

Review

Ex-addict mixes AA, Buddhism to come clean

ONE BREATH AT A TIME: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps, by Kevin Griffin, Rodale Books, Emmaus, Pa., 2004, 304 pages, \$13.95.

Buddhism is a religion of meditative study that points the way to spiritual growth and enlightenment. AA's Twelve Steps are tools to reach and keep sobriety that become a religion to many who follow.

Kevin Griffin, a musician, meditation teacher and former addict, found that even when practicing meditation he still used - and even when sober he lacked awareness.

Using meditation as the foundation, he mixed Buddhism and the Twelve Steps to pave a new path to sobriety.

Griffin surely has street credibility. Throughout his book, he weaves in stories from his roller-coaster life from fifth-grade altar boy to 16-year-old atheist and the next 19 years of use and abuse - pot, psychedelics, cocaine, alcohol, sex, rock 'n' roll, even spiritual seeking itself. His dark hours of doubt, despair and disillusion - both in spirituality and addiction - and resulting moments of illumination show it isn't easy, but it's worth it.

An addict's life is desire run amok. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism say life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, this desire can be overcome and the way to overcome it is by the Eightfold Path, the guidelines to self-destiny.

So Griffin takes each of the Twelve Steps, correlates them to these Buddhist precepts and parses such terms as "powerless" and "defects of character" and puts them into the Buddhist perspective of free will. The structured step-by-step approach of AA asks for a moral inventory so underlying causes of addiction are revealed and released. Put together, the two ways give discipline, higher purpose and compassion to people who might get lost in one method alone.

AA's "Higher Power" and "God" can be a major turnoff to many addicts trying the Steps, so Griffin tackles this at length. He says Buddhists can best relate "Higher Power" to "mindfulness" - our own higher consciousness of universal egoless self, or Buddhature. Others might

best define God as a mystery, the laws of nature, the Great Spirit or as whatever gets them through the night. The important thing, he says, is to let go of concepts, let the real meaning come through meditation and never mind the words.

Just reading Griffin's stories, however sordid, could trigger desire in addictive minds, but they are crucial to show how painful and jerky the steps to freedom are. The book reads a lot like an addict's life - high and low, back and forth, at times messy and repetitive. But his honesty and insight pull one along on the journey with many moments addicts and spiritual seekers can relate to with an "Amen, brother" or at least an "Ah, ha."

For those who think this path doesn't apply to them - nonaddicts (if there is such a thing), longtime recoverers, other religious believers - the lessons are not moot. Griffin shows the lovingkindness of Buddhism and moral structure of the Twelve Steps can lead to a life of freedom, not only from substances and physical wants, but from resentment, judgment, ego, illusion and other plagues of the usual human condition.

Allison Gerfin is a NEWS copy editor. She can be reached at agerfin@copydesk.org.