



12 Step Zen

Pathways
of Recovery

Peter Kuhn

Foreword by KEVIN GRIFFIN, author of *One Breath at a Time*

READING GROUP GUIDE

A READING GROUP GUIDE FOR

12 STEP ZEN

PATHWAYS OF RECOVERY

BY PETER KUHN

This guide is designed for book clubs, Dharma/Sangha study groups, and Twelve-Step-informed reading groups exploring 12 Step Zen together. It offers questions and practices organized around the book's structure—the Seven Factors of Awakening, woven through the Twelve Steps of recovery — along with suggestions for pacing a group over multiple sessions.

How to Use This Guide

12 Step Zen moves on two tracks at once: a memoir of addiction, music, and awakening, and a teaching guide organized around the Buddha's Seven Factors of Awakening — Mindfulness, Investigation, Diligence, Joy, Ease, Concentration, and Equanimity — each paired with steps and practices from Twelve-Step recovery. Groups can approach it in more than one way:

- One meeting, whole book. Use the General Questions below, plus two or three questions from whichever Part resonated most.
- Three sessions, by Part. Part I: Taking Refuge (Mindfulness, Investigation) — Part II: Dwelling in the Refuge (Diligence, Joy, Ease) — Part III: The Refuge Dwells in Me (Concentration, Equanimity).
- Seven sessions, one per Factor of Awakening. This mirrors the book's own architecture and gives the most room for practice, not just discussion — see “Practices to Explore Together” for an activity to pair with each session.

Enjoy the discussion, and don't worry about getting through all the questions. Pick a few to start with, and don't feel obliged to discuss them all.

A note on care: this book moves through addiction, trauma, family estrangement, and death with real candor. In a mixed group — some in recovery, some not — it's worth naming at the outset that no one is required to share more than they're comfortable with, and that Twelve-Step traditions of anonymity and “principles before personalities” are welcome to carry into the discussion. This guide is a companion for reflection, not a substitute for a sponsor, a therapist, or a treatment program.

Consider starting with a few minutes of silent reflection or mindful breathing, so the group can come together in the collective energy of mindfulness. You may want to try the In/Out, Deep/Slow meditation from the book.

General Questions for the Whole Book

- 1.Kuhn writes that music was both his “refuge” and the thing that nearly killed him — narcotics helped him play, then took everything. Where else in the book does something that once felt like salvation reveal its double edge?
- 2.The book's title yokes two traditions that don't always sit easily together — a program with steps and often theistic language, and a practice built on impermanence and nonself. Where did you feel the fit was seamless? Where did you feel the seams?
- 3.Kuhn returns often to the idea that surrender is not defeat but “a shift in perception.” Is there a place in your own life — recovery-related or not — where that reframe would change how you're carrying something?
- 4.The Foreword calls this book part of a larger “Buddhist recovery” movement. Did the book change how you think about the relationship between spiritual practice and clinical or peer-support recovery models?
- 5.Kuhn is unusually direct about the harm his addiction caused to specific people— his parents, his brother's memory, his younger self. How did that specificity affect you as a reader, compared to a more general account of “hitting bottom”?
- 6.What passage or story did you find yourself returning to after you'd finished reading? What do you think it was doing for you?

Part I — Taking Refuge: There Is a Path The First Factor of Awakening: Mindfulness • The Second Factor of Awakening: Investigation

Step Zero and Steps One and Two

- Kuhn names “Step Zero” as the willingness that has to exist before Step One even makes sense. What was your own “Step Zero” moment — in recovery or otherwise — the point before the official turning point?
- He reframes powerlessness through the Buddhist idea of dependent origination: nothing exists as a separate, independent cause. “Sounds like powerlessness, doesn't it?” Does thinking of powerlessness as interconnection, rather than defeat, land differently for you?

- On Step Two, Kuhn writes that he used the recovery program itself as his higher power before arriving at mindfulness as “a power greater than myself.” What has served as a higher power in your own life, whether or not you'd use that language?

Our Original Nature and the Two Truths

- “What if well-being is not something to earn but our birthright?” Kuhn asks. How does this collide with — or confirm — the messages about worth you grew up with?

Taking Refuge and Looking Deeply

- The chapter on Investigation describes “looking deeply” as a practice of non-fear rather than self-criticism. How is looking deeply at your own patterns different from the self-judgment that recovery (or just modern life) often trains into us?
- Kuhn writes about “selective watering” of the mind — choosing what to feed attention to. What are you watering right now, and is it what you want to grow?

Part II — Dwelling in the Refuge The Third Factor of Awakening: Diligence • The Fourth Factor of Awakening: Joy • The Fifth Factor of Awakening: Ease

Reconciliation, Living Amends and Beginning Anew

- The scene of Kuhn's father meeting him at the door with a shotgun is one of the book's most searing images. He later writes, “The real amends are lived and expressed in all future actions.” How does this idea of amends as an ongoing practice, rather than a single conversation, compare to how you think about repairing harm?
- Beginning Anew — flower watering, expressing regrets, sharing a hurt, asking for support — is offered as a structured practice for repairing relationships. Is there a relationship in your life where one part of this practice (even just “flower watering”) might be worth trying?
- Kuhn becomes his father's caregiver, then his mother's, and describes both deaths with tenderness rather than only grief. How did these later chapters reframe the earlier, harder family scenes for you?
- In “Righting a Wrong View,” a decades-old belief about why a relationship ended turns out to be incomplete once trauma is factored in — “not everything that affects me is about me.” Where might you be carrying a story about a past hurt that deserves a second look?

