

Why Alcoholics Anonymous Should Implement the Buddhist Four Noble Truths  
as Opposed to the Christian 12 Steps

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## ***Introduction***

Alcoholics Anonymous has helped a significant number of people in their recovery from alcoholism. However, the 12 Steps utilized by Alcoholics Anonymous overtly shift the autonomy of the individual in their recovery process to God. Such shift not only makes the recovery process more difficult but eradicates the central importance one plays in their own recovery. By utilizing the Buddhist Four Noble Truths autonomy is shifted from God to the individual. This allows an individual to play the proper integral role in their recovery as well as employ a way of life that satisfies both a spiritual need and practical guide for continued progress.

## ***The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and Their Christian Underpinning***

The following are the relevant Christian steps of Alcoholics Anonymous:

(1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol; (2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity; (3) Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God; (5) Admitted to God . . . the exact nature of our wrongs; (6) Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character; (7) Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings; (11) Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God . . . praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out (Monico 2021).

As the relevant steps above do not explicitly mention a Christian God, it is widely and rightfully presumed that such steps reference the Christian conception of God. Alcoholics Anonymous (“AA”) emerged from an evangelical Christian movement and one of its founders, Bill Wilson, proclaimed that he experienced a “great white light experience in which he was overcome with the presence of God” (Wiechelt 2015, 1011). Because Bill Wilson was of the Christian faith and subsequently wrote the basic text of AA, the *Big Book*, all references to God have been inferred to reference the God of the Christian faith. The Christian underpinnings of AA can also be evidenced by the fact that AA meetings are “held largely in rented church

basements” as opposed to mosques and synagogues (Kelly 2016, 929). Additionally, recovery is promulgated through an emphasis “on a set of explicitly religiously worded steps, that include turning one’s life . . . over to God” (Kelly 2016, 929). Furthermore, though only generally supportive, is the evidence that the United States Supreme Court has recognized AA as a religion, thereby barring mandated attendance (Kelly 2016, 929).

### ***The Consequences of Christian Association***

A common criticism of AA and the one most central to this paper is that the program “relies on God as the mechanism of action” (Kaskutas 2009, 145). In other words, AA’s 12 steps emphasize “turning one’s . . . will over to God” (Kaskutas 2009, 145). Consequently, one confers their autonomy and subsequent successes and failures to the will of God. This notion of transferred autonomy is embodied more specifically, although not exclusively, in steps six and seven. By praying to have “God remove . . . defects of character” and “shortcomings” one is implicitly acknowledging one of the following: (1) God through His *will* will rid one of alcoholism; or (2) God through His *will* will provide one with the strength and various other attributes to overcome alcoholism (Monico 2021). However, the problem of God’s will, rather blatantly, raises subsequent questions regarding not only the nature and what constitutes His will but also how it affects one’s autonomy and subsequent progress.

If we understand steps six and seven as God having the sole power to intervene as ridding one of alcoholism, then we reappraise God’s power (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530). In other words, by recognizing God’s power to intervene and cure an afflicted individual, God is said to have the “ability to influence a stressful life event” (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530). However, by reappraising God’s ability to intervene, one is more likely to experience a negative outcome,

such as lack of recovery. This is because said reappraisal of God's ability to intervene is often understood as "prayers hav[ing] gone unanswered" (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530). Here, the autonomy and subsequent responsibility for recovery is shifted from the individual to God. Therefore, if progress is not being made or there is a relapse in progress, an individual looks not to self-reflection but to the will of God and the infinite regress of questions that lead to either the lack of progress or relapse. However, if we understand God's role in sobriety as Him having the ability to intervene through his will to give one strength, then the issue of the reappraisal of God's will is only pushed back. Restated, one can then question why God did not provide them the strength to recover or to stay sober. Consequently, individuals are still more likely to experience the negative outcomes of either lack of progress or relapse (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530). Having understood both the Christian underpinnings and consequences derived from lack of autonomy I will now explore the Buddhist Four Noble Truths.

### ***Buddhist Four Noble Truths***

The Four Noble Truths are at the center of the Buddhist religion, regardless of the variation. The following are the Four Noble Truths: (1) the truth of suffering; (2) the truth of the cause of suffering; (3) the truth of the end of suffering; (4) and the path that leads to the end of suffering (Eltschinger 2014, 254). To adequately understand the Four Noble Truths, it is imperative to also understand the context which gives rise to such. Buddhism holds that suffering is inevitable because of our worldly attachment and craving to the impermanent. And because everything of our world is impermanent, we are bound to suffer. Furthermore, there are "16 aspects of the noble truths" (Eltschinger 2014, 254). The aspects that coincide with the First Noble Truth are impermanent, painful, empty, and selfless (Eltschinger 2014, 254). The aspects

that coincide with the Second Noble Truth are origin, cause, source, and condition (Eltschinger 2014, 254). The aspects that coincide with the Third Noble Truth are cessation, peaceful, excellent, and escape (Eltschinger 2014, 254). The aspects of the Fourth, and last Noble Truth are path, right way, access, and salvation for the truth of the path (Eltschinger 2014, 254). Having identified the Four Noble Truths and their respective aspects, I will argue how each Noble Truth and its aspects better capture the illness of alcoholism and more aptly recenters the notion of autonomy to provide better results for recovery.

