

Introduction

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Taungpulu Kaba Aye Monastery, Boulder Creek, California, July 1992

I'm sitting on my black zafu, a hard, round pillow, in a small meditation cell on self-retreat. I came down the coast from Berkeley to this mountain monastery in the redwoods above Santa Cruz a few days ago. Less than a month after my seventh sobriety anniversary, I plan to practice intensive meditation for a week.

I've practiced Buddhist meditation for almost 12 years, and there have been a lot of ups and downs. At first I threw myself into the practice—this was before I got sober—and kind of burnt myself out. Then for the first few years of sobriety I was more focused on recovery and Step work than meditation, but now, having moved up here from Southern California to complete my B.A., I find myself drawn deeper into practice.

I've done a lot of self-retreat over the years, sometimes for convenience when I couldn't find a teacher-led retreat, sometimes because it was cheaper, and maybe sometimes to avoid other people. It's always been pretty easy and pleasant. But on the second day of this retreat I fall into a depression, not really about anything, just a swirling mass of negativity and self-hate. Depression has been a theme in my life, even before addiction, but on retreat it's rarely reared its head.

I'm doing my best, now on day three, to just keep practicing, 45 minutes of sitting meditation, 45 minutes of walking meditation, alternating throughout the day with breaks for food and a bit of sleep. I mix my typical Twelve Step prayers with my meditation. In the late afternoon I sink to such a low point that I consider leaving. I've never left a retreat no matter how hard it got, but I'm not sure about this time. Finally, though, in the early evening, the mindfulness and concentration begin to nudge out the depression, and a sense of calm begins to come over me. I fall asleep relieved and ready to go deeper in the morning.

My window faces south, and as I sit first thing the next morning, the sunlight creeps up my chest. I feel at ease now—depression is so mysterious, so real when it's there, but so meaningless when it's gone. At the end of the sitting I begin to pray, try to speak to God, but something feels heavy and awkward. My mind is empty, my body still and grounded, and all of a sudden the word God sounds completely artificial. I ask myself what the word means.

I eat in my cell before going outside for walking meditation in the courtyard. The monastery, inhabited by Burmese monks, is usually quiet. Very quiet. But today a large Burmese family has arrived to serve a meal to the monks, a way of attaining good karma. Three generations of extended family bustle around the monastery setting things up. I go to the kitchen to make some tea and move silently around this group who largely ignore me.

My koan stays with me: “What is God?”

I do more sitting and walking meditation through the morning, then go to the courtyard and watch the meal offering. A long table has been set up outside the kitchen, and the family members are lined up behind it with serving spoons, tongs, and forks at the ready. The half-dozen brown-robed monks move silently down the line, their bowls getting more and more full. Mothers push sons forward to serve—it’s important they receive the merit from this—and at the end of the line, a little nine-year-old girl tops off each monk’s bowl with a Snickers bar.

Back in my cell, I continue to sit, my mind growing more spacious, my koan drifting through. I try out different words in my prayers: Higher Power, All that is, Universe. I try to feel my way into what I’m experiencing. This spaciousness, this stillness, this is what feels like God to me. I feel connected to something greater than my small self that’s sitting on this cushion in this empty room.

Great Spirit.

The words pass through my mind and resonate. Even as I hear the words and feel their accuracy in describing what I’m touching, I feel silly: I’m not a Native American, and that’s what I hear in those words, some old cowboy movie with white actors pretending to be Indians. But still . . .

I continue sitting for a few more days, and I start using this new name for God. For now it feels right. Soon I realize that what’s important, though, isn’t the words, but the experience. Instead of spending my time figuring out how to name God, I should spend my time figuring out how to know God.

Looking back, I know now that the week I spent at that monastery was a turning point in my recovery and in my spiritual life. In the early years of my sobriety, I hadn’t thought much about the meaning of the word God. I actually had a fairly easy relationship with the word, just thinking of God as the power that I trusted to guide and take care of me as I discovered what being clean and sober meant and

as I explored life from this bright new perspective. But at seven years sober, which happened to be the end of my first year as a full-time college student, my recovery began to encompass a more serious exploration of Buddhism, and also a more engaged and skeptical intellect. Playing with different names for God was just the beginning, it turned out, of a much more serious question: is God some mysterious power or entity, or is God something real, tangible, and comprehensible? When I began to teach on the topic of Buddhism and the Twelve Steps, I felt a responsibility to be clear about what God or Higher Power might mean and how Buddhism could inform the way we tried to do things like “turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.” I wasn’t satisfied with vague platitudes like “just let go” or “God is a mystery.” The Dharma isn’t a mystery; it’s very clear what the Buddha taught—not that it’s easy to fulfill his teachings or the insights he offers, but it is practical and down-to-earth. Suffering, impermanence, karma, and all the rest make perfect sense. I felt that if I was going to make the claim that Buddhism and the Twelve Steps could work together, then God, an idea that is at the center of the Steps, had to be understandable through the Dharma.

I’ve come to believe not only that we can use the Dharma as a Higher Power, but that, in fact, as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a towering figure of 20th-century Thai Buddhism, says, “the naturally self-existent Dharma, or the Power of Dharma,” is the meaning of God “in the true sense of the word.” This is a bold statement and, essentially, the basis for this book. #