

UNPOPULAR STUDIES
in
THE LAST
THREE STEPS

by
Several Program Members

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A Note

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About the Unpopular Books and Guides

Why is this series of books and guides called “Unpopular”?

The Big Book of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous is the basis for recovery for countless millions of people around the world. The reason for this is that the Big Book “show[s] other alcoholics precisely how we have recovered” and offers “clear-cut directions ... showing how we recovered.” Consequently, most of us follow its recommendations closely.

But for some reason, certain sections of the Big Book – sections which are just as explicit as other sections – are generally ignored. Not only that: when it is pointed out that they are being ignored, the reaction of many people in recovery can range from bewilderment to hostility.

Mainly, therefore, these books and guides focus on those neglected sections of the Big Book ... however unpopular they (and we) may be.

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The Last Three Steps: An introduction

Welcome to these little Studies on the last three Steps of Program!

Having welcomed you, we should perhaps give you a warning: These Studies are not for everyone. In Program we do our best to avoid controversy, but sometimes it is not possible to say things that are simultaneously true and yet will make every member of every 12-Step fellowship feel comfortable. And these Studies are not intended to make readers feel comfortable – rather the reverse, perhaps. They are intended to help you to wake up – to wake up to what the founders of Program said about Steps 10 and 11, and what many people say about the real significance of Step 12.

The founders of AA – Bill Wilson in particular – had a vision of what the recovered life looks like, and they wrote about that vision in just a few pages of the AA Big Book – pages 84 to 88, which are devoted to the practice of Steps 10 and 11. They also devoted a chapter to the practice of Step 12, but that chapter mainly deals with how to approach the alcoholic who still suffers, and while working with potential newcomers is an important aspect of our practice of Step 12, it is far from being the whole story.

The view which Bill Wilson had of a life lived in the last three Steps came to him from heaven knows where (some people would say, quite literally from heaven knows where), and it may be that he lived it himself for some years – it seems that he did, though whether this is true or not we cannot know. What we suspect is that he lost to a significant extent the reality of that vision in subsequent years. He suffered from depression; he had ongoing problems with sex; he used AA to promote private ventures; he came to believe that the spiritual awakening could be induced using hallucinogenic drugs; he smoked himself to death. And AA also lost to some degree the nature of Bill Wilson's original view too. By the time of the writing of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, that view had become diluted: while parts of the *Twelve and Twelve* are excellent, it is by no means the spiritual masterpiece that parts of the AA Big Book are. What it was that Bill Wilson saw and experienced that enabled him to write the Big Book we can never really know, despite his attempts to tell us. What can never be taken away from him is that he was for all practical purposes the author of that supreme work of spirituality, regardless of whether he himself was able to practice in later years what he had written about at the beginning.

With regard to these final Steps, in the 1980's there appeared the work that would round out the AA Big Book's treatment of Steps 10 and 11, and talk about how to practice the last three Steps everywhere, all the time, in all areas of our lives, within the walls of our 12-Step program and also outside them, in the everyday world in which we live. That work was *A New Pair of Glasses*, by Chuck C., and it is – in our opinion, and even though it comes with some rough edges – the greatest work that Program has produced other than the Big Book itself.

You may want to re-read the previous paragraphs. If reading them upsets you, or annoys you, then these Studies are probably not for you. They are intended to help you get to the very

core of the practice of the last three Steps, and as ever if we are going to go and explore somewhere new, we must begin by leaving the place we are at right now. So if your recovery is based on ideas of the near-sainthood of Program founders; if you believe that other “Big Books” from various fellowships are every bit as good as the two works we have mentioned; if you think that 12-Step discussion meetings are much more fun and beneficial than book study or Step study meetings; if you believe that the last three Steps are “maintenance steps” rather than the very heart and soul of Program; if your recovery consists mainly of working the first nine Steps over and over; if you feel still that you are fundamentally different from most other people on this planet because you are an alcoholic, an over-eater, a compulsive gambler or whatever; then we urge you to read no further.

If, however, you suspect that a life based on the last three Steps is simplicity itself; if you have given up on the idea that you must be a devout Christian (or Jew, or Moslem, or whatever) in order to work this Program; if you have come to see that the first nine Steps are merely intended to bring you to the place where you can work the last three Steps for ever and ever; if you are starting to feel that you may have something fundamental in common with everyone else in the world, regardless of whether you are an “addict” or not; if you have begun to sense that “God” is not some giant Santa Claus “out there” but courses through every atom in your body and through the world and the universe ... if you are starting to entertain any of these ideas, then you may find something here that is of use to you.

It is worth saying right now that there is not a single original idea in these Studies. All of its “insights” are thousands of years old; they are rediscovered from time to time, and the world always seems to have a tiny, tiny minority of people who incorporate these ideas into their spiritual practice. Many of these ideas were rediscovered in the 1930s by the early AAs, and since then they have transformed the lives, not merely of millions of addicts desiring sobriety, but of far fewer people well into 12-Step recovery who have asked themselves this question: “Isn't there more to life than this?”

Yes, there is. If you are willing to go to any lengths to find it; if you have started to find it already, and want more of it; or if you live your life to the best of your present ability in the last three Steps ... then you may want to read on.

Thank you for “stopping by.”

Step 10

Step 10: An introduction

Step 10 is the key to living moment by moment in what the AA Big Book calls “the world of the spirit.” The Studies in this section are about Step 10. We hope that, while you might not agree with all that we say, they inspire you to explore Step 10 further and to make it a deeper part of your own spiritual journey.

First, a little background. Some people have suggested that we really practice a Six-Step rather than a Twelve-Step program. We acknowledge our powerlessness over our basic addiction (Step 1), come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity (Step 2), and make a decision to hand our will and our lives over to the care of that Power (Step 3). We then begin to lead a life of self-examination and restitution (Step 10), of prayer and meditation (Step 11), and service to others (Step 12). However, our initial working of Step 10, when we have years and years of abuse of ourselves and other people to contemplate and act upon, is a formidable task; so that first working of Step 10 is broken down for us into six separate Steps – Steps 4 through 9.

Perhaps the reason this thinking seems so strange to us is that we generally take some time to work Steps 4 through 9, making a very big deal particularly of Steps 4 and 5. Some of us take years to work these six Steps. By contrast, the early members of Program worked them rapidly. Dr. Bob, the co-founder of AA, worked them in one day. Anecdotal evidence from early stories in the AA Big Book suggests that working Steps 4 through 9 (or the equivalent of them) took days or perhaps a few weeks rather than months or years. The idea seemed to be to begin leading the spiritual life of the last three Steps as soon as possible.

These Studies take the view that Steps 4 through 9 are indeed an initial practice of the Tenth Step. Steps 4 through 9 need be done only once – and preferably quickly. We then begin to practice the last three Steps, in particular Step 10, on a moment-by-moment basis. There may come times in our recovery when we choose to work Step 10 on an in-depth basis, perhaps by creating another written inventory on some troublesome matter. But when we do these things, we are not working Steps 4 and 5 again. We are practicing Step 10.

If you are in doubt about this matter, you may want to re-read the AA Big Book's treatment of Steps 10, 11, and 12. You will find there no suggestion that we somehow “return to” or “rework” the earlier Steps. There is no need to do so, if we are thoroughly working the last three Steps.

So it is our position that *Steps 4 through 9 are only ever worked once. They are a guide to working Step 10 for the first time. And we can only “work Step 10 for the first time” once.*

Many of us think that the AA Big Book suggests that we work Step 10 in the morning and the evening. This thinking is a result of confusion arising from lack of familiarity with the text of the Big Book. The suggestion to examine our day at its beginning and its end is part, not of Step 10 at all, but of Step 11. By contrast, the few paragraphs dedicated to Step 10 suggest that it should be done continuously. The word “continue” or some variation of that word occurs four

times in just one short paragraph. There is no question that the founders of Program intended that we should practice Step 10 constantly.

If this is true – and it is our position that this *is* true – then Step 10 takes on a whole new complexion. The previous nine Steps are practiced sometimes, not all the time. For example, although it is critical for us to remember particularly in the early days that we are powerless over our addiction, few would suggest that we *practice* Step 1 constantly, merely that we *remember* that it is true. When we work Step 9, we do not spend our time from dawn till dusk making amends to people.

So there is something both *qualitatively* and *quantitatively* different about Step 10. For the first time in our recovery, we are confronted with a task which is to be done, if possible, *all the time*. And of course, it's not possible. So we are also being given a task that we can never do with complete success.

As we look further at and work Step 10, we will discover that this suggested commitment to its constant practice affects every single area of our lives. It *must* affect every single area of our lives, if we are truly attempting to work it constantly. These Studies explore several of those areas.

When we attempt this constant practice of Step 10, we find we start to become different people from what we were. This is not some far-fetched mystical claim. It is something that we have seen happen time and again with members of 12-Step programs who have moved from a repetitive practice of the first nine Steps to a committed practice of the last three.

They are the same people they used to be, but in some profound way they are different. Someone has said that they are not changed – merely transformed.

Step 10: How to do it

The AA Big Book says this about Step 10:

... Step 10 ... suggests we continue to take personal inventory and continue to set right any new mistakes as we go along. We vigorously commenced this way of living as we cleaned up the past. We have entered the world of the Spirit. Our next function is to grow in understanding and effectiveness. This is not an overnight matter. It should continue for our lifetime. Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God at once to remove them. We discuss them with someone immediately and make amends quickly if we have harmed anyone. Then we resolutely turn our thoughts to someone we can help. Love and tolerance of others is our code.

Some of us reduce this outline to the following simple approach: Moment by moment, we ask ourselves the following questions:

Right here, right now, what am I thinking?

Right here, right now, what am I feeling?

Right here, right now, what am I doing? What am I considering doing?

In other words, we attempt to watch ourselves constantly. We will say more about this business of “watching” in another section.

Depending on what we discover about ourselves with these questions, we may take certain actions – or refrain from taking certain actions. We may decide an apology is in order. We may pray about our answers. We may even decide to write about them at some length. But none of these things can happen unless we are aware on an ongoing basis of our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Here again are the questions we constantly ask ourselves as part of our Step 10:

Right here, right now, what am I thinking?

Right here, right now, what am I feeling?

Right here, right now, what am I doing? What am I considering doing?

Step 10: Watching ourselves

When we begin to watch ourselves in Step 10, moment by moment as best we can, we begin to discover that we seem in some profound way to be not one person but two.

We become aware that, every waking moment, there is a “critic” inside our heads that is never quiet. This critic passes ceaseless comments upon what is happening outside and inside ourselves. If there is nothing in particular going on outside ourselves, perhaps because things are quiet, then this critic starts to comment on the future or on the past. If you take the time right now to sit down and watch yourself, you will see it is happening this very moment as you read this book.

Here is an example of what that critic might be saying:

... i didn't agree at all with what that book was saying i've no idea why i let martha talk me into reading it i wonder what my pastor would say about it that reminds me i need to get the brakes done on this car before church on sunday i wonder if i should take it to the same garage as last time i didn't like that mechanic i'm pretty sure he overcharged me perhaps i should get a new car but the loan would be too much if only i were paid more at work perhaps i should look around for another job but the benefits are good and i like my boss i wonder why he was wearing that suit on friday perhaps he'd been to a funeral or maybe he was interviewing if he's leaving i don't know that i want to stay why is that man driving like that doesn't he know this is a 50 mph zone and what a bizarre color for a car oh no the traffic's stopping if this keeps up i'll be late maybe i should call paula and tell her because she can be pretty mean if people are late

This background commentary, this “noise” goes on and on every waking moment. It seems for most of us to have started in childhood and it has never stopped since, except for rare occasions we will talk about in a moment. Some of us have a critic that criticizes mainly ourselves. This critic says *every time I open my mouth, she figures out just what to say to make me look stupid i wish I knew how to put her in her place but I get so tongue-tied and look even worse I'm not sure why they hired me if they're going to treat me like this it always happens to me no matter how much work I do* Some of us have a critic that spends most of its time criticizing other people, and says things like *where on earth did she get that dress she surely can't think she looks nice in it but probably her worthless husband put her up to it he's a real cheapskate i need to tell bill at work to back off on that job he wants me to do the schedule is completely unrealistic and he's only trying to get it done to impress the boss* And for most of us the critic offers a mixture of the two things.

We said a moment ago that this critic never stops. But it *does* stop sometimes, and there is one surefire way to make it stop: Watch it.

If we turn our attention inwards to that critic and watch it, it suddenly stops. Try it right now. As soon as you turn all your attention to the critic, it suddenly stops criticizing. Keep watching it. As long as you watch it, it will be quiet.

That is all very well, but sooner or later something will come along to distract our attention. The car in front of us stops, or the telephone rings, or we remember that there is a program on TV that we wanted to watch. And shortly after our attention is distracted, the critic starts up again.

You'll notice that we suggested *watching* this critic rather than *listening* to it. The reason is simple: We actually listen to the critic all the time. We listen to it and we frequently believe it, even though we're not actually aware that the critic is talking (if we *were* aware of it, of course, it would stop), or that we're listening to it. The critic says *i'll never be able to impress people driving around this old car* and we listen without realizing to the critic and find ourselves going to the dealer to buy a new car we don't really need. The critic says *janie doesn't like me so i'll say something nice about the job she did on the ABC project* and we listen to the critic and end up saying something completely insincere to Janie. The problem with our critic is precisely that we *do* listen it – listen without hearing, listen without realizing; and not infrequently we do or attempt to do what it is telling us to do. So that is why we suggest *watching* the critic rather than listening to it.

Now, this business of watching the critic raises a question that we hinted at earlier. When we watch the critic, it's as though we have become two people. One of us is generating all this criticism, all this background nonsense, and the other of us is watching it. So here's the question: Who is the critic? And who is the “person” watching the critic?

Let us put the question to one side for a moment, and focus instead on this process of watching the critic. In the times when we are able to remember to watch the critic, the critic falls silent. But we know very well what the critic was saying just *before* it fell silent. It was saying something like this: *this customer service person has made me mad and i'm going to give her a piece of my mind*. Or it was saying *if i don't hold the door open for this person i'll be able to get to the front of the line at the buffet*. And it is in this awareness of what the critic was just saying that we are able to practice Step 10 in one of its purest forms. We are able “to take personal inventory, and when we [are] wrong promptly admit it.”

It is precisely in this moment of awareness that we are able to say to ourselves, *It's not this woman's fault that my electric kettle is faulty. She's just a service rep doing her job. There's no need for me to take it out on her because I feel angry*. It's precisely now – and at no other time – that we can say to ourselves, *So what if I hold the door for this person and they get to the front of the line before me? I'm just being impatient*, and as a result “do the next right thing.”

The best expression of this practice of Step 10 comes, not from the AA Big Book, but from the Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text:

We work this step continuously. This is a prevention, and the more we do it, the less we will need the corrective part of this step. This is really a great tool. It gives us a way of avoiding grief before we bring it on ourselves. We monitor our feelings, our emotions, our fantasies, and our actions. By constantly looking at these things we may be able to avoid repeating the actions that make us feel bad.

We've already said that it's impossible to maintain constant awareness of the critic inside us. And because it's impossible, there will continue to be times when we listen to the critic instead of watching it and *do* say something we later regret, or *fail* to take an action that we realize afterwards we should have done. But that is where the provision of the second half of Step 10 – “when were wrong promptly admitted it” – comes in. We acknowledge as soon as we can that we were wrong. We apologize, and we make amends where necessary. Because we are beginning to practice self-awareness, we tend to see much earlier than would otherwise be the

case where we were in error. And doing what we can to repair the resulting damage – primarily by freely admitting we were wrong – is a part of this process which we tend to do more readily.

There remain two questions to consider. The first is this: Isn't it possible, if we try very hard, to be aware constantly of this critic inside us and therefore never to do anything wrong? If we work constantly at Step 10, don't we eventually reach the point where we never listen to the critic and therefore never take the wrong action?

The answer to this is a very definite *no*, and it is important to understand why. Step 10 is not part of some program of self-help or self-improvement. The successful practice of this Step, as with all other Steps, is based not on our ability to fix ourselves, but on precisely the opposite: our complete and total surrender to the truth that we can never help ourselves, and that we are utterly dependent upon Something other than ourselves in our spiritual journey. When we do Step 10 and become aware of the critic, it is not because we are somehow spiritually advanced or super-fit. In fact, it is exactly the reverse: it is because we are allowing that Power greater than ourselves to enter us and to direct our attention to our negative, judgmental thinking. Like all of the three last Steps, Step 10 is not about us *making* something happen. It's about *allowing* something to happen; it's about *consenting* to the working of a Power greater than ourselves within us.

Which begs the second question, one which we briefly considered earlier: What is this new-found part of us that is able, however briefly, to watch the critic in us?

Some people have suggested that it is the working of conscience, and that our practice of Step 10 allows us to access that conscience that most of us tried to suppress in the practice of our addiction. For some of us, however, identifying this “watcher” with conscience can bring problems with it. Conscience, for some of us, is not merely the voice that tells us that what we are doing is wrong. It can also be that pernicious power that pushes us into feelings of guilt about what we have done or not done, and that tells us we can never be forgiven.

This has little or nothing to do with our ability to watch our critic in our practice of Step 10. You may try it for yourself if you wish. You will probably find that when you watch your critic, you do not judge it, condemn it, or feel guilty about it. Instead, you are probably more inclined to feel a little sorry for it, for its pathetic attempts to judge you and everyone else around you, for its pitiful efforts to make you worry about tomorrow or brood over the past. And so Who can it be that watches us with this lack of judgment – with this Love?

