

Recovery Through Mind Training

by Sally Clay



Early in the morning I open my computer and load some colorful Buddhist images on the screen. I pull out my practice implements, a Tibetan bell and dorje, along with a rosary made of sandalwood. Then I ignite a stick of incense and light a red votive candle in a crystal holder. Finally, I open iTunes to a special playlist that I call “Daily Practice.” These are a series of prayers and mantras recorded by Buddhist monks and practitioners, and I chant along with them for an hour or so every day. And that is the secret to my recovery from mental illness.

I first experienced madness many years ago when I was a junior in college, and it was a life-shattering experience. I became wildly psychotic and had to be carried off to a mental hospital in a strait jacket. At that time I was hospitalized for nearly six months, and my psychiatrist later confided to me that he had feared that I would never return to sanity. Mental health treatment was very different in those days at the start of the 1960’s. Most people who became as psychotic as I was very often wound up incarcerated for months in mental institutions, and many of them stayed there for life. At that time Thorazine had just been introduced, and I was given massive doses of it.

Becoming mentally ill was, in a very real sense, the end of a person’s life. Although I was lucky enough to get out of the hospital in six months, I found that I had become a non-person. I was a feeble shadow of my former self, and the future stretched ahead dully as something to dread. Everything that had meant anything to me, including most of my friends and any shred of self-respect, was gone. My college would not take me back, so I had to settle for a business secretarial course. A year or so later I got married and tried to resume something that passed for a normal life, but I never could make it. A few months after I married I cracked up again, and before long it became evident that whatever it was that happened to me—mania, madness, mental illness—would be an ever present threat. It would creep up on me from behind, always a catastrophic surprise waiting in the wings.

In six years of marriage I was hospitalized nearly as many times. The last time was a nearly two-year stay in the Institute of Living, a long-term private mental institution. Before I left there I had thirty shock treatments, and when that did not work, I made a nearly successful suicide attempt. Finally I was released from the IOL, but my marriage was destroyed and in the divorce trial I lost custody of my children, whom I now saw only on weekends and holidays.

Doggedly I kept on going. Despite all of the breakdowns, I had maintained a certain spiritual outlook since an early age. Silent prayer and meditation had always been at the core of my faith, and at the IOL I had attended religious services every week. With that small kernel of hope, I pulled together the courage to start from scratch yet another time. I was able to set up housekeeping as a single woman in the city, and I found a clerical job at a printing company. I joined the choir in my church and did my best to be a good mother during the times I was allowed to see my daughter.

I have always tried to be a good person. During the periods between my breakdowns, I was careful to lead a good life. I fulfilled all of my duties first as a wife and mother and then as an employee and friend. I did not keep my mental illness secret, but I still conducted myself well enough that I was accepted and respected in the world around me. The monster of insanity, of course, was always looking over my shoulder. Within a year or so of getting my job in the city, I again began dealing with manic episodes and the depression that followed. Just as these

experiences led to the loss of marriage and family, so my Jekyll-and-Hyde behavior shocked and frightened any new acquaintances and colleagues. I did not like to admit it, even to myself, but I knew that I had failed and damaged people that I loved. The anger and aggression that came out during my episodes turned me into a monster myself. Even worse, I had neglected my children, because the long absences caused by my hospitalizations must have seemed like abandonment to them.

In my mid thirties, I tried to start over once again by moving to the country with a new lover, a woman I had met at NOW meetings. I found a good job with a local newspaper and successfully pursued my career as writer and editor. Here again, however, the same pattern repeated itself and I again struggled with episodes of madness. By this time deinstitutionalization had made it possible to go in and out of the hospital for short stays without being trapped there, so for the most part I tried to sit out the episodes of madness at home. But the unexpected arrogance and irrationality that went along with the mania were too much for my partner, and she left me to endure the torments of my delusions alone.

