

Spiritual Paths

Like any good guidebook, we should consider the suitability of the suggested paths. Only an irresponsible guide would take infirm clients along trails appropriate only for super fit athletes. Different people need different routes and it is wrong to infer that there is only one correct spiritual path.

The last step asked us to identify a God or Higher Power that we could accept. In the next step, we are going to be looking at "moral" defects. Both of these are intensely personal challenges and don't need to conform to anybody else's opinion. One person's moral behaviour is another person's taboo. The final decision of what we are willing to accept is ours alone, but we may take guidance from people we trust.

At times, even accepting guidance can be dangerous. In selecting a person to turn to, we risk giving the monkey too much power. We allow it the opportunity to guide us towards dangerous people. People can be dangerous because through their guidance we end up pursuing a dead end, they possibly say what we want them to, or not understanding our illness, they enable us to remain deluded. There are also people who prey on the vulnerable, hoping to capitalise on weakness and we can be too willing to listen unconditionally to their suggestions.

The vicar's wife said that I would get the strength from God to control my drinking, so I don't need to come to meetings anymore.

It seems unlikely that a vicar's wife would have sinister motives, but the monkey does. It constantly fights to drag us away from recovery. It whispers, "Don't listen to those people talking about the program, let's go and see if there are better routes to go down, they look easier and more interesting."

The "Big Book" warns about looking for *easier softer ways* that don't exist. It is also possible for us to invent harder and more difficult ways that don't exist either. We are starting to change and it tends to be around this point in our development that we become confused and lose sight of "Keep It Simple Stupid" (KISS).

If we look closely at the principles of the program, we can possibly identify Christian undertones. However, anybody with knowledge of any of the major religions of the world could identify influences from them as well. AA is not a religion and it doesn't matter one way or the other if we are or aren't part of one, it works for anybody who is willing to accept a "spiritual" way of life.

Not all spiritual paths are religious, but all religions are spiritual paths. If we look collectively at the major religions, Christianity, Islam, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhism and Judaism there are some specific guidelines that start to appear. The positive aspects of all of these paths suggest words like compassion, charity and respecting other people. The negative traits they all identify as dangerous are pride, envy, greed, lust and anger.

Rejecting these suggestions simply because we have an aversion towards religion seems pointless. In doing so, we are looking for the intellectual argument that will allow us to reject the program or seeking that elusive shortcut.

Some of us are tempted to return to our childhood religion because we think that it will help us with the praying and spiritual parts of the program. "Grab a fix, any fix" and move on as quickly as possible is a symptom of the illness. Told that we should grow spiritually, we half listen and dive headlong into the past. We justify it by claiming that we are, "Going back to our roots". We visualise pictures of happy times and think we are receiving guidance back to the correct path. Having become engrossed in our "new found" spirituality we drift away from AA and present the monkey with an easy victory.

If we are part of a religion, or find one after stopping drinking, we remain safe if we keep it separate from the program and allow space for both of them in our life. If this is the first time we have been attracted to religion, before becoming committed to it, we should be consider the suggestion of not making any major decisions on our own for the first two years.

Understanding the word - Spiritual

Some of us react rather like a vampire to a cross at the suggestion of a spiritual way of life. We possibly indulged in the more sordid aspects of life, or we believe ourselves too intellectual to consider such superstitious rubbish. It is important to acquire an acceptance of the term "spiritual" that does not get in the way of progress through the rest of the steps.

A dictionary definition of spiritual is:

Related to the human spirit as opposed to material or physical (Oxford English).

This means that we cannot measure it by any of our senses: sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste. We can “feel”, or strongly believe, but we can never actually prove the existence of the spiritual.

The basis can be as simple as becoming “needed, wanted and loved”. By using these simple guidelines, we can move gradually towards a spiritual way of life, possibly through the concept of “wholesome” living. Wholesome is certainly not a word that we would normally apply to ourselves in the latter stages of our drinking, but it describes four attributes for life that are worth considering.

Wholesome action is not harming others. Possibly, refraining from sexual misconduct and avoiding selfish behaviour.

Wholesome speech is not being offensive, gossiping or chattering meaninglessly.

Wholesome livelihood is earning our living in a way that does not harm others and looking for meaning and contribution into their lives through our work.

Wholesome effort is giving time to develop positive aspects of our lives and moving towards a more spiritual way of life.

All of the major faiths of the world propose similar concepts and we will change if we live by them. Hesitantly, we start to experience small pools of happiness. We realise that serenity is not boredom and reverse our understanding of life. Originally, gaps in the chaos were the low times, but as the gaps become contentment, our tolerance for chaos diminishes and we start to understand spiritual growth.

Moral Defects – What are they?

On the descent into the last painful stages of alcoholism, our boundaries of acceptable behaviour became blurred and as we recover, we need to re-learn appropriate behaviour. A good definition is:

Moral behaviour is not what we do, but what we refrain from doing.