For some of us, what watches the critic is no longer “I” but that very Power we were talking about a moment ago. When we try to practice Step 10 on a moment-by-moment basis, when we attempt to be completely in the here-and-now, *the Watcher that watches the critic in us is not we ourselves but that Power which we are permitting to work in us precisely in this moment*. It follows that every time we practice awareness in Step 10, we are in the presence of God as we understand God. We are only able to watch ourselves at all because the Watcher is not really us but this Power. *To practice Step 10 in this way is to be in an intimate relationship with God, to be one with God, right here and right now.*

Step 10: No more reasons

When we routinely practice Step 10 – ideally moment by moment – we ask ourselves three questions:

Right here, right now, what am I thinking?

Right here, right now, what am I feeling?

Right here, right now, what am I doing? What am I considering doing?

We then merely *watch* the thoughts and the feelings we become aware of. But is that all we do? Or do we analyze them to find out where they come from? Do we judge those feelings as good or bad? Do we look to the past to find reasons for these thoughts and feelings? Or do we simply *watch* them?

To find answers to these questions, let's examine how the AA Big Book handles this issue. We have already suggested that Steps 4 through 9 can be seen as an outline of how to work Step 10 for the first time. Let's now look again at the AA Big Book and its treatment of Step 4.

We are all familiar with the approach suggested for dealing with our past behavior: the piece of paper with the columns drawn on it. The example shown in the Big Book has four names in it. The imaginary writer of this Fourth Step is resentful at Mr. Brown, Mrs. Jones, his employer, and his wife. He lists the “cause” of these resentments – the actions that Mr. Brown and Mrs. Jones, his employer and his wife took or might take against him. He lists how these resentments affect him, and the word “fear” appears frequently in that column.

But we are interested here, not so much in what appears in these columns as in what does *not* appear. In this treatment of Step 4, there is no attempt by the writer to determine *why* these actions of these other people affect him so much. In fact, the writer – and the AA Big Book in general – appear to be completely indifferent to the possible reasons we are affected so strongly by the actions of other people. We, with the influence of twentieth-century psychology and psychotherapy to help us, tend naturally to wonder about these very things. What causes the writer's lack of self-esteem in his dealings with Mr. Brown? Is it to do with something that happened in his childhood? Did his parents neglect him? Or did they, by contrast, pay him too much attention, so that when people ignore him today he finds it hard to deal with?

Let's examine carefully the Big Book's example of a Fourth Step and see if we can find some insights.

Look again at the writer's first column. It was certainly true when the writer wrote this Fourth Step that he was resentful at Mr. Brown, Mrs. Jones, his employer, and his wife. Now look again at the third column. It was certainly true that these resentments were associated with his self-esteem and security. And it was certainly true that the underlying sentiment was fear.

But look now at the second column. The writer maintains that the *cause* of his being resentful at Mr. Brown was “his attention to my wife ... told my wife of my mistress ... Brown may get my job at the office.” But is the writer correct? Think about this question for a moment, for the answer is key to the effective working of Step 10.

If we are committed to an ongoing working of Step 10, the conclusion we must inevitably come to is that the writer was incorrect when he wrote these words, *although he believed in all sincerity that he was telling the truth when he wrote them*. It is not the case that these actions of Mr. Brown *caused* the writer's resentment, affected his self-esteem and feelings of security, and made him afraid. *The truth is the exact opposite. The truth is that the writer was afraid, that his fears drove him to brood over feelings of insecurity, and that they caused him to live in a world of his own devising in which few people were on his side and most people were against him, a world where people deliberately and maliciously did unpleasant things to him.*

There is a remarkable phrase in the AA Big Book, remarkable not least because it occurs twice. *Our troubles*, it says, *are basically of our own making* in Chapter 5. And in Chapter 7 it occurs again: *After all, our problems were of our own making*. Most of us are familiar with these words. Relatively few of us, though, have spent much time pondering what they might really mean.

As we work Step 10, we begin to bump up against one of the unpalatable truths about our Program. And that truth is this: Our program is really still mainly about us and not very much about God as we understand God. Despite having committed in Step 3 to “hand our will and our lives” over to this God, the reality is that we have actually attempted to make a deal with God. We do not really live God-based lives. We lead self-based lives with God's help – or at least we try to do that. We carry around opinions about the world and hold tenaciously to them, either quietly or by arguing with people who disagree with us. We have hopes and fears – many fears, often suppressed – about ourselves and those who are close to us. We have notions of right and wrong and we allow little or no debate over them. We hold political views which, however “reasonable” we may like to think they are, must inevitably result in our seeing nearly half the population as being politically deluded. Our religious beliefs, though we may think we are deeply committed to them, are usually based on some hazy notion that, if only we behave ourselves fairly well by working the Twelve Steps to some extent, God as we have defined God will somehow look after us. Far from having been “rocketed into a fourth dimension of existence,” as the Big Book puts it, we actually live lives of low-grade anxiety, punctuated occasionally by events like 9-11 or the death of a child which make it even more difficult to believe there is a God who really loves us. Instead of living in the world that God has created, we sit around feeling resentful about the fact that God won't make *our* world behave the way that *we* want.

In fact, *we are very much like the writer in the example of the Fourth Step*. In many ways, nothing has really changed since we ourselves wrote down our own inventory. Sure, we've cleaned up our behavior to some extent. We're no longer drunk or deep in debt or obese or in very destructive relationships. But at heart we are still like the writer. We are resentful at people because of what we see them doing, and their actions affect our feelings of self-worth and make us afraid. Or at least we believe this to be the case. And – just like the writer of the sample inventory in the Big Book – *to the extent that we think and live like this, we are deluding ourselves just as surely as he is*. The truth is that *we have created this threatening world ourselves. Our troubles are not of anybody else's making. They are completely and entirely of our own making*.

This is not an easy truth to absorb – and in fact it cannot be apprehended intellectually: It can only be experienced by working Step 10. So let us approach this matter from a slightly different perspective.

We are now going to talk a little about therapy and other forms of psychological help that people in recovery sometimes seek. We want to make it clear that we are by no means opposed to these techniques. Many people in recovery have found them useful. The Big Book itself specifically suggests that some of us may want to do Step 5 with a psychologist, that psychologists can be very helpful with matters of “human health,” and that they can be helpful with sex problems. Some of us are so badly damaged that any recovery may be impossible without their assistance. Our only point here is that our practice of Step 10 – and indeed of all the Steps – is a spiritual practice, not a psychological one. Psychological help may be enormously beneficial, but it can never be a *substitute* for the ongoing spiritually-based practice of Step 10.

There may be many psychological reasons why we feel we have low self-esteem or feelings of insecurity. And some psychological writers have suggested that becoming aware of these reasons, usually by looking back into the past, can be useful in dealing with these negative feelings. As we have said already, this kind of work can be of great help to some people in Program. *But it has nothing to do with our working of Step 10.* Examining the past is a psychological practice, while Step 10 is a spiritual practice done here and now. When we practice Step 10, we are concerned with how we are feeling, thinking and acting right here, right now, in this very moment. It is no concern of ours *why* we may be feeling the way we are feeling. We are not interested at all in *whether* we should be feeling the way we are feeling. We are only interested in *what* we are feeling, in putting a name to it, and in *watching* it.

Sometimes we may wonder what the supposed “origin” of these thoughts and feelings may be. But when we wonder in this way, we are wondering *here and now*. When we wonder about what happened to us thirty years ago and how it affects us today, we are having those thoughts *now*, not thirty years ago. And Step 10 is *entirely and solely* about what is happening now – not about the supposed *reasons* for our thoughts and feelings.

To discover that we were affected in a particular way by the actions of our parents may be of *psychological* interest and conceivably even of therapeutic benefit. But such supposed “insights” form no part of Step 4 or Step 10, or indeed any part of Program. AA's *12 Steps and 12 Traditions* is unambiguous about this fact: *A.A.'s 12 Steps, it says, are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole.*

In short, it doesn't *matter* why we feel or think the way we do when we perform Step 10. These feelings and thoughts arise from the fact that we have created our own world and then attempted to live in it, rather than living in the world as it actually is, with the help of God as we understand God. The practice of Step 10 is intended to draw this fact to our attention, to get us to see that we are exhilarated or disappointed, happy or sad, furious or pleased simply to the extent that we want the world to be the way we want it, rather than the way that it is. And when we *watch* the feelings and thoughts that arise from these desires, we allow God as we understand God to show us these fantasies for what they are, powerless to harm us or anyone else *as long as we merely watch them instead of believing them, analyzing them, or judging them.*

Step 10: Talking and listening

When we practice Step 10 with another person, there are two parts to our interaction. We talk about what is happening with us, right here and right now: that is the first part. The other person listens. That is the second part.

We were tempted to say there that the other person “simply listens,” but there is nothing simple about listening. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that listening is not *easy*. It's simple enough. Listening involves just listening – not thinking about what has been said, not analyzing or criticizing, not attempting to “help” or “fix” the other person, not thinking about what we are going to say when the other person stops talking, but just listening.

We've already seen that Step 10 is concerned with being aware of what we are thinking, feeling, and doing, right here and right now. When Step 10 practice starts to become routine, we find that acknowledging these feelings, thoughts, and actions, and sharing them with God as we understand God, is often sufficient. But sometimes it isn't. Sometimes our emotions in particular are so strong that we feel the need to share them with somebody else.

It's usually best – for reasons we will consider in a moment – to do this with another person rather than in a meeting. But if we do decide we want to share what is happening right now with another person, we should choose carefully. For – as we said above – we will want to do this with someone who is really able to listen. And people who can really listen are much rarer in Program than we tend to believe.

We live in a society that wants to “fix” people, to “help” them, to “make the world a better place.” That these are reasonable goals for us seems so self-evident that most of us have never stopped to think the matter through and determine whether they *are* reasonable goals. And – regardless of whether they are or not – too many of us carry this sort of thinking into Program. As a result, we too rarely listen to people who want to talk out their Step 10 and too frequently start thinking about what we can do to help them with the “problems” that we think they're talking about.

A wise friend in Program once said, “A complaint is rarely a request for help.” If we take this saying and modify it to cover Step 10, we might phrase it as follows: “When someone *genuinely* does Step 10 with another person – that is, when she *truly* talks about what is happening to her right here and right now with another person who is *truly* listening – that is not a request for help.”

If I ask you to listen mindfully to me, but then I talk to you with the intention of seeking help from you, I am certainly doing something, but it isn't Step 10. Step 10 is about sharing our present thoughts, feelings, and actions. It is never about seeking help from another person, for the reason that another person cannot help us. If he could, we wouldn't need God as we understand God and we wouldn't need a 12-Step program.

What? we may respond. Doing Step 10 isn't helpful?

But that is not what we said. Of course doing Step 10 is helpful – if it weren't, none of us would do it. But the help doesn't come from the person we are sharing our Step 10 with. It comes from our Higher Power, *as a result of* sharing that Step 10 with another person.

So when we practice Step 10 with another person, we don't require her to be some sort of an expert with regard to whatever supposed problem we think we have. We only require that she *listen* – listen mindfully, carefully, thoughtfully, but without judgment or criticism, without a desire to “fix” us or “help” us, merely with a desire to hear us in compassionate humility.

Now for a question. Is it easier to be the talker or the listener in such a Step 10 exchange? There is no question about it. It is far harder to be the listener. And the reason is this: There is a much greater burden on the listener to be focused than there is on the talker.

If I ask someone to listen to me while I do Step 10, it's reasonable to assume that something out of the ordinary is happening to me. Perhaps I feel impelled to do something I suspect is unwise. Perhaps my feelings are more than I think I can handle. Whatever it is, I feel the need to open up to another person. And as a result, I may well start talking about things which have nothing to do with the “here and now.” I may start blaming myself or other people for some perceived “problem” I think I have. I may start analyzing the past to find out how I got into this state. I may start dissecting the future. When I talk about these things, I am not really doing Step 10, but it's understandable that in the middle of some unpleasant feelings or thoughts I may wander away from the present.

But if the person who is listening to me follows these false trails I am tempted to pursue, then all is lost. What then happens may be a debate, a counseling session, amateur therapy, a “lively interchange of views,” but it is no longer Step 10. While it may be understandable that my feelings and thoughts are driving me to talk about the past or the future, if the person listening to me succumbs to the same temptation then that is no longer the practice of Step 10.

It follows that – when we are in the role of listener – we must be vigilant. We may hear the talker wandering away into the past or into speculation about the future, and we may note that mindfully, but it is not our job to correct her, guide her, judge her, or help her – merely to listen to her.

A little earlier we mentioned that, when we feel we must share our thoughts and feelings, it is wiser to do so with one person rather than in a meeting. And the reason will now be clear. It's difficult enough to find one person who is prepared to listen mindfully to what we have to say. The chances of every person in a meeting being able to listen mindfully are for all practical purposes zero. And remember, if just one person fails to listen mindfully in that meeting, when he shares it will almost certainly be about what was going on in his mind when we spoke. In other words, it will be crosstalk – heavily disguised, often enough, as words of encouragement, of advice, of judgment, of assistance, but crosstalk nonetheless. And crosstalk is the death of a 12-Step meeting.

As we practiced the first nine Steps, many of us thought how hard it was to share the things we found we must talk about. And that was certainly true. But when we begin to practice Step 10, we find that the hardest thing is to listen mindfully when others speak. To have enough confidence in a friend in Program to be willing to say anything to her is indeed a great gift. But to be so well versed in the practice of Step 10 that we are able to listen mindfully to another person is a greater gift.

One last note: How is it possible to learn this skill of listening mindfully, without judgment or criticism? And the answer, happily, is simple: Go to any 12-Step meeting and practice

listening with awareness, without judgment, to all that is said, no matter how outlandish it may seem to you at first. There can be no better practice for our role of Step 10 listener.

Step 10: Meditation

Most of us think that meditation is part of Step 11, and of course it is. But there is also a form of meditation we can practice which is more closely linked to Step 10. This kind of meditation, when done frequently, can gradually become a natural part of our everyday practice of Step 10. For Step 10 is to be done constantly – or at least that is the goal. And Step 10 meditation practice is a very helpful way of moving ourselves further towards that goal.

Let us begin with talking about meditation as most of us understand Step 11 meditation. We find a quiet place and sit comfortably, in some position which we can sustain without moving for the duration of the meditation period. Then we focus on something fixed: a candle flame, our breathing, a verse from the Bible. Our practice is a) to remain focused on this object as much as we can; b) when we realize we have become distracted, to return our attention to the object we chose to focus on.

Step 10 meditation is almost the reverse of this. In Step 10 meditation, we need not be in any quiet place (though it is useful to practice Step 10 meditation in such a location at least some of the time). And in Step 10 meditation, instead of focusing our attention on one object and bringing our full awareness to that object alone, we do the opposite: We shift our full attention to whatever we may suddenly have become aware of, and “note” what it is that we are doing.

We’ll talk first about doing Step 10 meditation in a quiet place, and then move on to its practice elsewhere.

We find a reasonably quiet place and sit comfortably. We then choose something on which we can place our primary focus if our attention is not engaged elsewhere – say, the rising and falling of the stomach as we inhale and exhale. This area of primary focus is the place we “fall back” on if we find we are momentarily aware of nothing else.

We focus, then, on the rising and falling of our stomachs, noting the fact by saying silently to ourselves, “Rising, falling.” Then we hear a sound, and our attention is drawn to it. We say to ourselves, “Listening, listening,” for as long as our awareness is placed on that sound. Then we may find ourselves thinking that the noise may be the central heating switching on. We say to ourselves, “Thinking, thinking,” for as long as our attention is on the thought. Then we may be aware of the moving of a current of air on our skin as the heating fan switches on. We say to ourselves, “Feeling, feeling,” for as long as we remain aware of the movement of air on our skin. Then we may be aware of the fact that our attention is presently engaged by nothing at all, so we return to our primary focus, that of the rising and falling of our stomachs as we breathe, meanwhile saying silently to ourselves, “Rising, falling.” Fairly soon our attention goes elsewhere: Have we remembered to change the filter on the central heating unit? “Thinking, thinking” And so on, for the period of our meditation.

We find, as we said above, that this is almost the opposite of the more usual form of meditation. Instead of directing our attention to our primary focus and making ourselves aware of that primary focus over and over again, we follow instead the wanderings of our awareness,

focusing our attention deliberately on whatever we become aware of and noting it to ourselves at the same time – “Seeing, seeing; thinking, thinking; feeling, feeling.”

Why might it be that no less a figure than the Buddha is reported to have said that, while focused meditation brings peace, this other form of meditation – Step 10-based meditation – brings insight and enlightenment?

Perhaps the reason is this: Step 10 meditation helps us to become aware of our every interaction with the realities of the world we live in. It is, in fact, about living completely in the moment – being aware of and naming each thought that passes through our brain, each stimulus we receive from what we call the “outside world.” If we try Step 10 meditation, we discover that it almost compels us to live in the moment. Provided we note and name each different focus of our awareness, we cannot help but be in the moment. Even if, during Step 10 meditation, we start thinking about tomorrow or about what happened to us ten years ago, the accompanying act of noting and “naming” what we are doing *while we are in the act of doing it* (“Thinking, thinking”) reminds us that we are thinking *here and now*, not tomorrow or ten years ago.

There is another great advantage to Step 10 meditation, and that is that it can be practiced anywhere and at any time. While it is good practice to do Step 10 meditation in a quiet place, it can – unlike Step 11 meditation – be done while we are driving a car, sitting in a business meeting talking about our company's strategic goals, riding a roller-coaster, or running a marathon. In short, *there is no place or time where it is impossible to practice Step 10-based meditation.*

The Sermon on the Mount, preached by Jesus and recorded in Matthew's Gospel (with an alternative version, the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's Gospel), consists to a significant extent of recommendations to practice Step 10 meditation. Take no thought for the morrow, says Jesus. Don't worry about what you are going to eat or what you are going to wear, for wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And in Step 10 meditation, we are treasuring what is happening here and now. If we do start to worry about tomorrow, or about what we are going to eat or wear, at least we are aware that we are worrying here and now. And we note it to ourselves: “Thinking, thinking.”