#### Four Noble Truths Applied

The First Noble Truth of suffering recognizes not only that one's life will be wrought with suffering but also implicitly rejects the notion that suffering can be eliminated by any sovereign will other than one's own. By acknowledging that suffering is inevitable for all, one may be said to eradicate the internalized societal "shame and isolation" often attached to "addictions and persons with addictions" (Warren 2012, 34). Furthermore, by recognizing that one suffers from alcoholism, said individual can begin the path toward acceptance. One may reframe their affliction as understanding that "although suffering is inevitable . . . suffering is simply part of living" (Warren 2012, 40). In reframing one's affliction, they shift their mindset from God punishing them for their sins to a more general understanding of how life operates (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530). This shift in understanding is important because those who believe that alcoholism is a punishment from God tend to demonstrate negative outcomes (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530). Furthermore, and more specifically, by utilizing the respective aspects of the first Noble Truth one is better equipped to address alcoholism. By acknowledging

that everything is impermanent, one struggling with alcoholism by extension must recognize that the feeling of consuming alcohol provides, is also impermanent and will not provide permanent relief. Moreover, the alcoholic by extension, must realize that life consists of suffering regardless of the affliction one suffers. Thus, “escape” from suffering is fruitless.

The second of the Four Noble Truths assist one struggling with alcoholism in recognizing their alcoholic dependence and aids one in discovering the source which led them to utilize alcohol as a coping mechanism. The respective aspects of the Second Noble truth centers on origin. Here, cause, source, and condition, require “fearless” “self-reflection” on one’s “moral inventory” when identifying their alcoholic dependence as well as the underlying reasons driving the continuous cycle (Warren 2012, 39). By reflecting on one’s own knowledge rather than “praying only for His knowledge,” autonomy is shifted from God’s will to the individual’s will (Monico 2021). Consequently, the individual is able to reflect on their actions or actions of other’s that have brought them to such state of suffering. Additionally, the refocusing of autonomy through the shift of adherence to the 12 Steps to the Four Noble Truths highlight the negative aspects of reappraising of God’s will. Instead of viewing the affliction of alcoholism “as a punishment from God for the individual’s sins” or “prayers that have gone unanswered,” an individual is able to identify their role in creating the dependence as well as serves as rectify any underlying trauma which gave rise to the conditions to permit dependence (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530).

The third Noble Truth emphasizes that “suffering can be managed” and therefore there is no need for reliance on God (Warren 2012, 37). Rather, it is within one’s ability to mitigate the suffering they experience as a result of alcoholism through cessation and escape. By understanding that suffering can be managed, an individual need not “a Power greater than”

themselves that “could restore” them “to sanity” (Monico 2021). But rather they themselves can restore sanity. This shift eliminates the highlighted negative outcome associated with the Christian underpinning of the 12 Steps and, “relapses . . . are part of an addicted” life (Warren 2012, 41). Therefore, relapses are inevitable in one’s recovery. In acknowledging that “recovery embraces every small step in the direction of desired change” coupled with one’s autonomy and recognition that there is a path toward the end said respective suffering, one is more apt to view the relapse as a temporary setback rather than “punishment from God for the individual’s sins” (Phillips and Stein 2007, 530). For if one adheres to steps one and seven and “admits [they] are powerless over alcohol” and God fails “to remove [one’s] shortcomings” then one is apt to either believe God failed to answer their prayers or God has instead punished them.

Lastly, the fourth Noble Truth provides not only a path by which one can continuously overcome their alcohol addiction but also provides practical hope that the 12 Steps fail to provide. The fourth Noble Truth sets forth “the eight-fold path and the middle way” by which an individual may attain enlightenment (Warren 2012, 37). “The middle way balances demands, desires, attachments, and cravings with reasonable limitations” (Warren 2012, 37). Because the fourth Noble Truth elaborates a specific path, although not discussed at length in the present paper, and a way of life, it provides a more practical guide for how one struggling with alcoholism is to accord their conduct as compared to the 12 Steps. More simply stated, the 12 Steps elaborates one’s relationship with God in the context of alcoholism more so than how one *ought* to practically concern themselves with the “sufferings, temptations, and opportunities to relapse” (Warren 2012, 34). Moreover, the fourth Noble Truth provides one a practical hope of recovery rather than a divine hope. Because the fourth Noble Truth encourages one’s autonomy in achieving recovery and thus rests ultimate responsibility on the motivation and action of the

individual, it nurtures the hope of actual attainment. Comparatively, because the 12 Steps emphasize reliance on God, a removed divine being, one must have a hope merely that God will act for them or in favor of them to enter recovery.

### ***Conclusion***

Ultimately, the 12 Steps incorporate the Christian conception of God which consequently removes autonomy from the individual to God. This shift of autonomy proves a hinderance during one's recovery for alcoholism. By implementing the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, one maintains a need for spirituality while not sacrificing the necessary autonomy for a successful recovery.

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