

# QUIET MIND RECOVERY

overcoming addiction through self discovery

Terry M. Orr - 2005

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## Preface

The following article is an exploration of the relationship between the mind and the body, and how the interaction between the two influences the way we view our world.

I am someone who struggled with chronic alcoholism for over thirty years before I found a solution deep within my own inner being - a solution that has enabled me to break the cycle of addiction. I am writing this in the hopes that it may help others increase the realization of their own human potential for a more healthy, productive, and happier life.

I owe my recovery, and indeed my life, to the kindness and patience of many people over the years who have tirelessly stood by me during my darkest hours. The list of family members and others whom I have adversely affected, and to whom I will be forever grateful is long. My daughter, my parents, my wife, and my step son are among them. The family of an active alcoholic is often the hardest hit - as they can only stand by confused, heartbroken, and helpless - awaiting the day that may never come when their loved one finally finds a way out of the vicious cycle of destruction and madness that prevails as long as the alcoholic or addict continues their insane behavior.

While the opinions expressed herein are drawn from my own life experiences, many of the ideas and philosophies are not my own, but have been derived from various philosophers, teachers, and scientists who have had an impact on my thoughts and beliefs. S.N. Goenka, the world renowned meditation teacher, and international diplomat is one to whom I will be forever in dept for his providing an opportunity for me to learn [Vipassana meditation](#).

The Russian mystic Helena Petrovna Blavatsky said: "There is no religion higher than truth". The ultimate truth about ourselves is independent of cultural background or religious preferences and beliefs. It has been said that "the truth will set you free". For

those of us seeking freedom from addiction, discovering the truth about ourselves is absolutely essential.

It is important to note that this article is not affiliated with, or supported by any organization, religion, individual, or group. While there are those who have made suggestions and provided valuable feedback for this article, I alone am responsible for its contents.

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## Observation

"Time is what prevents everything from happening at once"

— John Archibald Wheeler - American physicist, professor at Princeton University

Scientific investigation in the field of quantum mechanics indicates that the entire universe is affected by the presence of an observer. This is true not only in the present time, but also as it relates to the past (memory) and the future (imagination) as well. Indeed, the very pattern of the electrons in our brain is conditioned by observation.

While it's true that the existence of matter is conditioned by the presence of an observer, it is possible to be unconscious of what we are ACTUALLY observing. For example, many people have seen a common stereogram poster which at first appears like a bunch of random colored dots - until the mind becomes aware of the underlying pattern - and then an image appears. This is a case of observing something (the image) without being fully aware of what we are observing (the underlying pattern).

The more we increase our conscious awareness of the universe, the more we are able to understand the true nature of the world in which we live, move, and have our being. Ideally, we are fully aware of what we are observing - of *how things really are*.

Ignorance is a condition of not being aware of things *as they really are*; and it is a difficult condition to overcome - because to overcome ignorance, we must gain the very knowledge that ignorance itself is hiding from us. This article will take a look at what we can do to help raise the veil of ignorance that can keep us locked in the cycle of addiction and misery.

It isn't difficult to see how a heightened ability to observe things *as they really are*, can help us gain useful insight into problems which have previously baffled us.

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## Self Knowledge

"To Thine Own Self be True"

— William Shakespeare - English dramatist, playwright and poet. (1564-1616)

An accurate knowledge of "self" is an important component in the maintenance of a healthy and happy sustained recovery from addiction. These pages explore the relationship between the mind, the body, and the self, and how this knowledge can be

put to practical use in the treatment of addiction.

I use the umbrella term "addict" to refer to both alcoholics and drug addicts. Alcohol is a drug, and recovery from alcoholism follows a similar path to recovery from any addiction.

The idea that recovery from addiction can be assisted by self knowledge is not a very popular one in some recovery circles. For example, in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, we have the following statement:

"But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be *absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge*." This is a point we wish to emphasize and re-emphasize, to smash home upon our alcoholic readers as it has been revealed to us out of bitter experience".

— Alcoholics Anonymous - Big Book page 39.

