

Introduction

I knew when I started writing this book that I wanted it to follow the Twelve Steps, exploring them one by one in a linear way. As it unfolds, nothing else is linear about the book. I write about the distant past, the near past, and the present whenever they serve to illustrate the ideas I want to talk about. My driving questions were, How does this Step relate to Buddhism and its practices, and what practical use can be made of those connections? Some of these connections even surprised me; the book is a true exploration in this way—I didn't follow a map and I didn't know how I would get to my destination. So, for instance, I find myself talking about the first Twelve Step gathering I ever attended in Step Five because Step Five involves sharing.

One of the things that I explore is the language in the Steps. Most of the chapters do this in one way or another, trying to take apart the meaning of terms like powerlessness or defects of character and put them back together again from a Buddhist perspective.

Anticipating that many of my readers are new to Buddhism, I've tried to cover many of the foundation elements of the teachings as I understand them. Again, because I'm following the Steps and not the Buddhist teachings as a framework, this isn't linear either.

In the spirit of nonlinearity, I start near the end of the story...

Two Weddings

July 3, 1997

I'm rushing down the flagstone path, straightening my yellow-striped tie, when James comes out from behind the tall hedge to catch me.

"Are you okay?" he asks. He puts his hands on my shoulders and looks me in the eye.

"Fine," I say, although I'm actually in something of a daze.

"Okay, take a breath," he says.

I do as he suggests. My heart starts to slow, my shoulders un-hunch.

James leads me around the hedge onto the patio of the Brazil Building. We're in Tilden Park, in the wooded hills above Berkeley. We're here for a wedding. Mine.

And I'm late.

Beyond us is a lawn, which falls away down a hill to the botanical garden. I turn

around to look at the crowd and smile broadly. There are the faces of my family, the old one and the new one: two of my brothers, their families, and my soon-to-be in-laws; a group of Buddhist friends who attend the local meditation group with me; and lots of friends from Twelve Step programs who have come to support me on this remarkable day.

James, who has been my meditation teacher and mentor and has fostered my own development as a teacher, is to my right, ready to perform the ceremony. My best man, to my left, is Stephen, my sponsor, who has seen me through the last twelve years of recovery, guiding me through the Steps and through the building of a new life, a life which, on this sunny early July afternoon, includes an event I'd doubted could ever happen.

The piano begins the Pachebel Canon, and Rosemary and her father emerge. I remember James' admonition to breathe. This is a moment I want to be present for; I feel my heart beating rapidly, the glow of joy in my chest, the sun above the building warming my face. I see the crowd following Rosemary's steps toward me. She looks as giddy as I feel, and as beautiful as a bride could ever look.

With all the preparation for this day, I didn't expect the sheer happiness that's overtaken me. It's happening; it's happening now, this brave, crazy, inevitable, surprising moment.

We recite our vows--"To hold you dear and to be worthy of your love"--and James leads a Buddhist meditation on Lovingkindness, asking everyone to focus kind thoughts on us. "May Rosemary and Kevin be joyful, filled with peace. May their joy touch all beings." And then he asks people to spread this joy outward to all beings, just as the Buddhist sutras suggest. He rings a small Tibetan cymbal and the sound vibrates in the stillness.

Everyone moves inside for the reception, a whirl of food and conversation. There's chicken, which I eat, and wine, which I don't drink. After dinner, a group of my musician friends start to play. Three songs into the set, I join them, changing from my blue suit coat to a shiny lamé jacket, strapping on my Stratocaster and launching into "Blue Suede Shoes." Rosemary twirls across the dance floor, laughing and glowing.

This is the happiest day of my life.

May 1982

Another wedding—that of the manager of a rehearsal studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The leader of the band I'm playing for owns the studio, so I'm invited partly as a guest and partly as free entertainment.

We're packed into a suburban banquet room, and the soup comes around.

"Does this have beef stock?" I ask the waiter.

"Yes, it does," he says.

"I'll pass," I say. I've been a vegetarian for five years, and it's important to me to maintain this purity. There's plenty of wine, so I pour myself a glass to keep from feeling too hungry while I wait for the next course.

