Everything around us – people, places, objects – is in flux. This creates a sense of dis-ease. We can't completely relax into this changing world – at least to the extent that we try to fix it or lean on it for security. Sometimes we can feel that if we could just get to the end of our to-do list, everything would be OK. We would sort everything out, get on top of our lives and arrive

at the perfect state. Unfortunately we never get there: there is always more change. Nothing and nobody can give us permanent, lasting satisfaction and happiness. This is true for everyone, not just those of us with an addiction. There is no one we can turn to who can provide us with complete security. Whenever we seek out permanence or perfection, even though we may do it unconsciously, we will have an undercurrent of dissatisfaction.

We might experience existential suffering as a nagging sense of disquiet or insecurity, lingering in the background of our awareness. Alternatively, we might feel it more strongly, for example, with an overwhelming lack of meaning in life, perhaps when confronting ageing, sickness and death.

Physical suffering will always occur; we can't prevent it from ever happening to us. But mental and existential suffering can cease. We are what we think. We multiply our pain. When we let go of expectations, happiness will begin to naturally arise. When we can accept this, our suffering will lessen.

The Buddha was asked, what is the difference between how an ordinary person and a wise person responds to pain? He replied with the analogy of the two darts. All of us experience pain – whether that is physical pain like catching your finger in the door or mental pain such as when someone rejects you. This is the first dart, which we could call primary suffering. An ordinary person then gets caught up in trying to push away or avoid the pain; in blaming themselves or others, or feeling self-pity. This has the effect of making matters worse: the second dart, which we can call secondary suffering. A wise person just has the first dart. They don't get stuck in avoidance or obsessing about the pain. Instead they mindfully accept it for what it is, without making it worse with secondary suffering.

Simple Breathing Meditation

In this meditation we follow the breath as an anchor for the meditation. Then whenever we notice that we are experiencing bodily pain or difficult emotions, as best we can we try to face the pain just as it is and let go of any stories we are telling ourselves about the pain.

Begin by settling into a comfortable posture, bringing your attention onto your breath. Follow your breath as it moves in and out of the body. Then whenever you notice a painful sensation, as best you can, recognize the difference between the raw primary painful sensations and the responses of aversion towards it. If the pain is emotional, notice the difference between the raw emotion and the thoughts about it – the stories or narrative we tell ourselves about it. As best you can, allow the primary painful sensations to be there. Breathe into the sensations. If the pain is mainly emotional, there will be physical sensations associated with the emotion – breathe into these bodily sensations, with a sense of friendliness and curiosity. As best you can, let go of the stories about the pain, and open to, feel into the raw sensations. If the sensations are very strong, breathe onto the edge of the area where the sensations feel intense. If it's helpful, say to yourself: 'It's okay, it's already here, let me feel it.'

Suffering and Addiction

Valerie:

When I first came into contact with Buddhism, I was addicted to feeling high. The first whiff of pain was my trigger to make myself feel high. When something traumatic happened in my life I would go out dancing all night, even without intoxicants. The dancing made me feel momentarily better. I was not aware that I was still suffering. I had many coping strategies to deal with all my pain. I would never have admitted to being depressed. But when I look back on my life I can see how I was self-medicating. The binge-vomit cycle of bulimia was most definitely a form of depression. And when I needed a break from the cycle, I would take a stimulant.

I was told I had the perfect body, and was often asked if I was a model. I had achieved the ultimate goal of controlling my body. I thought that if I could control my body, this would control my world. But once I went below 100 pounds I was perceived by the world as sick, and when I went over 130 pounds I perceived myself to be obese. I could not cope with my body changing. I refused to face the truth of my suffering. I would rather die a miserable death

than accept change. I could not see that throughout my 20 years of anorexia, bulimia and hedonism, I was playing a deluded game of sensations, swinging from craving to aversion, without even a pause in-between. My life would be going seemingly well as a successful journalist, and then something would happen, and I would be in protest against the change.

My nostrils collapsed from snorting so much cocaine, and yet I still continued to use. My front teeth crumbled away from the acid of purging, and yet I still continued to binge and purge. I did not want to be reminded of change, and certainly did not want to put down the coping mechanisms that had protected me from the pain of my trauma as a child and adolescent.

But once I had the courage to reflect on the Buddha's teaching on suffering, it was as if I'd had brain surgery. My coping mechanism just began to slip away. I began to glimpse spaciousness and could see the insanity of my addictions. I could see how I had been torturing myself from self-induced mental suffering. I could see how I had created the suffering I was experiencing in life. I wanted something different. I wanted to move towards spaciousness. I wanted more positive emotion.