Yet at the same time, members of Alcoholics Anonymous are frequently encouraged to follow the axiom "*To Thine Own Self be True*". One might wonder how it is possible to be true to ourselves without knowing what it is that we are being true to!

What is meant by the term "*self-knowledge*"? Usually we identify ourselves with our thoughts and our feelings. We say things like "I am sad" or "I am happy".

What is this constantly changing *self* that can be sad one moment and happy the next, then perhaps angry or embarrassed moments later? How is it that with very firm conviction an alcoholic can swear never to drink again, only to find themselves before the end of the day (or even hour) in utter defeat; with that familiar incomprehensible demoralization" from having once again been overpowered by their addiction?

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## The Monkey Mind

"What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: Our life is the creation of our mind"

— Buddha - Hindu Prince Gautama Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism. (563-483 B.C.)

If you sit quietly and observe your thoughts for a few minutes, you will undoubtedly notice that your mind constantly moves from one thought to another, like a monkey in the tree tops jumping from one branch to the next. Furthermore, you may notice that your mind is usually involved with imaginary things that don't really exist at all.

Most of the time our minds are occupied with either the past or the future - not the present. And the nature of our thoughts is usually one of two kinds: we are either thinking about what we want but don't have, or we are thinking about what we do have but want to get rid of. The following four states of mind dominate the average person's thoughts:

- Thoughts about the past.
- Thoughts about the future.

- Thoughts about what we want.
- Thoughts about what we don't want.

Thoughts about the past and the future are totally imaginary. The past doesn't exist - except in memory, and the future doesn't exist either - except in imagination.

For example, our thoughts might be occupied with some happy or sad event in the past. We could be thinking about the great time we had a year ago, and then our minds switch to the future as we figure some way to repeat the enjoyable event. Or we might be thinking about the person who "did us wrong" last week, and what we will say to them next time we see them. Most of the time we don't exactly like the way things are at the moment, so we are constantly looking for ways to change our situation or circumstance. This inability to be content with the *here and now* and with *the way things are* is the cause of much misery.

And to make matters worse, we are often unsatisfied even once we finally get what we think we want. Then there is the added fact that things always seem to have a way of changing on us. The shiny new car gets a dent, the wife leaves us, the new job gets boring, now that we have a two car garage - we want a three car garage. It never ends! Sometimes we feel like we're walking in quicksand, never reaching the final goal of our elusive utopia where everything will be perfect and stay that way.

It is very important to fully understand that everything is constantly changing as we pass from one moment to the next. Nothing remains the same for very long. This is a law of nature. Change occurs as long as we exist in the dimensions of time and space. The atoms that make up the physical universe are constantly vibrating trillions of times a second as they pass in and out of existence. This is the process that allows change to take place, and for time to play its role in the dance of life.

Let's add the following point to our list of truths:

- Everything is impermanent - that means everything is constantly changing.

The fact that everything is impermanent carries with it a mixed blessing. On one hand, what we like won't last forever, yet on the other hand, what we dislike won't last forever either.

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## Acceptance

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"

— Reinhold Niebuhr - American theologian. (1892 - 1971)

Acceptance of things *as they really are* is absolutely essential for any kind of healthy recovery. Not accepting things *as they are will* only add to our storehouse of misery, and adding to our misery will definitely add to the likelihood of alcohol and drug abuse by people who have difficulty in that area. We must give up this craving for things to be

as we would like them to be - and learn to accept things *as they actually are*.

Practicing acceptance is not a once-a-day affair - to be done only at the end of a long day before we go to bed. Acceptance has to be a continuous state of mind - because change is continuous. Serenity depends on acceptance, just as the butterfly depends on its wings. It is impossible to maintain serenity if we are constantly at odds with the world as it is currently manifesting in our lives. As soon as we stop accepting things *as they are*, we begin adding fuel to our fire of misery, and our attention becomes painfully focused on our perceived inadequacy of "people, places, and things".

You might have noticed that if you have a toothache or a sore thumb, how much worse the pain is when you focus your attention on it, and how if you happen to become distracted by something else, you may temporarily "forget" about the discomfort.

