

Spiritus Contra Spiritum: A Yogic Approach to Alcoholism

*"His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness; expressed in medieval language: the union with God."
Carl Jung*

“Alcoholism is a sickness of the soul.” This was the response I received from an alcoholic turned yogini when I asked her about her experiences with the drug. I don’t know if she had heard these words before or if they had come from her heart, but they were certainly a wisdom gained from personal experience. It’s a wisdom that seems to be true for many who suffer with the disease, and it is why the 12 step programs that have been successful here in the West and across the globe are so focused on the need for spiritual nourishment. It is as though the alcoholic quenches his spiritual thirst with a different kind of ‘spirit,’ attempting to fill the void with something that could never replace what is actually missing—a meaningful connection with the Divine. It is this dilemma that prompted Carl Jung’s formula “Spiritus Contra Spiritum” in his letter to Alcoholics Anonymous founder, Bill Wilson, which translates as “it takes the spirit of God to overcome the spirit of alcohol,” and it is the reason why Jung has been known to describe alcoholics as “frustrated mystics’ who were distracted in their quest by the ‘spirits’ in the bottle instead of pursuing the true pathway of spiritual awakening.” (Bien and Bien 2002) This can be said for all types of addiction, because addiction is a disease that begins with either a desperate search for wholeness or an avoidance to acknowledge and attend to the emptiness felt when the numbness of a drug subsides or when the spiritual void is no longer being filled with some activity of pleasure whether that be food, or sex, or gambling. After all, emptiness is a painful experience and a difficult one to face when you don’t know that you have the tools to meet it with success, and this is why the addict often chooses the easy path above the challenge of the unknown. The following pages offer a yogic approach to the problem of addiction using mindfulness, Kriya yoga, Patanjali’s Eight-Limbed Path, and other yogic techniques. I will explain how some of these practices compare to that of Alcoholics Anonymous’ Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, and how they can be applied directly to the life of a recovering addict.

Yoga Encourages Spiritual Awakening

When you begin to look at the disease of alcoholism or addiction in general as a spiritual deficiency, it becomes evident why yoga and yoga therapy have been so successful in the treatment of them. Yoga itself means union—often interpreted as union with the Divine or with the higher consciousness that resides innately within each of us. For the practitioner it creates a balance between body, mind, and spirit whether the practitioner is seeking the balance or not. It doesn’t happen overnight, but anyone who has practiced intently over time comes to realize that there is more to yoga than mere exercise or stretching. The goal of yoga is self-realization, and sometimes that journey of self-

realization begins with a simple awareness of the body and the breath or an observance of the activities of the mind. In our society it is rare that our bodies and minds are in the same place at once. We spend our days so focused on completing tasks that most of the time our bodies are on auto-pilot. Before our current task is finished our minds are on to the next one, or we are engaging in several tasks at once (i.e. eating and reading /talking /driving). This creates a disconnection between the body and the mind. By bringing the body, mind, and breath together in the practice of yoga we experience mindfulness, a state in which the mind becomes completely present in the activity of the body. “Where mindfulness is, addiction is not. Where addiction is, mindfulness is not. Cultivation of one leaves less room for the other.” (Bien and Bien 2002, p.16) Observance of the breath is an essential aspect to mindfulness. It is interesting to note that the word ‘breath’ is the same for the word ‘spirit’ in several different languages (Hebrew, Greek, French, and Latin). When body, mind, and breath (spirit) join together, we become present in the here and now where we can begin to recognize that change-less being that resides within us in the midst of an ever-changing world. This is “sahaj”: living your natural awakening even in the midst of life. In this place you come to know that there is no separation between you and All-That-Is. This is the true gift of yoga, and for an alcoholic it can be their first experience with their own internal locus of control and the key to finding calm from the storm.

