

Author seeks to bridge Eastern Buddhism and Western Twelve Steps

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A book about the confluence of ideas between Theravada Buddhism (Tip for Judeo-Christian myopics: Buddhism is not monolithic, and there are many kinds) and the famous Twelve Steps of recovery pioneered by the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous would seem to have a pretty small target audience. The ultimate in niche publishing, perhaps?

But Kevin Griffin's new book, "One Breath at a Time," actually serves as a very accessible introduction to both philosophies, as well as a deft examination of confluences in their respective, concepts.

As Griffin points out, many Western Buddhists look at the Twelve Steps, based originally on Christian concepts by AA's founders but now expanded far beyond those roots, as irreconcilably opposed.

"At first it seemed that admitting my alcoholism didn't fit with my search for the perfection of nirvana. Digging around in my past by doing the Fourth Step inventory seemed opposed to the idea of living fully in the present. Going to meetings and talking about my pain and the difficulties of sobriety seemed negative and self-indulgent," Griffin writes in his introduction. "Over time, though, I found that the ideas behind the Steps have parallels in the Buddhist tradition, and that using the two together brought a deeper experience to my Buddhist meditation and a more satisfying, integrated understanding of the Steps."

The connection between the two traditions can be found in Buddhism's First Noble Truth, Griffin argues: "The Buddha said that the cause of suffering is desire, and the Twelve Steps try to heal people from desire gone mad: addiction. This connection is the gateway into integrating the two systems. Both ask you to look at the painful realities of life, to understand them, and to use this understanding as the foundation for developing peace, wisdom, faith, and compassion. Both systems culminate in an 'awakening' or 'enlightenment.'"

Many who are unfamiliar with the Twelve Steps assume they are primarily about dealing with addiction, whether to alcohol, drugs, sex, spending, or whatever. But abstinence from various addictions is more

like a beginning point for the program, and the step process is a much broader approach to changing an addict's approach to life. The steps, like Buddhism, are a spiritual program first and foremost.

Griffin may surprise adherents of both "systems" with his analysis of the similarities, which he lays out ... Step by Step. He breaks the Twelve Steps into three parts, "Surrender," "Investigation and Responsibility" and "Fulfillment," and within those sections addresses and breaks down each step.

The Third Step — "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him" — would seem to fly in the face of a belief system, Buddhism, that does not promote a belief in a higher power (though many Buddhists have such a belief). But Griffin does a creditable job of bridging that gap by invoking the Buddhist "Law of Karma": "Every time you do something, there is a reaction." Thus, in Griffin's view, the alternative to believing in a "God of our understanding" is "to believe that there is no cause and effect, that the universe is random, that our actions have no effect, and that therefore it doesn't matter what we do."

Seasoned Twelve Steppers may raise an eyebrow at the contradiction of placing any constraints on "God as we understood Him," since the steps explicitly leave the conception of a higher power up to the individual.

Despite such unavoidable limitations, Griffin does a nice job of synthesizing the two traditions. And beneath his analysis are truisms that can apply to almost anyone: "We forgive others so that we can heal ourselves. For no other reason."; "(T)he object of our resentment doesn't feel pain, we do."; "Because of your Perfectionism, you keep putting off doing anything, which leads to Procrastination; after a while, you can't function: Paralysis."

"One Breath at a Time" should intrigue spiritual seekers, as well as those who want a taste of either the Twelve Steps or Griffin's brand of Buddhism.