



RECOVERY DHARMA NEWSLETTER

Fall, 2019

"Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity." -Pema Chödrön

Warm greetings to the Recovery Dharma community! We are excited to share this very first Recovery Dharma newsletter with you, created by the community for the community.

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New information and resources

Big news! Nominations for the first democratically elected Recovery Dharma Board of Directors are now open! Deadline for nominations is December 1. Click

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In case you missed it, we published "[Circles in Recovery Dharma](#)," a document that gives an update on a lot of the exciting volunteer efforts underway. [New resources](#) have also been posted on [the website](#), including an [Appreciative Joy Meditation](#), [Compassion Meditation](#), [Sitting with Difficult Emotions Meditation](#), [What is Recovery Dharma?](#), and an [editable tri-fold pamphlet template](#).

If you are unable to click any of the links in this newsletter, visit <https://recoverydharma.org/resources> to find them!



Keepin' it Local

Meet the Online Sangha

"I know someone comes from about 30 miles [50 km]," **Craig Wilkie** said. He's speaking about his Recovery Dharma meetings held in Lexington (Kentucky), USA.

Recovery Dharma meetings provide safe spaces for people recovering from the suffering of addiction. The meetings allow folks to come together to heal by helping them maintain sobriety and avoid craving by providing spaces to discuss their challenges—all the while leveraging Buddhist principles and practices in a non-theistic, social setting. The meetings are typically held in places such as conference annexes in hospitals and institutions, in yoga studios, in Buddhist education and meditation centers, in recovery and rehab centers, and even in church basements. "I personally travel about 3–5 miles [5–8 km]," Craig explained. The distance of 3–5 miles—or 30 miles—is a journey worth making every week—or even several times a week—when addiction is on the line.

After all, addiction can kill.

However, what can you do if there's no Recovery Dharma meeting close by? Many regions in the U.S. and Canada still lack in-person meetings. There are a handful in England and only two in the rest of Europe. Australia is home to just one known meeting as of this writing. And even if there is a meeting in a nearby metroplex,

That's where online meetings make sense.

Online meetings provide similar benefits to in-person Recovery Dharma meetings but take advantage of technologies such as video conferencing and the internet to provide a virtual space from the comfort of attendees' homes, offices, or wherever they happen to be. Instead of taking a seat in a folding chair in a conference room, you use your computer or smartphone to connect to a virtual meeting room. Virtual meetings also make it easier for people to attend who might otherwise carry a lot of shame or guilt around their addictions. Turning on their cameras to show themselves to others in an online meeting is optional. You can even leave your microphone off and just listen the entire time.

Today, Recovery Dharma has its own "online sangha," specializing in providing virtual meetings every day of the week, sometimes up to three in any single one day. These meetings include open-ended "sitting groups," which provide spaces for people to meditate together and share their experiences in recovery and Buddhist principles. They also include specific meetings for intensive book study, answering Recovery Dharma's "Questions for Inquiry," women's meetings, LGBTQIA+ meetings, and even a spotlight session featuring talks from rotating dharma speakers.

Unlike a local sangha which draws attendees who live nearby, the online sangha attracts people from around the world. Attendees from Japan, Finland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Bali, Canada, and the United States can all be found in a single virtual room at the same time.

This wasn't always the case, though. **Kris Roehling**, one of the progenitors of the online meeting, faced an uphill battle getting the format—and the idea—taken seriously. "Many of the smaller peer recovery groups around money, sex, relationships, and food have strong online fellowships," they said. "But for Recovery Dharma members who come from larger fellowships like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, it is more difficult for them to wrap their heads around the power and helpfulness of a strong international sangha." They went on to explain that at the 2nd RefCon (a recovery conference in Los Angeles), "We advocated to have a voice on the stage in a panel or two." They added that the hesitation against the online sangha "was painful and frustrating, but it was also motivating" and that "we ... decided that the best thing was to just do the work. We created the website. We started posting on the Facebook groups to advertise the meetings and things started to look up."

experienced a meteoric rise in activity, and presence. In addition to nearly 20 meetings every week, the sangha created the "[RD Friends Action Guide](#)," and as part of that effort, has been recognized by the larger non-online community as a valuable resource for members.