Yoga’s View Inspires an Internal Locus of Control

As an outsider it is the locus of control, that appears to be the fundamental difference between the solution of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and that of the Eastern-influenced resolution of mindfulness as proposed in Mindful Recovery by Thomas and Beverly Bien, Cool Water by William Alexander, and other such texts based on the teachings of yoga and Buddhism. The 12 step program suggests the existence of a Higher Power outside of oneself and requires admitting that we are imperfect souls in need of this external support as opposed to realizing our perfection through the Divine wisdom that lives within. Along with admitting imperfections, these parameters set forth by AA involve making amends with your past and taking responsibility for your short-comings. Though this process seems to work for many, unless the recovering addict can acknowledge these ‘faults’ without owning them it can cause the soul to identify with past deeds, actions, and experiences--perpetuating a negative life story. In yoga we relate these ‘faults’ to the creation of samskaras, or ruts along your life’s path that you have created through your actions and decisions in this and previous lives. Although the word ‘rut’ can have negative connotations, it is used here to help in understanding how samskaras can affect us. These ruts can be produced by actions of a healthy or unhealthy nature, and the repetition of those actions can make the ruts deeper whether they are positive or negative. “Everytime you do or think something, you increase the likelihood that you will do or think it again.” (Timothy McCall, *Yoga as Medicine*, p.20) Though samskaras may affect us, it is paramount to remember that they don’t belong to us nor are they an intrinsic part of our svabhava, or “true nature.” Through self-inquiry we become aware of samskaras and therefore vigilant to making decisions that are appropriate to our life’s path. In Timothy McCall’s *Yoga as Medicine*, he states “the yogic model is that by creating new samskaras, and systematically strengthening them through repetition, you create habits so strong they can compete and replace older, dysfunctional ones.” (McCall, T. *Yoga as Medicine*, p. 21) By becoming aware of your negative tendencies (due to samskaras), how those tendencies effect your progress, and recognizing through mindful living that every

moment is a new opportunity to choose wisely, you can effectively access an internal locus of control to assist you through the challenges that life presents. Mindfulness cares nothing about the past or the stories you have created until now. It allows you with careful attention to unpack your bags and relieve yourself of the burden of carrying your past with you throughout your life. It doesn't release us from the responsibility of our actions, but it reminds us that within every moment lies the opportunity to make a new decision and to create a new story. It allows us to know ourselves as perfection in the moment, which is the only thing that really exists.

With well over 2 million current members and countless lives saved over the 70 years of its existence, there is no doubt that Alcoholics Anonymous has earned its place in the field of healing and certainly contains its own element of truth through mutual support and anonymity. The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous realized that alcoholism was a spiritual malady, and their purpose was to help others recognize this void within themselves and take steps as provided in their guidelines for recovery. One of the most compelling aspects of the program is its drive to help others. In fact the fifth tradition of AA states that "each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose - that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers." (12 steps and 12 traditions) This message attests to the yogic belief that we are all connected, and what benefits another benefits the whole. Although there is no shortage of wisdom in the teachings of AA, a steady state of mindfulness along with observance of the Yamas and Niyamas (particularly the last three niyamas which make up the practice of Kriya Yoga) as stated in the Patanjali's 8-limbed path of yoga could be another source of healing as well as an invaluable tool on the road to self-realization.

A Background of Patanjali's Eight-Limbs of Ashtanga Yoga

Patanjali, who was the foremost scholar of the Sanskrit language and author of the Yoga Sutras, devised an 8 fold path to self-realization known as the 8 limbs of Ashtanga Yoga. This path consists of : the Yamas (ethical guidelines), Niyamas (spiritual observances), asana (physical postures), pranayama (breathing exercises), pratyahara (control of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (absorption). This path when followed with intent is meant to release the practitioner from the bondages of the cycles of birth and death and the suffering of worldly existence. This liberation is known as moksha. The 8 limbs are not always practiced in sequence. Since disease is considered to be the first obstacle on the journey to enlightenment, most begin with the third limb of "Asana" to keep the body in good health in preparation for spiritual inquiry. The word asana means to be seated in a posture. It is asana, the physical aspect of yoga, that has become the poster child for yoga as it is known in the West. Though asana is important to the health of the body, it is only one step on the path to self-realization. The

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first and second limbs of Patanjali's yoga teach us how to live our lives in harmony with ourselves, others, and the world around us. These are the yamas and the niyamas.

