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By Mary Adamski

Buddhism's path parallels 12 Step program There's no meter that can measure the brain waves or spiritual essence of a person to register who has reached the state of enlightenment.

There's no place where an expert reads the diagnostic image or blood test result and declares a person cured once and for all of addiction.

It's not about getting to some finishing line where you win and that's the end of it.

It's all about being on a journey, continuing on a path, and only you can measure where you are.

That's the reality for people in a 12 Step Program working to be in a continuing state of recovery from alcoholism or other addiction. It's the life of a Buddhist following the Eightfold Path of ethical conduct and mental discipline outlined by Buddha as the way to achieving perfect and complete awareness.

"There is so much of the dharma in the 12 Steps," said Buddhist teacher Kevin Griffin, who described the parallels and intersections of those paths for Oahu audiences earlier this month. Griffin, author of "One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps," talked to a Unity Church audience and led a weekend retreat for 12 Step Program participants at the Kailua Shambhala Meditation Center. He teaches Buddhism and meditation in the San Francisco area and gives classes for recovering addicts and alcoholics and medical professionals.

"An addict tries to control the world: 'If I feel good, the world is good.' The delusion, not just for addicts but a common human condition, is that by satisfying something in us, the next shopping spree or new relationship, that will fix us. We will arrive at some place: 'If I can just get there or get rid of this situation, I'll be OK.'

"We never arrive at a static location because everything is always changing," said Griffin.

"One of the purposes of meditation is to see that on a visceral level, something that is absorbed into your consciousness. You watch the process of the arising of the craving, realize how unsatisfactory that is and if you don't react to it, it will recede. Letting go of the craving is what happiness comes from. To give up your desires altogether, that is the ideal."

In his book, Griffin wrote that the two paths are compatible. "Both ask you to look at the painful realities of life, to understand them, and to use the understanding as the foundation for developing peace, wisdom, faith and compassion."

But, he told the Unity Church crowd, he is not advocating "substituting Buddhism for the 12 Steps. The 12 Steps give you very specific things to do, put some serious demands on you. Buddhism, as it is presented in the West, doesn't direct you so specifically."

The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous came from a Christian culture and in charting the path for recovering people, brought God into the journey. Steps require turning lives over to God, admitting shortcomings to him, asking him to remove them, and bringing lives into "conscious contact" with God.

Griffin said the Christian imagery doesn't work for him, but that doesn't trip him up on the 12 Step path. "I call God 'It.' I see God as power, as all that is. A great teacher said God is nature. It works if I 'turn my life over to God as I understand It.'

"I feel the word 'God' is misunderstood. I still like to use the word," said the Buddhist teacher. He is writing a book that will reflect on God and Buddhism and the 12 Step program.

"The thing about Buddhism is that it is not a dogma. The thing it emphasizes is practice, taking on the tools to explore the mind."

People in 12 Step programs sometimes distill the whole process as "showing up and learning to speak the truth."

"The idea of showing up is essential to stay sober, showing up for school, for work, it's what you're supposed to know when you're 20,"

Griffin said. "Meditation for me is the same thing. You sit down to meditate and it doesn't seem like anything is happening. But just the sitting is having an effect that you don't realize is happening."

The 12th Step talks about having a "spiritual awakening" as a result of following the path. It sounds a lot like the concept of achieving enlightenment.

But that's not the end of story in either discipline. The recovery program calls for carrying the message to others and continuing to practice the principles learned in the first steps.

"The point of awakening is to help others," Griffin said. "After the Buddha reached enlightenment, he spent the next 45 years teaching others the way.

"People may want to go up on a mountaintop. Instead of running from your feelings, you are sitting there with your feelings. You are managing your relationships out in the real world."