Sooner or later, addictive behaviours are likely to lead us into trouble. For example, we wake up with a bad hangover, or in bed with someone we have no memory of meeting. The secretive bingeing and vomiting will destroy our only set of natural teeth. Working in the office or at home over 60 hours a week may lead to isolation. One day we may return home only to find the creditors have seized our house due to our gambling or credit card spends. No matter what the addiction, it can lead to depression, isolation, the break-up of a relationship, loss of family or living on the streets. When we are addicted, we heap upon ourselves unnecessary suffering, and often associated with this are feelings of shame.

Part of the truth of suffering is simply that sometimes painful things will happen. Part of the delusion of suffering is that we can avoid our own suffering, perhaps just holding it off at arm's length. Our addictions are part of the delusion and ignorance that we as humans cultivate, causing our lives to become a whirlwind of chaos. We think that we are managing our emotions, that we can remain constantly high. We think that we can defeat the law of gravity, even though we know that what goes up must come back down. When we are high we will plummet from the euphoric state induced by stimulants back down into the depths of despair.

Cocaine may give us a high, keep us out dancing all night, even help us have creative ideas and keep us awake to achieve all the things we need to do,

but it can also lead to depression and psychosis. Alcohol may make us more sociable, humorous and likeable, but it can also make us more argumentative and even violent. Gambling may earn us a living, but it can also make us bankrupt. It may also be fun, but a livelihood that has an overwhelming amount of stress attached to it will create much tension and resentments in life. Similarly, using avoidance strategies like staying at work all day and night may feed the family, but inevitably it will have an impact on personal relationships.

Addictions are a dis-ease, an illness of the heart, body and mind. Even without any addictive behaviour, we all experience illness and dis-ease at times. We catch a cold or strain our back or are affected by more serious sickness, or emotional distress. It's built into the nature of being human. The workings of our bodies are incredible, but eventually they must wear out, break down or go wrong.

However, the truth of suffering goes deeper than this. Nothing stays the same and everything is in flux. All things are impermanent – the Buddha's fundamental insight. If we try to fix things and keep them the same, we will suffer.

Reflection: Counting the Costs of Addiction

Take ten minutes to stop and reflect on your life and how addiction affects it. Find a quiet place to sit, and settle yourself in a chair or on the ground. If you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes, or keep them slightly open, directed downwards. Feel the ground beneath your feet and anywhere else your body touches the ground. Allow the ground to support your weight. If you are sitting in a chair, feel the support of the chair. Notice that you are breathing and follow the sensations of the breath as it enters and leaves the body.

Now recollect your addiction.

How does it help your life?

What do you gain from this behaviour? Perhaps recall what first led you into this behaviour. If you notice any judgments or qualifications about your reflections, just acknowledge them and try to let them go.

How does your addiction cause you suffering?

What are the costs of this behaviour? Again, if you notice any judgments or qualifications, as best you can, acknowledge them and let them go.

Now allow the reflections to drop away. Notice again the breathing and follow the sensations as the breath fills and empties the chest and belly. Notice how you are feeling. If you are left with the thought that you want to move away from any discomfort, remember it is just a thought and not you. Take a breath and pause. There is no need to identify with the thought. Just let it arise and cease. And there will be a new thought telling you something different.

When you are ready, open your eyes. If you wish, write down your reflections.

Everyone Has Pain

In an affluent society, we have so many things to distract us that we are often unaware of the pain we are carrying around. We don't realize that the sudden angry outburst we had, the conflicts that seem to keep on arising in our lives, and our intense dislikes or cravings, are all connected to pain.

When we slow down, and let go of our addictions and avoidance strategies, we can quickly discover how busy our minds are. Our minds are like a tumble dryer, often with the same old stuff going round and round. We re-run and rehearse arguments, we fantasize about the future, we make up shopping lists, we go over past difficult events. We plan what we are going to have for dinner. We meet someone we fancy, and before we know it we have married them, and in the next breath killed them off in our heads. We can get completely caught up in any number of mental troubles or physical pains.

We may even think that we are the only ones with this type of noise going on inside our heads. The world is full of calm-looking people. It can seem that everyone else is having a better life than we are. We think that, unlike us, they must all be sorted, happy and have focused minds. We might feel a pang of anguish or jealousy, perhaps berate ourselves, and even feel self-pity.