When we begin practicing Step 10 meditation regularly, we are sometimes tempted to wonder what the difference is between Step 10-based meditation and the “usual” practice of Step 10 as outlined at the beginning of this booklet. And the answer is, of course, that *there is no difference at all.* Step 10-based meditation *is* precisely the practice of Step 10 – no more and no less. Step 10 meditation simply takes the basic practice of Step 10 and turns it into a discipline – a discipline we practice quietly when we can, and each moment of the day as we go about our so-called “everyday lives.” In short, Step 10 meditation *is* Step 10. And that is the best reason for cultivating it as a meditation practice.

Step 10: The good, the bad, and the selfish

We have seen several times in this Study the simple structure for working Step 10. All we do is to ask ourselves some simple questions: Right here, right now, what am I feeling? What am I thinking? What am I doing? What am I thinking about doing? And we continue to ask ourselves these simple questions throughout the day.

Most of us have encountered the reality that whenever we find a simple spiritual practice we can perform, it's usually not very long before our egos grasp hold of it and try and pervert it into something that is not a spiritual practice at all. Generally this happens along the following lines: Instead of performing some spiritual practice *because* of the *unconditional* love that God has for us, we perform it *so that* we will receive the *conditional* love that God hopefully *will* have for us.

Performing some act so that we will be “saved” is the oldest heresy of all. It underlies virtually all so-called “primitive” religions which rely on the pacifying of the gods through sacrifices of animals or even humans. This practice lay at the root of the Canaanite religion which the Israelites sought to crush during the occupation of the Promised Land; it underpins much of the ancient Greek and Roman religions; it attempted to infect Christianity from the very beginning – Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* is the definitive refutation of it, and James had another go at it in his Epistle; St. Augustine had to address it all over again in his attack on Pelagianism; and it even creeps into Buddhism, with the notion of acquiring merit for ourselves through good works.

Since the major religions of the world have to contend with this sort of heretical thinking, we are dreaming if we think our 12-Step programs are going to be immune to it. The practice of Step 10 is not infrequently reduced to an adoption of this heresy. In this scenario, it becomes a sort of moral scorecard, where we tot up at the end of the day all of the good and bad things we have done. Quite what the benefits supposedly are of doing Step 10 this way is never actually made clear – which is scarcely surprising, since it's impossible to justify a heretical practice.

Enduring heresies always have a common characteristic: They are invariably as close to the truth as you can get while still being totally false. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” as the old proverb says. Our egos are far too smart to try and pervert our spiritual lives by telling us that bad is good, or that black is white. Instead, they attempt to persuade us in our practice of Step 10 that we have become so enlightened, so well versed in the practice of the spiritual life, that we are able not only to tell the difference between good and bad but to direct our own lives based on these moral principles that we are supposedly now able so clearly to discern.

Let's compare three sections of text, two from the AA Big Book and one from AA's *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, to see if we can distinguish the true from the not-so-true when it comes to our ongoing practice of inventory. We begin with the Big Book:

When we retire at night, we constructively review our day. Were we resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid? Do we owe an apology? Have we kept something to ourselves which should

be discussed with another person at once? Were we kind and loving toward all? What could we have done better? Were we thinking of ourselves most of the time? Or were we thinking of what we could do for others, of what we could pack into the stream of life? But we must be careful not to drift into worry, remorse or morbid reflection, for that would diminish our usefulness to others. After making our review we ask God's forgiveness and inquire what corrective measures should be taken.

We see that, in our examination of the day that has passed, we determine whether we might have done things differently – in fact, we are performing that part of Step 10 that suggests “... when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.” But “wrong” here does not have a *moral* overtone, but a *selfish* one. A “wrong” action or thought is an action where we were thinking entirely of ourselves – where the thought or action was not accompanied by the Step 10 exercise of asking ourselves what we were thinking, feeling, or doing. In the AA Big Book, a “wrong” action is simply a selfish one – no matter how “right” it may look from a moral point of view.

This distinction between actions that are *morally* wrong and actions that are *selfish* is explored in the Big Book way back in the treatment of Step 3. The critical phrases are underlined:

The first requirement is that we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good. Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wished, the show would be great. Everybody, including himself, would be pleased. Life would be wonderful. In trying to make these arrangements our actor may sometimes be quite virtuous. He may be kind, considerate, patient, generous; even modest and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, he may be mean, egotistical, selfish and dishonest. But, as with most humans, he is more likely to have varied traits.

The underlined phrases refer to thoughts, feelings, or actions which may be quite desirable strictly from a moral point of view. But the Big Book is not interested in our notions of morality. *Many of us had moral and philosophical convictions galore*, it reminds us a little later, *but we could not live up to them even though we would have liked to*. And the fact is that we will never be able to live up to them. The last three Steps, and Step 10 in particular, are not about leading a *moral* life. They are about leading an *unselfish* life.

If we now look back to the Big Book's treatment of the review of our day in Step 11, we'll see that its recommendations do not cross over the dangerous distinction between the unselfish and the moral. The Big Book's recommendations are not a self-examination that uses a moral scorecard. They are the genuine and legitimate practice of Step 10 – even though they appear in the section on the Eleventh Step.

Now let's look at our third text.

AA's *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* was published several years after the AA Big Book. There are some good things in the *Twelve and Twelve*, but its treatment of our review of our day is, alas, not one of them:

When evening comes, perhaps just before going to sleep, many of us draw up a balance sheet for the day. This is a good place to remember that inventory-taking is not always done in red ink. It's a poor day indeed when we haven't done something right. As a matter of fact, the waking hours are usually well filled with things that are constructive. Good intentions, good thoughts, and good acts are there for us to see. Even when we have tried hard and failed, we may chalk

that up as one of the greatest credits of all. Under these conditions, the pains of failure are converted into assets. Out of them we receive the stimulation we need to go forward.

It's clear, based on our discussions so far, that something has gone wrong here. What was outlined as a spiritual exercise in the AA Big Book has now become some sort of a moral scorecard. The identification of our feelings, thoughts, and actions in terms of their selfishness – a practice begun in the Big Book's outline of Step 4 and continued in its treatment of Steps 10 and 11 – seems somehow to have disappeared. Instead, we have apparently attained a level of spirituality where we can console ourselves that “inventory-taking is not always done in red ink.” We rarely have days where “we haven't done something right.” And the idea that any act performed for selfish reasons, no matter how well motivated, is still a selfish act – an idea so boldly outlined in the Big Book's treatment of Step 3 – has vanished without trace. Instead, “[e]ven when we have tried hard and failed, we may chalk that up as one of the greatest credits of all.”

The treatment of the review of our day in the Big Book presents a complete contrast to its treatment in the *Twelve and Twelve*. The Big Book asks us to determine where our thoughts, actions, and feelings are *selfish* – which is pure Step 10. The *Twelve and Twelve* seems by contrast to be suggesting that we are capable of discerning, and then doing, what is *right*, while avoiding what is *wrong*. Based on our discussions so far, this would seem to be a dubious thesis at best.

In previous sections of this Study, we have talked about the practice of Step 10 beginning and ending with watching our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We do this solely to determine whether they are selfish or not. When we place that small distance between our thoughts and feelings and the actions we take as a result, we find that God is able to direct us – *through some agency which we shall never understand and which can never be reduced to some system like a scorecard* – to the action which is unselfish. This doesn't always happen, of course. But our ongoing attempts to work Step 10 continuously move us into a sphere of existence where increasingly we find that we do what is unselfish.

A man once called Jesus good, and Jesus' reaction was interesting. “Why callest thou me good?” he asked. “There is none good but one, that is, God” (Mk. 10:18). It is God's business to determine what is good – our job is merely to be unselfish. And there is an extended version of the conversation we have just looked at. In Luke 10:25-37 Jesus has an encounter with a lawyer who wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. When Jesus challenged him, it turned out that the lawyer already knew. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.” Correct, Jesus told him. But the lawyer could not be content with that reply. Like us, when we attempt to determine how well we have done each day, he wanted a scorecard. “But he, *willing to justify himself*, said unto Jesus”

And that is what lies at the heart of the morality-based practice of Step 10 we have just discussed. When we use a moral scorecard, we want to justify ourselves. We want to show ourselves – and hopefully others – just how spiritually advanced we are. But self-justification is no part of Step 10. Instead, it is the humble attempt to determine, moment by moment, whether we are thinking selfish thoughts, feeling selfish feelings, and performing or about to perform selfish actions, together with a retrospective review of our likely selfishness at the end of the day. Moral judgment has no role in Step 10. We can never justify ourselves before God. But we can invite God in, moment by moment, to direct us away from selfish actions. And when we do this, as we have already seen, we are completely and fully in the presence of God.

Step 10: Not knowing

The fundamental purpose of Step 10 is to bring us to a point where we do not know. In particular, it is intended to place us in a position where we do not know what to *do*.

Elsewhere we have seen that we can summarize the last three Steps as follows:

- We do not know what to do;
- We ask God as we understand God what God wants us to do;
- We do it.

In this short Study we will look at the relationship between the practice of Step 10 as it is outlined in our various Programs and the assertion made in the first paragraph: that Step 10 is about not knowing.

We have seen in other Studies that in Step 10 we ask ourselves what we are thinking, feeling, doing, and about to do, right here and right now. This is not an occasional practice: It is undertaken continuously, as the treatment of Step 10 in the AA Big Book suggests.

But our thoughts and our feelings are closely related to our motivation. When we think to ourselves, *That woman is wrong*, the thought is usually accompanied by others, for example wanting to tell her what we think of her.

Similarly, our feelings are related to our motivation. If we feel sad, we are also inclined to think *I'd like to do something to make this bad feeling go away or I'll just sit here and feel sorry for myself*. Lurking behind our feelings and thoughts is motivation, and motivation is just another word for *will*.

In Step 11 we attempt to determine God's will for us by using prayer and meditation. It is sometimes suggested that we don't pray enough in Program, and certainly that we don't meditate enough, but all the prayer and meditation in the world is going to be relatively ineffective if we don't precede it with a committed practice of Step 10.

And we have just seen the reason for this. Our thoughts and our feelings are closely linked to our motivation; and our motivation is really just our will. If we don't do Step 10 on a continuous basis, then we never really become aware of our will.

Let's look at that a little more closely. We have seen how our thoughts and feelings are a reflection of our motivation, or our will. If those thoughts and feelings remain unexamined, our will directs us without our being aware of it. And when that happens, we approach Step 11 with an unconscious agenda – an agenda based on what we secretly want. If we now begin to pray and meditate in order to determine God's will for us, we are setting ourselves an impossible task – to determine what God wants, while at the same time we are secretly seeking for what we want.

So Step 10 is at heart the practice of raising those secret desires, aversions, and fears to the level of consciousness. We look deliberately at our thoughts and feelings, because by doing so we are able to see that those thoughts and feelings are emerging from our will, from our desire to

have this or to be rid of that. Once we are aware of what it is that we really want, we are in a position to do Step 11 – to ask God in prayer and meditation what God wants from us.

Now, on the face of it, it would seem that we are still in an untenable position, even if we acknowledge our thoughts and feelings in Step 10, even if we are able to bring to a conscious level what it is that we really desire or are really attempting to avoid. For – if we I really want X – how is it possible for us to ask God what God wants from us when God may instead want Y?

This takes us back to an issue we have dealt with elsewhere in these Studies. Step 10 is about raising our thoughts and feelings to the level of consciousness, of becoming aware of them, and then watching them. *But Step 10 is never about trying to get rid of those thoughts and feelings, or attempting to control them. It is merely about becoming aware of them.* Wanting to change thoughts or feelings is just another example of my own will at work. If I feel sad, Step 10 teaches me to be aware of the fact that I am sad. The reality of this moment is that I am sad, and that is the beginning and the end of it. All I need do now is watch the feeling of sadness.

So it may be that I look at my thoughts and feelings and become aware that I really want X – even though I can see that X may not be particularly a good idea for me. At this point, my Step 10 is complete. I can now pass on to Step 11 and determine what it is that God wants from me, *even though, at the same time as I am asking God, I really want X.*

It may be worth recalling here the Agony in the Garden – the situation Jesus found himself in immediately prior to his arrest and crucifixion. For it was here that He prayed one of the greatest of all prayers: *Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done.*

We can now see how striking this prayer is. It is a combination of the results of Step 10 with the practice of Step 11. Jesus does not say, *I want to avoid this, but I know I shouldn't want to avoid it.* He says, *I want to avoid this, and I acknowledge that this is what I want, while simultaneously asking You what You want and committing to doing it.*

If the Son of God was able to do Step 10 and Step 11 in this way, if He was able simultaneously to acknowledge what He wanted in His humanity and yet to seek God's will, then this will be an excellent prayer for us to use as well. When we pray this prayer, we acknowledge what it is that we feel and think, what it is that we want; but also we acknowledge our “not-knowing-ness,” our ignorance of what it is that we should in fact do. It is a prayer of submission, of total surrender, of full acceptance that our own wills are the poorest of all possible guides when it comes to determining what it is we should do.

As Bill Wilson suggested in AA's *12 Steps and 12 Traditions*, Steps 10 and 11 are intimately linked. Neither can really stand alone. Step 10 without Step 11 leaves us in a position of not-knowing, powerless to stop following our own wills without the help of a Power greater than ourselves. Step 11 without Step 10 causes us to try and seek God's will for us while we are still clinging unconsciously to our own thoughts, feelings, and desires. As we will see in our Studies of Step 11, one important purpose of the continuous practice of “prayer without ceasing,” of ongoing prayer and meditation, is to make the power of God available to us moment by moment in our practice of Step 10 – so that, with Jesus and with many other spiritual thinkers throughout history, we may say to our Higher Power, “I want to do this; please give me the knowledge and power to do what You want instead.”

Step 10: Prayer (1)

We commonly think of Step 11 as being the step that focuses on prayer. But prayer is also an important part of Step 10: there is even a Step 10 prayer which – based as it is on the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – is one of the greatest prayers of all, as we shall see.

These Studies of the last three Steps are not intended to be controversial. But it is simply not possible to talk about the matter of prayer within the framework of Steps 10, 11, and 12 without re-examining carefully many of the assumptions that most of us have made about prayer, not only within our churches or other religious or spiritual bodies to which we may belong, but during our time in AA or other 12-step programs.

Prayer is something we think we understand before we come into Program, regardless of whether we practice it or not. It is such a common idea that we barely even think about what it means to pray – indeed, the primary issue with prayer for most of us when we arrive in Program is not what prayer is, but whether we are going to follow the advice of our new friends and start to practice it.

When we do start to practice it, the overwhelming majority of us do it on the basis of a position similar to the following:

We are *here* and we are now coming to terms with the fact that there may be a Higher Power of some sort who is *out there*. Previously, we have attempted largely to run our lives on our own resources ... and the result is that we have ended up in a 12-step program. Now we are prepared to concede that we need some help. So, on the basis of Step 2 (that is, coming to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity), we begin to pray to this Higher Power, this “God,” who is *out there*. Our initial prayers tend to be simple in the extreme. (Someone once said that *Help!* is the best prayer ever.) We reach out in prayer for help to stay away from the source of our addiction, one day at a time, sometimes one moment at a time. And as we do this, we start to see – usually retrospectively – that we are able to achieve things we could not achieve before. We are able to stay away from the source of our addiction. And our lives slowly start to come back into some semblance of shape.

Paradoxically, it is when this starts to happen that we can become puzzled as to exactly what we should now pray for. We should pray for sobriety, evidently; but what else? And so we begin to tack on other requests. We pray for our families, relatives, and friends. We pray that certain things may happen or not happen. We ask for courage to face difficult situations. And as this happens, we begin to lose something. We begin to lose the notion that we are utterly dependent for what happens to us on this Higher Power that we are praying to. The days of that utter dependence – when our moment-by-moment recovery depended completely and totally on this “God” – have gone. Slowly, imperceptibly, this entity *out there* becomes a divine Santa Claus. Sometimes it seems we are well-behaved enough for Santa to come through with the goods, and we get what we want. Sometimes he fails to come through, and then we rationalize this disappointing outcome by telling one another that “God knows best,” or that it’s probably a

good thing we didn't get what we asked for even though we don't understand why. A prayer practice which began with complete abasement before a Higher Power has turned into a bizarre crap-shoot.

The apostle Paul called this childishness (1 Cor. 13:11). Being a child is a necessary part of growing up, just as praying these “gimme” prayers in the early days is a necessary part of our recovery. But St. Paul said that when he became a man, he put away childish things. And when we commence our practice of the last three Steps, we too need to put away childish things. We need to put away the notion of a God who is *out there*, and adopt a spiritual practice that means we encounter God right here and right now, every moment of our lives. We need to abandon the idea of God as some divine “fix-it” guy, and in particular we need to lose entirely the notion that what happens to us depends on whether we are good (thus pleasing God, so he will give us what we want) or bad (thus displeasing God, so he will not give us what we want). Above all, perhaps, we need to abandon the idea that we understand God, that we understand prayer, and that we understand our relationship with God. The purpose of the last three Steps is not to refine our understanding of God based on some new “spiritual way of life.” The purpose of the last three Steps is to abandon completely our notions of what constitutes the spiritual life, and through a simple daily practice *to allow God to teach us all of these things without any help from us*. When we first sobered up, we learned we had to abandon all our notions about how to run our lives; and when we did, a Power greater than ourselves provided us another way of life. *We did nothing to bring that about, other than surrender*. Now precisely the same thing is required of us in our practice of the last three Steps. *We are not required to do anything, other than surrender all over again*. And one thing we must surrender is our understanding of prayer.