It was at this time that I began to explore spiritual alternatives to the churches I had attended in the past. At the suggestion of a colleague at the newspaper, one Friday evening I drove to a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center in the next state. Over that weekend I was introduced to a way of thinking and a spiritual practice that suddenly put everything in a new perspective. I hungrily listened to some teachings, attended meditation sessions, and purchased a handful of books to bring home with me. Buddhism had always seemed too passive for me—kind of “spacey” and irrelevant. But the first thing that I discovered as I began to study it was that it was really a psychological system. The books that I read precisely addressed the altered states of consciousness that I had experienced both in madness and in prayer. This was, literally, a revelation.

I had always known that there was an essential connection between my madness and spirituality, but I had never found a way to put the two together in a constructive way, with the possible exception of my prayer experience at the IOL. The next months were a roller coaster ride that was alternately joyful and dangerous. As I visited the meditation center and then a Tibetan monastery, spiritual discoveries came with breathtaking clarity, but I had to deal with flights of madness that arose alongside them. At one visit to Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery, I became manic one evening when the lamas and other staff members were out to dinner at a local residence. Filled with spiritual passion, I became annoyed with the other lay visitors who were laughing and joking in the reception hall. I got it into my head that they were desecrating the monastery, and impulsively I ran into the dining room and pulled down the lever to the fire alarm on the wall. The effect was instantaneous. A loud bell sounded throughout the building, and in the kitchen a poisonous white substance was released from the ceiling, covering every surface with a sticky white powder.

I was as stunned by this as was everybody else, and I quickly retreated to my room on the third floor, where I pulled out my bodhi seed rosary and started saying mantras. That is where I stayed all night, awake, not knowing when the lamas were coming home and what they would do with me. Early the next morning a nun who was staying there came up to talk with me at the request of the lamas. She was gentle and kind, and very sympathetic, but in the end she was asking me to leave. I could only panic. I was in no condition to drive the several hundred miles that it would take to get home, so I refused to go.

A little later the police arrived and arrested me for trespassing. They said they would have to take me to the judge in town, and as they escorted me to the police car, we were joined by the nun and two of the lamas, who followed us to court and sat with me while we waited for the judge. When the judge arrived, I pled “guilty,” and he sentenced me to jail for a week. I served my time in an unusual solitary cell that had piped-in rock music. When released from jail after this

experience, my mind was in total confusion and I had nowhere to go. Somehow I made my way to a motel, where I stayed for several days, drinking bottles of wine that I had delivered to my room. Eventually, when I could not pay my bill, the motel manager had me picked up and committed to the state mental institution in the next county. I was held there for several weeks, over Christmas and New Years, in conditions so hellish and dismal that I was obliged to get my head together, just to get away from there.

Finally I was able to drive all the way home to my single apartment in the city. It was time for another fresh start. This time I got a new job at a radio station and, remembering all the wine I had drunk in the motel, I joined Alcoholics Anonymous. I decided to make AA my spiritual path, and I also returned to church and joined another choir. At this point I assumed that I had worn out my welcome with the Buddhists.

I attended AA regularly and benefited greatly from the various types of meetings and sponsorship that introduced me to the value of peer support. However, after a year clean and sober, I broke down again. Clearly, eliminating alcohol was something I could easily do, but I was still powerless over madness. Now I even lost my friends in AA, and by this time whatever health insurance I had had was gone. I could no longer pay the bills in private hospitals, so my episodes of loud music and delusions were interrupted not by men in white coats but by police officers, who transported me to the state mental hospital. There I would wander the silent halls and take my Thorazine for a week or so until I came down from the manic high and reestablished myself as a non-person just getting through life as unobtrusively as possible.

I entered a period that was to last for the next few years, when once or even twice a year, I was overtaken by a manic episode, spent a week or two in the state mental hospital, and returned to my apartment, depressed, to start all over again. This usually happened like clockwork around my birthday in August. It became difficult to hold onto a job.

On one of these visits to the state hospital, I began to figure out that the peer support that had been so comforting and helpful at AA meetings could also be put to use here. Instead of curling up in a fetal position on the couch in the dayroom, I began talking with other patients and listening to them the way that people had listened to me in AA meetings. As I did this, I remembered something that a lama had told me when I was staying at the Buddhist monastery. He had encouraged me to accept the spiritual insights of my madness and to use what I had learned from it to help other people. Now this advice seemed to click into place.