Chances are, once we have slowed down, people will look at us and think we are living perfectly calm and happy lives. The reality is that the majority of people have minds that are just as busy as ours. We can't tell what is going on in someone else's mind, and we have become very skilled at masking what is actually going on in our own lives.

Most of the time we are preoccupied by the thoughts and feelings that assail us. Sometimes, this is painful. And when it is, it's hard not to be caught up in it. Occasionally we look at other people, and often they look fine; they don't seem to have the pain and suffering we experience.

In fact, everyone has pain, not all of the time, but definitely sometimes. This is a basic fact of life.

The Four Reminders

The Buddha's teaching is a prompt to face this reality and take responsibility for our own lives. There are Four Reminders to nudge us to do this. They are a poignant, gritty message to help us remember that change is a bittersweet reality.

If we do not wake up to the Four Reminders, we can spend our lives chasing after pleasure in the guise of our addictions, or reaching out for something external to numb our pain. If we wake up to the Four Reminders, we can begin to accept calmly that this human life will bring suffering, and start to shape our lives in ways that bring greater fulfillment.

The First Reminder is that this life is precious. What this means is that we are fortunate to have a human birth; we have the capacity to live a rich and fulfilling life. If we are born into a family of alcoholics or a family of hate, we still have the potential to change our lives, and not continue the family's vicious cycle. We can break the family history and pathology. We don't know how long we will have on this planet, but we do know that we are living right now in this moment. And this present moment is an opportunity to change and to let go of our addictions. Do we want to waste any more of our precious time? What changes would we like to make in our lives?

The Second Reminder is that death is inevitable, that everything is impermanent. It has been said that the teachings of the Buddha can be summarized in one sentence: Everything changes. Everything that arises will cease, and without warning our death will greet us. Our body one day will be a cup full of ashes, or a corpse in a coffin, or an abandoned piece of rotting flesh. One day we will have to renounce everything we have ever loved, owned or been addicted to. We do not need to create drama in our lives; reality will bring its own stock of drama. Life is complex in itself. The addictions we use (so we believe) to keep us sane, and our fear of change and ultimately death, will only enhance tragedy. The fact that we will die is not a tragedy. Our addictions, and our denial, create the tragedies in our lives. Can we contemplate our death calmly? Can we use the fact of our death to make the most of our precious lives?

The Third Reminder is that actions have consequences. It's as plain and as simple as that. We act, and positive or negative consequences follow. Just as our bodies move in the world, our shadows follow us. Just as we are born,

death follows. We cannot escape this law of cause and effect. It is with us in every breath that we take. We may drink one glass to drown our sorrows, and before we know it, that action has led to the consequence of finishing a whole bottle. And when we wake up, our heads are thick with a hangover, and so the consequences continue.

By paying attention to the consequences of our actions, we can discover whether our actions are helpful or unhelpful, whether they promote harmony in our own and others' lives, or whether they lead to our unhappiness. Are we aware of the consequences of our actions? Are we willing to take responsibility for our actions? Are we willing to admit to ourselves and face up to the consequences of our actions?

The Fourth Reminder is that suffering and dissatisfaction are part of everyday life. It is the painfulness of existence, which we discussed above in the three types of suffering. It is a reminder to help wake us up to the reality that our birth is precious, that we will not live forever, and our actions will have consequences. The Fourth Reminder nudges us out of living a life of complacency. What is the pain in our lives that we hide from or try to avoid? How much time do we think we have to complete everything we want to do?

If we can form a relationship with these Reminders and welcome them into our lives, they will help us to face our pain, and not avoid it with our addictions or coping mechanisms. We will have the courage to face ourselves in the mirror and witness the truth of our lives. We will see that everyone suffers. That pain is pain. We all suffer. Money may be able to buy us a few more years of life, or a few more years' life for a loved one. It may even be able to buy cosmetic surgery to superficially slow down external ageing. But in the end, money cannot prevent sickness, ageing and death. We all will suffer in the end.

The Four Reminders can put suffering in context by helping us to recall that suffering is universal and that our brief lives are a precious opportunity. Reflecting on the Four Reminders can help us to make the most of our lives and to connect with other people as we remember that we are all in the same boat: we will all experience suffering and death.

Four Reminders Reflection

Having read these Reminders, pause for a moment, put the book down, lie down if you are in bed reading, or just relax in your seat, even if you are travelling on public transport. Allow yourself to reflect on these Reminders one at a time for ten minutes. After the reflection, let it germinate for the whole day, and then reflect on another Reminder the following day. Take your time with each. You may want to reflect on each one for a week. We are just giving pointers. The Four Reminders are strong medicine, and difficult issues may arise; they may even feel overwhelming. It may be helpful to find somebody to talk to, rather than go it alone.