* * * * *

There is general agreement about the different kinds of prayer. Prayer seems to fall into five or six categories: petitionary, where we ask for ourselves; intercessory, where we ask for others; penitential, where we confess what we have done wrong; thanksgiving, where we give thanks; and adoration, where we worship. Some people add meditative or contemplative prayer.

Step 10 concerns itself with what is here called petitionary, intercessory, and penitential prayer.

Before reading what follows, the reader is recommended to look over the other Studies dedicated to Step 10, otherwise what is said may prove hard to understand and even more difficult to accept.

We have seen from those other Studies that Step 10 concerns itself with awareness, with watching. Specifically, Step 10 is about watching *ourselves*. We continue to watch for resentment, for selfishness, for dishonesty, for fear; and when we encounter them, we ask God at once to remove them. Every moment, as best as we are able, we watch ourselves. We ask ourselves, *What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What am I doing? What am I about to do?*

We practice this simple activity when we look at our own lives and when we look at the lives of other people in the world. When we do look at ourselves, or at the rest of the world, we discover that we are full of *wants*. We want something for ourselves. We want something for those we love. We think that conditions in the world “out there” should be changed. We see ourselves suffering and we want the suffering to go away. We see others suffering, sometimes through no fault of their own, and we want that suffering to be relieved.

We want something ... There is the source of all our problems. And it's not just the Buddhists who say this. The Christians say it too: *You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war* (James 4:2). As we watch ourselves, we see that we want something different from what we are or what we have. We watch ourselves looking at the world and we see that we want something different from what the world is. And then we pray *in order to get what we want*.

The AA Big Book dealt with this sort of thinking in its treatment of Step 3. We wanted things to be a particular way, it says, and we tried to get that by manipulating our fellows. So when we tell God in so-called “prayer” what we want *in order to get it*, we have simply reverted to our old ways ... except that now we are hoping that we can manipulate a *God out there* in a way that is analogous to our attempts in our addictive days to manipulate everybody else.

Our practice of the last three Steps, and Step 10 in particular, teaches us that there is no “us” and no “world we live in” other than the one that we create in our minds on an on-going basis. When we practice watching ourselves moment by moment using Step 10, we can see the absurdity of wanting our lives to be a particular way. We can see that we are feeling resentful without any justification other than that things “ought to be” different. We can see that we are working out how to manipulate another person so that we can get what we want. We can see that we are about to say or do something that will hurt us or other people. And as we see this *we simultaneously accept that we are quite powerless to stop our thoughts, our feelings, and the actions we are contemplating*.

That is what Step 10 is really all about.

So is it wrong to tell God as we understand God what we want? Far from it. In fact, *it is essential* to tell God as we understand God what we want. Why? *Because we want it*. If I want a promotion at work, there is little point in pretending to God that I *don't* want it. Of course I want it. As I watch myself wanting it, of course, I can see that I want it for all the wrong reasons. *But that doesn't stop me wanting it*. And as I turn to my Higher Power once more in my complete powerlessness – just as I did in my early recovery – I tell God what it is that I want – just as I did in my early days of recovery, when what I wanted was to go back to my addiction. *There is absolutely no difference at all in the two situations*, other than that Step 10 prayer is not just about my core addiction. *It's about my entire life*.

What happens as a result of this admitting our helplessness to God is really a result of Step 11, and the reader is referred to the Studies on that topic for further discussion.

The prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is a perfect illustration of this practice of Step 10. He is afraid – Luke says that sweat ran off his brow like great drops of blood. He is about to be arrested, and he knows what will happen as a result. We refer lightly to this event as the “Agony in the Garden.” But this was the agony of the Son of God: this was the moment in his life that we should be able to relate to most strongly, for in this moment he was just like us. And – just as we are recommended to do in Step 10 – Jesus told God what he wanted. He wanted, if it were at all possible, to be removed from the situation – just as we would. But he did not tell God this so that God *would* remove him from the situation. Just like us, when we practice Step 10, just like us when we simultaneously want something and, by watching ourselves, know that we will not be any “better off” if we get it, so Jesus told God of his wants ... and then immediately moved on to Step 11: “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”

The idea that petitionary or intercessory prayer is merely telling God what we want simply because that is what we want, rather than in order to get it, is alien – sometimes hugely alien – to religious people. Doesn't the Bible, for example, seem to tell us that we should ask God for what

we want in order to get it? But – while this is certainly true to some degree – it is true to a far more limited extent than most people think. That we should tell God what we want is recommended constantly in the Bible. That we should tell God what we want so that he will give it to us is an idea that appears much more rarely. Indeed, some passages seem to suggest that we are so ignorant we do not even know what we want, while God knows exactly what it is that we need ... which brings this entire discussion full circle. For we hinted earlier that our practice of the last three Steps is not intended to build on our understanding of God, but to allow God to teach us about God without any assistance from our preconceptions.

And not only about God, but about ourselves and about the world. We are so ignorant, we are so helpless, that we cannot see ourselves clearly, we cannot see others clearly, and we cannot see the world clearly. Indeed, we can only see these things more clearly as we practice the last three Steps. Do we seriously believe that, at any stage, we see these things clearly enough that we should petition God – who is the source of this clarity – to change them? No: petitionary and intercessory prayers are identical, and indeed identical to penitential prayer too. In fact, petitionary and intercessory prayers *are* penitential prayers – though very few religious people would agree. When we tell God what we want, we are admitting when we are wrong. We want something, and we know that that wanting cannot do anything other than make us and other people unhappy regardless of whether we get what we want. We tell God our wants because we are powerless on our own to do anything other than want; but we acknowledge as we tell God these wants that we know we have them merely because we cannot see ourselves, others, the world, and the situations we find ourselves in with true clarity. And so we tell God what we want *in penitence*, knowing we are wrong, but knowing too that the first step in dealing with these wants is to admit them to God and to admit our powerlessness over them.

As we do this, as we slowly give up on the idea of petitionary and intercessory prayer and replace them with the penitential practice of Step 10 prayer, as modeled by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we start to have a new understanding of God, an understanding based on an ongoing *relationship* with God as we practice this Step moment by moment. God becomes an experience, not a thesis or a divine Santa Claus. As we turn to God moment by moment and tell him of our ego-based wants, we experience God, and begin to understand what James means when he says, *Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials* (James 1:2). For as we experience these desires, and confide them to God as we understand God, we experience the power of God, moment by moment, in our own lives.

For the relationship between Step 11 and prayers of thanksgiving and adoration, for more on prayer as a contemplative or meditative activity, and for the role of Step 11 in the completion of this penitential activity outlined above, see the corresponding essay on prayer under Step 11.

Step 11

Step 11: An introduction

Step 11 suggests that we seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.

By the time we reach Step 11, most of us are familiar with the concept of, and routinely practice, prayer. Not all of us meditate, though, and AA as a whole – not to mention other 12-Step fellowships – seems to have forgotten that an hour's “quiet time” each morning was regarded as mandatory for the early AAs in Akron. This practice came from the Oxford Group, from which AA came and which was uncompromisingly Christian. During this period of an hour, the recovering alcoholic would ask for guidance. If he received any specific guidance, it was recommended that he check this with someone else before acting upon it.

There may be various reasons why the recommendation of an hour's quiet time did not appear in the AA Big Book. One possibility is that the Oxford Group, and its founder Frank Buchman in particular, had fallen into some disfavor by the time the Big Book was published, to the extent that one looks in vain in its first 164 pages for any mention of Buchman or the Oxford Group. But another may be that the Big Book does not seem much interested in prayer and meditation for their own sake, but rather emphasizes the results of their practice. This is an important observation, and we will be looking at it in more detail in other Studies.

By contrast with the Akron AAs, for most people in Program today, “meditation” consists of reading “meditation books” and then presumably thinking about what they have read. This is tantamount to claiming we pray because we read “prayer books” and then think about what they say. Prayer and meditation are basic actions. We don't merely talk about praying, read about praying, think about praying, or believe that praying is a good idea. We pray. Similarly, we don't merely talk about meditation, read about meditation, think about meditation, or believe that meditation is a good idea. We meditate. As we have said already, most people in Program pray. However, most people in Program don't meditate. Furthermore, if meditation is mentioned to them, the response can vary from discomfort to horror. Thus a basic practice of the early AAs, and a fundamental recommendation of the Twelve Steps, is not merely ignored but regarded with distaste.

The way Step 11 is phrased means that many of us see its main purpose as being improving our conscious contact with God as we understand God. However, when we look at it more carefully, we see that prayer and meditation are regarded simply as a means to an end. That end is the determining of God's will for us and finding the power to do it.

And that is why Step 10 precedes Step 11. Despite what some people in Program maintain, these last three Steps are in a particular order for a very good reason, and the reason that Step 10 comes before Step 11 is that determining God's will for us is going to be much more difficult if our minds are still fully occupied with what we want. Step 10, as we have seen, is really designed to bring us to a place of not knowing what to do – which is the state we will be in when

we do Step 10 thoroughly. Step 11, by contrast, is designed to tell us what to do – right here and right now.

Unfortunately, those in Program who do pray and meditate can tend to regard these as an end in themselves – particularly meditation. Now, there are many benefits to be derived from meditation – peace, tranquility, acceptance, and so on. But those are simply side-benefits. The main purpose of both practices is to determine what God wants us to do and to obtain the power to do it. So, Step 11 looks forward to Step 12 – compassionate action. In the end, that compassionate action is the only purpose of prayer and meditation.

Step 11: Doing nothing

What exactly is meditation? The AA literature seems to offer at least two responses to this question. The Big Book, in its treatment of Step 11 – contrary to what most people believe – gives no real answer. Indeed, the Big Book assumes that we are actually meditating long before we get to the Eleventh Step. If you look at page 69, you will see that the Big Book recommends using meditation to determine how to handle specific matters involving sex: “In meditation, we ask God what we should do” But a careful reading of the paragraph suggests that the recovering alcoholic is *already* using meditation for issues other than these. The previous sentence reads, “We treat sex as we would any other problem.” The implication, then, is that we are already routinely practicing meditation as a means of asking God what we should do at least as early as our working of Step 4.

By the time the Big Book arrives at Step 11, therefore, it assumes we are practicing prayer and meditation routinely. Modestly, it says that “we believe we can make some definite and valuable suggestions,” and goes on to recommend nightly and morning reviews of our day, and living our lives on the basis of intuition and inspiration. In other words, it suggests that we practice Step 11 *all the time* – in just the same way as it suggested that we practice Step 10 *all the time*. Significantly, it talks on page 87 about our “morning meditation.” Again, the implication is that meditation is an established practice – established well before we reach Step 11.

The *Twelve and Twelve*, by contrast, offers an actual approach to meditation. It uses the Prayer of St. Francis and invites us to consider it line by line. In the end, it suggests, meditation “is essentially an individual adventure, something which each one of us works out in his own way.”

The *Twelve and Twelve* makes one other important point. It says, “There is a direct linkage among self-examination, meditation, and prayer.” In other words, Steps 10 and 11 are very closely related to one another. We have already seen that we can actually make a meditative practice out of Step 10 itself, using it moment by moment throughout the day to practice ongoing awareness – something close to what the Buddhists call *vipassana* meditation.

Taking all this information together, therefore, we can make the following observations. We will not get very far if we try to practice Step 11 meditation without an ongoing practice of Step 10. We will find that meditation is “an individual adventure” – that, regardless of whether we are practicing alone or with others, we will gradually work out an approach to meditation which works for us. And we also learn that, as people in recovery, we can practice and should be practicing meditation routinely long before we arrive at Step 11.

So – having said all of this – what is meditation? Specifically, what is Step 11 meditation?

There is plenty of extra-Program material to read on this topic, and both the Big Book and the *Twelve and Twelve* suggest that we should read it. They also suggest that, if the particular faith we may belong to has a tradition of meditation, we should explore it. When we start to read

this literature – and we usually start to read it when we are first coming to meditation, so we tend to be vulnerable to the opinions of self-proclaimed “experts” – we can be troubled to find that many writers say there is only one real way to meditate: their way. It turns out that meditation is a process, even a ritual, to which these authors individually have the unique key. If we do not meditate in exactly the way each of them tells us to, then we are going to be in trouble. Which would not be a problem, if only they were united in their definitive answers. But, alas! – they are not. It turns out that you can only meditate properly if you are a Christian, or a Buddhist, or a particular kind of Buddhist, or Hindu, or Sufi. It turns out that you can only meditate if you have a teacher ... or no teacher at all. It turns out that if you do not meditate the way this author tells you you should meditate, you are not only going to meditate ineffectually – you are going to do yourself positive spiritual damage. And all these authors are evidently convinced of the accuracy of their recommendations, and – by implication – the falseness of everybody else's.

As recovering addicts, perhaps we should go back to first principles as far as the practice of Step 11 meditation is concerned. In fact, let us look at what we have learned from our practice of Step 10, and see if that is helpful with regard to our practice of Step 11 meditation.

The conclusion we reached in our study of Step 10 was that its main purpose is to make us aware that in each and every situation we encounter, *we know neither what we should do nor how to obtain the power to do it*. In an odd sense, the results of working Step 10 are peculiarly negative. We examine our thoughts and feelings, we determine what it is that we want to do, even while realizing that doing what we want would probably damage ourselves and other people. We come to see that if we attempt to refrain from doing what it is that we want to do, using self-will, we will inevitably fail. And yet – as we involve ourselves in this very practice of accepting that we are powerless even to determine what is right, never mind finding the power to do it – we find that we are miraculously given the knowledge of what to do and the power to do it. And this is something we can – or should – experience moment by moment. Moment by moment we are aware of what we are thinking and what we are feeling. Moment by moment we accept that we do not know what we should do. Moment by moment we are powerless to do what we should do, even if we *were* aware of what that was. And yet – miraculously – moment by moment we seem to be told what to do and to be given the power to carry that out. This is the “linkage” between Steps 10 and 11 that the *Twelve and Twelve* talks about. Through moment-by-moment inspiration and intuition, Something other than ourselves directs us and gives us the power that we simply cannot summon up on our own.

So much for the moment-by-moment practice of Step 10. But this very process which we have discovered in our study of Step 10 and summarized above also points directly to what the practice of meditation – that meditation which we practice alone or in the company of other people at a specific time of the day – should probably involve.

Nothing. Doing nothing.

But very few of the supposedly “definitive” books on meditation mentioned above suggest that meditation should consist of doing nothing. Quite the reverse, in fact: the vast majority of them suggest exactly what we should do when we meditate. We should count the breaths. We should recite a mantra. We should put some sort of guided meditation on our music system and follow that. We should exercise our imaginations. We should wrestle with a “koan” – a Buddhist practice. But rarely will our reading recommend that we do nothing.

There are two questions at least to consider here. The first is why *we* should be suggesting that meditation should consist of doing nothing. The second is, if meditation ought to consist of

doing nothing, why does most literature on meditation seem to imply that meditation should consist in doing *something*?

Let's start with the first question. Why should meditation consist of doing nothing?

Well, the answer follows on quite logically from the summary of Step 10 practice we looked at earlier in this essay. We saw that Step 10 consists at its heart in our acknowledgment of our complete helplessness in the face of our thoughts and feelings, our inability to determine what we should do and to find the power to do it. And yet we find, as we practice Step 10 moment by moment to the best of our ability, that we *are* able to determine what we should do, and we *are* given the power to do it, as our practice of Step 10 merges imperceptibly with our practice of Step 11. We find that Something, a Power greater than ourselves, tells us what to do and gives us the power to do it, moment by moment.

What did we ourselves do to gain that insight, that power?

The answer, of course, is *nothing*. And that is why we suggest that, in meditation, we should seek to do *nothing*. When we do nothing in meditation, we are modeling the only appropriate response we can make to God as we understand God with respect to our supposed "problems." We do *nothing*. We sit or kneel in silence, in inactivity, before our Higher Power. We sit or kneel in our acknowledged powerlessness. We "wait on God," as the Bible puts it. We do not pretend, even for a moment, that we can somehow make this gesture more effective by performing some activity while we meditate. To do so would be to believe, at least in some small measure, that we are capable of doing something ourselves to increase the all-powerfulness of God.

Well, so much for theory – what about the realities of doing nothing while meditating? Why do so few writers on meditation suggest doing nothing?

The basic reason, of course, is that doing nothing for any period of time at all turns out to be very difficult. Even in the East, which has a rich meditative tradition, it's regarded as difficult. For us in the West, used to doing this and doing that in order to "achieve" something, it's almost impossible. And so we are recommended to do certain things. Our advice here, for what it is worth, is that doing something that is as close as possible to nothing may turn out to be the most effective choice. Counting the breaths, or merely watching the breaths, may be the activity of choice. But any simple, repetitive activity may suffice.

When we establish a practice of meditation at regular times of the day, we find to our surprise that "doing nothing" starts sooner or later to happen all by itself. It may take weeks, months, even years for this to happen, and when it does happen it may do so only briefly. But when it does occur, it can be striking. Of course, we try to "grab hold" of it immediately, and attempt to "do nothing" by doing it ... and of course that cannot work.

Nor should it even be a goal. We must always start meditation from where we are, not where we think we should be. In reality, we have no choice but to start from where we are. And anyway, trying to determine where we should be will probably prove, as we cultivate our practice, to have been just another attempt on our part to direct our own lives towards what we think should be the goal. Whatever method we may choose for meditation today, we accept that we may very well not use it for ever. We use it because we must start somewhere. We use it because we seek for God to guide our meditation, as God will, if only we are open to God. We cannot learn to do nothing ourselves – we are powerless even to do that. We must allow God to teach us how to meditate, through the very meditation practice itself.

At least three great religious traditions value doing nothing in meditation. In some branches of Buddhism, it is known as *shikantaza* – "just sitting." And it appears also in the Christian and

Jewish faiths: *Be still and know that I am God* (Ps. 46:10). *Not count the breaths and know that I am God* or *listen to meditation music and know that I am God*. Just be still.