This time when I stumbled back into my apartment with its sink overflowing with dirty dishes and phonograph records strewn over the floor, I was ready to transform myself once again. In a kind of prayer I called upon the presences that had helped me in the past—at the IOL I had assumed it was God and His angels—and asked them to guide me. This led me to join a new organization in town composed of families of people like me and a few of the people who had mental illnesses themselves.

This time I was onto something. I became the leader of a small support group of the other people struggling with mental illness—my peers—and this group grew to be one of the first peer-run organizations of its kind in the country. I realized that I had found my vocation in life. From that point onward, my mission was to organize and advocate for people who, as one advocate put it, “experience mood swings, fear, voices, and visions.”

As I did this work, my disposition brightened and expanded, and along with that my attraction to the Buddhist point of view returned. I still sang in an Episcopal choir, but I also joined a small Dharma study group in the area. The lama who had advised me to help others was right, because as I learned compassion I also learned to believe in myself—I, who had for years secretly believed myself to be a non-person. It turned out that recovery from mental illness would become the rallying cry for mental health consumers around the world. It was a genuine movement that held

implications for healing the whole world. And as any good bipolar person will tell you, saving the world is what it's all about.

There was just one problem. Even after advocating to help myself and others for several years, I myself was still going through destructive manic episodes. I was still being picked psychotic out of the shambles of my living room by the police and dumped into jail or the state hospital on a yearly basis. It could not go on like this. I decided that it was time to return to the monastery.

When I sheepishly returned to KTD, I was genuinely surprised to find that my lama even remembered me. Not only that, he chided me for not letting him know how I was and what I had been doing! He was pleased when I described my advocacy, and he even smiled approvingly. I was touched and grateful. Later, in talking with some of the other students who knew about the chaos that I caused with the fire alarm, I learned that Rinpoche had watched what happened from the staff house and giggled.

After a number of weekend visits and more talks with my lama, I decided to move to the town near the monastery. This time I applied myself to learning more about Dharma practice, about what the Buddhists call "mind training." Mind training is exactly the right term for Dharma practice, and my first impression of Buddhism as a psychological system turned out to be accurate. The liturgies and prayers that I did at the monastery were a demanding discipline that involved effort as well as devotion. There were times when I regarded the prayer ceremonies as a kind of mental calisthenics. At other times, as I learned to experience altered states in a controlled fashion, I could sense that something was actually happening in my physical body, and especially in my brain pathways. Sometimes these were pleasant sensations and at other times it was a bit painful to deal with mental states as they arose.

The end result was that I noticed gradual, almost imperceptible, improvements in my attitude and my behavior. I could see that other people instinctively trusted me more, and I experienced much less fear and anger. It was easier to maintain my confidence and composure in dealing with situations that had previously been stressful. I continued these habits of daily prayer even after I spent less time at the monastery and returned to doing mental health work. It occurred to me that the work with my peers was a sort of training in compassion, while the prayers and Dharma practices allowed me to develop wisdom without the loss of grounding that can lead to madness.

All of this, of course, was a process that only started during my time at the monastery and had to be maintained. During a couple of years when I lived in another state, I neglected the spiritual disciplines that I had learned, and that led to another brief manic episode. Nevertheless, except for that one embarrassing slip-up, I no longer have the annual breakdowns that I had with such regularity before I started Dharma practice. As I write this, it has been twenty years since I started mind training, and I have succumbed to madness only that one time in all those years.

*Grant your blessings that my mind may be one with the dharma.
Grant your blessings so that dharma may progress along the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path may clarify confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom.*
— The Four Dharmas of Gampopa

Originally published 2007 in
Common Threads: Stories of Survival & Recovery From Mental Illness
Edited by Patrick Hendry, a project of The Florida Peer Network, Inc.,
and the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute
For permission to reprint, contact me at zangmo@sallyclay.net.
