

## THE 12-STEP BUDDHIST

*An Interview with Darren Littlejohn*

*Darren Littlejohn, a recovering addict and practicing Buddhist, shares his groundbreaking approach to recovery that blends deeper Buddhist spirituality and the 12-Step program, originally of Alcoholics Anonymous. In his new book, The 12-Step Buddhist: Enhance Recovery from Any Addiction, he shares his own struggle and his approach to recovery, as he takes readers through each of the 12 Steps, along with the Buddhist integration he developed for each step. In this interview (and overview of his 12-Step integration, see sidebar), Littlejohn shares his perspective, the result of years of personal struggle and spiritual seeking*

**Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM):** What's your view of addiction?

**Darren Littlejohn (DL):** In Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the old school of thought is that alcoholism is one thing and drug addiction is something else. AA fundamentalists say, "If you have a problem other than alcoholism, go find another 12-Step program." I don't see it that way. In my view of addiction—a version of attachment gone wild—I see it as a continuum. Every being has attachment but the addict has mastered it to a fine art. On one end of the spectrum is attachment, say, to a certain color. A non-addict might *prefer* a certain blue shirt. But she isn't going to go off the deep end if it happens to be in the wash. On the other end is the addict's extreme version that goes from unreasonable to totally berserk.

From a Buddhist view, addiction is caused by attachment to things we think will make us happy. It's the honey-covered razor blade. If chocolate cake is the cause of happiness, you can back a truckload up and keep eating. But, after two pieces, you're in a sugar coma [*laughs*]. Or you're bingeing and purging. In the 12-Step program, we say, "Be careful what you pray for, you just may get it." We fool ourselves into believing that the momentary pleasure we get is the source of happiness when, in actuality, it is the source of suffering. The addict has the attachment thing mastered as a way of life. It's not about a preference but a desperate clinging, a grasping and going after something as if your brain—and there's brain science to support this—and life depends on getting your drug of choice.

**IYM:** Are you primarily a Buddhist, a 12 Stepper or ?

**DL:** I look at life mainly through the Buddhist lens. In recovery you always identify yourself through that view. Sometimes I shift focus and come from the perspective of addict and sometimes I come from Buddhism. What I'm suggesting is: Stand over here; then stand over there and see where the common threads are. See through both lenses at the same time. The 12-Step program may not come right out and say it's all really emptiness. But it says to abandon yourself to God, as you understand God, and turn your thoughts to helping others in need. Those are also Buddhist principles. I had a spiritual epiphany when I experienced the connections between these two paths. Having participated in years of psychotherapy, studying it and working in the field, I found it hard to divorce myself from what I learned when I became a

Buddhist. These two paths complement each other.

I differentiate and yet, I don't think integrating them waters them down. I enjoy the common threads. If you're looking for a Buddhist version or an alternative to the 12 Steps, you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm for taking the essence of each step, what works for you, but really being part of the 12-Step community. The concept of one addict talking to another is *key* in recovery. If you try and substitute that with something else, it's not as effective. If you want to be the one addict in your Buddhist group, good luck. I tried it without much success. In 12-Step work, it's full disclosure, 24 hours a day, but that doesn't work when you are the token recovering guy in your Buddhist group [*laughs*].

**IYM:** What are other challenges for addicts?

**DL:** You can't tell an addict, "Don't drink, just watch your breath." When my mind is completely out of control and I am doing mental back flips, trying to get sober, I can't just watch my breath. If I am newly sober and trying to meditate and all the things I had covered up with the substances come flying out all at once, watching my breath isn't going to do it. When you try to talk to your Buddhist teacher, what the teacher has to say is profound and meaningful and could lead you to enlightenment eventually, but it is of limited impact when you are in an addict state of mind. Spiritual teachers need to develop the skill and knowledge about the severity and depth of the ignorance and attachment of an addict. They need to know what the mind of an addict is like and encourage that person to get into the 12-Step recovery process.

**IYM:** You say we can learn a lot from the mind of an addict.

**DL:** You can gain a lot of insight into your own mind. If you walk the streets of Vancouver, British Columbia, where drugs are used openly, you can watch addicts feed their habits. You can also watch them run out. As they reach for the high frantically, you see them feeling total bliss and fulfillment. From there an addict begins to panic—as if they were falling down an elevator shaft—as they are thinking about how they will get their next fix. By reading my book, even a non-addict can observe this relentless cycle of desire, despair, clinging and attachment. You may recognize you have those qualities, maybe on a more subtle level.

IYM: What led you to integrate Buddhism and the 12 Steps?