I'm a bit uncomfortable here, since I know hardly anyone. I have another glass of wine, then go looking for a friend who usually has some pot. Without food, the wine is getting me pretty high, and some pot will take the edge off that and help me slow down drinking.

I find Joey out on the patio.

"Hey, man, have you got anything to smoke?" Two other guys are with him.

"I just finished my last joint," he says. "Sorry."

"Is there any more around?"

"I don't know," says Joey. "I'll check it out-hey, nice jacket."

"Thanks." He hasn't seen me in my tan sport coat, brown slacks, and peach tie before. They're left over from a disco band I played for.

I've never seen him dressed for a wedding before, either, and he looks a little odd, his long, straggly hair hanging over the collar of a blue undertaker's suit. Joey's father owns a funeral home, and his sons drive the hearses and help out around the place. Today they're lending some of the limos to the wedding party.

I go back to my table just as they bring around the main course: beef stroganoff. The noodles are drowned in the meat and the salad is all iceberg lettuce. Not even close to organic. I pour some more wine and slather some butter on a roll. I'm getting edgy, not eating anything substantial, being in this alien environment.

Just one season has passed since I left the fall retreat: three months of silent meditation, an intensive training based on the traditional monastic Rains Retreat held each year in Asia. By the end I felt I'd been washed clean, my meditation had become luminous, fluid, lighter than air. I still practice two hours every day and often get to that same place of vast stillness. Only, today I skipped my afternoon sitting to get here, so I'm not quite as serene as usual. I haven't been drinking much or smoking much dope since the retreat. I've always told myself that as my spiritual life deepened, drinking and drugs wouldn't be a problem anymore. Not that I ever admitted they were a problem.

The musicians are setting up, and I figure I better get my guitar in tune. I stagger up to the stage.

"Where do you want me to stand?" I ask Chris, the bandleader.

"Uh, I don't know," he says, as he runs a wire behind the drum set. He looks at me oddly. "There's a lot of guitar players here, so maybe you should take the night off."

"But I thought you needed me to play lead."

"Don't worry about it," he says.

I'm a little disappointed and surprised, but I go back to the table and have some more wine. The band plays through a set of old Beatles and Beach Boys songs while I continue to drink.

During the next set a conga line starts, and I slip behind the bride, who is quite attractive. I enjoy holding her hips as we slither around the room. I think I'm a little drunk now, but I can tell she likes me. Of course, I probably shouldn't hit on her right now. Things begin to get a little foggy, and the bar starts charging for drinks. I'm broke, so I sidle up, trying to find someone who'll spot me a five. There's a half-drunk cocktail no one's attending to on the end of the bar. I look around, then pick it up and guzzle it. It tastes like crap—it's got gin in it, which I hate—but it's pretty strong.

"Kev, whatcha doin'?" It's Joey beside me.

"Buy me a beer," I say.

"We gotta get going," he says.

"Come on," I say. "Just one beer."

He pays for the beer and I take a big gulp. The wine isn't mixing so well with the cocktail and the beer, but I manage to get it down.

Joey drags me down the steps where the bride and bridegroom are seeing people off.

"Hey," I say to them. "What sign are you guys?" I figure the bride as a water sign, compatible with me.

They laugh as though I've made some joke and Joey pulls me away. Everyone seems to be treating me as if I were wearing polka-dot pants.

We get in Joey's white limousine and head back toward Cambridge. My stomach's queasy as a squabble breaks out among the wine, beer, and gin.

"Where's my beer?" I ask Joey.

"You finished it," he says.

We come onto the bridge across the Charles going into Cambridge. I'm really nauseous now.

"Roll down my window!" I shout.

The window goes down and I lean out of the car. I vomit down the side of the sparkling white limousine.

Hours later I wake up, still dressed in the tan sport coat and brown slacks. My peach tie is still on, though loosened. I'm lying on my futon. I open my eyes. Something smells awful. Then I see it: I'm covered in vomit. I've thrown up in my sleep. gingerly, I move to get up; then the shattering headache explodes. I want to fall back onto the bed but the pillow is also coated in brown, chunky puke. I roll over, trying not to touch anything. I go into the bathroom, strip, and turn on the shower. I choke down four aspirin and climb in the steaming water. Vague memories of the night pop up and I groan at the images, each one more humiliating than the last. I think of Jimi Hendrix, who vomited in his sleep, choked, and died. That could have happened to me. Only I wouldn't be remembered as the greatest guitar player in the world, just some guy who never got it together.