Do nothing.

Step 11: Prayer (2)

In our Studies of Step 10, we have already talked at some length about prayer. If you have not yet read those Studies, you may want to do so before you read this one. One of the main reasons for this suggestion is that what we have to say about prayer is controversial, and a significant part of that controversy is dealt with in the treatment of Step 10-based prayer.

If you *have* read that Study, you will know that we have taken the usual divisions of prayer into different kinds, and grouped petitionary, penitential, and intercessory prayer together, linking them directly with Step 10. This particular Study will group together prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of adoration, and meditative or contemplative prayer, and associate them with our practice of Step 11. Our thesis will be that all these activities are really meditative or contemplative prayer – that they are, in fact, meditation rather than prayer at all, in the sense that prayer is normally understood. In other words, prayers of thanksgiving or adoration are, when offered meaningfully and thoughtfully, really meditation.

One thing that ought to make this discussion of Step 11-based prayer simpler is that we have already dealt, in our discussions of Step 10-based prayer, with the issue of our wanting things and looking to something or somebody called God in order to obtain them. Hopefully, we won't be doing this as much as we used to if we are regularly practicing Step 10. It is always a great deal easier to focus on our working of the last three Steps when the business of our desires has been removed from the equation.

But in Step 11-based prayer we encounter another problematic preconception: that of a God who is external to us. In this case, instead of being some mythical Santa Claus figure who deliberately or arbitrarily gives us or doesn't give us what we want, God is now some gigantic Other whom we should thank for what we *have* been given even though we probably didn't deserve it, or should be adored or venerated because He or She or It is so wonderful, powerful, or perfect when compared to the miserable beings that we are. The childish notion that we are able to influence, persuade, or flatter God into giving these things (our immature idea of Step 10) is now succeeded by an attitude that is supposedly more adult or mature, the attitude that – far from being able to get God to do these things – we are unworthy, helplessly guilty, undeserving, and impotent. Consequently, we are almost pitifully dependent upon this God, and should be unreservedly grateful for whatever God provides because it is entirely a gift of grace.

Now, on the face of it this is a definite improvement over the “gimme!” model of God that underpins much petitionary or intercessory prayer, as we saw in the previous Step 10 Study on prayer. We are no longer under any illusions as to our ability to provide for ourselves. We appear to have abandoned the notion that our lives should somehow be an equal or near-equal partnership between us and God, with God thoughtfully providing what we think we need. In fact, this model of God emphasizes our total God-dependence. So far, so good.

But when we look more closely, we see that we are making the same fundamental mistake we made before – that of treating God as though God is somehow *other* than us. We are *here*; God is *there*, by which we mean somewhere other than *here*.

And the underlying problem which lurks behind this idea of the *otherness* of God is this: It allows our ego to remain center stage, which is of course where it always wants to be. *I am here*, right *here and now*; and this God-entity, whatever He, She, It, or They may be, is *somewhere else*. What it is important to note is that *there are still two players present in this mistaken view*. There is the great, omnipotent, omniscient and eternal God ... and then there is *I*. This *I*, of course, does not cut a very impressive figure any longer. This is no longer the *I* that caused all the mayhem with its addiction-driven behavior. This is a humbler *I*, a down-sized *I*, an *I* that knows and accepts that it is quite unable to run its own life alone, an *I* that actively seeks fellowship with this God-entity ... an entity which is, of course, *over there*.

This view of the divine cosmos naturally contains other entities too – other people, for example: our relations, our friends, our enemies, the seven billion or so people we’ve never met; and the world of plants and animals, of course, not to mention a universe full of stars, galaxies, black holes and so on. But these other entities are, in a sense, bit-players. At the center of this model sits *I*, a diminished *I* perhaps, but still at the center, albeit totally dependent on God ... a God who, wherever He, She, It, or They may be, is *somewhere other than here*.

The model of God we are discussing here seems naturally to encourage the kinds of prayer we want to discuss in this Study. After all, if God is *other* than *I*, if *I* am here and God is somewhere *other* than here, and if *I* am completely powerless and God-dependent, doesn’t it make sense to *thank* this Other for the good things that I have, to *adore* and *praise* this God for being so wonderful, so kind, and ... so condescending ...?

The 1967 movie *Bedazzled* takes this view of the relationship between *I* and God and pushes it to its ultimate, ludicrous conclusion. In the movie, the Devil (the character George, played by Peter Cook) describes for Stanley Moon (played by Dudley Moore) why he tired of being the favorite angel in Heaven, revolted against God, and decided instead to “rule in Hell,” as the poet Milton puts it. “Pretend I’m God and now dance around me and sing my praises,” says George to Stanley. Stanley, after doing this for a short time, says that he’s getting tired. “That’s exactly how I felt!” says George.

One of the most ironic aspects of this idea of the supremacy, the omniscience, and above all else the Otherness of God is that it appears to have taken root most firmly in that overwhelmingly democratically republican of nations, the USA. For the USA was born as least in part as a result of its banishment of the idea of kingship; and yet this notion of the Otherness of God, so warmly espoused by the American nation, is derived almost entirely from kingship. It is a king who is treated, honored, and praised in the manner manifested in prayers of thanksgiving and adoration. He is treated this way precisely because his followers regard him as qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from themselves – because they regard him as Other. At the periods in history of the rise of Judaism and Christianity, no other model was available to describe God. Using the model of kingship made perfect sense to the Jews and the Christians because it was a model every believer knew of and understood. Today, particularly in the West, it makes much less sense.

The root of the problem with prayers of thanksgiving and adoration, then, is that they only make sense if we are willing to see God as *other* than ourselves. To see God as *other* than myself means that my ego is able to remain on-stage – that my universe remains, at its core, a

place that is occupied by two entities: a wonderful, all-powerful, all-knowing God, and miserable *I*, utterly God-dependent, quite unable to fend for myself ... but still there on the stage.

Step 11-based prayer is really devoted to getting that second entity off the stage entirely. In fact, it's devoted to establishing the reality that there is no *I* at all – not in the sense that we have just described. Step 11-based prayer is devoted to the dissolution of the ego, to the acceptance and above all the *experience* that there is only God – not simply that there is only God in the world or only God in the universe, but that there is only God. And – to repeat – Step 11-based prayer is intended to allow us to *experience* this truth – not to acknowledge it as an intellectual, emotional, religious or spiritual truth but to *experience* it, to *live* it, to *be* it.

If this is true – that there is nothing other than God – then prayers of adoration or thanksgiving, prayers in which *I* thank or adore a God who is *other* than *I*, would seem to be of little utility. In fact, such prayers carry a risk with them – a risk that, by praying these prayers, *I* merely reinforce the myth that it is possible and meaningful for *I* to be *here* adoring or thanking a God who is *over there*, separate and different from me.

We now find ourselves in an interesting situation with respect to Step 11-based prayer. If there is no real *I* here and there is no “God over there,” what is it that we are able to do in such prayer to experience this true God who is in fact everything?

The answer is ... *nothing*.

There is nothing that we can do. If we pray in the normal sense of the word, if we think about God, if we try to speak to God, then we are merely back in the position where we are, in some sense, *other* than God. We find ourselves back at the position we were at in Step 1 with respect to our core addiction. What was it that we were able to do about that core addiction? The answer, of course, was *nothing*. Our recovery paradoxically only began when we “fully concede[d] to our innermost selves” that we were helplessly and hopelessly addicted – that we could do absolutely nothing to help ourselves.

Step 11-based prayer, therefore, is the practice of *doing nothing in the presence of God*, whatever and wherever God may be. It is the act of modeling, right here and now, what we are able to do to help ourselves, which is *nothing*. We may call this act *meditation* or *contemplative prayer* or *centering*; we may call it all kinds of things; but at its heart it is, and must be, the practice of *doing nothing in the presence of God*.

Now, the moment we attempt to do nothing in the presence of God, we find ourselves in the midst of difficulties. For it turns out, as every potential meditator has discovered, that doing nothing is the most difficult thing in the world. When we attempt to do nothing, we discover that our minds and our bodies are simply not willing to play along. Our bodies twitch and wriggle. Our minds generate thoughts and tempt us to become absorbed with them. Of course, now we understand why we encounter this revolt when we attempt to do nothing in the presence of God. We now understand that we are embarked on an activity designed to sweep away our ego; and our ego will resist that more strongly than anything else we might undertake, for when we pray or meditate in this way we are looking to encompass its death.

So we cast around for something to do which comes as close as possible to doing nothing. Most of us watch the breath. We watch the in-breath, the out-breath, and that fascinating gap that occurs between the out-breath and the next in-breath, that simulation of death. Almost instantly we forget to watch the breath. A thought arises, an idea, a feeling; we hear a noise, or smell something cooking, and our minds take over and race away. Then – a little later, perhaps much later – we recall that we are simply watching the breath, and we return to it. *That is the practice of meditation: watching the breath, forgetting to watch the breath, realizing we have*

forgotten to watch the breath, going back to watching the breath. Everyone who ever meditates, who ever practices this business of doing nothing in the presence of God, goes through that sequence over and over again during the period of prayer and meditation. It is *meant* to be like that.

This pattern, this sequence of watching the breath, forgetting to do so, and then remembering to do it again, is a perpetual reminder to us of what we are able to do to bring us closer to God, and that is *nothing*. The very act of failing to remember to watch the breath and then remembering all over again is an actual *acting-out* of our helplessness. It is an *acting-out* of the key truth of our total God-dependence. It is an *experience* – a direct experience of God, a direct experience of our complete one-ness, our complete identity with God. There is no longer any need for adoration, no need for thanks. In this Step 11-based prayer/meditation, we not only act out or model our God-dependence, we encounter God directly and – with time – find we are at least to some extent absorbed into God.

For more information about meditation as “doing nothing in the presence of God,” see the Step 11 Study entitled Doing Nothing.

Step 11: Breath and Death

If you have not yet read the earlier Studies on Step 11, it might be helpful to do so before reading this one. Those other Studies offer an understanding of some of the concepts that are assumed here. We do not suggest that you read them in order to agree with them – these Studies are offered merely for what they are worth to you, and as always you are invited to take what you need or want and leave the rest behind.

In particular, it is probably necessary that you understand what we have written about Step 11 meditation as doing nothing in the presence of God. In the earlier Step 11 Studies, we suggest that Step 11 meditation consists at its heart in doing nothing: that is, following the recommendations of Psalm 46:10 – “Be still and know that I am God.” We determined in those Studies that recovery consists largely (some would argue, totally) in surrendering completely to the will of God: that this is how we recover from our core addiction in the first place, and that the focus of the AA Big Book is to bring that concept of total surrender to every thought, feeling, and action we may be involved in in the rest of our lives. There is nothing, these Studies argue, that we can do to bring about our recovery. Even the working of the Steps is advised, it has been suggested, not to bring about recovery, but because it has been found that “the Steps are the twelve least dangerous things you can do while God is solving your problem.” Recovery, in other words, comes about purely as a result of grace. And what can we do to “help grace along”? Nothing. So nothing is what we do in Step 11 meditation.

We also discovered that it is extremely difficult to do nothing for any protracted period of time; and so we recommended that we focus on our in-breath and out-breath. We watch the in-breath from the moment it starts till the moment it ends; we watch how the end of the in-breath is succeeded immediately by the beginning of the out-breath; we watch the duration of the out-breath until it stops. We breathe normally, through the nose, but we watch for the beginning, the continuation, and the end of the in-breath, and then the beginning, the continuation, and the end of the out-breath.

We forget, of course, to keep watching the breath. Our minds wander, and we wander with them. Thoughts arise and we believe them and pursue them; feelings arise and we indulge them; “disturbances” or “interruptions” (as we typically think of them) arise and we are disturbed or interrupted by them. But sooner or later we “remember that we have forgotten” to watch the breath, and we return to it: the in-breath, from its inception to its ending, and the out-breath, from its inception to its ending. Every part of what we have described in this paragraph is part of Step 11 meditation. Watching the breath; forgetting to watch the breath; remembering to watch the breath: they are all part of meditation.

When we watch the breath like this for a while, we begin to realize that there is one more stage in this in-breath and out-breath business. While it tends to be true that the end of the in-breath is followed immediately by the beginning of the out-breath, it does not always seem to be the case that the end of the out-breath is followed by the beginning of the in-breath. Instead, there is often a space between them, a pause of a few seconds where the out-breath has finished

but the in-breath has not yet begun. (You can try practicing this for yourself right now, without formally “meditating.”) Not infrequently we find that there is a pause after the end of the out-breath before the start of the next in-breath. When we do try this, we don’t “force” the situation. We don’t deliberately hold our breath, for example. The idea always in Step 11 meditation is to watch something (or nothing) happen, not to make it happen. So we watch for the pause. We watch too for the fact that the in-breath comes all by itself. It starts of its own accord. We don’t have to make it happen – we can simply watch.

As we continue to focus on the in-breath, the out-breath, and the pause in between, we may notice something else. We may notice that thoughts and feelings, ideas and distractions, disappear entirely or almost entirely during that pause in our breathing. It seems to be a place of almost perfect peace. It is a limited time of peace, of course; it is brief, and it’s succeeded almost too soon by the beginning of the next in-breath. So this seems to be what happens: We breathe in, we breathe out, and then – however briefly – we seem to experience peace. And then we must breathe in and out again, and then arrive once more at the brief period of peace.

Of course, the moment we realize that this peace is there, we start to strive to attain it. And that simply doesn’t work. We can’t meditate in order to experience peace; in fact, we can’t meditate in order to achieve anything, for meditation is in a way one of the most profoundly pointless things we can do. So just as soon as we start to watch the in-breath and out-breath in order to feel that peace, it vanishes.

We may also notice that the feeling of peace can only come if we have watched the in-breath from start to finish and the out-breath from start to finish. It doesn’t seem possible to let our attention wander during the in-breath and out-breath and then bring it back to the pause between the breaths in order to feel peaceful. If we do not watch the in-breath and the out-breath, we “forget” to feel the peace of the pause between the breaths.

That pause seems to be, in a sense, a prefiguring of our deaths. Death is typically something we fear: the breath vanishes, and life is over – our life is over. But it now turns out that we “die” in some sense between every contemplated breath we take. There is a pause between the out-breath and the in-breath; and, far from being something to be afraid of, it seems to be something that is almost desirable, something to be experienced, even enjoyed.

Those among us who are Christians will be familiar with the story of the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-8). We remember what Peter’s response was: He wanted to build homes there, so that he could stay in that state of peace for ever. In fact, it turned out not only that he could not stay there, but that immediately upon his descent from the mountain he was confronted with one of the most unpleasant episodes of his life. And it’s the same way with this Step 11 meditation. The space between the breaths is a refreshing pause, but that is all it can be. All too soon, it seems, comes the next in-breath. But when we recognize what it is that truly comes between the breaths, we experience something of the greatest importance.

First, we recognize that it is part of our true nature to be at peace – a peace we cannot create for ourselves, but which we can experience if we so choose with literally every breath we take. We learn that peace is part of who we are, when we cease to pay attention to ourselves and instead pay attention to nothing.

Second, we recognize this peace as being something that is given to us quite freely, without any striving on our part – “it just comes,” as the AA Big Book says in another context.

Third, we come to see that this “something” that is given to us is “portable” – we get to carry it around with us. We don’t have to go to church, or to some beautiful location in the countryside, or to a distant, silent, and secluded place. We don’t have to go anywhere, because

we are carrying it around inside ourselves. The Kingdom of God is indeed within us, and we can experience it any time we wish, any time that we are ready to set aside our ego-driven plans, thought, and feelings and just be.

Fourth, we start to see that in a very profound way, we don't breathe at all – something or somebody breathes us. Indeed, this is reflected in the Genesis story of man's creation: "God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). To practice Step 11 meditation is to experience God breathing us, God meditating us, God living us. In the practice of meditation, these intransitive verbs become transitive: we are the object and God is the subject. This, incidentally, is the ultimate mystical experience: the reversal of subject and object in the God-man/woman relationship. Very oddly, such mystical experiences are regarded in most religious faiths as exceptional. Nothing could be further from the truth. A key theme in the AA Big Book is the availability of mystical experience as a moment-by-moment routine.

Indeed, this "portable" practice is a core recommendation of the AA Big Book's treatment of Step 11. It may be worth going back and reading that treatment again, once you have begun your Step 11 meditation practice. We read what the Big Book says about how we are to live each day, and we see that it takes this place of peace for granted. The Big Book does not seem to regard it as exceptional in any way. Indeed, it describes it as "a working part of the mind." This is yet another reason why, against a committed practice of the last three Steps, it is possible to see the first eighty-eight pages of Alcoholics Anonymous as one of the supreme spiritual works of all time.

Lastly, we come to experience the ceasing of the breath, not as something to be frightened of, but as something to be accepted. If there is peace in the pause between the breaths, we start to see (and above all experience) that there will truly be peace when the breath ceases altogether.

Step 12

Step 12: An introduction

There are at least two broad ways of looking at Step 12.

The first way is to see it as a means of bringing the specific message of recovery to other addicts, or to others who suffer from the same basic problem that brought us to Program to begin with. It is this view of Step 12 which guides the AA Big Book's treatment of the step. Appearing only a few years after the discovery that one recovering alcoholic could help a still suffering alcoholic when no one else could, the chapter dedicated to Step 12 brims over with advice as to the best way to approach and talk to the desperate alcoholic.

