

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Faith and the 12-Step Movement in Recovery

Pascal E Scoles

Community College of Philadelphia, USA.

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Corresponding Author: Pascal E Scoles, Community College of Philadelphia, USA

Abstract

The 12-Step programs, far from confined to Christian spiritual values, serve as a unifying force for individuals from a broad spectrum of spiritual paths. This inclusive approach ensures that everyone, regardless of their spiritual journey, is welcomed and accepted, all sharing the common goal of conquering substance abuse and dependency and transforming their lives (www.cnsproductions.com/pdf/12step).

The Twelve Traditions, the guiding principles of 12-Step recovery, are a testament to the movement's profound respect for individual beliefs. They serve as the movement's governing rules, mirroring the Twelve Steps in their universal essence. This respect ensures AA-based fellowships maintain a neutral stance on external issues, including religion, valuing each individual's beliefs and making them feel respected and valued. The emphasis on respect for individual beliefs is a cornerstone of the 12-Step movement, fostering a sense of value and importance among the audience.

As a cornerstone of the recovery, the Twelve Steps demonstrate a profound respect for individual beliefs. This is evidenced by the diverse cultures, from Europe to Asia, which have embraced various religions, atheism, and agnosticism, where the 12-Step movement has taken root and thrived (Braxton et al., 1987, p.280). The global acceptance and inclusion of the 12-Step movement, regardless of geographical location or cultural background, makes the audience feel part of a larger community united in the goal of recovery. This sense of Fellowship provides comfort and motivation for individuals on their recovery journey.

Keywords: This Fellowship is Evident in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Native American Belief Practices.

1. The 12 Steps and Judaism

The Twelve Steps, the foundation of Alcoholics Anonymous, are essential for Fellowship participation and demonstrate their compatibility with specific spiritual paths, such as Judaism. By exploring their compatibility with Jewish theology, as explained by Twerski (1993), we can dispel any confusion and illuminate the spiritual principles that underpin the 12-Step movement. These powerful spiritual principles are a testament to how they can be a valuable tool for Jewish individuals in their recovery journey. The guidance from the 12 Steps can effectively steer and bolster the recovery journey, providing a clear example of the 12-Step movement's adaptability to different spiritual paths.

The first three, often referred to as the "God Steps," are reflected in the Talmud: "A person's temptation becomes more intense each day, and was it not that God helps him, it would be impossible for him to resist." (<https://www.thesukha.co/full>). The Talmud tells one that even though giving into destructive impulses may be recognized as foolish and detrimental, no one could resist these urges without the help of God. Regardless of their greatness, one's resources are simply inadequate. However, turning one's life and will over to the care of a "higher power" does not mean one relinquishes responsibility. Although the quoted principle of the Talmud indicates that an unaided man is helpless, it does not imply that an individual should make no effort and place total responsibility on their higher power. The Talmud states that God's

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“Assistance” means that one is taking some action but needs help. An individual must do everything possible to make their life constructive and productive. Divine help, if sought, will be forthcoming only when one does his share of the work (Twerski, 1993).

Steps Four and Five, the “*confessional Steps*,” reflect the need for a daily detailed personal accounting, as well as a more general overview of the direction, accomplishment, and shortcomings of one’s life taken periodically, with particular emphasis on the period beginning with Rosh Hashanah and concluding with Yom Kippur. The great Chassidic master, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk (https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/5197165/jewish/The-Life-and-Teachings-of-Reb-Elimelech-of-Lizhensk-1717-1787.htm)

one must repeatedly confide in another person, whether a spiritual counselor or trusted friend, all improper thoughts and impulses that come to one’s heart and mind, whether these occur during meditation while lying idle awaiting the onset of sleep or at any time during the day, and one should not withhold anything because of the shame of embarrassment.” Anyone familiar with the siddur knows that confession before God is not restricted to Yom Kippur. A detailed confession is required twice daily.

Steps Six and Seven reflect an understanding of Jewish ethics. In Judaism, man is defined as a homo spiritus, a hominoid with a divine spirit. Man is a biological animal with all the lusts, cravings, impulses, and drives that are natural to all animals. In contrast, humans have a spirit that enables them to master these innate urges. However, all that unaided man can do is master these forces. He cannot eradicate them any more than he can change the color of his eyes (Twerski, 1993).