- Reflect on why your life is precious – Ask yourself, ‘What inspires me to live?’
- Reflect on the fact that death is unavoidable, and how you want to live your life – Ask yourself, ‘How am I being in this life? What am I doing with my life?’
- Reflect that actions have consequences, and on some of the consequences of your actions – Ask yourself, ‘What actions have been a gain to my life? What actions have been a cost in my life?’
- Reflect on the ocean of inevitable suffering, the waves of sickness, ageing, and death that one day will come even to you. Ask yourself, ‘What am I feeling right now?’

What Is Meant by the Truth of Suffering?

Suffering is universal. None of us can escape this life without a share of pain, discomfort and grief. It’s not a terrible mistake that we are suffering, nor a personal failure. Pain happens to us and it happens to everyone. We do create our own suffering – mostly through not understanding how we do it or not seeing an alternative – but so does everyone.

Suffering tends to isolate us. We feel alone and helpless in our pain, often feeling that no one else understands the extent of our suffering or has experienced anything like this. Recognizing that suffering is universal changes its quality. It connects us to humanity and opens the door to changing our relationship to suffering and learning to alleviate its excesses.

Suffering can come from our personal response to the mental or physical pain we experience. Therefore suffering is often our stinking thinking that can turn into emotions like resentment, anger, hatred or jealousy.

How We Practise This Step

Let's be clear: we are not recommending suffering as a good thing. Self-martyrdom has no place in recovery from addiction. So if you have a headache, we are not saying 'Don't take a painkiller.' Or if you break a leg, we are not suggesting that you don't get it fixed, or that you deliberately stay in a violent relationship to experience the pain of it.

Our overall purpose in recovery is to overcome and move beyond suffering. However, in order to do that effectively, we need to look at our suffering in a clear-sighted way. We need to really get to know our suffering and how we cause ourselves to suffer. There is pain in our lives, some of which is inevitable or cannot be changed, and there is our response to pain, which often makes our suffering worse.

We will explore more fully in Step Two how our responses to pain create more suffering in our lives, and how we can change our responses so that we suffer less. In order to do so, we will need to face our pain and get to know it – but in a new way. That is the work of Step One.

We need to fearlessly take stock of the pain in our lives; to look at it unflinchingly and without judging it. This may feel like a big task. Facing our pain and suffering is the last thing we want to do. Indeed, it doesn't seem like a remotely sensible thing to do. However, if we focus on our suffering, we may be surprised at what will arise. It requires a degree of courage, and should be done slowly and gently. We can start by noticing the smaller discomforts, and learning from these, before tackling bigger areas of pain.

Mindful Attention to Our Suffering

Mindfulness is the deliberate paying attention to our moment-by-moment experience as it unfolds. We do this in a non-judgmental way, with an attitude of friendliness and curiosity. Mindfulness is a key part of the Buddha's teachings, used increasingly to help with a range of health issues, including chronic pain, depression and addiction.

The Buddha's last words are said to have been, 'With vigilance strive to succeed.' This statement reminds us that we must pay attention to every moment, one moment at a time. Those of us living with addictions know how hard this is to do. We also know that when we don't pay attention to each moment it is so easy to spiral back into overwhelming addictive behaviour.

We learn to pay attention to our minds and our bodies through connecting to the breath. The three-minute breathing space, AGE, which we introduced earlier in this Step, is one way to help us begin to notice what we are thinking

and feeling. We become aware of what we are covering up and what is really happening in our lives. Sitting meditation is one way we can begin to bring awareness to our experience as we go about our daily lives. This is why we include meditation as an important tool for recovery in this book. The practice of loving kindness and mindfulness meditations can restore a mind to sanity. As well as the shorter versions we describe as we go through the Steps, you will find fuller versions of these two meditations in the tools section at the end of the book.

Many of us find it very difficult to stop, and being asked to sit and meditate for ten or more minutes could be the end of reading this book. There are simple ways to try and bring the pause into our lives. If we practice AGE for three minutes in our day there will be benefits. It is something we can do while at work, stopping for three minutes. However, if you would like to explore a sitting meditation with a dedicated amount of time, you could begin with ten minutes.