Chuck C. in the book *A New Pair of Glasses* pointed out that the newly recovering alcoholic is in no position to carry the message to the still-suffering alcoholic – after all, what message does he have to carry, if he has been sober only a short time himself? “You cannot transmit what you don't have,” as the Big Book says. So why were many of us told in our early days of recovery that we should work with newcomers in Program? Because, as Chuck C. says, if we can't carry the message to the alcoholic, we can at least carry the alcoholic to the message. We can tell the prospect that there is help, and we can take him to it. We can go with him to an AA meeting. This business of working with the newcomer to Program occupies most of the attention of the Big Book in its treatment of Step 12.

The second way of looking at Step 12 is as the step which builds on the continuing practice of Steps 10 and 11 and results in action – compassionate action. This view of Step 12 sees it more as a natural consequence of working these other two steps. When we look at Step 12 in this way, we see that the distinction between carrying the message to others and practicing these principles in all our affairs is really no distinction at all – for to practice these principles *is* to carry the message.

It is this second way of looking at Step 12 with which these Studies concern themselves. There is relatively little about this view of the Step in the chapter “Working with Others” in the AA Big Book; and so since we cannot use it as our guide, as we were able to for much of the time in our Studies of Steps 10 and 11, we shall have to look elsewhere in Program – and outside Program – for guidance as to how to work Step 12 as part of our daily practice of the last three Steps.

We can make some preliminary statements here, though, about the way our Studies of Step 12 are likely to lead us:

Firstly, Step 12 is concerned with *action* – specifically the action that arises out of our practice of Steps 10 and 11. We have seen that the purpose of Step 10 is to bring us to the point, moment by moment, where – with increased clarity into what we are thinking and feeling – we acknowledge that we do not of ourselves know what to do, and we do not have the power to do it even if we did know. We have seen that the purpose of Step 11 is to determine what it is that God as we understand God wants us to do, and to obtain the power to do it. And now we are at Step 12: *We do it.*

Secondly, Step 12 is concerned with doing what we determined in Step 11 that God wants us to do. By definition, therefore, Step 12 consists of actions which are at their heart, to a greater or lesser extent, *compassionate* – that is, they involve us in participating in the suffering of *other people*. Step 12 actions are not selfish – our working of Step 10 has assured that. They are not actions which arise out of an attempt to merge our will with God's will – our practice of Steps 10 and 11 together has assured that. The actions we take in Step 12 therefore involve our own wants and desires very little, and the needs of other people almost exclusively. As we shall see, this does not mean that most of the compassionate actions we take as a result of doing Step 12 are done on the grand scale. These are generally not actions which are going to stop world hunger, involve us in terrible personal privation, or make us famous as exemplars of charitable works. They *may* be, but in reality they very rarely are. Most Step 12-based actions are in fact trivial, as we will find out, and would barely be noticed by anyone other than a very observant onlooker. Nevertheless, they are actions that are focused on other people, specifically the sufferings of other people, and not on ourselves.

Thirdly, the compassionate actions we take in Step 12, simply because they are the result of the ongoing practice of Steps 10 and 11, can sometimes be *strange*. We find ourselves drawn to do things that are alien to our previous existence. We find ourselves working for, or alongside, people with whom we would perhaps not have associated previously. But then the actions we used to take were motivated by things like religious imperatives, or political affiliations, or ideas from our childhood about what we ought and ought not to do. By contrast, Step 12 actions come from none of these things. We do them, not because we think we ought to, nor because some religious figure said we should, nor because the political groups we belong to are committed to them ... but because it seems to us from our practice of Step 11 that God as we understand God wants us to do them. Step 12 actions are therefore intensely *personal* in nature and origin, even if we find we are doing them alongside other people who *may* be motivated by these other reasons.

Finally, our Step 12 actions lead us to *commitment* and to an understanding of the role of *drudgery* in living the spiritual life. For if we have decided to start doing what God wants us to do, we will inevitably find ourselves taking on certain tasks which have to be done over and over again. If God seems to be suggesting that we work with the indigent, for example, it's unlikely that He is suggesting we do this *once*. And so we find ourselves engaged with a concept that most addicts, even recovering addicts, hate: *commitment*. And – again inevitably – if we commit to some ongoing action, one day it will become drudgery, and in our practice of Step 12 we shall come to learn that taking on drudgery is one of the most important keys to the Kingdom. As a great poet wrote:

*All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, "For Thy sake,"
will not grow bright and clean.*

*A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine.*

*This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told.*

Step 12: Compassion and selfishness

Compassion lies at the very heart of our practice of Step 12.

Compassion as a topic deserves an entire book to itself. It is often misunderstood, occasionally very greatly misunderstood, not only in Program but in the spiritual life generally. We are only going to be able to touch briefly upon it here – which is a pity. Because it is so widely misunderstood, it is controversial, and controversial topics deserve deeper study than we have room for in these Studies.

In Program, our idea of compassion tends to be profoundly affected by the so-called “12-step work” we are encouraged to perform, very often from our first arrival in our respective 12-Step fellowships. “12-step work” is a Program phrase and almost always means carrying the basic message of recovery to another addict. When we are recommended to do this work, we are told that it is an excellent way of ensuring our own recovery – that sharing our personal experience of recovery, no matter how brief, will not only help others who are still suffering from their addiction, but also provide solid support for our own programs. And there is no question but that this is true. Indeed, it is true to such an extent that “12-step work” occupies the attention of the AA Big Book's treatment of Step 12 to the exclusion of virtually any other aspect of the Step. This reflects the experience of early AAs. None of them had more than a couple of years, very often only a few months or even weeks, of recovery. But the need for help that they encountered among still-suffering alcoholics was so great that this lack of “time” in recovery could not be allowed to be a bar to sharing the message of recovery. This practice of carrying the message to other suffering addicts continues to this day in many of our fellowships, and it is perfectly correct that it should be so. In the lounge areas of AA clubs, in quiet corners of recovery centers which emphasize the 12 Steps, in coffee bars and inexpensive restaurants across this country and around the world, the basic message of recovery is shared every minute of every day between the new arrival in Program and someone who has a little more “time.”

But can we really carry the message when we ourselves are so new in recovery? Some people think that we can't – and they also think that that fact doesn't matter very much. Chuck C., in his book *A New Pair of Glasses*, memorably suggests that we do not. After all, we can't carry a message if we don't have a message to carry. And – as the AA Big Book says – you can't transmit something you don't have. Instead, Chuck C. suggests, rather than carry the message to the addict, we carry the addict to the message. We can take the addict to a 12-Step meeting; we can show the addict where the message is, even if we can't carry it ourselves. We can, as Chuck says, show love to the addict. That's what we do when we perform this sort of “12-step work.”

Our experience of this early “12-step work,” and our continuing of it as we continue to live in and work our programs, inevitably has an effect on the way we view our practice of Step 12, and particularly when it comes to the involvement of compassion in that practice. When we carry the message to other addicts, we reason, we do so because it continues to make our own recovery more solid, and it also involves us in helping others to recover and lead happier lives.

These reasons demonstrate why this sort of basic “12-step work” is not based on compassion. Compassionate acts are not performed because we get something out of them, even if what we get seems to be “good.” It may be true that carrying the message to others reinforces our own recovery, but if that is why we do it – if that is why we *continue* to do it – then it cannot, by definition, be a compassionate act. Similarly, if we are carrying the message to others because it will help them to recover, to become free of their addiction, and to be happier and more productive, then what we are doing – however helpful and beneficial it may be – is not compassionate action, because compassionate action has no purpose ... at least, no purpose that we are able to discern.

Now, these statements appear to many people to be simply inflammatory. How can it possibly be true that carrying the message of recovery to other addicts is not a compassionate act? How can it be true that helping other people who are suffering isn't necessarily an act of compassion? If it isn't a compassionate act, then what is it?

And what exactly is a compassionate action?

* * * * *

A compassionate action is any action (or decision not to act – we will talk more about this later) which is taken purely as a result of working Steps 10 and 11 on a continuous basis, as described elsewhere in our Studies on those two Steps.

Those of us who are very familiar with the AA Big Book's treatment of Steps 10 and 11 will realize that this position on compassionate action comes from a literal reading of that treatment, and in particular of what is said about Step 11:

We ask God to direct our thinking, especially asking that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives. Under these conditions we can employ our mental faculties with assurance, for after all God gave us brains to use We may not be able to determine which course to take. Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought, or a decision What used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind [O]ur thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration. We come to rely on it We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day, “Thy will be done.”

There is another version of this in the much-neglected summary of Program found in Bill's story in the first chapter of the Big Book:

I was to test my thinking by the new God-consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt, asking only for direction and strength to meet my problems as He would have me Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements.

Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness.

We have read the first of these passages so frequently that paradoxically we no longer see what it says. It suggests quite literally the ongoing replacement of the calculating mind of self with intuition and inspiration derived from the practice of prayer and meditation. The Big Book is suggesting that “we can employ our mental faculties with assurance” only when “our thinking ... [is] divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives.” Our thought-life, it says, “will be placed on a much higher plane when our thinking is cleared of wrong [i.e. selfish] motives.”

Of course, attempting to lead one's life on this basis does not mean "that we are going to be inspired at all times. We might pay for this presumption in all sorts of absurd actions and ideas. Nevertheless, we find that our thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration. *We come to rely upon it* [our italics]."

We have noted elsewhere that one of the great spiritual insights of the AA Big Book is that the root cause of our problem is not lack of morality but selfishness. And whenever our calculating minds start to determine a course of action, we can be sure that lurking there somewhere is a selfish motive, however pure-minded we would like to think our motivation is. In fact, when a recovering addict has any sort of motive to do any action, there is always at least a hint of selfishness there. So an action which carries with it a motive of any kind tends to be suspect. It seems, from what the Big Book is suggesting, that to a great extent our actions should be goal-less.

And that may be an answer to part of our question about what a compassionate action is. It is, at its heart, goal-less. It may well have a purpose as far as God as we understand God is concerned, but that purpose is no affair of ours. Compassionate actions seem in the first instance to simply "come out" of our practice of Steps 10 and 11. We acknowledge in Step 10 that we do not know what to do; we use our practice of Step 11 to ask God as we understand God what we should do; and the answer simply seems to suggest itself. But this will only happen as long as we are vigilant about keeping "self" out of the picture.

By very definition, therefore, a compassionate action cannot benefit us – or, at least, we may not take it *because* it benefits us. This means that compassionate action is always directed in its entirety to others. It follows, therefore – even though this may seem odd – that compassionate action is much easier with people we do not know at all than it is with people with whom we are familiar. With those whom we know, it is extremely difficult to keep our own feelings and our own goals or motivation out of the way. We want to be generous to friends or relatives in need ... but why? Isn't it because we have a goal for them, some sort of result to which we're guiding them? And isn't the action we're contemplating merely manipulation at its heart? Isn't it true that we made that gift of money so that our relative would spend it on college fees? And isn't that the very reason that we became annoyed when he spent it on audio equipment? At this point it may be worth our examining every interaction we've had with others in our recovery where we believed that we were acting compassionately. Think over those actions, and then exclude every single one from consideration where there was any hint of a selfish component in the action. How many of our supposedly "compassionate" actions survive this sort of scrutiny? Probably not many.

And indeed it's unlikely that many of them *can* survive that scrutiny, unless we are routinely and deliberately practicing Steps 10 and 11. The practice of Step 10 in particular is aimed at the very heart of selfish action. Absent an ongoing practice of that Step, our ego can have a field day directing us towards supposedly compassionate actions which carry with them a significant chunk of personal motivation. And personal motivation means selfishness; and selfishness, when indulged with these kinds of bogus actions, means the worst sort of personal gratification.

We have spent some time on compassionate action here, and we do not seem to have gotten very far. In fact, we seem to have spent most of our time talking about what compassionate action *isn't*. But let's be patient. There are other characteristics of compassionate action for us to examine, and when we are through we will likely have a much better understanding of what it *is*. For now, at least we have become aware of the following:

1. Compassionate action results from an ongoing, dedicated, and meaningful practice of Steps 10 and 11;
2. Compassionate action results from God-directed intuition and inspiration, not from our calculating minds;
3. Selfishness is the enemy of compassionate action;
4. By definition, therefore, no action which has any hint of personal goal in it – no matter how “enlightened” or noble that goal may be – is or can be a compassionate action.

Step 12: A primer on compassion

The little Study entitled “Compassion and Selfishness” enabled us to do a certain amount of groundwork on compassion by determining what it was *not*. We concluded there as follows:

1. Compassionate action results from an ongoing, dedicated, and meaningful practice of Steps 10 and 11;
2. Compassionate action results from God-directed intuition and inspiration, not from our calculating minds;
3. Selfishness is the enemy of compassionate action;
4. By definition, therefore, no action which has any hint of personal goal in it – no matter how “enlightened” or noble that goal may be – is or can be a compassionate action.

Our third and fourth conclusions summarize what we believe that compassion is *not*. But the first two conclusions point us in the direction we must now go. They summarize the belief – and not merely the belief, but the *experience* – that compassionate action results from the practice of Steps 10 and 11 (or the equivalent of those Steps in any meaningful spiritual practice) *and from nowhere else*.

Let's say a little more about this matter of *experience* when it comes to determining what a compassionate action is. Underlying all of these Studies on the last three Steps is one common idea: that what we learn about Steps 10, 11 and 12 comes first and foremost from *our experience of working them*. These Studies are intended to be read, to be understood, and to be agreed with or disagreed with primarily on the basis of our shared experience of working those Steps. What we have to say in these pages may be of intellectual, psychological, or academic interest to readers who do *not* have a daily spiritual practice based on Steps 10, 11, and 12. But whether such disengaged readers agree or disagree with what is said here can be of no significance at all to those of us who *are* practitioners. In other words, what lies at the heart of these Studies is the experience of a Power greater than ourselves, an experience which is a part of the practice of those Steps – indeed, an experience which *is* the practice of those Steps.

Why then have these Studies been written at all? If all our interest is in our shared experience of working these last three Steps, why should there be any need for these little essays? And the reason is this: Those of us who base our lives on this simple practice live in a world which is anxious to explain what we practitioners experience, but in intellectual, psychological, or academic terms. And not only that: Too many of the inhabitants of this world – indeed, too many of *us* – are subject to the temptation to explain what we practitioners experience by resorting to *religious* terms, or *moral* terms, or *humanist* terms. Many of us are not willing to *accept* our ongoing experience of a relationship with a Power greater than ourselves as the *basis* of our entire outlook on life. Instead, we want to *explain* what we experience in terms which will be accepted – or at least understood – by people who do *not* share this experience. Particular problems can arise when we attempt to understand matters like compassion in a religious or moral context.

Of all parts of the AA Big Book, it is perhaps pages 84-88 which stand in the strongest opposition to the idea that our continuing spiritual practice – the practice of watching, praying, and serving or doing – has or should have a religious or moral basis to it. In our Studies of Step 10 in particular, we have seen that the peculiar genius of the AA Big Book is that it rejects the notion that “goodness” comes from morality. As early as its treatment of Step 3, the Big Book instead urges upon us that the heart of our problem is our *selfishness*. Unlike the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, it rejects the idea that we will ever reach the point where we will know *as a matter of principle* what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. Instead, that knowledge, and the power to do what is good, is mediated to us on an ongoing basis by God as we understand God, as we practice Step 10 (acknowledging that we do not know what to do) and Step 11 (determining what God as we understand God wants us to do, and finding the power to do it).

The inevitable consequence of this position is that we cannot look to academicians, psychologists, intellectuals, moral philosophers, or even religious authorities to tell us what compassionate action is. If we do look to these people, then we are diluting what we learn from God in our practice of Steps 10 and 11 with what other human beings are telling us. And that cannot be the way to proceed. Instead, we must learn from God what compassion really means.

In taking this stance, the AA Big Book sets itself apart from the majority of religious teaching and literature and even from the tenets of many spiritual movements. It is in many ways the most radical aspect of the spiritual foundation of AA. In this regard, the Big Book finds itself much more in line with what the Buddha is supposed to have said about the basis for compassionate action: “Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense” (remembering, of course, what the AA Big Book says about “common sense” on page 13: “Common sense would thus become uncommon sense,” and about having God direct our thinking, in the third paragraph of page 86).

It also finds itself in agreement with the teaching of Jesus in one of the hardest sections of the Sermon on the Mount, namely Mt. 7:21-23: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” In that section, Jesus makes it clear that actions which are performed because *someone else* says they are compassionate are of little account; instead, only actions which are performed because “they are the will of my Father” can be said to be compassionate.

While we are discussing the issue of other people's ideas of what constitutes compassionate action, it may be worth saying something about politically-based thinking. Alas, what we have to say here is likely to be as controversial as other statements we have made, but nevertheless let us proceed. Socially-oriented action tends to be part of more left-wing political agendas. The dedicated practitioner of the last three Steps will hopefully already have reached the conclusion that following the spiritual path must inevitably bring about the death of political commitment of any kind, since political thinking is invariably based on the idea that what is wrong with the world at heart has the possibility of being fixed or at least ameliorated by humankind. In particular, those of a left-wing orientation tend to believe more readily than their opponents that it is, it can, or it should be the role of the state to promote, underwrite, or prosecute a social agenda because it is “compassionate.” But compassionate action can no more arise from

political conviction than it can from religious or moral conviction. It can arise only from our ongoing practice of the last three Steps or their spiritual equivalent.

Now, this is not to say that compassion may not drive us to participate with other people who themselves may have a political, religious, moral, or philosophical agenda. To decide whether, when, and how to cooperate with people who may be motivated very differently from ourselves is one of the most difficult decisions to make in our practice of Step 12, and we deal with it in another Study where we can give it the consideration it deserves.

We have now made some advances in determining what actions are compassionate. We have discovered that compassionate actions are actions which are taken because they are the will of God, and that knowledge of what to do and the power to do it come about through the practice (and solely through the practice) of Steps 10 and 11 or a similar, continuous, spiritually based practice. We have learned that moralists and philosophers, intellectuals and even religious authorities may be of little help in our ongoing attempts to determine what we should do. It is not unlikely that these people may approve of our actions; but whether they approve or not cannot help us as we seek for God's will and the power to carry that out.