Steps Eight and Nine reflect The Code of Jewish Law, which states that all the atonement possible is ineffective if an individual has harmed another unless forgiveness from the victim has been sought. If the wrong action resulted in monetary loss, adequate restitution is required. If the offended party refuses to grant forgiveness, he must be approached three times. If he remains resistive in refusing forgiveness, and the offender regrets his behavior, Divine forgiveness is assured. If the victim has died, the Shulchan Aruch requires that one take a minyan (a quorum of ten people) and visit the burial place to ask forgiveness (Twerski, 1993) publicly.

Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, taking a personal inventory, promptly admitting our wrongdoings,

improving our conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation, and having had a spiritual awakening due to these steps are integral to all Jewish traditions. There needs to be more than just taking a personal inventory of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This must be an ongoing process. The need to recognize a wrong and promptly admit it stresses the Talmud. The longer one delays admitting a sin, the more apt he is to explain away and justify his behavior until the sin may even appear as the right course of action. Upon rising, one of the first prayers asks for Divine guidance and the strength to do God’s will. In Ethics of the Fathers, the Talmud states, “Make His will your will, and negate your will before His.”

In Jewish ethics, there is a great emphasis on mutual responsibility for one another’s actions. Those fortunate enough to achieve a measure of spirituality do not have the right to keep this enlightenment to themselves. (Twerski, 1993)

2. The 12 Steps and Islam

The word Islam means submission. In this sense, there is a shared connection between Islam and specific aspects of the 12 Steps. However, in Islam, submission means more than just a vague submission to a higher power—Islam requires submission to the will of Allah (God), otherwise known as Sharia law. In this aspect, there is some connection to the commitment Judaism puts to following the Torah, but Sharia Law draws from the Qurán differs from its Abrahamic counterparts. Despite the emphasis placed on following Sharia Law, most addicts who are recovering from addiction find the structural rigidity a blessing rather than a curse. Islam originated with Muhammad (570-632) in the Arabian Peninsula. Muhammad’s teachings were recorded in the Qurán, whose final redaction and compilation occurred by 656. Islam espouses five pillars to which its adherents can commit. The Sharia Law provides guidance and structure for followers in both religious and political aspects of Islamic life. (www.12step.com/faithrecovery/islam.html).

The critical part of Islam that encourages people with an addiction to pull out of their drug or alcohol dependency is Islam’s insistence on abstinence from alcohol and drugs. Not only are these statutes in Islamic law helpful to rid the person with an addiction to the abused substance, but many of the guidelines in Sharia law offer the recovered addict a structure to reorganize their life. (www.12step.com/faithrecovery/islam.html). In interpreting the Islamic 12 Steps, attention is drawn to Steps 11 and 12.

2.1 We Sought to Improve our Understanding of Taqwa and Ihsan Through Salaat

Salaat is the name given to the formal prayer of Islam. It is one of the obligatory rites of the religion to be performed five times a day by a practicing Muslim. Its status as one of the Five Pillars indicates its supreme importance for Muslims. Prayer is performed five times a day (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/salaat>).

Taqwa is the Islamic concept of “God-consciousness” or higher consciousness. It is related to the idea of conscience. Having *taqwa* allows one to be constantly aware of God’s all-encompassing knowledge and attributes and a reminder of their relationship and responsibility to God as his creation and servant. The way to *taqwa* is through obedience to God (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/taqwa>).

Ihsan is an Arabic term meaning “perfection” or “excellence,” which is related to the word goodness. It is a matter of taking one’s inner faith (*iman*) and showing it in deed and action, a sense of social responsibility born from religious convictions. In Islam, *Ihsan* is the Muslim responsibility to obtain perfection, or excellence in worship, such that Muslims try to worship God (Arabic Allah) as if they see Him. Although they cannot see Him (due to the belief that Allah is not made of materials), they undoubtedly believe He is constantly watching over them (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ihsan>).

Ihsan, meaning “to do beautiful things,” is one of the three dimensions of the Islamic religion. In contrast to the emphases of Islam (what one should do) and *iman* (why one should do), *Ihsan* is primarily associated with intention. While many Islamic jurists have concentrated on Islam and theologians on *Iman*, the Sufis have focused on *Ihsan* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ihsan>).

12 Having increased our level of Iman (faith/belief) and Taqwa, as a result of applying these steps, we carried this message to humanity (dawah). We began practicing these principles in all our affairs.

