

# MEDITATION FOR ADDICTION RECOVERY

*Awareness techniques can not only help to free addictive patterns – but in some places have been developed as interventions in their own right. Anastasia Stephens outlines the latest developments and gives practical tips on meditation and psychotherapy, which can be speedily put into practice*

Addiction recovery is looking to the East. Whether it's through Zen, Mindfulness or other meditative approach, the discipline of watching the mind is fast gaining recognition for its value in helping to free people from addictive patterns.

Once seen as a helpful adjunct to addiction recovery – meditation is listed in the 11th step of the 12-step program – mindful awareness methods taken from Buddhist practices are being developed as addiction interventions in their own right.

In Japan, home of Zen Buddhism, a school called Naikan has been offering people with addictions a structured recovery approach based on meditation for some time. These and similar methods based on 'mindfulness meditation' are now gaining recognition elsewhere.

At the University of Washington, Professor Alan Marlatt, director of the Addictive Behaviours Research Centre, is researching the effectiveness of mindfulness-based therapy in relapse prevention – many *Addiction Today* readers heard his presentation on this at the UK/European Symposium on Addictive Disorders last year. He sees Buddhism as less of a religion and more of a "manual of how to deal with the behaviour of your mind".

Addiction counsellors Radha Nicholson and Brendan Healy would agree. Over in Australia, they have pioneered the Bay Approach, a complete recovery method which combines meditative awareness with psychotherapy.

The increasing application of meditation techniques to the field of addictions led to the formation of the Buddhist Recovery Network last year. Its aim, says spokesman Paul Saintilan, is to encourage relevant academic research and promote the benefits meditation methods for addiction recovery.

"Over 500 studies show that meditation raises levels of serotonin, the 'feel good' chemical deficient in addicts," explains Santilan. "Vipassana meditation has even been used successfully in the treatment of addictive behaviour among prison populations."

## HOW DOES MEDITATION HELP?

Both Zen and Vipassana traditions employ techniques such as 'mindful awareness' and 'self inquiry.' In this, meditators observe and analyse the workings of their own mind.

They are powerful tools for recovery, says Nicholson, who has integrated both methods into the Bay Approach, because they lead to personal insights about the source of cravings. That, in turn, helps to dissolve them.

"Mindful awareness is the process of watching the mind," explains Nicholson, a psychologist and meditation teacher for over 20 years.

"You observe your thoughts and feelings, without becoming attached to them. From this perspective, you can begin to see the subtle patterns and habits around your addictive behaviour. When you are aware of how they influence you, they have less hold over you.

"Self Inquiry is a process of exploration into the truth," she adds. "You determine to look honestly at your past and present, for example, the impact your behaviour has had or is having on you and those around you."

In the Bay Approach, awareness and inquiry are used to help clients overcome addictive patterns. The method is effective because the emphasis is on self reflection and analysis.

"Combined with psychotherapy, these meditative tools encourage people to take responsibility for themselves. In gaining their own awareness and insight, clients are often motivated to change for the better," Nicholson explains.

Additional therapeutic benefits of meditation for addiction recovery – points out Kevin Griffin, author of *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps* – is that, after some guided practice, the techniques can be applied by people on an ongoing basis in their lives. If practiced regularly, its effects are transformative and long lasting.

"Meditation can be applied to whatever you are doing, wherever you are," says Griffin.

"In addiction, people turn to drugs to escape from uncomfortable feelings but in meditation, you learn to do the opposite. You sit with yourself,

your thoughts and feelings instead of running away. At first, that can be very unpleasant. But with meditation you cultivate a positive relationship to yourself and the world," he says.

"Only 20 minutes' practice a day can shift your perspective on what is important. You develop compassion for yourself and a deeper connection. After a while, that is not something you want to let go of."

## STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO MEDITATIVE PRACTICES TO HELP FREE ADDICTION.

### CONTACT MEDITATION - RELATING TO THE PRESENT...

People with addictive problems often lose their sense of self in relationship with others, - and even in relationship to themselves. Brendan Healy, addiction counsellor at The Bay, recommends this 'contact meditation' to help people come into the present and strengthen their sense of self.

### WHAT TO DO.

Sitting alone or with somebody, focus on the factual sensory information you are receiving from your environment, internally and externally, without interpreting them.

Start with external sounds, smells or tastes, then move to your inner sensations. If you hear chirping, say "chirping" – deciding it is a bird song is an interpretation, and that would be a secondary step.

Internally, you might feel tension in your belly, or heat in your chest. Describe your feelings physically. Then notice if these physical sensations give rise to you labelling them with an emotion such as anxiety or anger.

If you are with somebody, start a dialogue describing what you sense and feel in the moment and in response to one another. In this way, you start developing a sense of how physical sensations lead to feelings and then emotional reactions. If you use this method as an exercise with a friend or partner, you can become more conscious of your reactions to others while staying present with how you feel.

**AWARENESS MEDITATION - FOR DIFFICULT EMOTIONS.** Nicholson recommends this awareness meditation to help stay with difficult emotions as they arise.

**WHAT TO DO.**

Spend about 20-minutes daily sitting quietly with yourself. Watch your breath rise and fall. As you do so, notice the activity of your mind. Watch thoughts come and go. When you realise you have become lost in your thoughts, come back to your breath.

In this way, you can develop a sense of yourself that is not your thoughts or emotions. It is the 'watcher' or the awareness that notices emotions and thoughts come and go, like clouds. This awareness is steady and timeless and the more you cultivate it, the more you notice how feelings, desires and cravings come and go. Developing a strong sense of awareness can help you sit with difficult feelings without acting on them.

**LOVING KINDNESS MEDITATION – DEVELOPING POSITIVE REGARD.**

Loving-kindness is a buddhist meditation practice that systematically develops the quality of loving acceptance towards the self and others. When practiced regularly, it can help free a troubled mind from pain and confusion and make everyday relationships more meaningful, explains Kevin Griffin.

**WHAT TO DO.**

Sitting quietly for 20-30 minutes, begin by developing a loving acceptance of yourself. You might start by imagining a light filled with unconditional love filling your body. Another technique is to imagine inhaling positive light and exhaling dark clouds filled with

negativity. Alternatively, think of all the times you felt loved or were appreciated by others.

After filling yourself with love, think of a beloved person in your life. Send love to them. Repeat this with a neutral person and then a hostile person. Finally, imagine sending your love to all your friends, family – and people you hardly know. If you have trouble feeling self-love at first, this is probably due to feelings of unworthiness. Stick at it. Even if you don't feel it at first, with practice, it will develop.

**CONTACT FILE.**

**FOR READING.**

In their book, *Mindful Recovery: A Spiritual Path to Healing from Addiction*, doctors Bein and Bien describe meditation exercises to aid addiction recovery based on their experience as therapists and meditators; info at [www.mindfulpsychology.com](http://www.mindfulpsychology.com).

Kevin Griffin applies a Buddhist perspective to the 12-step recovery programme in his book, *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps*, giving useful meditations to practice throughout. For info go to [www.kevingriffin.net](http://www.kevingriffin.net)

**FOR RECOVERY.**

The Bay specialises in personal 1:1 rehabilitation retreats with a recovery method based on mindfulness meditation, inquiry and psychotherapy' info at [www.thebayretreats.com](http://www.thebayretreats.com)

**FOR INFO AND RESEARCH.**

The Buddhist Recovery Network aims to promote Buddhist meditation methods for addiction recovery and encourage further research. Go to [www.buddhistrecovery.org](http://www.buddhistrecovery.org) for reading recommendations, to source research papers or to find out about presentations at conferences.



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*Images: Iko (main picture), Edyta Pawlowska*