In an impromptu (and completely unscientific) survey, as many respondents said they attended online meetings exclusively—or mixed online with in-person meetings—as did those who did traditional in-person meetings only. A number of the online attendees qualified their answers indicating that they did online meetings because in-person meetings were not available to them, while yet another exuberant subset celebrated online meetings "all the way."

Attending a Recovery Dharma online meeting is as simple as visiting <http://recoverydharma.online/> and finding a meeting that work for you on the homepage. Hardware-wise you'll need a somewhat modern computer or smartphone and an internet connection, although plain dial-in options are available too (and all you need in that case is a telephone). Meetings are listed by day of the week and time of day, and following any of the meeting links takes you to pages with more information about each meeting, when they're scheduled in various time zones around the world, and how to join. Most of the meetings are hosted on the Zoom conferencing platform, and your first visit to such a meeting will typically involve installing the Zoom software if it's not already on your computer or smartphone (two of the meetings appear on the "In The Rooms" platform and work best on a desktop or notebook computer only). Most choose to participate with full audio and video, letting you not just hear but also see other people in a meeting. In the spirit of consensual participation, people are reminded that they may choose to share whatever they're comfortable with, such as turning off their own camera so as not to be seen, or even turning off their microphones and just listening in to the meditation or the group sharing.

"We believe we are—we see ourselves as—a real sangha," Kris concluded. "So we do all the things a local group does—business meetings, contact information, promotion. But most importantly: a friendship support culture outside of meetings. We learned from our attendance with other recovery groups ... that those with a sponsorship and service structure were the strongest."

They summed it up: "We're just dharma friends instead of sponsors."

*Thanks to **Sean Kelly** for this sangha profile. If you'd like to feature your sangha in the Recovery Dharma newsletter, contact us at newsletter@recoverydharma.org.*



My Path

I am no longer my story

[Content Warning: This story contains graphic material pertaining to sexual assault, trauma, and abuse and may be triggering for some readers.]

I was dropped on my head when I was about a week old. My father was drunkenly taunting my brother when out of my brother's hand I slipped and hit the ground. He was told by our father that he was at fault. The next 18 years of my childhood was riddled with violence, soaked in alcohol, and peppered with sexual assault. My grandmother on my father's side committed suicide when I was four and my father drank and raised his fist to anything in his way as my mother hid it all from the outside world. My mother crash-dieted. My father fat shamed. I later realized he was bulimic—drinking alcohol, binge eating, and throwing up almost nightly. I would shrink under the covers and pray for it to stop. When he would hit my mother, I would beat my head into the wall, believing this was all my fault and if I were dead, they would not have to fight anymore. He would often turn his fists to me when I would try and intervene. This violence inspired what were my first suicidal thoughts.

I started seeking ways out at about age 12. I questioned and rebelled from the roles of my gender. I experienced my first major sexual assault at a church youth retreat. This started a damaging practice of seeking self-esteem through sex. I found solace in drugs and alcohol. Marijuana became my best friend for the three decades. I had a real-person best friend who was also a victim of assault, addiction and violence. However, her story was much more graphic, and crack was the drug of choice for her mother. It was the 80s in small-town nowhere, Illinois. She was my running partner. We never had to talk about what was going on at home for either of us; we just ripped and ran. She lived with her grandmother and we had ample freedom. Our circle grew to be the rebellious youth who did and sold the drugs, listened to the wrong music, and wore the wrong clothes. We were queers, freaks, punks, the hippies, the skaters, the headbangers, and the kids in black trench coats who became the bane of the fundamentalist Christian ideal that was grossly pervasive in my hometown. I was never more at home than I was with this community.