The yamas or ethical guidelines include:

1) Ahimsa (non-harming to self and other living things)

- 2) Asteya (non-stealing)
- 3) Satya (truthfulness)
- 4) Brahmacharya (sexual restraint, can be viewed as maintaining a sacred partnership)
- 5) Aparigraha (non-hoarding or non-greed)

The niyamas or spiritual observances include:

- 1) Saucha (cleanliness or purity)
- 2) Santosha (contentment)
- 3) Tapas (discipline)
- 4) Svadyaya (self-study)
- 5) Ishvara Pranidhana (devotion to God)

Kriya Yoga for Recovery and the Twelve Steps

The last three niyamas make up the practice of Kriya Yoga, the yoga of action. These three spiritual observances (Tapas, Svadyaya, and Ishvara Pranidhana) are of particular importance to the recovering addict.

Tapas means heat or fire in the Sanskrit language. It is the fire that fuels your practice and keeps you on the path even when you'd find it easier to do something else. It is the fire of dedication. In the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, their variation of tapas is the dedication to help other alcoholics who are still in the process of suffering. Through the action of helping others, it fuels the fire of dedication which in turn encourages the recovering addict to stay on his own path.

Svadyaya is self-study. Noticing the effects of your yoga practice on your body or the effects of poor decisions in your life are two forms of self-study. Svadyaya helps us to discern between the ego (that with which we typically identify ourselves) and the higher consciousness (the part of us which operates from a place of wisdom, integrity, and peace. The higher consciousness is our own Divine wisdom that exists beyond the confines of the physical world with its numerous distractions). Steps 4 and 10 of the AA twelve step program are both examples of svadyaya. Step four requests taking a "searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves," and step ten requires taking personal inventory and responsibility for actions. These are the elements of self-study—becoming aware of your behavior and how it affects your state of being.

Ishvara Pranidhana means devotion to God. It involves knowing that there is something greater than what we see ourselves to be, and trusting in the existence of that power to

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guide us through any given circumstance. That power can be something that you view outside yourself or something that exists within you, but knowing the truth of that power is essential. This is not something to be taken as blind faith, but discovered firsthand through meditation and other spiritual practices. The AA twelve step equivalent for Ishvara Pranidhana is seen in steps 2, 3, 6, and 11, which all involve complete trust in a higher power as a source for strength and guidance.

These three niyamas, known together as the practice of Kriya Yoga, can be beneficial to anyone on the path to recovery, because it discourages thoughtless actions. Having applied these practices, the following steps in Patanjali's 8-limbed path should be practiced with great care and under the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher. These are pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi.

Pranayama (Breathing Exercises)

The word prana means energy, and pranayama exercises are used to balance the subtle energies in the body, slows thought waves, increases focus, and helps to activate the spiritual energy (Kundalini). Certain pranayama exercises can help the recovering alcoholic to develop the ability to focus intently—preparing the mind for the next limb of yoga which involves control of the senses. Pranayama requires careful attention, which can give the mind something to do when it begins to seek addictive behaviors. There are many different types of pranayama—each having a different effect on the practitioner depending on his Ayurvedic constitution. For this reason these exercises should be chosen on an individual basis by a qualified teacher. The following is a tridoshic pranayama breathing practice known as the Eight Kriyas. It can be used by anyone at any time without worry for increased focus, clarity, and internal balance:

- 1) Inhale and exhale through the nose focusing on the chest (repeat 5 x)
- 2) Inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth focusing on the chest (5x)
- 3) Inhale through the mouth and exhale through the nose focusing on the belly (5x)
- 4) Close the right nostril breathing in/out through the left focusing on the chest (5x)
- 5) Close the left nostril breathing in/out through the right focusing on the chest (5x)
- 6) Inhale and exhale through the nose focusing on the belly (5x)
- 7) Inhale and exhale through the mouth focusing on the belly (5x)
- 8) Five-part segmented inhale through the nose focusing on the chest (5x)