Mindfulness of Breathing – Ten-Minute Version

This meditation can be a good way to start to give mindful attention to your experience and to learn to pay attention to your suffering. As you become more comfortable meditating, you can do the longer version of the mindfulness of breathing, which is in the Tools section at the end of the book.

Meditation can be done sitting in a chair, on cushions or on a meditation stool. Try to be as comfortable as possible. The lower body should be stable, supported by the ground and your chair or cushions. At the same time the upper body should be upright, but without straining. It can also be done lying down, especially if you have chronic pain, although that brings a greater risk of falling asleep.

First, scan your body. As best you can, allow your body to relax with alertness whether sitting or lying down. Pay attention to your body. Allow yourself to feel your body in contact with the clothes you are wearing, in contact with the seat you are sitting on or the surface you are lying on. Bit by bit, scan through your whole body. Begin with your left foot, and then the right foot, moving up through each leg one by one. Bring your attention into the groin area, and the buttocks. Become aware of your torso, and your stomach rising up and down. If you are sitting up, feel the natural curves of the spine rising out of the pelvis, and if you are lying down, feel your spine

being supported by the ground. Become aware of where each hand is resting on your body, and then move up each arm, and into each shoulder. Become aware of your neck, throat, back of the head, top of the head, and face. Now notice that you are breathing; feel the chest and perhaps the belly expanding and contracting. Without trying to change your breath in any way, allow yourself to follow the movement of the breath in and out of the body. Become interested in just what the breath is like: whether it is deep or shallow, long or short, smooth or irregular.

Sooner or later your mind will wander off away from the breath. That's just what minds do. When you notice your mind has wandered off, you can use it as an opportunity to notice where your mind has gone. Note what has taken up your attention. If you have been caught up in something that is uncomfortable or painful, just note that discomfort is present. Once you have noted where your mind has gone, gently bring your attention back to the breathing.

Do this again and again: each time your mind wanders off, note where it has gone, then return again to the breath. When you are ready, bring the meditation to a close. Pause a little before getting up and perhaps stretch your body, before continuing with your day.

If you noticed you had to keep on bringing your mind back, that you were really distracted, and you spent the whole ten minutes having to bring your mind back to the breath: Well done. You have been meditating!

When we sit in meditation and we try to stay with our breath, we start to notice when painful sensations of body or mind are present. We can also notice that we are re-running an argument with our partner or that our belly is clenched with fear about our debts. We catch in their infancy the little triggers that can slide into our mind unawares, build up and run away into a seemingly unstoppable force demanding a fix or a binge to assuage them. We learn to notice early on that we felt hurt by a comment from a friend or that insecurity over our job is gnawing away and building tension in our body. We also begin to see how we relate to our suffering. As the mind wanders away from the object of meditation, we see how it turns to blaming or pity, or we find that we have distracted ourselves from some discomfort by getting lost in our head.

Change begins with ourselves. If we are attentive to ourselves, we will begin to notice the triggers that lead us into addiction and we will then have a choice to pick up or not. When we are in the throes of addiction, it can seem

that we have no choice. This is because we are like the gerbil running around and around inside of the wheel, never allowing ourselves to pause.

You may say: 'This is all too overwhelming. I can't sit still for more than five minutes, and if I do, I can hear all sorts of crazy thoughts in my head.' This is excellent. Sitting still for five minutes a day is a great start. Don't undermine it. And the fact you can hear all the insane thinking means that you have finally paused, and allowed some of your suffering to arise. We do not have to act out our thoughts; we do not have to cling to our thoughts; we can just observe them arising and ceasing without desire or hatred. When a strong thought seems to grip you, just say to yourself, 'Let it go, let it go.'

If we can let go, let the thought arise and cease, the feeling of being overwhelmed could subside and there would be no need to turn to our addictive behaviour. There would be no overwhelming thoughts to numb. It is an opportunity to pay attention to ourselves, give ourselves some affection, appreciate ourselves, and, ultimately, learn to accept ourselves.

Recap

In Step One, we accept that this human life will bring suffering. We learn to face our pain. We do this by noticing our pain with mindfulness. We begin to notice our pain with a calm mind. We learn to stop, pause and slow down. We occupy the breath and the body and become aware of what is going on in the mind. We also reflect on our precious life, that death is inevitable, actions have consequences and unsatisfactoriness is part of everyday life.

This is a gentle reminder for us to pause at the end of Step One, and take a three-minute breathing space, AGE.

Awareness of thoughts, feelings and body.

Gather the breath, notice the breath, become aware of the breath.

Expand the breath throughout the whole body – connect to the whole body.