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awesome. They never sought treatment for themselves or have admitted to this day that there may have been some problems. Of course I did not get sober, I just became a better liar for my own safety.

At 18 I left home and found myself homeless. WTO happened around this time, enlightening me to the reality that the entities of authority that were held to such high regard by my family, institutions, and media of my youth were also deeply corrupt and bring violence and suffering to people all over the world. This gave way to a whole new set of resentments towards authority, especially political ones.

I had no life skills and had a lifetime of pain to suppress. I found some stability as a marijuana farmer in my 20s and early 30s. That was a dark and vicious world full of deceit, guns, violence, and the constant fear of incarceration. I was very successful financially, and that's when my drinking, drugs, and abhorrent abusive behavior took off. It was all me, me, me, until age 32. Several of my running partners did not survive those years.

I wanted to get sober. I wanted to travel abroad. I wanted healthy relationships. I wanted to be healthy, but my addiction blocked my ability to do any of that. Every day was the same ball and chain and every day I hated myself a little more than the day before. I finally got brave enough to walk away from the industry.

I hit bottom, had deeply disordered eating, was addicted, and was living in a squat in Oakland. Full of resentment, devoid of resources, spiritually dead. I cried all the time. I wanted to die. There seemed to be no way out.

A friend stopped by my house and told me he was on probation and asked me not to smoke weed around him. That was the longest 20 minutes of my life. This friend also asked me to go to an A.A. meeting with him and I accepted his invitation. I walked into a room of 200 glowing, smiling happy people. I had a scarf wrapped around my head and face, and dark sunglasses on. I walked into the room and promptly turned around and went into the bushes and threw up. I would be doing much emotional purging over the next year—that was only the beginning. This was early October 2012, the beginning of my sober life.

I bought a small sailboat, got out of the squat and got sober. I taught myself to sail, tried out college, mentored a child of addict parents, and tried having regular jobs. Sailing and mentoring came naturally, but college and stable jobs I struggled with.

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I had very little when I arrived. I had spent my whole life up until that point in survival mode. Then, the experience I heard other people talk about started to happen for me. I felt truly clear, free, content, and happy for the first time I could remember since my very early childhood. I was able to wake up in the morning and not get loaded. I was able to go to bed, sober and fulfilled.

I found Buddhist recovery when I needed it most. I had always had an interest in Buddhism; however, it was not time then. Now, Buddhist recovery has taken the depth of my recovery, and quality of my life, up a serious notch, exactly when I needed fresh tools and perspectives. Today I live a sober life, having learned not to push or pull on the world around me. Finding the way to the middle path is a boundless miracle. I did not understand that much of my suffering was a product of my own thoughts. This does not minimize the impacts of my trauma or justify the depth of the abuse I have suffered. However, the dharma has given me permission to take responsibility for who I am now and how I show up in the world. The simple act of responding and not reacting, sitting with and not clinging or being averse, breathing and not clinching. These actions are how I center myself. I am aware of the harm I create by just being a human on the planet. However, I no longer let that guilt consume me. I do my best to cause no further harm by my desires. When I am called out, I do my best to listen and examine my actions. All these things help me move through the world with ease and stay sober.

I started to understand resilience as an alternative to reacting. Being strong was not about reacting or protecting myself anymore. It was about understanding that those who seek to harm me are suffering and stuck in a cycle. It became about responding with compassion. No one who hurt me in my past had the skills to choose to do otherwise. And I learned to have compassion for myself. The world is harsh enough. I don't have to hurt myself anymore to feel comfortable. I am no longer the center of the universe in my mind.

Learning to sail taught me my best understanding of humility, equanimity, and how to be fierce. I had no power over the water; it was up to me entirely to respond appropriately and know it could kill me if my response was hasty. Until that point, my entire life was about staying ahead of a wave that was about to break and pull me under. No matter how heavy and violent the seas became, eventually, in large exhale, she would lay down again, to almost a dead calm, sometimes in a matter of minutes. The moods of the ocean, and myself are impermanent. Storms pass. So do feelings. So do cravings.