If only they'd had a vegetarian option on the menu, I think, or if only Joey had had some pot.

Who, me?

It's amazing the lengths of convoluted thinking to which an alcoholic will go to avoid the truth. Getting drunk, hitting on the bride, blacking out, and waking up in your own vomit is not "normal" drinking. But on that day I wrote it all off as a small glitch.

Although I'd been practicing meditation for four years, and Buddhist meditation for two, I was still far from the serenity that Buddhism promised. The blind spots in my spiritual development were glaring—or at least should have been. Something wasn't falling into place for me, and I couldn't see what it was.

Over the next three years I would fall back, ending up lost in a fog of booze and drugs, barely hanging on to the semblance of a meditation practice, much less a spiritual life. I would flounder in my career, bumble through relationships, and finally lose all sense of integrity and morality.

Still, the idea that I was an alcoholic and addict was unfathomable to me. My associations with those words--a drunk collapsed in an alley, a junkie with a needle hanging out of his arm--seemed much more extreme than my case. I kept telling myself I was going to get it together in my own way, that some magical event like rock stardom or enlightenment would save me. Of course, it didn't.

Putting it together

It may be more common that people come to meditation and Buddhism after working with the Twelve Steps, rather than, like me, practicing Buddhism first. The Eleventh Step encourages people to make meditation a regular part of their lives, and Buddhism is known for its effective meditation techniques. Also, Buddhism offers an alternative to the Judeo-Christian slant found in the Twelve Step literature. 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.

As I began a life without drugs and booze, I joined a support group where I had to make sense of the Steps for myself. At first I tried to suspend my discomfort with the Christian tenor of the literature. I saw that the authors of the Twelve Steps used their Protestant background very skillfully in building a spiritual program, at times touching the deepest meanings of this tradition. But, finally, that wasn't a tradition that touched my heart, and I had to bring an authentic understanding of the Steps into alignment with my Buddhist training and beliefs. 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.

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 to the Steps.

What makes Buddhism and the Twelve Steps so compatible? 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."

Their respective means may seem very different at times: for the Twelve Steps, support groups, dependence on a higher power, writing inventory; for Buddhism, sitting meditation, developing mindfulness and lovingkindness, following the

precepts. But I have found that as I learned more about both traditions, the deeper means and purposes of each came into harmony: understanding powerlessness helps me let go in my meditation practice; investigating my mind in meditation helps me do inventory work; listening to the suffering of others in self-help groups develops my heart of compassion. This book begins an exploration of the many connections between these two traditions, and I hope it will help you to develop the understanding and tools to harmonize them for yourself. I believe that even if you are not an alcoholic or addict, these tools can serve your meditation practice. The stories of alcoholism and drug addiction can even be thought of as dramatizations of common, subtler behaviors and mind states which meditators often see in their practice. The integration of the Steps with Buddhism can still be applied skillfully to these behaviors and states.

Who needs it?

Although my writing is often directed toward the person in recovery or the Buddhist practitioner, the heart of this book is the timeless truth that speaks to every spiritual seeker. Beyond the needs of recovery, the Twelve Steps can be seen as an archetypal journey, just as the Buddhist teachings seek to solve the human dilemma of suffering.

Not everyone will feel the need to combine these traditions. As a practitioner and teacher of Buddhist meditation I've met many people who didn't need anything more than those teachings to fulfill their spiritual lives. In my years of recovery, I've also met many people whose spiritual aspirations were completely fulfilled by the Steps. I admire and respect these people. But I needed a strong dose of both remedies to find fulfillment. I need the discipline and depth of concentration and mindfulness which Buddhist practice has brought me; I need the honest self-appraisal and practical tools for living that I learned in recovery. I need the wisdom of the Buddha to absorb the realities and mysteries of life; and I need the voices of a thousand alcoholics and addicts to keep me on track day to day.