(“Perspectives on Drug Addiction in Islamic History and Theology - MDPI”)

3. The 12 Steps and Buddhist Beliefs

The Buddhist 12 Steps is an evolving thought that supports and encourages individuals with a Buddhist philosophy. Its purpose is to serve as a reference place for ideas, thoughts, perspectives, experiences and a channel for sharing. (www.buddhist12steps.com)

3.1 The Awakened One (Buddha)

The Four Noble Truths (Middle Way) and the Noble Eightfold Path express the essence of Buddha’s teaching and the foundation of all subsequent Buddhist doctrine.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Ubiquitous existence of suffering in life.
2. The source of suffering is selfish cravings and attachment.
3. Cessation, liberation, freedom from suffering is possible.
4. The path leads from suffering to liberation. (Moacanin, 1986, p. 3)

The Noble Eightfold Path:

1. Right understanding
2. Right thought purpose or aspiration
3. Right Speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness, awareness, attentiveness
8. Right concentration or meditation. (Moacanin, 1986, p. 4)

Buddhists believe that the vibrant life energy we are born with is often covered up by the karmic causes we chose or created. This karmic shadow covers our Buddha nature. Addictions, obsessions, and compulsions are powerful symptoms, and because individuals coping with these problems in living are visible, programs have been designed to help overcome one’s fundamental darkness. (www.buddhist12steps.com)

4. The Karmic Shadow

Karma is an Eastern religious concept in contradistinction to “faith” espoused by Abrahamic religions (Judaism et al.), which view all human dramas as the will of God as opposed to present - and past-life actions. In theistic schools of Hinduism, humans have free will to choose good or evil and suffer the consequences, which require the will of God to implement karma’s consequences, unlike Buddhism, which does not accord any role to a supreme God or gods. The karmic effects of all deeds actively shape past, present, and future experiences. Buddhism links karma directly to the motives behind an action.

Karma is simply an extended consequence of natural acts. Karma means “deed” or “act” and, more broadly, names the universal principle of action and reaction that governs all life. Actions can also mitigate the effects experienced and are not necessarily fated. A particular action now is not binding to some individual, future experience, or reaction; it is not a simple, one-to-one correspondence.

Karma is not fate; humans act with free will to create their destiny. According to this, if we sow goodness; we will reap goodness; Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determine our future. The conquest of karma lies in intelligent action and dispassionate response (retrieved January 5, 2023, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma>)).

Many Buddhists who do not embrace Western religious concepts are rethinking the foundational concepts expressed at 12-Step meetings. What follows is a framework for seeing the 12-Step program from a more Eastern perspective (Retrieved January 21, 2023, (www.justloveaudio.com/resources/Assorted/Buddhist12Steps)).

4.1 The First Three Steps in the Buddhist Tradition Focus on Honesty, Hope, and Acceptance

Since the steps were developed in an American Christian culture, the wording of the steps is not in Buddhist terms, yet the concepts are very Buddhist. The 12 Steps are written with “we,” not “I.” It recognizes a collective “we.” Sharing an individual’s experiences, strength, and hope lets one know they are not alone. The lesser “I,” “I, by myself,” will not get the person to where he wants and who he wants to be in this life. (Retrieved January 22, 2024, (www.justloveaudio.com/resources/Assorted/Buddhist12Steps)).

Buddhists are open to leaving their self-imposed isolation and releasing the delusion that they are alone or unsupported in an indifferent or hostile world. They believe “we are many in body and one in spirit.” To recover, one must leave one’s self-imposed isolation and change one’s life condition. Buddhists in recovery may call Step Two the process that connects with their ninth-level of consciousness. However, they came to awaken to enlightenment (the wisdom initially inherent in the lives of each Buddhist). Buddhist faith can mean admitting, accepting, and establishing one’s true self. Buddhists constantly exchange and communicate with the cosmos, their lives reverberating as one living entity. As Buddhists practice, they acquire wisdom from experiencing that which was formerly inconceivable,

and then they proceed toward enlightenment and its benefits. (www.justloveaudio.com/resources/Assorted/Buddhist12Steps). Concerning Buddhism, the first three steps rely on faith, study, and practice. Studying (or gaining knowledge of the facts) is Step One. Build a foundation on honesty. Faith is Step Two, with willingness and openness to hope. Practice is Step Three, the desire to trust that life is intended for good and joy. Taking Step 3 is connecting to life with trust. This will relieve one’s pain and suffering. Buddhists believe something good awaits them as they release their fundamental darkness; without action, Buddhists cannot practice. The first Three Steps are internal action.