Every aspect of our culture wants us be drunk, trapped, malleable, in a state of constant consumption, eating, drinking, driving, shopping, comparing, upgrading, getting sick, getting better. Consumer culture creates suffering at every turn, with violence in far away places, with wars we do not hear about, environmental degradation we do not see, and exploited labor we don't talk about. A healthy, content, sober person is not nearly as profitable! We are not exempt, but I strongly feel sobriety and humility have a positive impact in our communities and, in turn, the world around us. Living a life by the teachings of the Buddha, staying sober and helping others stay sober, I build my strength and carve out a just, accountable community that is kind and welcoming and available for those in need.

*Thank you to **Amanda Hugachicken** for this personal story of recovery. If you'd like to share your personal story with the Recovery Dharma community, contact us at newsletter@recoverydharma.org. Please see the recoverydharma.org website for guidelines.*



Dharma Toolbox

Using RAIN in Difficult Times

Sometimes we just get stuck—with difficult thoughts, in trying times, in a relationship that challenges us. Bringing awareness and equanimity to these situations can prove difficult, when it's often easier to get swept away in our emotions. For example, often in my recovery I reflect back on unskillful actions I took in addiction that brought suffering to others—like not being fully present for my daughter because my mind was muddled with alcohol. It led me to be short-tempered and uninvolved, and reflection can create feelings of strong dislike for myself, of failure, and loss.

Using a technique called RAIN helped me bring my awareness back to the present moment and sit with rather than getting immersed in the difficulty.

RAIN is an acronym for a practice developed by Vipassana teacher Michele McDonald, and used often by Dharma teacher Tara Brach. RAIN stands for

Here's how it can work in practice. First, it can help to sit for a few moments with the difficult emotions.

R - recognize what is happening

We ask ourselves as we reflect, "what is happening inside us right now? What sensations are we aware of?" We can be patient and really investigate what we're experiencing, instead of just affixing a label to it and owning it.

I tend to get lost in a swirl of negative self-talk, observing myself from outside, attaching words like "failure" and "loser" to myself.

A - allow it to be what it is

This is when we allow ourselves to admit "right now, things are like this." Instead of fighting our emotions, judging them, or becoming caught up in them, we simply acknowledge them, make room for them in our hearts.

What helps me here is to focus on my breath, always there for us, or to picture my daughter's face when we interact now, bringing me away from the labels I mindlessly gravitate toward.

I - investigate with compassion and attention

Explore the nuances of what we are feeling—where in the body do we feel it most? What emotions surface? What beliefs do we bring to this awareness (for example, that we have failed, that we will never be happy or strong enough, that we deserve what is happening)? Acknowledge these feelings and beliefs, and inquire what they seek from us—do they want to be accepted, recognized, forgiven? Offer yourself an embrace, or put your hand over your heart and allow yourself to be human.

As I create a little distance from the labels I am so quick to identify with, I feel more distinctly the sadness, a tightness in my stomach, and a disbelief arise that I could have ever been like that. I turn from judging myself to compassion for the ways I allowed my addiction to manipulate me.

N - non-identification; rest in awareness

Realize that as much as we identify with the emotions we feel, we are also the awareness that observes them. Recognize that no matter how strong the difficult feelings are, they are not the totality of us. Take some time to rest in this observing awareness, understanding that we are more vast and deep than any single emotion or difficult feeling we may experience.

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does not define me, and that in recovery, I can now be an example for my daughter in my study of the dharma, and in offering her my sober presence. I acknowledge my unskillful actions and forgive myself, and bring renewed energy to my practice, and my loving relationship with my daughter.

*This piece was written by **Dirk Wethington**. Do you have a practice technique or approach that might be featured in Dharma Toolbox? Please send your submissions (about 500 words) to newsletter@recoverydharma.org.*



Between the Lines

The Recovery Dharma Newsletter Book Review

Once upon a time, if you were an alcoholic or an addict, there really wasn't much hope for you. There wasn't any treatment available. Addiction was probably a death sentence.