At this point, we may want to pause and consider an important question. We have suggested that a truly compassionate action is one which results – and can only result – from our practice of Steps 10 and 11. Well, what happens if I am deluded in some way? What happens if I believe that a particular course of action is being suggested to me by my practice of Steps 10 and 11, but – because I am actually being selfish, because I am under stress or mentally or emotionally ill, or for some similar reason – the action that I am contemplating is not compassionate at all: perhaps it is even damaging in some way?

The answer to this question lies within the immediate area of Step 11 and also outside it. It is connected strongly with our practice of Step 10, with what became the First Tradition of AA, and with what became the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions of AA.

Let's begin with what the Big Book says about our practice of Step 11. It suggests that, *[i]f circumstances warrant, we ask our wives or friends to join us in morning meditation. If we belong to a religious denomination ... we attend to that also Be quick to see where religious people are right.* In other words, the practice of Step 11 is intended to take place, at least in part, in a community. At the time the Big Book was written, there *was* no real 12-Step-based community as we understand that today. Many AA members were members of the Oxford Group, a Christian community.

This is of the greatest importance. If the practice of Step 11 takes place to some extent within a community, then it is much less likely that we are going to be deluded in some way about the actions that we believe we are being prompted to perform. Indeed, the Oxford Group had adopted as a standard practice not only the devoting of an hour every morning to what was called “quiet time,” but also, and significantly, to the “checking” of any “guidance” that might be received during that time with another member of the Oxford Group – precisely to guard against the eventuality we are now considering. Particularly with regard to significant actions we may feel drawn to perform, *and particularly when it comes to the matter of whether the action we are contemplating is truly a compassionate action,* we turn to other members of our spiritual community for help.

An additional safeguard against taking action that may be ill-considered comes from Step 10. The Big Book's treatment of Step 10 says, *When [selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, or fear] crop up, we ask God at once to remove them. We discuss them with someone immediately* The process of watching ourselves, of coming to the conclusion over and over that we do not

know what to do next, of realizing that the understanding of what we should do and the power to do it must both come from God, is preceded by our talking with someone else in our spiritual community, in order in part to ascertain that – whatever motives we may have – they are not *selfish* motives.

When AA had been in existence for twenty-one years and had indeed become a spiritual community in its own right, the importance of that community became enshrined in the First Tradition: *Our common welfare must come first: personal recovery depends upon AA unity*. In fact, something very radical had been understood by the time the Tradition was formulated, and that was that *the spiritual community had primacy over the individual member*. This is reflected in many religions too: for the knowledgeable Christian, the Body of (the members of) Christ is more important than the individual believer; in Buddhism, the *sangha* or community has primacy over the individual member of the *sangha*. In our 12-Step programs, the wisdom of the group is greater than our individual wisdom, however spiritually oriented we may believe ourselves to be. If the group, or a member of the group, tells us that the supposedly compassionate action we are contemplating is in fact selfish in some way, we do well to listen and to return to Step 10 to determine why. Compassionate action arises out of our individual practice of Steps 10 and 11, and out of the humility we have when we check our intuition and inspiration with another, spiritually-oriented member.

Finally, the Eleventh and particularly the Twelfth Traditions spell out for us that compassionate action must always be anonymous to the maximum extent that that is possible. If we look at actions that we took (before we began our practice of the last three Steps) which we believed to be compassionate, we often find that we talked about those actions, either directly and openly or covertly. We grasped at chances to let other people know what we had done. We told others of our actions in the hope that they would approve of them or of us. We mentioned them in order to influence other people to our way of thinking. Any action which is not performed “in secret” is open to the suspicion that it is not in fact compassionate. The links between anonymity and compassionate action is so important that an entirely separate Study is devoted to the subject.

These, then, are some of the tests we can use to determine whether an action we are contemplating is compassionate: Has the action arisen naturally out of our ongoing practice of Steps 10 and 11? Have we checked the action with another, closed-mouth member of our spiritual community? To the maximum extent that this is possible, will we be performing the action anonymously, without the intention of letting anyone know unnecessarily what we are doing or what we have done? If the answer to any of these questions is No, then the action is probably not compassionate.

Step 12: Compassion and anonymity

The subject of anonymity bears strongly on any consideration of compassionate action as it is understood in Step 12. Our thoughts here are an extension of the brief consideration of anonymity in another of our Studies.

This little Study on anonymity is unusual in that – unlike virtually every other Study here – it is not based primarily on the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Instead, anonymity emerged as a key issue as a result of the early experiences of AA within and outside the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, and was eventually enshrined in two of the Traditions and – very memorably – in the little card *Just For Today* which is still available through most AA Intergroups.

The two Traditions are:

Tradition 11:

Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films;

and Tradition 12:

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

The relevant part of the *Just For Today* card reads as follows:

Just for today, I will do somebody a good turn and not get found out; if anyone knows of it, it will not count.

Let us start with the following thesis on anonymity and Step 12. It is quite simple, though it will need some explanation and some qualification:

Compassionate actions are always anonymous in nature.

To the maximum extent possible, we should ensure that our compassionate actions are performed anonymously. Of course, it's impossible for all actions to be performed anonymously – since they usually directly involve another person, or other people, someone else will know at least to some extent who we are and what we have done. And as Dr. Bob observed, the only way that a person ever gets into Program is because someone else broke his or her anonymity. But the general rule still holds: where possible, our compassionate actions should be anonymous. The touchstone of anonymity tends to be this: *Have we permitted or encouraged people to find out about what we have done, who otherwise would not have known?*

Anonymity was a feature of the AA program from the start: even the book for which the fellowship was named was called *Alcoholics Anonymous*. But the reasons for anonymity in those early days were different from the reasons that lay behind the Eleventh and Twelfth

Traditions. The Foreword to the First Edition of the Big Book says, rather ambiguously, “It is important that we remain anonymous because we are too few, at present to handle the overwhelming number of personal appeals which may result from this publication. Being mostly business or professional folk, we could not well carry on our occupations in such an event. We would like it understood that our alcoholic work is an avocation.” The link between the “overwhelming number of appeals” and the professional occupations of early members is not too clear, but what is clear is that from the beginning AAs recognized that “alcoholic work” was to be performed anonymously, even though the reason given seems to be practical rather than idealistic. Later in the book, the author says, “We have concluded to publish an anonymous volume,” and since that volume contained personal stories, it also seems safe to infer that anonymity was a means of protection to some extent for these early AAs.

But the focus of anonymity in the Traditions is rather different, and reflects the experience of the fellowship in the intervening years.

The Eleventh Tradition addresses itself to the matter of keeping ourselves anonymous at the level of “press, radio, and films.” In AA's early days, a well-known baseball player sobered up and attributed his recovery to Alcoholics Anonymous. While the initial reaction of some members of the Fellowship was delight, it was soon realized that, while the average member of the American public might conclude from this that AA was effective, if the player were subsequently to get drunk then that same American public might just as logically conclude that AA didn't work. The eventual result was the Eleventh Tradition.

But it is the Twelfth Tradition that focuses directly on the spiritual significance of anonymity. The long form of the Tradition reads, *[W]e of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.*

The idea that compassionate action should be undertaken anonymously, to the maximum extent that that may be possible, is not of course unique to 12-Step fellowships. It is found in religions such as Islam (“If you disclose your charitable expenditures, they are good; but if you conceal them and give them to the poor, it is better for you” (Quran 2:271)) and Christianity (“When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret” (Mt. 6:3-4)). Although it is absent from others such as Buddhism, where compassionate acts can even be seen as a way to acquire “merit,” the general consensus seems to be that anonymity when it comes to practicing “charity” is a good thing.

In our practice of compassionate action, though, anonymity is more than “a good thing.” It is one of the marks of compassionate action; indeed, a supposed compassionate action that is not anonymous to the maximum extent possible cannot (according to our thinking here) even be called a compassionate action.

But why? Why should an action that is loving and charitable not be regarded as a compassionate action?

Let us explore again where compassionate actions come from. They come from our practice of Steps 10 and 11. In Step 10 we examine what we are thinking and feeling, and acknowledge that we do not know what to do. In Step 11, we determine by intuition and inspiration what we are to do, and we seem to be given the strength to do it. In both cases, we are turning ourselves away from what the ego appears to be suggesting and placing our entire dependence for guidance and power on something other than ourselves. It follows that, as we perform these actions, we

should continue as much as possible to keep that “I” out of the equation. Our sole contribution to the performance of that action was to accept our helplessness, our complete dependence on something other than ourselves. In no meaningful sense, therefore, can we claim afterwards, or encourage others to think, that *we* were responsible for the commission of that action.

If we lived in a world where everyone attempted to live a life based on the last three Steps, of course, no one would ever make the assumption that *we were* responsible for the action in question. They would recognize it for what it was: the natural consequence of living a life based on Steps 10 and 11.

But the fact is that *we don't* live in that sort of world. We live in a world that is constantly looking for evidence that it is not necessary to live life in that way. Particularly if we live in a western country, we find ourselves surrounded by people who want to believe the complete opposite: that it is possible to act compassionately without living the spiritual life. And in order to believe that, they must find people who are exemplars of self-motivated, supposed compassionate action and make them into temporary heroes.

If we do practice Steps 10 and 11 as a basis for determining what actions we should take, we will find increasingly that we shrink with distaste from such thinking. (At least, we will do so most of the time. Sometimes, though, we will find ourselves longing for that kind of adulation – it's a function of our humanity that this will happen, and Step 10 is there to take care of it for us when we do!) Many of us find that it is easier to cultivate anonymity as a habit if we deliberately refrain from telling *anyone* about our compassionate actions, *even friends in Program*. This takes us back to the *Just For Today* card, which we will remember reads: *Just for today, I will do somebody a good turn and not get found out; if anyone knows of it, it will not count*. We find that we are more at peace with ourselves when we refrain from telling *anyone* about *any* compassionate actions we may perform.

This is not easy. Most of us have had the rather unedifying experience of attending meetings on Step 12 and listening to the pseudo-modest remarks of members who (we now learn) sponsor lots of people, perform incessant 12-Step calls, chair groups in prisons, and – at long last! – are free to tell everyone in a meeting about what they have done simply because the topic happens to be Step 12. The *Just For Today* card tells us that – alas! – these cannot be compassionate actions, because we have told someone about them. They “do not count.” Of course, compassionate actions, even if performed anonymously, “do not count” – how can they? They are not done to *prove* anything or to *demonstrate* anything. They are done because we have no alternative. If we genuinely practice Steps 10 and 11, we cannot help but perform them. But all compassionate actions cease to be compassionate if we talk about them afterwards – for what reason could there be for mentioning them, other than self-glorification?

In the Sermon on the Mount, there is a verse that tells us that our spiritual practice cannot be discerned by others in terms of what we do. It can only be discerned in terms of *who we have become*. Our practice of the last three Steps is not, and cannot be, a function of the world's perception of the actions we take, but of the “light” that emanates from us because of who we now are. Mt. 5:16 says, *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven*. The sequence is not to see our “good works” and therefore conclude that we are a source of light. It is completely the other way around: to perceive that we are a source of light and only as a result to see the good works. And when people do this, they will not make the mistake of thinking that *we* are heroes: instead, they will understand that they are witnessing the workings of God as they understand God in this world.

Step 12: Compassionate inaction

We have so many Studies here dealing with the subject of Step 12 and compassion that the reader may end up feeling discouraged. Could the subject of compassionate action really be so complex? Is it so difficult to determine what a compassionate action is? Why is it that something that seems so simple to most people should require so much discussion in these Studies?

There are at least three important points that we can make here about compassionate action.

The first is this: Properly approached, compassionate action associated with our working of Step 12 is something that, in reality, we do not have to think about at all ... provided that we are working Steps 10 and 11 routinely, as part of our dedicated meditation practice in the morning and/or the evening, and as part of each moment of our daily lives. If we are indeed working Steps 10 and 11 in this fashion, we will find that Step 12 happens all by itself. Our practice of Steps 10 and 11 will automatically guide us towards compassionate action – we will find we are impelled to it without any effort or thought on our part. Through our practice of Step 10, we will remind ourselves frequently that we do not know what to do next, and we will admit that to God as we understand God. In Step 11, we will find that God is directing us, through intuition and inspiration, to take certain actions, and that God is also giving us the power to do what we are being guided to do. The resulting actions are Step 12-based, compassionate actions – they cannot be anything else. So – in a way – many of these Studies on Step 12 are unnecessary. A practitioner of Steps 10 and 11 will find she is performing them anyway.

Secondly, the reason we have offered so many Studies on the subject of compassion and Step 12 is this: Unfortunately, compassion is something which the majority of people in the world – whether spiritual in orientation or humanist, whether faith-driven or agnostic or atheist – believe they understand. Perhaps they do; but if they do, then they understand something very different about compassion from what the practitioner of the last three Steps will understand. Indeed, we could make out an excellent case for saying that the practitioner of Steps 10, 11 and 12 does not understand what a compassionate action is because he doesn't *need* to understand it – he merely needs to do it. *Do what?* may ask our secular friends. And the answer is: Do what God suggests through inspiration and intuition in Step 11. For the spiritual man and woman, there need be and often is no understanding at all of the actions they feel impelled to perform as a result of working Steps 10 and 11.

A recent book by a well-known author on the subject of religious belief makes this classic mistake of starting with the idea of compassionate action and then suggesting how one approaches performing compassionate actions. But this is to put the cart before the horse. The whole point about Step 12-based compassionate action is that it cannot be defined by us, simply because it can never originate with us – it must always originate as an impulse which is engendered in us by God. We need not, and indeed cannot, define what compassionate actions are. We merely perform them.

Thirdly, most compassionate action is in fact compassionate *inaction*. And that's what this little Study is about.

Let's see what we mean by this.

* * * * *

Many of us find that our involvement with compassionate inaction begins with our ongoing practice of Step 10. As we ask ourselves on a continuous basis what we are thinking and feeling, what we are doing and what we are about to do, we often find that we are feeling resentful, selfish, dishonest, or afraid, and as a result of that feeling we are about to do something which is going to harm other people or ourselves. We find ourselves in a disagreement, and realize that we are about to say something hurtful or that we are about to lose our temper. We find ourselves at a disadvantage, so we are about to say something dishonest to justify ourselves. We are afraid that we may lose something we think we have, so we are tempted to withdraw to protect ourselves. We are in a meeting at work, and realize that we want other people to think we are effective and knowledgeable, so we are about to try and dominate the meeting The list is endless, just as our encounters with our own resentments, selfishness, dishonesty and fears are endless. Feelings like these do not go away, or if they do so, they do not go away for long. Which is not surprising, for these feelings are *meant* to happen. It is the job of our brains to think thoughts and to feel feelings. There is nothing wrong with the thoughts and feelings in themselves, unless we fail to raise them to the level of awareness. Then there is a danger that we will act on those thoughts and feelings as if they were real or true.

As we raise these thoughts and feelings to the level of awareness in Step 10, therefore, we accept that we are unable to control them, and therefore unable to control the actions we make take as a result of those thoughts and feelings. This is a critical part of Step 10: our acceptance of our inability to manage ourselves and our lives. To this extent, Step 10 is a repetition of our taking of Step 1 with respect to our core addiction. We acknowledged then that we were powerless over our addictions *and that our lives had become unmanageable*. Now, as we perform Step 10 on our thoughts and our feelings, we acknowledge not only that we are powerless over them but that we are quite powerless as to what actions we will take as a result of experiencing them. The proper conclusion to our practice of Step 10 is always the same: our acknowledgment that we do not know what to do, and could not do it even if we did know.

Immediately we pass to Step 11. Step 11 is to be practiced constantly, just like Step 10 (the treatment of Step 11 in the AA Big Book is basically a gentle way of introducing us to the idea that it is to be done all the time). It is Step 11 that enables us to determine what we should do, and that gives us the power to do it. Interestingly, for most of the time our practice of Step 11 tells us to do *nothing*, and gives us the power to take no external action *with respect to the resentment, selfishness, dishonesty and fear that we have just been talking about*.

When we practice Step 11 moment by moment just as we practice Step 10, we find that – despite the disagreement we are having – we don't take the harmful action we were just contemplating. We see that the feeling we have, of being at a disadvantage, is just a feeling, so we don't make the dishonest statement we were considering. While we understand that we have a fear of losing something, we don't act on the impulse to withdraw and protect ourselves. We see that we want to impress others in a meeting, but even so we don't try and dominate them. As Step 11 merges imperceptibly with Step 12, we *simply "don't do" what we were unconsciously thinking about doing before we did Step 10*. In exactly the same way as freedom from thinking

about our core addiction “just comes” to us recovering addicts as we reach the end of Step 9 “without any effort on our part,” so the impulse to act resentfully, selfishly, dishonestly or fearfully “just goes.” *There is no real difference between the two situations.* In both cases, a Power greater than ourselves brings these things about. We do nothing: we merely surrender all over again to our helplessness, and precisely as we do this, so we receive the knowledge of what to do (or *not* to do, in this case) and the power to do it (or *not* to do it, in this case).

This “compassionate inaction,” this ability *not* to do what we were going to do, is so deeply mysterious to us recovering addicts, even those of us who routinely work the last three Steps, that we are tempted to come up with all sorts of explanations as to how we are able to refrain from these damaging actions. It is perhaps inevitable that, because we live in this secular world, we use humanistic concepts to explain why we did not act self-defensively. “I realized that it was not her fault,” we say, “so I simply didn’t say anything.” Or “I could see that I was being bloody-minded about it, so I just nodded when he told me what he was thinking.” In other words, we tend to talk about these “compassionate inactions” of ours in *rational* terms, as though we had reasoned the matter through and managed to persuade ourselves that the actions we were contemplating would benefit no one.