Pratyahara (Sense control)

In order for pratyahara to be effective, it helps to have the mind focused and prepared. Pratyahara is the act of internalizing your senses—drawing them away from external diversions. The mind is distracted by the five senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. These are the five tanmantras or objects of sensory perception in the Ayurvedic school of thought. Durga, a clinical Ayurvedic specialist and founder of the Yoga of

Recovery, shows the relationship between the five senses and addiction in her workshops on yoga, meditation, ayurveda, and the 12-Step Programs. She explains how the element of earth is connected to the nose and therefore the sense of smell. This element is associated with addictions to smoking and snorting drugs. The water element is related to the taste and tongue, and involved in addictions with alcohol, tobacco, sugar, and eating disorders. The fire element is involved with the sense of sight and is associated with addictions to television, pornography, and video games. The air element governs the sense of touch and is the driving force behind sex addictions, tattooing, and other addictive behaviors involving touch. These five

sensory perceptions fuel our desires, create attachments, keep us rooted in the physical world. Although, Durga proposes healthy healing practices that satisfy the five tanmantras without sacrificing the health of the mind, body, or spirit; practicing pratyahara (sense withdrawal) allows us to gain control over the mind and its attraction to the senses.

Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi

These last three limbs are the stages of meditation. Meditation is an essential tool for self-realization and beneficial in the recovery process. A regular practice of meditation can help quell addictive behaviors by allowing the individual to see those recurring urges as fluctuations of the mind. Those who meditate on a regular basis know that thoughts come and go often, but the meditator learns to separate himself from those urges. Thomas Bien states that “the key to urges is mindfulness. Urges will come and go, like any other thought or feeling.” He says that in order to handle urges effectively you must recognize them, acknowledge them, and view them for what they are “a passing phenomena.” Meditation is a state of mind where thoughts happen, but we no longer see ourselves as the thinker but the observer of the thought, therefore separating ourselves from the need to act on those thoughts. In the second of Patanjali’s yoga sutras he states “Yogas citta vrtti nirodhah” which means: Yoga happens when thoughts cease. This is an empowering tool for recovery.

Other Yogic Practices for Recovery

Yoga is an ancient healing art. Its teachings were derived over thousands of years, from the experience of many sages and gurus, across several different subcultures. For that reason there are a plethora of useful exercises for any problem related to the suffering of man. Some other useful exercises for problems related to addiction include sankalpa and a more modern adaptation of relaxation/meditation called yoga nidra.

Sankalpa is the action of repeating a statement which specifies something you want to manifest in your life. Sankalpa helps you to identify what you want in your life, so you are no longer prey to the subconscious mind. In order for sankalpa to be successful you must formulate your wish in the present tense (i.e. “I am free from the bondage of addiction”), use only positive words, and be spiritually present when you speak it.

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Yoga nidra is a practice from the Tantric tradition of yoga. It is a method of guided relaxation in which we are waking during the sleeping state. It gets us in touch with our pure conscious awareness and invites us to be amidst the changing world but to know ourselves as the unchanging state of being. Yoga nidra begins by sensing the body, thoughts, and emotions, yet allows us to experience ourselves as separate from them.

These are the practices of yoga which can help to guide the recovering addict to a feeling of wholeness through spiritual awakening. Durga, founder of the Yoga of Recovery program, says that “yoga practice and meditation are not stand-alone treatments for the complex socio-spiritual psychological disturbance of addiction, but they are important aspects of a holistic plan to bring

mind, body, and spirit into balance.” (Bloom, A. *Life is Sweet*; LA Yoga, May 2008, p. 56) It is this balance that can bring a sense of wholeness back to our lives and the lives of others.

Om Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu
May all beings in the world be happy.

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By Stevi Woolworth

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