Anger, Pride, Lust and Greed have appeared in the earliest spiritual writings as the cause of degenerate behaviour. We can usually identify anger or lust, but can mask defects such as greed with other intentions. There is nothing wrong with wanting a comfortable life, but we can easily slip over into greedy or gluttonous behaviour. Masking makes it hard to identify where our defect truly lies. If we can't recognise them and see how they have twisted our behaviour, we won't recover.

Listed below are common examples of how we remain chained to despair through our beliefs. It is our choice to hold on to the defects, or to work through the program of recovery to become free of them.

Do you want to keep – Fear?

Alcoholics talk of a racing brain and we seem to perceive frightening things that others don't. We are shocked when people leave their front doors unlocked, their cars with the keys in, or a baby left sitting in the back seat. To us these things are invitations to doom and disaster.

Where others carry on seemingly unaware of the potential for misery, the terror our imagination creates leaves us transfixed. A door left unguarded for a moment heralds the entrance of a marauding psychopathic gang from hell. Criminals will use our stolen car in a violent robbery and the police will link us to the crime. Bad things happen, we read of them every day, but alcoholics seem to be more aware of and act upon fears without stopping to find out if they are real or imagined.

We have fear designed into our being. In the wild, it is correct for a weaker animal to feel fear and flee at the sound of a strong carnivore heading towards them. In modern life, fear is still a valid response in some circumstances. If we have harmed somebody with power over our lives, such as stealing from our boss, then it is correct to feel fear.

We discover that our unhealthy fears become progressively more irrational. This doesn't happen suddenly, but creeps up on us like a strangling weed. We can't understand why we are scared, but we know that we are. We don't recognise it, but the monkey on our shoulder is incessantly chattering reasons to be frightened. It creates a continuous private showing of the worst horror movies we can imagine and we start to react to them. People frequently share that they slept with a knife under the bed, or could not answer the door without a baseball bat, or a shotgun concealed close by.

Do you want to keep – Projecting?

My sponsor told me to try an experiment. Take a deck of cards and shuffle them, hand them to somebody and ask them to turn cards for me to guess. I didn't do well, although I had always believed that I knew what other people were thinking – I didn't.

The same applies to the ability of projecting a future situation. We pretend that it is planning when we play the “they say - I say” game, but it isn't - it's projecting. We need to accept that we cannot predict the future and that we have to be able to handle life as it comes, trusting that we will be able to cope as it unfolds.

There is a difference between projecting and planning a future. Projecting, is when we operate our thoughts like a film projector and we project our thoughts and desires onto those around us. If people stand up in front of a film projector, they reflect a distorted section of the film. When we project, we see a reflection of our thoughts, not theirs.

Planning is, “I am going on holiday in five days and need to make sure I have the correct clothes to take with me”, or, “I have a bill to pay and I need to save money to cover it”. The difference is that planning sounds like something for people with boring lives. With the aid of projection, we can live on the edge and have fights with strangers, both verbal and physical without moving from our chair.

Do you want to keep - Living with resentment?

Living in the day is one of the throw away lines that people use in AA. To a logical person, it would seem quite difficult to live anywhere else, but for us it is actually the last place our mind spends much time. We are either looking at past victories, or more likely past failures. We dream of how everything will be better when “X” happens. “X” could be anything, like, getting a new job or the United Nations Security Council finally realising that it needs our help.

A strange fact is that although we could use the revisiting of past times for pleasure, we rarely do so. We could use the imagining of future times to visit a wonderful fairyland of happiness. We start our journey there, but quickly descend into hurt and hatred.

Life creates a set of oil paintings, fixed and unchangeable. When people look at their past they review these oil paintings, they can see good parts and flaws. However, the alcoholic wants to climb inside the frame and change what they can see. We try to paint over painful scenes and re-draw them to portray ourselves in a better light. Sometimes when we replay these incidents, we become locked rigid, every muscle in our body tense as we re-live an insult or embarrassing time from the playground or workplace. We recall our pain and inability to act appropriately, but then we go on to imagine how we would like to have reacted and made our tormentor suffer, we gloat at their pain.

There are many ways to phrase this concept, “once the page is written it cannot be re-written,” “don't let people live rent free inside your head.” Try as we might, we can't go back in time and undo anything.

Do you want to keep - Selfish Behaviour?

Our thoughts and motivations try to put us at the centre of everybody's universe. We cover it well, pointing out how we help others, but this is often a subconscious need to be indispensable. At other times, we are less complex and regardless of the impact, simply demand the attention we believe we deserve.

We know how much harm a drink will cause, but we still decide to take it. Even the suicide we imagine as a release for our family is actually the ultimate selfish act. Our own need overrides every other consideration. In our darkness do we honestly consider the impact our death would have, or do we secretly gloat at the guilt we would leave behind?

Do you want to keep – Allowing “if only...” to rob you of happiness?