Often if something unpleasant happens we will focus on it, and say to ourselves over and over: "I hate this, I hate this, why do things have to be this way, oh why, oh why!" By obsessing this way, we tend to amplify the situation, and often become overwhelmed by it like a runaway train.

Understand also, that a healthy acceptance of things *as they are*, does not give us a license to become completely passive and inactive in the world of human endeavor. It does no good going around throwing up our hands saying: "oh well, this sucks, I guess I'll just accept it", or "I see someone being abusive to a child, but I guess I'll just ignore it because I have no power over anything". No! The well known Serenity Prayer provides us a good balance for acceptance:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"

We must learn how to be positive and active participants in the world - accepting that other people have interests which do not always coincide with ours. Learning how to communicate our needs while listening and appreciating the needs of others is very important. I suggest everyone read the book [Nonviolent Communication by Marshall B. Rosenberg](#), which is about learning how to communicate in compassionate, non-confrontational ways, and learning how to appreciate the needs of other people while expressing our own needs. This is especially important for those of us who are in recovery, because our self-indulgence and self-centeredness has often crippled us in this important area of human interaction and communication.

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## The Eye of the Beholder

"there is a quality of energy which can be called an awareness - an awareness in which there is no evaluation, judgment, condemnation or comparison but merely an attentive observation, a seeing of things exactly as they are, both inwardly and outwardly, without the interference of thought, which is the past"

— Jiddu Krishnamurti - Indian philosopher. (1895 - 1986)

Have you ever wondered why people don't see things quite the same way as you do? Do you ever find yourself saying or thinking things like: "How can people stand that music", or "I can't see why people voted for that candidate", or "Why can't people see how insensitive they are"? Clearly not everyone perceives things the same way.

So, what or who determines the "*right*" way to see things? Is there even such a thing as a "*right*" way? How often is our view based on a truly accurate perception of reality, instead of just our personal interpretation? To answer these questions we need to take a look at how the mind processes information when it decides the nature of how things are in our world.

One of the best models we have of how the mind works was described by Gautama the Buddha nearly 2500 years ago. Of course the nature of the mind existed before Buddha explained it, just as the nature of gravity existed before Newton described it. Buddha's description of the mind has no more to do with Buddhism as a religion than the principles of brotherly love have to do with Christianity.

The mind consists of the following four major elements:

- Consciousness - observation.
- Perception - interpretation - judgment - memory database.
- Sensation - feeling.
- Reaction - action.

You might think that the body is responsible for physical sensation, but it is not. Pain in the body will come and go according to our mental focus. Without the mind, the body is not capable of feeling anything.

Let's see how this works. Say you see some outside object with your eyes. First, the eye sense (sight) transmits information about eye contact. Next, the awareness part of the mind becomes conscious of the outside stimuli. No judgment is made about the sensed object up to this point. You are just aware of it. Next, the interpretation part of the mind makes an evaluation about the object, and decides whether it is "good", "bad", or "neutral". Then, the mind creates some kind of sensation in the body. If the object is judged "good" the mind will generate pleasant sensations. Likewise, if the object is judged "bad" the mind will generate unpleasant sensations. Finally, the mind will formulate some kind of reaction depending on the sensation provoked. If the sensation is pleasant, you might smile. If unpleasant, you might run away.

The important thing to understand about this mental sequence is that we react according to the physical sensation produced in our body by our mind. This information

holds a very important key to understanding the process of addiction and craving. WE DO NOT CRAVE THE SUBSTANCE, WE CRAVE THE PHYSICAL SENSATION THAT THE SUBSTANCE PROVIDES US.

Alcoholics for example, are NOT addicted to alcohol; they are addicted to the sensation that alcohol provides them with. The sensation provided by alcohol might at times be a sense of euphoria, at other times it might be a sense of numbness, or a lack of feeling. Often, alcohol provides a kind of oblivion; it made our feelings of guilt, and fear, and shame, and self-worthlessness go away temporarily. If alcohol gave us the same sensation as eating a slice of bread, I doubt that it would cause some of us the problems that it does. Of course, there are lots of people who are addicted to food. Actually they too are addicted to the sensations that accompany their excessive consumption - not the food itself.