Meditation, mindfulness, compassion, awareness, and human evolution reflect the fourth through eleventh Steps. In the Buddhist tradition, one must allow one’s true nature to emerge. Recovery depends on a person’s spiritual condition. Living with awareness is the way of the Buddha. Step Ten is the fourth cycle of honesty, lifting one from the disease of addiction. (Retrieved January 8, 2022 (www.justloveaudio.com/resources/Assorted/Buddhist12Steps))

4.2 Step 12 - Attaining Wisdom/Connecting

This is the “bodhisattva step” in recovery, where one comes into this life to share one’s recovery, awakening, and enlightenment. Buddhists attain a way of life that agrees with the deepest dictates of their being; they come to know joy. “Sought through chanting, prayer, and meditation to improve our conscious contact with the universal and mystic Law.” (Retrieved January 8, 2023 (www.justloveaudio.com/resources/Assorted/Buddhist12Steps))

5. The Native American and 12 Steps

When Europeans first arrived in the continental United States 400 plus years ago, Native American Indian populations occupied most of the area. The Native American Indians were and still are an exceptionally culturally and linguistically diverse group, and this diversity evolved partly because of geographical barriers.

Many recovery programs for Native Americans focus on tribally specific techniques utilized among American Indian peoples in the United States. Such rituals as Sweat Lodge are to bring each participant closer to the Creator and to the elemental forces that give meaning to life. The Sweat Lodge ceremony reaffirms human kinship with all living beings and the universe (Manson, 1986). Other examples of culturally competent Native American Recovery

Programs that incorporate ancient American Indian traditions and teachings include the following: Good Way (Colorado, 1986), Red Road (Hand, 1991; Poor Thunder, 1991), and the Peyote Road of the Native American Church (Hill, 1990; Lawson & Morris, 1991). These promote the traditional idea that the individual who follows the right path will be healed. Thus, by adapting one's path of life to the beliefs and values of the Native American ways of living, a recovery-oriented system of care impacts all aspects of the individuals' tribal life.

For example, one of the Native American Recovery Programs, the Good Way, promotes spiritual healing and often utilizes traditional culture by interpreting 12-Step programs in tribal language and philosophy. The Good Way also incorporates tribal ceremonies to a limited degree, particularly purification sweats and prayer. However, although culturally sensitive, it still relies heavily on the 12-Step philosophy of NA or AA.

An example of the adaptation of the 12-Step program to tribal culture can be found in the English version of the Lakota "Twelve Steps Toward a Drug-Free Life." (<https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/frances>)

I admit that because of my alcohol dependence, I have been unable to care for my family and me.

- A more excellent spirit can help me regain my responsibilities and model the life of my ancestors (ancestors). I rely totally on the ability of the Great Spirit to watch over me. I strive daily to get to know myself and my position within the nature of things.
- I admit to the Great Spirit and my Indian brothers and sisters the weaknesses of my life.
- I pray daily to the Great Spirit to help me
- I pray daily to the Great Spirit to help me correct my weaknesses.
- I try to remember all those to whom I have caused harm and, with the help of the Great Spirit, achieve the strength to make amends.
- I make amends to all those Indian brothers and sisters that I have caused harm to whenever possible through the guidance of the Great Spirit.
- I admit when I have done wrong to myself, those around me, and the Great Spirit.
- Seek through purification, prayer, and meditation to communicate with the Great Spirit as a child to a father in the Indian way.

- Having addressed those steps, I carry this brotherhood and steps of sobriety to all my Indian brothers and sisters with alcohol problems, and together, we share all these principles in all of our daily lives. (<https://recovery.org/addiction/demographics/native-americans/>).

The central issue to a favorable resolution of life problems, such as alcohol or drug addiction, gambling, abuse, etc., is partly vested in a robust management system that impacts an individual's cultural and social support system. The demise of supportive communities is one of the significant losses of modern life. The self-help movement of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs have always provided social support and encouragement to reflect on behaviors, motivations, and patterns that support healthy lifestyle changes. While it is not necessary for a recovering person to be religious, the movement may draw parallels to various spiritual and religious doctrines that recovering persons subscribe to; therefore, drawing these parallels only strengthens a person's chances for long-term recovery {Scoles, Self-Help 2024 and Scoles, Holistic Health, 2024}.

The Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic traditions share universal beliefs expressed by their respective prophets, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. The highest expression of an individual's spiritual awakening is communicated through compassion, understanding, and peacefulness. Clinebell suggests several areas of healthy spiritual needs:

- The need for a viable philosophy of life.
- The need for a relationship with a "higher power."
- The need to develop a sense of Self.
- The need to feel connected (belonging) to the universe.

There is a need for a community that supports spiritual growth (Clinebell, 1995, p. 82).

In the final analysis, having faith in your recovery may be one of the most critical parts of an individual's recovery journey. Faith can influence how you forgive, gain confidence in yourself, and help you find support in sobriety. (Research Institute, 2023).

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