When you hit rock-bottom with an addiction, life seems hopeless, yet in truth it’s anything but.

“As I read this, the promise of liberation from suffering got stronger and stronger. I finished the book inspired. It renewed my zeal. I think it will do the same for you.” —SYLVIA BOORSTEIN, author of *It’s Easier Than You Think*

In *12 Steps on Buddha’s Path*, the author describes her own journey of recovery from alcoholism—an astonishing passage through frightening territory. She marks out the path that allowed her to emerge into a life that is joyous and free.

“Groundbreaking, honest, insightful, and practical. This book is a treasure.”
— JANET L. SURREY, Ph.D., author of *We Have to Talk* and the play, *Bill W. and Dr. Bob: The Story of the Founders of Alcoholics Anonymous*

“There is a huge audience that needs and deserves this book. Weaving together the teachings and practices offered by the Buddha with the teachings and practices of the 12-Step Program is a brilliant move rendered with utmost integrity and wisdom.”
—MARCIA ROSE, founding teacher of The Mountain Hermitage

“An excellent introduction to 12-Step and Buddhist principles, and an insightful synthesis of the two traditions. Anyone seeking to understand recovery from a Buddhist perspective will find it to be a trustworthy and illuminating guide.”
—KEVIN GRIFFIN, author of *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps*

LAURA S. has written this book anonymously out of deep respect for the 12-Step traditions. Under her own name, she is a well-known Buddhist teacher, a widely published author, and is active in the meditation and recovery communities.
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12 Steps on Buddha’s Path
12 Steps on Buddha’s Path

Bill, Buddha, and We

A Spiritual Journey of Recovery

LAURA S.
MAY ALL BEINGS
BE WELL, HAPPY, AND FREE,
ONE STEP AT A TIME,
ONE MOMENT AT A TIME.
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Sober Speech
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We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness.
We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.
We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace.
No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others;
That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear; We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows; Self-seeking will slip away.
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I often have the opportunity to speak about the benefits of my Buddhist meditation practice to groups of people who have no background in Buddhism. It might be at the monthly meeting of the Parent / Teacher Association of the local middle school, the Library Club of a senior residential center, the Tuesday morning breakfast meeting of the Rotary Club in a nearby town, or the spring benefit luncheon of the county Association of Family Lawyers. The ages of the people in the audience vary and their reasons for coming together are different, but my message is basically the same wherever I go:

I tell them that the Buddha taught meditations as one way of cultivating wisdom and kindness. I say that the fundamental premise behind all the practices that the Buddha taught is that it is possible to have minds that are peaceful in the middle of lives, and in the middle of a world, that are continually and inevitably problematic.
I begin with the first of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha’s summary expression of his understanding of the causes and the end of suffering. Life is difficult, he taught, inherently challenging, because it requires constant accommodation to changing, often painful, circumstances. I say the Second Noble Truth this way: Suffering is the insatiable need to have things be other than what they are. I continue with the Third Noble Truth: Peace is possible, happiness is possible, because peace and happiness in life do not depend on what is going on but rather on how the heart and mind respond to what is happening. I add that the Fourth Noble Truth is the program of practices the Buddha taught to promote the heart’s wise response.

It is very often at this point that someone in the audience will say, “Wait a minute. I say something like this every day. I say, ‘God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can change, and the wisdom to know the difference.’ Isn’t that what you’re saying?”

I say, “Yes. It is.”

The idiom of the 2,500-year-old Buddhist tradition and the idiom of contemporary Twelve Step teachings are different, but both paths share the powerful message of the possibility of peace and happiness. The author of this book has used her own experience in decades of Twelve Step work and as a Buddhist meditator as the vehicle for presenting both practice paths. As I read these parallel reflections, echoing the promise of the end of suffering back and forth between them, the promise of liberation from suffering sounded stronger and stronger, as if two familiar voices were calling out “Yes!” and “Amen!” to each other. I finished the book inspired. It renewed my zeal. I think it will do the same for you.
The author, writing under the pseudonym Laura S., offers this book anonymously, in respect to the Twelve Step commitment to anonymity and in the understanding that no one does anything alone. Everything anyone does is an expression of all the circumstances, connections, and communities that have been part of that person’s experience. Laura S., Bill W., the Buddha, and We all wrote this book. May all of us and all beings share in its merit.