Then came Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), and for the first time, as meetings spread and the A.A. message became widely available, there was help for people suffering from alcoholism and other addictions. It's difficult to find any good research on A.A. or other recovery groups. From the studies that exist, a tentative conclusion that can be drawn is that people have varied experiences with A.A., from not helpful, to harmful, to very helpful. That may not sound like a comforting conclusion, but it's way better than no people being helped, which is pretty much what it was before Alcoholics Anonymous. A.A. was the preferred method of treatment for more than 70 years, and the language of A.A. has now passed into common usage. As a matter of fact, many people—and doctors and treatment facilities—still believe Twelve Step programs are the one best way to treat addiction.

But you may feel that A.A. just doesn't fit you, or that you've gone as far as you can with A.A., or you want a supplement to A.A. You found a Buddhist recovery program. At this point, you may want more information about how Buddhism can be used to treat addiction. And I'm willing to bet that since you are reading this, you probably do.

Buddhist practice, or books that translate the Twelve Steps into terms that are easier for Buddhist practitioners to deal with. But there is a book that goes right around the Twelve Steps, and I have found it to be a helpful guidebook in my recovery program and Buddhist practice.

Eight Step Recovery: Using the Buddha's Teachings to Overcome Addiction, by Valerie Mason-John and Dr. Paramabandhu Groves, blends the Mindfulness Based Addiction Recovery and Mindfulness Based Relapse Prevention programs with Buddhism to create a practical guide for those of us using Buddhist principles in our recovery.

This succinct, easy-to-read book starts with the fundamentals of Buddhism. Who was Siddhartha Gautama, now known as the Buddha, the young sheltered prince who upon learning about human suffering, responded by rejecting his idyllic life to spend his years learning how to end suffering and then teaching others what he had learned? The book goes on to explain what the Four Noble Truths are, and how they can help those of us struggling with addictions of all kinds. Here is the authors' take on the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life will bring suffering. How does addiction create suffering?
2. We create more suffering by avoiding, blaming, and craving. In other words, not accepting reality and trying to make it into something else.
3. There can be an end to suffering, if we are willing.
4. The Eightfold Path will end suffering.

That's just the first few pages! The rest of the book is devoted to explaining how the fundamentals of Buddhism can be used to end the suffering of addiction. The authors call these the Eight Steps, but they aren't A.A. Steps. The first four steps are the first Three Noble Truths, seen through the prism of addiction. Steps Five through Eight are basically a training manual for the Eightfold Path, written from the point of view of ending the suffering of addiction—teaching ourselves how to have right understanding, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and wisdom, and then sharing what we have learned.

For each step, the authors interlace personal stories with explanations, short exercises, and meditations. How do you become aware of and deal with triggers? How can you develop loving kindness and compassion? How can you use breathing or mantras to retrain your mind?

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hard time writing about, because all I want to say is, Read It. Study It. Mark It Up and Do What It Says. This is one of those books.

May you be at ease, and free from the suffering that addiction causes.

Thanks to **Bee Sloan** for this book review; it's great to have her back! The Newsletter Team welcomes book review submissions. Reviews should be about 500-800 words and be about any Buddhist or recovery-related book. Please send all inquiries to newsletter@recoverydharma.org.

The Recovery Dharma Newsletter Sub-Circle consists of Amy Reed, Dirk Wethington, and Critter Spinneret. We welcome your feedback and submissions of all kinds! Questions, comments, and submissions can be sent to newsletter@recoverydharma.org. With metta, may all beings be at peace and free from suffering.

The Inclusion Circle reviewed, provided suggestions, and approved this issue of the Recovery Dharma newsletter in order to encourage inclusivity, accessibility, and diversity. To bring up any questions or comments related to inclusion, please contact rdinclusioncircle@gmail.com.



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