Joyfully Letting Go

- Giving up music venues, then cigarettes, then meat — Kuhn frames each surrender as something that arrived gradually, sometimes triggered by an offhand comment from a stranger. Have you experienced a change that started as restriction and became, eventually, freedom?
- “Joy often lives on the other side of release,” he writes. Where has that been true, or not true, for you?

The Eleventh Step and Prayer

- Kuhn describes his early prayers as “transactional” — bargaining with a God he wasn't sure he believed in — and slowly finding a different relationship to prayer through meditation. Has your own understanding of prayer, meditation, or “conscious contact” changed over time?
- A friend in early recovery tells him, “You should be praying for yourself, Pete.” Is there a version of that same, slightly uncomfortable, necessary advice you've received?

Part III — The Refuge Dwells in Me The Sixth Factor of Awakening: Concentration • The Seventh Factor of Awakening: Equanimity

The Three Dharma Seals: Impermanence, Nonself, Nirvana

- This section pairs deep Buddhist doctrine with the plain language of recovery. Did you find the philosophical material and the memoir material equally accessible, or did one carry you more than the other?

The Zone of Recovery

- The parable of the salt and the river — the same amount of salt, but a different-sized container — is used to describe “spiritual fitness.” What enlarges your container? What shrinks it to a teacup?
- Kuhn connects equanimity to the nervous system directly: window of tolerance, fight-or-flight, freeze, fawn. Did naming these states in the body change how you think about “serenity” versus dissociation?

The Great Vow and Unconditional Love

- The bodhisattva archetypes — including the wry, everyday ones like “the Bodhisattva of Showing Up” — reframe ordinary recovery behaviors as spiritual practice. Which everyday bodhisattva would you nominate from your own life or group?
- In “Unconditional Love,” Kuhn sits with his own fear and anger after an election and tries to extend understanding to people whose votes felt like a threat to people he loves. Where is the edge of your own capacity for that kind of equanimity — and is that edge a place you want to work on, or a boundary you want to keep?

Practices to Explore Together

These are drawn directly from practices named in the book. Consider opening or closing a session with one, rather than only discussing them.

- Beginning Anew (Part II): as a group, or in pairs, try just the first movement — “flower watering” — naming one specific, genuine quality you appreciate in another member.
- A few minutes of walking meditation or sitting meditation (Part II) before discussion, letting the body settle before the conversation gets going.
- Mettā / loving-kindness meditation (Part II), especially useful before a session that touches Steps Eight or Nine material.
- A “selective watering” check-in: each person names one thing they've been feeding their attention lately, wholesome or not.
- Read the salt-and-river parable aloud (Part III) and go around naming, in one sentence, what currently enlarges or shrinks your own container.
- The Five Contemplations (Part II): recite the Five Contemplations before eating (from the book's Eating Meditation section) together before a shared snack or potluck session.

Journaling Prompts for Personal Reflection

- What is my own “Step Zero” — the willingness that had to exist before any visible change began?
- Where in my life am I still “paralyzing” or defending an old story, the way Kuhn describes holding onto resentment as if it were a prized possession?
- Who is on my own “living amends” list — not a single conversation to have, but an ongoing way of showing up?
- What is the size of my container this week — teacup or river? What would help enlarge it?

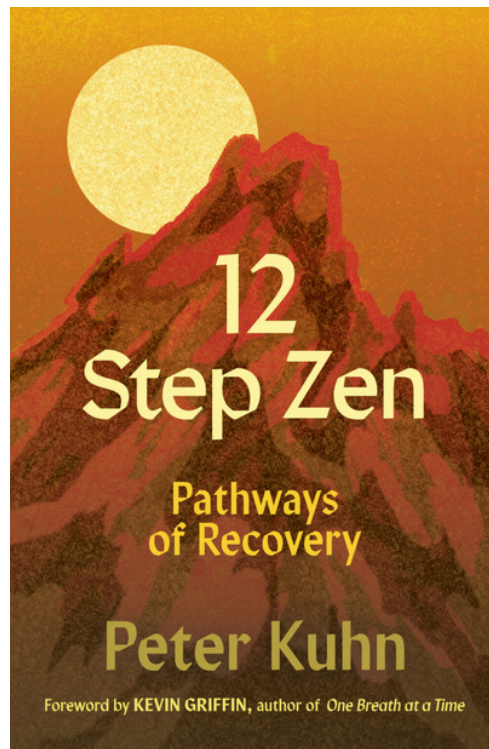
A Closing Question

What are you taking away from the book and this discussion? Was there a practice, aha moment, or something you are inspired to practice or explore further?

12 Step Zen: Pathways of Recovery is published by Parallax Press.

Interested in Hosting the Author? If your book club, classroom, sangha, or organization is interested in inviting the author to speak, lead a reading, or offer a mindfulness session, we would love to support you.

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We often think the past is gone
and unchangeable, but it lives on
in the present moment.

When we meet it with
understanding, we can transform
the past in the present.



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