Sylvia Boorstein
Spring 2006
On my thirty-third birthday I swallowed a bottleful of sleeping pills and died: in the ambulance to the hospital, I stopped breathing and my heart stopped beating.

No one who knew me could comprehend what had driven the person they saw as an intelligent, attractive, successful businesswoman to such a desperate act. On the outside, everything about my life looked rich; inside, I was emotionally and spiritually bankrupt. I woke up every morning crying because I was still alive. I was in unbearable emotional pain and I couldn’t imagine that anything would ever change. I just had to hang on as long as I could, then find a way to end the pain—and me. In the next two years I made two other serious suicide attempts, spent time in locked wards of mental hospitals, and lost all the things that had made my life look good on the outside—career, partner, home, car, sailboat, and above all, my heavily defended façade. I was broke and broken.
After I lost everything that propped up my façade, I was able to cut through my denial, one of the most pervasive characteristics of the disease of alcoholism, and come face to face with the fact that I was a drunk and that the “medicine” I took to get through my life was fueling the depression that almost ended it. Destitute and unable to work, I was brought to my knees and then I reached out for help. I did what until then had been unimaginable: I went to Alcoholics Anonymous. There I was surrounded by people who told me that they knew how I felt, and I knew that they did because they too had been trapped in the despair-filled cycle of alcoholism, and I let them love me back to life.

Slowly, fighting the desire to drink again, sometimes fighting the program that was helping me not give in to that compulsion, I eventually experienced “rebirth”: a new life unlike any I could have imagined. My struggle with the disease of alcoholism as I began my spiritual journey in Alcoholics Anonymous is portrayed in Part One of this book. As rewarding as my recovery was, I still found myself in a spiritual search for something to fill the black hole inside that was smaller but still there. Much to my surprise, because I had intellectually rejected it as a teenager, I found what I was looking for in Buddhism. As the result of some extraordinary experiences in the Himalayas, that attraction to Buddhism finally made the crucial twelve-inch drop from my head to my heart, a passage described in Part Two.

When I started out in AA, I thought I could carefully read the Twelve Steps and master the program of recovery. When I began to investigate Buddhism, I thought I could thoroughly study the Four Noble Truths and master the teachings of the Buddha. I was wrong in both cases. For me, the process has been something like nurturing an orchid seedpod, which takes seven
years to bloom. If a seedpod is from an existing, well-established species, we can anticipate what its flower will look like—just as we can see around us examples of what recovery is like for someone in AA or how practice transforms someone who is a Buddhist. But if we’re creating an orchid hybrid, we have no idea what we’re going to get at the end of the seven years. It may look as if nothing is happening to the seedpod for years, but on the inside rare beauty is being created if we continuously nurture the seedpod and our own faith.

In AA I was never asked to take anything on blind faith—I was urged to find evidence among other recovering alcoholics for everything I was asked to believe. So too had the Buddha repeatedly told his adherents not to accept anything he taught without testing out its truth for themselves. What was common to AA and Buddhism was the idea that if I do what I did (surrender to my attachment to alcohol or anything else), I’ll get what I got (great suffering); but if I do what liberated beings do, I’ll get what they got—in the case of alcoholism, a recovery that is happy, joyous, and free. In both cases, it helped me enormously that rather than some authority figure telling me what to do, there were wise beings who had achieved what I wanted and were telling me what they had done. If I wanted to be a joyfully recovering alcoholic, all I had to do was follow in the footsteps of those who had climbed the Twelve Steps before me. If I wanted to be a bodhisattva (“enlightenment being”), all I had to do was walk in the footsteps of those who had mindfully followed the Buddha’s Eightfold Path.

AA and Buddhism became inextricably linked for me when I began to seriously study the Four Noble Truths, and the flowering of that hybrid is described in Part Three. What first erupted into
my awareness was the obvious truth that all forms of addiction are dukkha (the Pali word for “suffering”). I also realized that all dukkha is a form of addiction to something—perhaps to a sensual pleasure, a person, an object, or even life itself. When I was imprisoned by alcoholism, I was not free, nor did I believe that I had choices. Imprisoned by dukkha, I was powerless.

