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## **Berkeley author takes it one page at a time**

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BERKELEY - According to the Buddha, the cause of suffering is desire. According to Berkeley author Kevin Griffin, addiction is desire run amok.

Kevin Griffin was an addict. He was addicted to alcohol and a smattering of drugs. He was even addicted to meditation. "What I really wanted to do was transcend all my problems," says Griffin. "Meditation was just another kind of drug." He was attempting to use a spiritual solution to get around his problems.

In his new book, "One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps," Griffin explores the two powerful structures that have helped him get clean and sober. He catalogs his deep descent into a world of poverty, drug use, alcoholism, and self-loathing. He was arrested on methedrine possession. He showed up for a meditation retreat hung over. At one point, he abandoned everything -- his job, music gig, his apartment -- to travel around with a person he calls "a low-budget cult leader."

"Actually, the guy was homeless," he says, telling of the way they bummed around the country doing aura cleansings. For Griffin, it was the beginning of the end. Those three months marked his final days of drinking. "If I could remember what happened, I'd write a book about it," he says.

After he got sober in 1985, Griffin began to see a connection between the 12-step recovery program offered by Alcoholics Anonymous and the Buddhist spiritual path he had long followed. For Griffin, Buddhist teachings offered a way out of the fundamental problem he found with the Twelve Steps.

For many people, the idea of "powerlessness" and the Christian slant to the Twelve Steps is a turn-off. "This powerlessness thing is so negative," says Griffin, addressing a meditation group. "But powerless is not equal to helplessness."

Furthermore, writes Griffin, "Issues of God and faith, of prayer and powerlessness can alienate people who have never had a religious training, or who have rejected their religious upbringing." For Griffin, the solution lay in what he found in Buddhist precepts; that God be substituted by "higher power" or higher self, that god-like form that rests inside the human psyche. "I had to make sense of the Steps for myself," he writes.

And he hopes that his book will make sobriety even more accessible for people today. Thanks to Freud, he says, "We have a lot of wisdom now. When we view these spiritual teachings through the psychological lens, we can reach a deeper understanding of what is being conveyed."

Griffin believes that both the Steps and Buddhist teachings are an archetypal journey. Indeed, one review of his book stated that the comparisons between the two systems are so obvious that it's surprising that no one has written about it before. Says Griffin, "If two traditions or systems are actually talking about the deeper 'truths' then they must share something fundamental." All religions have a common root, he says.

Griffin teaches a weekly meditation group in Berkeley. He also is a Community Dharma Leader at Spirit Rock. "I'm not the typical teacher," says Griffin. "They're emotionally well-balanced people. I'm more neurotic," he jokes. But perhaps that is precisely why he is receiving so many messages of thanks from both those in recovery, and those seeking a Buddhist path.

Having been in the trenches, he can relate to the trials of others in a way that totally enlightened beings cannot. "When I teach, I put my guts out on the table, and I've done the same in my book," he says. "That is a gift that I give."

Griffin's path as a writer has been uneven. Having written three unpublished novels, he was discouraged, but he shifted gears, took classes, shaped up his prose, and began again. "You just show up, every day. One page at a time," he says. His challenge now? "I'm finding my own demons around success." Having always defined himself as unsuccessful, he is uncomfortable in this role as a published author. "This is a new one on me," he says.

During a Wednesday night meditation group, Griffin's talk focuses on joy. He jokes that being Buddhists, everyone panics when something delightful happens. "We think something is wrong when we feel great," he says. He rings a chime that resonates throughout the room, the meditators "sit" for about 40 minutes, guided by Griffin who gently reminds, "If your mind is wandering come back to your breath. Every moment is unique, every moment precious. Every moment is another chance to start again."

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