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## The Foundation

"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets"

— Jesus Christ - the book of Mathew 7:12 Holy Bible New Testament

All great religions and philosophers throughout the ages have taught the importance of living a moral life based on a common code of ethics.

Webster's Dictionary defines the word "moral" as: "of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior".

The statement "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" captures the essence of living a moral life. I wouldn't like someone to try to kill me; therefore I shouldn't kill others, I don't like to be lied to; therefore I shouldn't lie to others, I don't like people to steal from me; therefore I shouldn't steal from others, I wouldn't like someone to rape my daughter; therefore I should not commit rape, etc.

The following five principles are a good basic code of ethics for moral behavior:

- Abstain from killing any living creature.
- Abstain from stealing.
- Abstain from sexual misconduct.
- Abstain from telling lies.
- Abstain from all intoxicants.

One thing to keep in mind is that whenever we commit an immoral act, the first person we harm is ourselves. It doesn't matter whether or not someone else knows about our transgression - WE KNOW. It is often our own knowledge of having done something wrong that punishes us the most. In fact, as soon as we even think about committing an immoral act we loose the balance of our mind. And once an addict looses the balance of their mind, it isn't long before they start sliding down that slippery slope leading to relapse. Without a foundation of moral conduct we will never be truly happy, and any

sobriety we have will be tenuous at best.

Most people will agree that living a moral life is very commendable, and even necessary for a peaceful and healthy society. The problem for the addict however, is that their lives have largely been anything but moral! They have lied, they have stolen, they have committed adultery, and they have certainly used intoxicants. Many of us have done all these things to excess.

All this talk about morality is well and good, but how does one *become* moral? Certainly many of us have tried to be better people - only to feel worse than ever when we fell short of our goals. We know the difference between right and wrong, we understand that our behavior is not good, and we feel horrible about our moral transgressions - and yet the pinnacle of that high mountain of morality often seems unattainable.

It does well to remember that change takes time, and not be too hard on ourselves. Many of us suffer from misplaced perfectionism, which creates too large a gap between what we are now, and what we think we should be. This perfectionist attitude can be very dangerous and self-defeating, because it creates an all-or-nothing stance that is unrealistic and doomed to failure. I find the following advice valuable in this regard:

"Many of us exclaimed, "What an order! I can't go through with it." Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual **progress** rather than spiritual perfection."

— Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous - Page 60.

Living a moral lifestyle is essential for recovery from addiction; but it may not be enough. Good moral people are still prone to depression, anger, jealousy, etc., and for addicts these things can spell disaster.

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## Application

"The final mystery is oneself."

— Oscar Wilde - Irish poet, dramatist, novelist and critic (1854-1900)

Attempting to live a moral life is unlikely to bear lasting fruit unless our efforts are steadfast and continuous. Every addict knows how firm convictions with sincere resolution, can melt like snow as some new onslaught of craving overcomes them. This **lack of continuity** is really the crux of the problem for the addict. If only they could hold on to their thoughts of abstinence!

Before we examine what can be done to help maintain the continuity of our commitment to sobriety, let's list some key truths that we have covered so far:

- The mind is usually focused on thoughts about the past or the future.
- The mind is constantly occupied with objects of desire or aversion.

- All things are impermanent - that means they are constantly changing.
- We must learn to accept things *as they are* - not how we would like them to be.
- We are NOT addicted to the substance. We are addicted to the sensation that the substance provides for us.
- Adherence to a moral code of ethical behavior is a necessary foundation for a healthy, happy recovery.

Knowledge about the nature and cause of addiction is only useful if it leads to practical application. The famous Swiss psychiatrist Dr. Carl Jung once told a patient under his care for chronic alcoholism the following hard fact:

"Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called **vital spiritual experiences**. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them."  
— Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book page 27.

Much has been written on how to bring about such a "vital spiritual experience". Words like "surrender" and "acceptance" and "higher power" are heard often in recovery circles. Let's take a look at some practical steps that may be helpful in our journey to recovery and long-term sobriety.