My first “miracle” in AA was learning that I do have choices—as long as I do not pick up the first drink—and even that I have a choice whether to pick it up. In Buddhist terms, I encountered the “law of karma,” which states simply that every intentional action (the definition of karma) will produce an effect when the right conditions arise. I gained the crucial understanding that I can’t change my past karma—my past intentions, my past actions, and their accumulated results—but I can change my future karma if I am mindfully making choices in the present. In AA terms, if I don’t pick up a drink, I won’t get drunk. It was the same lesson from different perspectives.

ABOUT ANONYMITY

In addition to the familiar Twelve Steps, AA also has the lesser known Twelve Traditions (see the Appendix), which are excellent guidelines for AA groups, just as the steps are for individuals. The Twelve Traditions have also been very helpful to my personal recovery, especially the twelfth, which states: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 184). Unfortunately, far too many famous
“personalities” have exploited their sobriety through AA by self-aggrandizement, taking all the credit for themselves in some cases or—well-meaning but misguided—trying to “promote” AA by telling how it has changed their lives. All too often, these people in the spotlight have picked up drinking again, giving themselves and Alcoholics Anonymous a black eye. Many struggling alcoholics who are resistant to going to AA and repeatedly have relapses excuse their own “slips” by pointing to these well-known people and saying, “You see? AA doesn’t work.” Reading tabloid headlines may give a relapser the rationalization to stay away from AA, and the miracle of recovery may never happen for her or him.

Anonymity is also a priceless gift for newcomers to AA. Most of us have a fairly high shame quotient—and in some cases are legally vulnerable for our past actions—and we need for AA to be a safe place for us to share aloud whatever may be threatening our sobriety if we choose to. The guideline is that each of us can tell another individual (but not at the level of print, film, video, or other media) that we are in AA, but we may not break the anonymity of another person.

Anonymity, for each of us personally, is the basis of humility in recovery: Only through our anonymity can we give credit where credit is due: to all those drunks who have gotten sober and stayed sober before us. Through anonymity, all us garden-variety alcoholics become a We instead of an I and know the blessing of joining the human race in sobriety. Out of respect for the tradition of anonymity I have used the pen name “Laura S.” and have avoided using the real names of other people in AA.
For more than seventy years, the success of Alcoholics Anonymous in helping supposedly hopeless drunks to recover has inspired the founding of other Twelve Step programs for people addicted to a wide variety of substances and behaviors, and other programs for the people who love someone in recovery. The first of these “other As,” now called Al-Anon Family Groups, was established by Lois W., AA cofounder Bill W.’s wife, during the earliest days of Alcoholics Anonymous. While Bill and other drunks met in their living room, Lois and the others’ wives (all the earliest members were men) sat around the kitchen table exploring the emotional devastation they had experienced as the result of the disease of alcoholism in someone they loved. As Al-Anon took shape and name in later years, it relied heavily on the Twelve Steps of AA for its program of recovery, as has Ala-Teen, a program for young people affected by the drinking of their parents or other adults. Since those early days, it seems as if as many organizations as there are addictions have arisen: Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous—the list goes on and on. All of these organizations have based their recovery programs on AA’s Twelve Steps—modified only slightly in some cases, changed greatly in others.

I have often been asked to speak at such meetings, especially about the Twelve Steps. So although this book describes my recovery from alcoholism, the discussions of the steps and other parts of AA’s program can easily be used by anyone in any other Twelve Step program.
As AAs love to say, the steps work if you work them—for a remarkably wide range of recoveries.

My journey through recovery has been an astonishing passage through strange and frightening territory, but it has made me joyous and free, as well as the kind of wise and compassionate person I always wanted to be. The hybrid of AA and Buddhism has been more beautiful and enriching than anything I could have ever imagined. I’m so pleased that you’re joining me for some steps on its path.

Laura S.
Part One:
Bill W.