But these explanations simply aren’t true. It’s not the case that we refrain from these actions because we pause, see clearly what the negative results would be, and therefore decide not to perform those actions. In exactly the same way, it is not the case that we no longer drink or over-eat or gamble because we are able to pause, see clearly what the negative results would be, and therefore decide not to drink or over-eat or gamble *The two situations are completely and absolutely identical for the recovering addict who is practicing the last three Steps.* In just the same way as we are able to refrain from over-eating, gambling, or drinking solely because of the relationship we have developed with a Power greater than ourselves, so we are able to refrain from the selfish action. We don’t know *how* we can refrain because it’s not an ability that we have. In and of ourselves, we *can’t* refrain from the selfish action, any more than we can – in and of ourselves – handle our core addiction. Our ability *not* to do these things comes solely and paradoxically from our acknowledgment in Step 10 that we *do not have that ability*, followed by our obtaining that ability in Step 11.

In other words, there is a very strong link between *not* taking those selfish actions that used to be motivated by our core addictions, and *not* taking the selfish actions that we contemplate as we interact with other people. These “inactions” are compassionate because they originate in the same way as the compassionate *actions* that we have discussed here in other Studies. They originate from our acknowledged powerlessness and from our ongoing dependence on a Power greater than ourselves.

To return now to the start of this Study: It turns out that compassionate action is not quite the difficult business that some readers may have suspected from reading other Studies here on Step 12. Because these “inactions” we have described here are themselves compassionate, we can see that all of us are involved in compassionate situations to a much greater extent than we may have realized. We now understand that behaving in a compassionate manner does not merely involve taking actions that we would not otherwise have taken. It also involves – and to a much greater extent – *not* taking actions that we would otherwise have taken: selfish, self-protective, dishonest actions born of fear, self-absorption, and resentment.

Compassionate inaction is one of the keys to accepting the workings of a Power greater than ourselves in our lives. It may be that sometimes we find it hard to see that we are acting out of genuine compassion with respect to those that we live, work, and socialize with. But all of us

can see that – by virtue of our working Steps 10 and 11 – we tend *not* to do many of the selfish things that we used to do. And when we are able to see this, it perhaps makes it a little easier to understand that the path to compassionate *action* is the same: the ongoing practice, moment by moment, of Steps 10 and 11, as the gateway to “practicing these principles in all our affairs.”

Step 12: Compassion, commitment, and drudgery

This Study examines the progression of our practice of compassionate action against the background of Step 12, and it shows how that practice will inevitably involve commitment on our part, and how that commitment will – sooner or later – involve drudgery.

On the face of it, this is a gloomy conclusion to the work that we have done. Is this really where we are bound in our respective 12-Step programs – to a life of commitment and drudgery? Is there not supposed to be something more attractive, or at least something more *noble*, about our practice of the last three Steps, and Step 12 in particular?

We have already seen that most people in the world – indeed, most people in Program – misunderstand at a very deep level what a compassionate action is. In Study after Study, we have pursued the idea that compassionate action by very definition can come solely from our practice of Steps Ten and Eleven. Compassionate action is not something we comprehend and then strive to perform. Indeed, in a very fundamental way we never really understand what a compassionate action is. Actions cannot be compassionate because we perform them from a notion of duty, personal morality, self-justification and so forth. They can only be compassionate if they arise spontaneously from our practice of Steps 10 and 11. In our previous Studies, we have seen how this process works.

Very well, then: We do not understand what a compassionate action is, except by performing it as a result of working Steps 10 and 11. Our understanding comes from the working of those Steps: it can never precede it. What we are going to suggest in this little Study is that, in an analogous way, we do not understand commitment or drudgery either. We think that we do: and we think that commitment (to some extent at least) and drudgery (to a significant extent) are things we should try to avoid. What we want to consider here is that we do not understand commitment and drudgery at all unless we first understand compassionate action; and we have already determined that we can understand compassion through (and only through) our practice of Steps 10 and 11.

Let us suppose that we are already following a way of life based on the constant practice of Step 10 (accepting each moment that we do not know what to do) and Step 11 (sitting in silence to allow God as we understand God to tell us what to do and give us the strength to do it). Then in Step 12 we do what it is that God seems to be impelling us to do. So far, so good. But it is more than likely that, sooner or later, we will feel drawn to take some action which will not be done merely once, but on an ongoing basis. Suppose that we feel drawn to accept an invitation to chair or lead a 12-Step meeting. Typically, meetings are not chaired just once, and often if we volunteer to lead a meeting we will be expected to do it three or four times in succession. When a situation like this arises, we find ourselves in a different set of circumstances from when we are impelled to help someone spontaneously, when the indicated action will be performed just once. Now, whether we like it or not, we are being drawn to do something more than once – in short,

to make a commitment, of however short a duration it may be, to *repeat* an action to which we were directed from compassion.

To commit to lead a meeting three or four times may not seem like much of a burden. If, by the third week, we are wishing we had never undertaken to do it at all, at least we can say to ourselves that we can “tough it out” for just another session. But when we say that to ourselves, we are on the edge of an important truth. For what we are telling ourselves is that it is possible to do something even though we may not feel like doing it. And to be able to do something that we do not want to do is one of the fundamental rewards of recovery. That is the lesson we learned in the first three Steps about our core addiction: that with the help of God as we understand God, it was possible to do (or not to do) something, even though every fiber of our being was insisting to us that it was *impossible*. This is the heart of recovery: to discover that the very same process that enabled us to stop our core addiction when we were unable to do so on our own is the process that enables us in Step 12 to do what we would not do, and not to do what we would do.

As we progress in our recovery, we will find our Higher Power drawing us in Step 11 to do more and more things that require commitment. We take these things on, knowing very well as we do so that we do not have the strength or ability to follow through on these commitments, but that the strength and ability will be given to us as needed by that same Higher Power. And one day, we find ourselves drawn to some open-ended commitment. Perhaps it is to work regularly with someone new in Program. Perhaps it is to visit someone who is sick or old. Perhaps it is to marry someone or commit to staying with that person no matter what. These open-ended commitments, we now see, are qualitatively similar to the smaller commitments we have made and already fulfilled. The difference is merely quantitative. There is no way that, in and of ourselves, we can follow through on these commitments. But that is as it should be. We are not supposed to have the power to follow through – by contrast, we are supposed merely to acknowledge that the task we have set ourselves is completely beyond our powers. And, as we make that acknowledgment in Step 10, and “practice the presence of God” in Step 11, the power to follow through on that commitment is given to us.

Notice that we say only “the power ... is given to us.” We should not think for one moment that the power to undertake these tasks is necessarily accompanied by the *desire* to perform them. For when we commit to some task which is open-ended, we can wait in serene confidence for the day to dawn when we *committed* to perform the task but *have absolutely no desire whatsoever to follow through on that commitment*. We have reached what is perhaps the final lesson of Step 12. We are learning, in all likelihood for the very first time, what is really meant by *drudgery*.

Drudgery is the performing of a task, usually routine, to which we are to a large degree averse. For whatever reason, we don’t want to do it. Yet the task is to be done: *we committed to do it*. And now here we are, confronted with the task again, and with an urge to remove ourselves from the situation completely.

This isn’t a new sensation. It’s old – as old as our addiction itself. The practice of our addiction was a means above all of escaping drudgery: of doing something or another which would relieve us, however briefly, from the necessity of performing this task for the *n*th time. *We have come full circle in our program. This was the situation above all others which we wanted to escape from: the situation of having to do something we loathed, or to refrain from doing something we desperately wanted to do*. And now here we are again. We told ourselves and other people we would do this thing; we committed to do it; and now it appears to us as the most

tedious, boring, monotonous, non-fulfilling action anyone could be confronted with. *What in God's name are we going to do?*

Well, we're going to do the same old routine. We are watching the rising of resentment, selfishness, dishonesty and fear. This is the stuff of Step 10. We ask God at once to remove the feeling. We discuss the matter with someone else (someone who also practices these Steps). We make amends if we have harmed anyone. We resolutely turn our thoughts to someone we can help. And then Step 11: We tell God as we understand God that we are – once again! – completely out of ideas. We sit in silence and know that God is God. We ask for the intuitive thought ... and then the miracle occurs all over again. We go ahead and do what we committed to do ... *very often while simultaneously thinking how dreadful it is to "have to" do something like this.* In the words of one of the great poets of the Christian church, we "make drudgery divine."

This is what Program is all about. This is the "aim" of all that we have done. A friend in Program frequently says that recovery is about learning how to want to do what we should do. But the truth is even more profound than that. *Recovery is about learning how to do what we should do even if we don't want to.* It's easy to do something when we want to do it: that was what made us all addicts in the first place. It's learning how to do something we don't want to do – particularly when we have to do it on an ongoing basis – that is the goal, the only goal, of Program.

How many people in the world know that this is the reason for our existence? Very few. Very few people in Program. Very few people in the Church. Very few people in any spiritual movement anywhere in the world. Most of us want to believe that the reason for our existence in the finding of salvation (particularly, of course, *our* salvation), of enlightenment (particularly, of course, *our* enlightenment), of helping sobering up other people (particularly, of course, the people we think *ought* to get sober). Virtually none of us want to believe that its purpose is to learn to perform a compassionate action when the last thing we want to do is that compassionate action.

This is quite understandable. For learning on an ongoing basis how to do what we do not want to do doesn't sound like it's terribly fulfilling, does it?

And yet it is. It really is. Those of us that have discovered it know that it is the most fulfilling experience we ever have

There are at least two written works we might look at here (from a countless selection). The first is *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence (available free on-line: it's a very old work). Brother Lawrence is said to have wanted to be a monk, but he did not for some reason have the ability (some authorities hint that he had mental or emotional problems). As a result, he worked most of his life in the monastery kitchen, cooking and cleaning. To read Brother Lawrence is to be invited into the world of a man who lived Steps 10 and 11 virtually every moment of his life, and who as a result became famous far beyond the cloisters of his home. Brother Lawrence knew about God because he *lived* with God moment by moment, no matter what he was doing. The work is short, but very rewarding; it is not possible to read it without believing that Brother Lawrence was a most contented man.

The other work is the poem by George Herbert which we looked at earlier. Like Brother Lawrence, Herbert lived most of his life in relative obscurity, as an English country parson in the seventeenth century. Here once more are three verses which we quoted in the Introductory Study to Step 12:

*All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture, For Thy Sake,
Will not grow bright and clean.*

*A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.*

*This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.*

This is what Brother Lawrence knew: that every action he took was done for God, even if it was washing dishes or peeling vegetables. Brother Lawrence did these things, not because he wanted to (or despite the fact that he didn't want to), but because God asked him to do these things and gave him the power to do them, moment by moment.

To sum up: It was commitment and drudgery that we sought to avoid when we lived in our addiction. Now we take them on, sometimes willingly, sometimes less so. From time to time, though – increasingly, as our practice continues – we experience a fulfillment so profound that it cannot be doubted. Now we are “restored ... to sanity,” as Step 2 puts it. Our practice of Steps 10, 11, and 12 brings us over and over again through the process of not knowing (Step 10), to being given the knowledge of what to do and the power to do it (Step 11), to doing it (Step 12). This does not happen as a function of the exercise of our willpower, but in exactly the same way as we first began to recover from our addiction: by surrendering totally to the will of whatever we may acknowledge as our Higher Power, and by living contentedly as a result in that very powerlessness.

The Last Three Steps: Conclusion

Studies such as these are not primarily intended to shape our practice of the last three Steps, but rather to help us understand what underpins that practice. To some extent, therefore, these Studies are a luxury rather than a necessity. It's obviously much better to practice the last three Steps without any understanding of why we do them, than to understand why the practice of those Steps is important but never actually get around to doing them.

Furthermore, there are aspects of the last three Steps that we have – quite intentionally – said very little about. For example, working Step 12 by carrying “this message” to other addicts is a key part of most people's programs, and yet we have largely passed over that element and focused instead on the place of compassion in our working of Step 12. Most people pray, in the generally accepted meaning of that word, and yet we have chosen to pass over that concept of prayer, and have suggested instead that prayer is an almost automatic result of working Steps 10 and 11 as suggested in the Big Book.

But the final observations we want to make here are linked very strongly to our actual practice of the last three Steps. We want to talk about two themes which run through any meaningful practice of the last three Steps – and to some extent through our entire practice of Program. We would like to suggest that, if these themes are absent from our working of Steps 10, 11, and 12, then we cannot really be said to be working them at all.

The first of these themes is *constancy of practice*. These Steps are not to be practiced occasionally. They are to be done constantly. The Big Book, in its treatment of these Steps, does not seem to be suggesting that the practice of Steps 10, 11, and 12 is something that we attach to the lives that we lead as recovering addicts. It seems to suggest the exact opposite: that our lives instead are to be based on this constant practice. The practice comes first: it is not an afterthought or a supplement. We do not base our practice on our living the life of recovery. We base our life of recovery on the constant practice of these Steps.

Consider first Step 10. When most of us worked our first nine Steps, particularly Steps 4 through 9, we were encouraged by the thought that – if we stayed in recovery – we would only ever go through this business of self-examination, confession, and restitution once. Having finished with Step 9, we told ourselves, we could press the cruise-control button on the dashboard of recovery, sit back, and take it easy. But the treatment of Step 10 in the Big Book suggests completely the opposite. It recommends that the practice of watching ourselves, asking our Higher Power to remove selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear, discussing the matter with someone else, making amends where necessary, and turning our thoughts to someone we can help, should be undertaken *continuously*, with the very help of that Higher Power. So much for taking things easy. If we were to summarize Step 10 as briefly as possible, it might be as follows: Continue to do what you did in Steps 4 through 9 *all the time*.

The theme of constancy also appears in the Big Book's treatment of Step 11. We recall here what was said earlier: that the assumption in the Big Book is that the practice of meditation is

already an ongoing part of our recovery – that meditation is first mentioned in Step 4, almost in passing, as an assumed part of our practice of Program. It may be worthwhile to repeat the exact phrase: *We treat sex as we would any other problem. In meditation, we ask God what we should do about each specific matter.* So the “definite and valuable suggestions” about prayer and meditation which the Big Book makes in Step 11 are not suggestions that we should pray and meditate. *The assumption is that we are already doing these things.* Its suggestions are that *we should make them a constant practice.* We do it at night. We do it in the morning. We do it “as we go through the day ... [w]e pause when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action.” It becomes “a working part of the mind ... [w]e come to rely upon it.” Note that we are to “pause when ... doubtful.” That means that we are to pause constantly, for the ongoing practice of Step 10 means, as we have said several times in these Studies, that *we do not know what to do or even how to do it.*

Inevitably, the continuous working of Steps 10 and 11 which the Big Book recommends also implies the constant working of Step 12, in that the actions that we take (or the actions that, more frequently, we choose *not* to take) come *solely* from our practice of Steps 10 and 11. As we have seen, compassionate action or inaction is the hallmark of our practice of Step 12. And compassionate action is not based on the calculating mind, on what we may think is the best thing to do or to say, but on inspiration and intuition which is mediated to us moment by moment in our experience of an ongoing relationship with our Higher Power. Sure, there may be actions we take which are part of a commitment we make: but that commitment is made on the basis of that same ongoing relationship, and indeed can only be fulfilled on the basis of that relationship, since we cannot follow up on any commitment using only our own resources. Sure, sometimes that commitment turns into drudgery: but we can readily undertake tasks that are boring or monotonous provided we do so in concert with our Higher Power.

Constancy, then, is the first of the themes that run through our practice of the last three Steps. And the second is *will*.

In fact, *will* as a theme runs through the whole of the Big Book. The first nine Steps are dedicated to determining how our own willpower has damaged us and everyone else around us, to placing our will in the care of whatever Higher Power we may have, and to confession of and restitution for all the damage that the unfettered use of our willpower has caused. Now, in the last three Steps, we begin a practice that is based on determining what our will is and telling our Higher Power and someone else about it; reminding ourselves once more – with the help of our Higher Power – what we now know will happen if we strive for what we want; asking instead, on the moment-by-moment basis of intuition and inspiration, what is our Higher Power’s will for us; and finally doing what it is that our intuition and inspiration suggests, rather than what our calculating mind thinks we should do. In other words, we see what we want, we ask instead what Higher Power wants; and then, using that Power other than ourselves, we do what that Power wants. This is “the proper use of the will” of which the Big Book speaks in its treatment of Step 11.

When we first came to Program, we were confronted with the following problem: What were we to do with ourselves, given that we found ourselves powerless not to do what we wanted to do, and that when we did what we wanted to do the results were disastrous for us and for those around us? In Steps 10, 11, and 12, we find the answer; and that answer was not what we hoped for when we first began this journey. If we are to be honest, what we hoped for was that we would be able to get what we wanted – that somehow we would find the ability to want only what was good for us and everyone else, or that we could develop a partnership with a Higher

Power where sometimes we would get what we wanted and sometimes that Power would get what he or she or they or it wanted

But the answer we find in the last three Steps is entirely different and entirely new. Our will, our wants, our desires, don't go away. Instead, when they arise we watch them. We ask for help, knowing we are powerless to deal with them. We determine what it is that our Higher Power seems to want us to do. And then, suitably empowered, we do it ... *over and over and over again*. We have discovered how it is possible to want to do something, to want to do it very badly, and yet not do it. We have discovered how it is possible to want to avoid doing something, to avoid doing it at all costs, and yet to be able to do it. But that process is something we must discover *continuously*. We "are not cured ... [w]hat we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition." The reprieve may be daily. But the so-called "maintenance" – the business of watching our own *will* and asking instead for our Higher Power's *will* for us – must be undertaken *continuously* – for the rest of our lives.