

The Karma Yoga of Vedanta and the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

Ram (James Swartz)

2012-10-17

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/497>

The 12 Steps are a set of guiding principles outlining a course of action for recovery from addiction, compulsion and other such dysfunctions. Originally proposed by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as a method of recovery from alcoholism, the 12 Steps were first published in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939. The method was then adapted and became the foundation of many other 12-step programs.

Such programs are offered free of charge to anyone who wishes to overcome whatever it is that ails them, whether it be alcoholism, drug addiction, overeating, co-dependency, overspending, overworking, etc. The 12 Steps have helped millions of people overcome almost every imaginable dysfunction. There are thousands of meetings held regularly throughout the world as can be seen on the internet. All meetings warmly welcome newcomers.

The 12 Steps work to remove the limiting and false notions people have about themselves, others and the world. By working the 12 Steps with a sponsor (someone who has successfully worked the Steps), reading and studying approved literature, doing service and by attending meetings, a sponsee (someone who is working the steps with a sponsor) will almost always overcome whatever brought them to the Steps in the first place plus they will learn to stop blaming others for their problems, overcome victim-consciousness and will strive to become responsible, happy, well-adjusted members of society.

Many people who are attracted to Vedanta are already qualified for the knowledge that, "I am *brahman*," as they have been working on themselves for years via seeking, therapy, working the 12 Steps and other healing modalities. However, there maybe some of you who are new to all of this and have never done any work on your unconscious dynamics.

Vedanta has many tools to help a relatively healthy emotional person resolve their unconscious dynamics and limiting beliefs. However, some of you may have some major dysfunctions which require a more systematic approach to removing your limited and false notions you have about yourself, and this is where the 12 Steps can help you.

If you have lingering resentments about the past or if your mother, father, school, work, religion, government, politicians, the left, the right, drug companies or whatever triggers some anger in you, you may benefit from working the 12 Steps.

Like Vedanta, there is a real richness to the program that can only be conveyed by working the 12 Steps. The meetings are very well organized and are based on proven principles and practices. The 12 Traditions ensure the fellowship operates smoothly by establishing boundaries that everyone can understand.

The key to the program is working the Steps with a sponsor. Like Vedanta, the program does not work by just reading the literature or attending the meetings. The program works when there is a living example, namely a sponsor, who can wield the knowledge of the program so that it can remove the false notions an individual has

about themselves and their world. There are even lineages in the program where people are able to trace their sponsors back through to the founders of AA.

In Vedantic terminology, the 12 Steps are a comprehensive program of *karma yoga* which will help remove an excessive load of *tamasic* and *rajasic vasanas*. The 12 Step ideal is to develop a service-oriented, non-attached mind that is *sattvic*. This is ideal from a Vedantic point of view as well, as it is this type of mind that can assimilate the knowledge that, "I am limitless, non-dual, ordinary, pure awareness." While the program is dualistic in that it maintains the distinction between the apparent individual and God, it is still profoundly useful for people who are seeking a *sattvic* mind.

Karma yoga as advocated by the teachings of Vedanta is an ideal way for most people to move through their unhealthy *tamasic* and *rajasic vasanas*. However, there are some people who have particularly heavy stacks of *vasanas* that remain stubbornly persistent even after years of therapy and practicing *karma yoga*. For those people, the 12 Steps offer a comprehensive methodology to bring together all the unresolved unconscious content of their minds so that they can work towards release from those *tamasic* and *rajasic vasanas*.

Most 12-step programs use the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, also known as the "Big Book," and AA's *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* book, also known as the "12 and 12," as the foundational books of their programs. Non-AA groups simply substitute the words that are relevant for their program.

For example, the Overeaters Anonymous program would substitute the word "drinking" with "eating" and the word "alcoholic" with "overeater."

The program itself is covered in the first 164 pages of the "Big Book." Pages 165 to 560 are the personal stories of forty-one recovered alcoholics and pages 561 to 575 are various appendices. The "12 and 12" is 192 pages and is an easy read. Non-AA 12-step groups will usually publish an adjunct book which is specific to their dysfunction and will have personal stories of people who have recovered from the relevant dysfunction, like overeating.

Regardless of one's understanding, the first 164 pages of the "Big Book" and the 192 pages of the "12 and 12" contain profound wisdom and make for a very worthwhile read for anyone.

Below is a list of the 12 Steps of AA as taken from page 59 of the AA "Big Book":

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives became unmanageable.
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 as we understood him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Make a list of all persons we have harmed and become willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admit it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Many people who are on a dedicated spiritual path are already working Steps 2 and 3 and Steps 11 and 12 even if they do not call them that. However, the real release from one's old dynamics comes from working all the 12 Steps with a sponsor.

All the Steps work to release people from their stuff, but Steps 1, 4 and 5 in particular bring things up and out in a way that enable people to experience release from their resentments of the past and their fears of the future. The "Big Book" and the "12 and 12" do a great job of explaining the Steps, so I will only provide a brief overview of Steps 1, 4 and 5, as those Steps have a way of bringing everything up from the unconscious in a systematic way so that efforts may then be made towards resolving them.