“I am an alcoholic.”
I walked down Hudson Street until I reached the corner. I stopped and looked up at the street sign: Bank Street. I checked my watch: 6:55 PM. I opened the notebook to see where I was supposed to be going: “St. Luke’s in the Village, where Grove Street intersects Hudson.” I moved on to the next corner and read the sign: West 11th Street. It was 6:59 PM. Forty-three electroshock “treatments” had left my mind so porous that I had to go through this agenda at every corner in order to reach St. Luke’s for the Monday night AA Beginner’s Meeting, seven blocks from my apartment in New York City.
I recently had signed myself out of one of New England’s most prestigious hospitals—highly esteemed, but highly ignorant about alcoholism. When the gurney wheeled me into the emergency room after yet another suicide attempt, the medical staff fought for my life. No one, including my closest friends, could understand why I wanted to die so much that I would swallow a bottle of sleeping pills or slash my wrists, which I had done in another attempt. So the hospital psychiatric staff did the only thing they knew to do for “severe depression”: they fried my brains with electroconvulsive “therapy” (ECT), leaving me with permanently impaired memory as well as the original depression that I now know was incubated within the disease of alcoholism. But none of my “friends” ever questioned my drinking. I was too intelligent and accomplished to be an alcoholic—wasn’t I?—to fit their stereotype of a drunk stumbling down the street in the Bowery. And if they wondered about my drinking, they’d have to look at their own, because I always hung out with people who drank at least as much as I did.

So I slithered into St. Luke’s—peeking out from under a large floppy hat that almost met my upturned collar. I was in disguise. I had taken a seat in the back of the room before I realized there was a coffee urn, and I didn’t want to get up again, because someone might guess that I hadn’t known the meeting had coffee and was a newcomer. Besides, my hand was shaking too much to hold a cup without splashing the coffee. I was like a teenager again, self-consciously sure that everyone was looking at me. When the meeting started, people turned their attention to a man in the front of the room reading something called the AA Preamble, so I risked glancing around. The room was crowded and smoky, but I didn’t see too many of the self-righteous Bible-thumpers or
derelicts I had expected. There were people of all ages, and most were African Americans. Some were well dressed, but I focused only on the relatively few obvious street people. The man finished reading, smiled, and said, “I’d especially like to welcome the newcomers here tonight.” My heart sank and I thought, “Has it come to this?” Yes, it had. I had never thought I would find myself in a church basement with a bunch of drunks, but here I was. The chairperson asked if anyone new would like to introduce themselves, and I submerged even deeper below my collar, certain that no one would mistake me for a newcomer.

Then strange things began to happen. People raised their hands and told the most intimate stories about themselves, and others laughed. I was baffled. Why would anyone humiliate themselves that way? And why was everyone laughing? There was absolutely nothing amusing to me about facing a life without a civilized cocktail before or a good wine with dinner. The prospect was just too dreary. I was sure I’d never smile—much less laugh—ever again.

At one point I glanced at the front wall. About ten hand-lettered signs were randomly hung. It was bad enough (for my obsessive mind) that hardly any of them were straight, but these simplistic “slogans” made me want to gag: One Day at a Time; Think; and Live and Let Live. One of what looked like two oversize eye-test charts was labeled “The Twelve Suggested Steps”; the other was “The Twelve Traditions.” I didn’t know what they said, because I could see only the word “God” and some sappy euphemisms like “Higher Power” that didn’t fool me a bit. I had finally cut through my denial enough to consider the possibility that alcohol could be at the core of my problems, but now there was a new barrier to the future: all that God stuff. I was much too sophisticated to believe

H A S I T C O M E T O T H I S ?
in a Creator God, and I despaired of being able to fit into a group
that I instinctively knew was my last, best—and only—hope.

I went home that night and called the woman I had asked to
be my AA sponsor (my spiritual guide in the program) that very
morning, obviously a major mistake in judgment. I was totally
steamed and whined, “Why did you send me to that meeting? I
have nothing in common with all those people!”

She paused, then responded, “You’re right. You don’t have
anything in common with them. They know how to keep things
simple; you don’t. They know how to be grateful; you don’t. They
know how to stay sober; you don’t. Keep going back.” Then she
hung up.

I’d had my first lesson in that rare species of honesty known as
tough love.