We spend huge amounts of time in the fantasy world of “if only...” we have dreams of becoming rich and powerful. We think that the world will come to us. We waste large parts of our lives in an imaginary land where we have taken centre stage and have proved ourselves equal to the task. In every circumstance, we can see what is required and feel continually frustrated by the obvious failure of others to understand our plan, *if only they would ask.*

If only, can also lead us into looking for “quick fixes”, such as, “if only I lost some weight, I would find a new partner”, or, “if only I could pay off these debts, I would be able to spend more time on my sobriety.”

We imagine that we know the solution to our problem and can justify bending the rules “just this once” to achieve our goal. The quick fix rarely works and we end up frantically applying sticking plaster upon sticking plaster to staunch the wound we have inflicted upon our life.

There is another side to this little phrase and this is the concept of creating Hell on Earth. It is easy to take a pleasant situation and by the slightest shift in thinking, remove the pleasure. For example, an excellent Sunday roast, ruined because there is no horseradish sauce. A day by the sea, spoiled because there was no ice cream. The simple utterance of “If only there had been...” reduces the pleasure.

The destructive powers of the phrase “if only,” should never be under-estimated it creeps in to many aspects of our lives. By looking for the last iota of pleasure, we remove the pleasure that was actually there.

Do you want to keep - loneliness?

We drink ourselves into a state of isolation whether we are the over-confident extrovert seeking ever-brighter lights, or the uncertain introvert attempting to fit in. Unknown or real fears dominate us and we end up alone.

This is not the content aloneness and peace of meditation. It is the hard to confess loneliness of a frightened child. We cover it with the bluster of phrases like “I am a lone wolf”, “I am completely self sufficient, I have no need of others”. We feel abandoned by friends and family, as our life spiralled out of control they chose not to follow. We all take different routes along the descent, but the result is the same, isolation and loneliness.

We all drifted into the local throughout the day. By early evening, I would be sitting amongst a crowd of “friends”. At some point, I would change. It was as if a bubble descended over me and cut me off from them. I could hear the conversation, but couldn’t readily join in. My judgement of them was spiteful. Her laugh could shatter a glass and his skin made my stomach churn. I stayed, but felt apart. I sometimes joined in to show them how to tell a joke or have a good time, but when I reached home, I wept for companionship.

Do you want to keep – shame?

To feel shame is to feel seen in a painfully diminished sense. The self feels exposed both to itself and to anybody else present. It is this sudden unexpected feeling of exposure and accompanying self-consciousness that characterises the essential nature of the affect of shame. (Kaufman 1993).

The subject of shame is extremely complicated, it is a normal controlling emotion, but the interplay between fear and pride means that it is one of the monkeys’ strongest weapons. Why do so many alcoholics hide the bottles that they empty? We proclaim that we are not doing anything wrong and aggressively defend our right to drink at any time, but feel that our behaviour remains acceptable on condition that nobody knows about the excesses. We can find ourselves in a vicious circle fuelled by shame. By drinking secretly, we drink more destructively. We sober up feeling shame regarding our actions. We vow that we will start to sort ourselves out and then we drink again to take away the feelings.

Many people are ashamed of incidents in their history. An alcoholic will almost certainly collect their fair share. Some of us spent a great deal of time functioning in a blackout (a condition where we appear to be coherent, but we have absolutely no recollection of what we do). Through lost inhibitions, we do things that we would not normally do. We also use the excuse of having a drink to justify outrageous behaviour. We can do whatever we feel like doing regardless of how unacceptable it is and claim that the drink made us do it.

The nature of these incidents varies for all of us, we possibly recall them boastfully, or we may suffer a stomach-churning wrench each time we recall them, sexual transgressions, physical, or mental abuse, bed-wetting, or the continual downward spiral of uncontrolled drinking. The common factor is that we wish they had never occurred and hope to take them with us to the grave.

Do you want to keep – secrecy?

As a practising alcoholic, there are so many secrets to keep hidden. Where have we been? Who were we with? What were we doing? There is the obvious secrecy that goes with alcoholism, hiding and covering up how much we drink. Our family becomes vigilant and comments if the bottles empty too quickly. In response, we become cunning. Whilst the bottle they can see doesn’t seem to empty, the one in the garage / washing basket / garden shed, needs replacing far more frequently.

There are shameful incidents and the crippling need to keep our fears secret. Many of us experience panic attacks, becoming scared in a supermarket or feel threatened in a crowded room. Having never put a label on the feeling, or discussed it, we believe that we are the only person to feel this way and cannot reveal it.

Finally

We are now working towards a full and successful life and we only achieve this by doing much more than stopping drinking. We are going to remove the thinking that allows the monkey to keep us under control. We are pushing the illness out of its comfort zone and it is snarling at our temerity.

The thoughts we may experience at this point will be things like:

- Now we have stopped drinking everything will get better. It is common to claim that we only wanted to stop drinking and don't want to change anything else in our life.
- We feel that because we are smarter than most people are, we don't need to go to the same extremes to get well.
- We claim that we are not as "sick" as they are and so we don't need to do as much to recover.
- We suspect that once we start to delve into and expose our defects, other people will not want to know us.

With these thoughts, the illness is using pride and fear to push us back into isolation and misery.

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