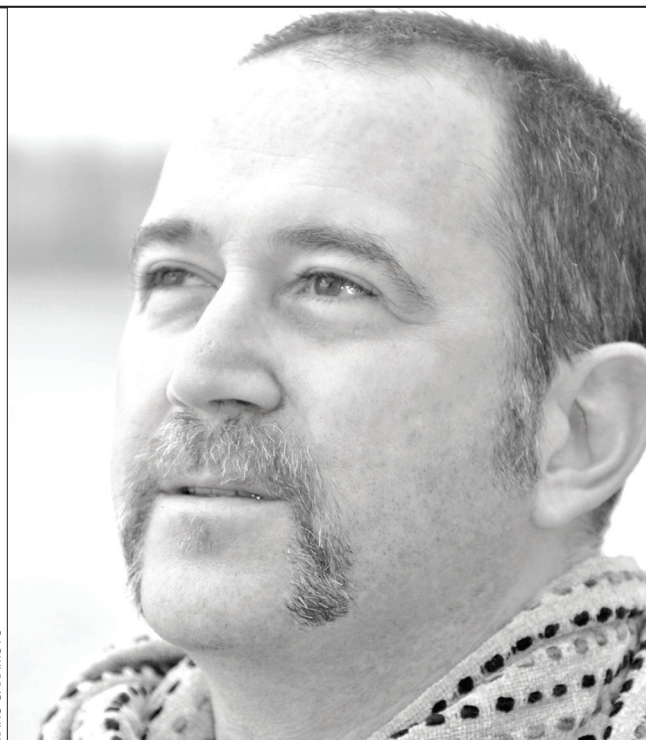
DL: In 12-Step programs, we offer abstinence and suggest a meaningful spiritual life. There are promises we talk about: knowing a new freedom and happiness, not regretting the past. But few people even scratch the surface of those promises. I did years of therapy and studied psychology, almost completing a master's degree before I realized that the psychologists didn't have all the answers. I was nine years sober and couldn't find the spirituality for which I was looking, but I knew I needed the 12 Steps to stay sober. What led me to integrate the two was the suffering and struggle to find the spiritual awakening that I was promised when I walked in the door. So, I started turning over more spiritual rocks, exploring different paths.

I created this integration to save myself. I couldn't feel like a whole person who fit into a singular treatment like therapy or the 12-Step program or Buddhism. I have had to connect the threads, to take the threads of my own consciousness and understanding and weave them to create a new spiritual garment I could wear—which is being a 12-Step Buddhist. It is woven from the thread of this struggle. Finding Tibetan Buddhism and embarking on that path was the beginning of the integration process. The Tibetan Buddhists have a canon of teachings into which I began to tap, which addresses every possible state of mind. Buddhists have been doing psychology for 2500 years!

IYM: What does Buddhism have to offer addicts?

DL: Buddhism helps me realize that there are others in the world, beyond me and my self-obsessions—that I'm not the center of the universe. I go from being a spiritual alien to being interconnected with all humanity. It's the difference between feeling alone and suicidal and being happy, joyous and free. Buddhism helped me to understand what it really means to rely on a higher power, or on something more than just my ego, my self-destructive tapes and behaviors. I started to see that *my* best thinking got me into addiction. In Buddhism I learned that I had this self that I was clinging to, and defending and creating boundaries around. The epiphany was that that self, the ego, is a dream-like apparition. It comes apart when we sit and meditate. It's like Pema Chodron says: We are on an island and the *dharma* ocean starts lapping away the fragments of sand. We are left on water and we float on the water and have to become one with the water. We gain that real knowledge of the interconnectivity of all of us.

*Darren Littlejohn has lived the life of a full-time addict. After taking the rough road of recovery, he went on to earn a BA in psychology, did extensive graduate coursework and became a practitioner of Zen and several systems of Tibetan Buddhism. Darren dedicates his life to speaking to those seeking a way out of their destructive habits of addiction. [www.the12stepbuddhist.com](http://www.the12stepbuddhist.com).*



MARC SAKAMOTO

Darren Littlejohn

### *12-Step Buddhist Integration*

**Step 1** Acceptance: Buddhist meditation on suffering and powerlessness.

**Step 2** Confidence: Buddhist deity meditation (outer and inner Yoga).

**Step 3** Refuge: In the Buddha, *Dharma* and *sangha*.

**Step 4** Self-examination: Tibetan teachings on moral ethics and Thought Training (practice of Bodhisattva perfections).

**Step 5** Self-honesty: Meditation on vastness of consciousness.

**Step 6** Willingness: Buddhist teachings on impermanence.

**Step 7** Humility: Understanding the *kleshas* or *nivaranas* (obstructions) and meditation on humility.

**Step 8** Forgiveness: Practice of *tonglen* (taking in and giving out).

**Step 9** Retribution: Practice of advanced *tonglen* and cultivation of *paramitas* (generosity, moral ethics, patience).

**Step 10** Admission: Meditation on the Four Opponent Powers (refuge, regret, recitation, renunciation) and *Vajrasattva* practice.

**Step 11** Seeking: Mindfulness meditation and prayer (*Heart Sutra* and others).

**Step 12** Unconditional love: Selfless service and *Bodhisattva* vow.