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## The Quiet Mind

"What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself."  
— Abraham Maslow - U.S. psychologist and philosopher (1908-1970)

Given that the root of our problem with addiction lies in the tendencies of our own mind, it seems obvious that we must find a way to change those tendencies.

You may think that you are already quite aware of your thoughts - but the mind is very quick, and often our awareness is too slow. How often have you done something only to wonder moments later why you did it? How often have you told a lie (or a half-truth) before you even realized what you were saying? Old self-defeating behavior is so deeply entrenched in us that we are often unaware of its insidious and automatic influence.

Just as physical exercise is used to train the body, meditation can be used to train the mind. There are many forms of meditation, just as there are many forms of physical exercise. When we meditate, some object or other is required to serve as a focus for the mind. Often the subject of meditation will be some religious object or image, or a word or phrase (mantra) repeated over and over. While there are benefits to those kinds of meditation, they do not serve our purpose - because we need a meditation object that is acceptable and understandable to all people regardless of cultural, educational, or

religious background.

I have found that the best, most effective way to learn meditation is by attending a formal meditation course, where you can be free from the everyday distractions of home and work. Fortunately there are currently many locations around the world where these kind of meditation retreats are available. Information about 10-day Vipassana meditation courses in your area can be found at: <http://www.dhamma.org>. There is no fee attached to attending one of these meditation courses other than your time and expense getting there. Students who have already completed one of these courses may offer a donation for the benefit of future students.

There is no way that I can over-emphasize how valuable I have found Vipassana meditation to be! Through meditation, I believe that I have found a scientific method for inducing that "**vital spiritual experience**" that Dr. Jung was talking about many years ago. You truly owe it to yourself to learn how to plumb the depths of your own being. Most likely you will be surprised with what you find!

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## Experience

"When one experiences truth, the madness of finding fault with others disappears."  
— S. N. Goenka - World renowned teacher of [Vipassana meditation](#)

Development of an ethical and helpful lifestyle depends on our heightened awareness of the present moment. But there is little use in simply having awareness of the fact that we are craving a drink, or that we are angry, or sad. We can say: "Yes, yes, I am totally aware of what I am doing wrong, but how can I prevent myself from becoming overwhelmed by my anger, or my depression?"

Intellectually we can understand what enlightened teachers and philosophers throughout the ages have reminded us: that attachment to objects or outcomes is the cause of all our misery. Intellectually we can understand that since everything is constantly changing, there is not much point becoming attached to things that are only temporary by nature.

Unless our intellectual understanding is accompanied by experiential understanding, it just remains theoretical. We can read all the great scriptures of the world, go to 12-step meetings regularly, participate in alcohol and drug treatment programs - with no lasting results. Theoretical knowledge is good, even necessary; but by itself it may not be able to bring about the needed transformation of mind.

Direct observation of ourselves, at a very deep personal level, within the core of our own being, must accompany any theoretical knowledge; or else our understanding of ourselves will be superficial at best, and not up to the task of empowering significant personal change. Only when we actually experience a truth does it become of practical value to us. Someone can describe to you how to ride a bicycle - but without the direct experience, you will be unable to ride one yourself.

The missing link between intellectual and experiential knowledge can be found when we closely observe the sensations within our own bodies. The truth of impermanence is realized when we can directly observe the sensations of craving and aversion arising and passing away from one moment to the next. Once we experience this truth of impermanence, we are in a very real position to be granted the results of the Serenity Prayer:

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference".

If you have a sensation of craving, or anger, or depression, or pain, or pleasure, don't react to it. Learn how to observe the sensation objectively - knowing that it won't last forever. Learn how to watch your feelings, and let them go. Learn how to observe them coming and going, arising and passing away. Neither suppress nor obsess over your temporary fleeting sensations.

Constant awareness of impermanence leads automatically to detachment from the fleeting sensations of craving. This is the development of wisdom, of true self-knowledge, of recovery from addiction, and elimination of misery.