In Step 1, you are asked to overcome pride and admit that you need help to overcome the relevant *vasana*, or ego dynamic. Many people think egotistically that they do not need help and that they can do it on their own or that they do not have any problem at all. This almost always flies in the face of the facts and is usually an indication of unwarranted pride. Intelligent living indicates that reaching out for help is a much more sensible approach. During the 1st Step, people come to realize the strange paradox that total admission of defeat by one's own efforts regarding the dysfunction is the first step in gaining real strength.

Even if you do not have a major dysfunction, you can simply substitute the word "alcohol" with "ego," which is just the sum total of your *vasanas*. If you can admit you are powerless over your *vasanas* then you are ready to work the Steps.

In Step 4, you make a list of all the resentments you have in life, a list of all your fears and a list of where you have harmed others. The resentments are unresolved issues from the past, fears are unresolved issues about the future and the harm done to others are issues that require resolution.

Your sponsor will ask you to make a list, beginning from your birth, of all the five people, circumstances, institutions and concepts that trigger you in some way. This is a free-flow list which should only take about 20 minutes to complete. It should capture most of the major life issues in chronological order without inclusion of unnecessary repetitive details. This list will form the basis of your resentment inventory, your fear inventory and your harm to others inventory.

Beside each person, circumstance, institution or concept you will be asked to note down why it triggers you. After doing that for all the items on the list you will be asked to describe what aspect of your being did it impact. Then you will be asked, did you contribute to the problem in any way? Finally, you will be asked to see that your own character defects ultimately did not allow you to successfully resolve the situation. Character defects is a 12 Step term for “error in perception.”

When you write all these things down in a systematic manner as called for in the 4 Step, you will see the beauty and magnificence of this Step. Long-standing unconscious patterns will arise into awareness where they can actually be dealt with, often for the last time.

After completing the 4 Step, the 5 Step is to sit down with your sponsor and share in detail each one of these items. This brings up more relief from the issues, as you will realize that a lot of these issues are common to everyone because the sponsor will share their experience with these issues too. The shame and guilt from whatever it is will be lifted and you will no longer feel terminally unique. Even the worst of the worst will be seen in a different light so that you can hopefully move through the pain of the past and the anxiety of the future.

All the Steps are profound, but the Steps 1, 4 and 5 are a unique way of bringing up all of one’s issues for resolution in a systematic way.

If you have a major dysfunction, you are in luck. The 12 Steps can form part of your *karma yoga* program and can be part of your road to freedom. Many people who have worked the Steps eventually become grateful for their dysfunction, as it leads them to the 12 Steps and a whole new way of living that they could never have imagined previously. If this describes you, please seek out the fellowship that describes your dysfunction and start attending meetings. The program will look after you from there, assuming you do the work!

If you do not have a major dysfunction and would still like to work the Steps as a part of your *karma yoga* program, you are still in luck. Almost all people who work the Steps believe everyone would be better off if they worked them, so you will find most 12 Step people very receptive to your desire to work the Steps.

Perhaps you have a friend or a friend of a friend who is in a fellowship that you could speak to. Failing that you could choose a fellowship that you can relate to and you could attend one of their meetings. All 12 Step groups are easy to find on the internet. If you cannot decide on a fellowship, choose AA, as it is the grand-daddy of them all and it is the foundation for all the other fellowships.

If you do decide to work the AA Steps, please refrain from drinking during the relevant period. You should know that “the only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.” You might even surprise yourself after working the Steps by giving up alcohol permanently!

Most of these fellowships have what they call “open” meetings where everyone is welcome. Often these will be speaker meetings where people share their experience, strength and hope with the program. People will describe in graphic detail what their lives use to be like, what brought them to the 12 Steps and finally what their lives are like now after working the Steps.

At these meetings, you will have a chance to mingle and you will be able to discuss your desire to work the Steps with group members. You will find 12 Step people very

welcoming and you will likely be impressed with how their meetings are organized and operated. After these meetings there is fellowship and you will have an opportunity to discuss your situation with individual group members. You will undoubtedly be able to find a sponsor who will be happy to work the Steps with you.

Just as *karma yoga* becomes a way of life within the Vedantic tradition, the 12 Steps becomes a Western version of *karma yoga* that people practice for the rest of their lives. Many people do multiple Step 4 and 5s over time and they periodically do all 12 Steps over from time to time, depending on their needs. The first Step 4 and 5 is usually the longest and most comprehensive while the subsequent ones tend to be person- or issue-specific.

Regardless, you will undoubtedly gain some significant release from those heavy stuck *vasanas* by working the 12 Steps with a sponsor. By working the Steps, doing *karma yoga* and continuing your studies of Vedanta with a qualified teacher, your mind will become more and more *sattvic*, so that you will be able to eventually assimilate the knowledge that you are limitless, non-dual, ordinary, pure awareness.

The above-noted text represents the opinion of the author who is solely responsible for its content. In keeping with the 11th Tradition of AA, where our public-relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion, we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and film, and the 12th Tradition, where anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions ever reminding us to place principles before personalities, the authorship of this article will be kept confidential by the Great Ramji.