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Buddhism and Addiction Recovery: An Interview with Kevin Griffin

William L. White

Introduction

For several years, I have served on the committee that is responsible for updating the Faces and Voices of Recovery's *Guide to Recovery Mutual Aid Resources*. It was in this role that I first became acquainted with the Buddhist Recovery Network (BRN). One of the founding members of BRN is Kevin Griffin, who has also published two important books on Buddhism and addiction recovery. On September 25, 2012, I interviewed Kevin about the BRN and about Buddhist concepts and practices that may be of benefit to people in recovery. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Bill White: Kevin, let me start by asking you how your personal story intersects with the story of the Buddhist Recovery Network?

Kevin Griffin: I was a habitual drinker and marijuana smoker for almost 20 years. In the later years of my addiction, I developed an interest in Buddhism even though I was still drinking and using. By the time I got sober, I was already a regular meditator and had some understanding of Buddhism. At first, I really didn't try to fit my recovery and Buddhism together. I just continued to do them both separately. Eventually, at about five or six years sober, I started to look for correlations and ways to connect them and integrate these two important pieces of my life. At that point, I really started to investigate how Buddhist teachings and practices could strengthen my recovery. That eventually led to teaching and writing about the topic. When my first book, *One Breath at a Time*, came out, Paul Saintilan from Australia contacted me and suggested we start an organization for this recovery network. That was in January of 2008; we'll be celebrating our fifth anniversary in a couple of months.

Bill White: For those who aren't familiar with the Buddhist Recovery Network, how would you describe it?

Kevin Griffin: Network is the right word for it because we're just trying to provide a place for people who have similar interests to connect since there are a lot of people around the world and certainly around the United States who are interested in this connection between recovery and Buddhism. We thought that a central place where people could find out about each other and share information would be valuable. I'd say that our website is our most valuable tool for achieving that at this point. People who are interested should look at the website and review the mission statement. That outlines our goals. One of our primary goals is community building,

and I would say that is one of our major accomplishments so far. Even though we've been around for five years, we're still a totally volunteer organization, and in some ways, we have yet to find our greater purpose. We would like to be more proactive in terms of making meditation and Buddhist teachings available for people in recovery.

Bill White: What have been some of the key historical milestones for BRN during its first five years?

Kevin Griffin: Perhaps our most significant milestone was a very successful conference we hosted in the fall of 2009 in Los Angeles. About 100 people attended and participated in all sorts of presentations—from addiction researchers who were working with mindfulness in treating addiction to a former Buddhist monk who talked about addiction to self. We had lots of addicts and alcoholics in recovery who were interested in Buddhist teachings. It was a really great event attended by people from the US, UK, and Australia.

Bill White: Is participation in BRN limited to Buddhists, or is it open to people of all faiths and to people not affiliated with a particular religious orientation?

Kevin Griffin: It's open to anyone who's interested in the connection between Buddhist practices or teachings and recovery. That certainly includes people who just want to practice mindfulness. Participation in the BRN is not limited to any religion. And we're also not just a 12-Step organization because we try to be very open to any kind of recovery path that incorporates some kind of Buddhist teachings.

Bill White: Kevin, one of your many contributions has been preparing guidelines for conducting Buddhist recovery support meetings. How do such meetings differ from other recovery support group meetings?

Kevin Griffin: I don't think they differ tremendously. One thing certainly is that virtually all such meetings include a period of meditation. This is typically half an hour of meditation, which is far more than you usually run in to in any 12-Step meditation group. There's a much greater emphasis on meditation. Beyond that, I think that what it really allows is for people to talk from their own experience about the connection between Buddhism and recovery without violating the principles of the 12-Step program, which emphasizes not being affiliated with any religion.

I hear a lot of people say that when they go to their 12-Step group, there's a lot of Christian orientation, and they don't feel safe talking about Buddhism. For those who feel alienated by the Christian language in 12-Step meetings and that it just doesn't relate to their personal experience, the BRN provides a place to share with people who have a similar spiritual orientation. I think it's really valuable in that way.

Bill White: Would you consider the BRN an adjunct or alternative to secular, religious, or 12-Step recovery programs?

Kevin Griffin: I actually would say that it's up to the individual to determine what it is for them. In other words, if I go to a Buddhist Recovery meeting, that's not my whole recovery program. I'm still gonna go to my 12-Step group, and I suggest that for other people. But I know that for

some people, that's not the case. They'll just work with their Buddhist Recovery group and not go to 12-Step meetings. So, I think it's really up to the individual to determine that. We try not to take a prescriptive stance on how people should approach their own recovery because we want to make these things available to people who might want to use BRN in whatever way works best for them.

Bill White: Could you give an example of the kind of insights drawn from Buddhism that would shed light on the source of addiction?

Kevin Griffin: To me, the source of addiction is just what we could call, "human nature." The Buddha says that what causes human suffering is our craving. So, what you learn through Buddhism is oriented to helping you let go, and that can happen at all kinds of levels from the simple level of just letting go of a thought to letting go of a behavior. I see the Buddhist practices as being very much about the same thing that recovery is about. Buddhist teachings and practices offer some tools that aren't offered in a traditional 12-Step setting, particularly mindfulness meditation. There are also key ideas emphasized in Buddhism that can help recovery—acceptance of the inevitability of suffering, acceptance of impermanence, the suggestion that we let go of our attachment to ego. All of these, to me, really build on other recovery principles.

Bill White: Would you say there's a Buddhist path to recovery?

Kevin Griffin: Well, I would say that the Buddhist path *is* a path of recovery. But of course, it was initially designed not for recovery from addiction but as a path of recovery from the human condition.

Bill White: You know, it seems like there would be a lot of congruence between Buddhism and recovery and 12-Step recovery just from the standpoint of this whole theme of transcendence of self and getting out of one's self.

Kevin Griffin: Absolutely. And that's certainly part of the 12-Step view—what is talked about in the third step in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and in the concept of anonymity as a spiritual foundation.

Bill White: You worked on the development of a personal value statement, pretty early in the life of BRN. Could you describe some of those values and their relationship to recovery? Are there other key concepts drawn from Buddhism that you see as particularly helpful to the recovery process?

Kevin Griffin: Certainly. I think mindfulness is a foundational principle for people in recovery because it provides two very obvious things that are helpful for recovery. One is just the calm and peace that comes from engaging in meditation. But what's further special to mindfulness is a quality of trying to really observe the mind and observe the emotions so that we start to see our thoughts not as being so personal, as just being words or images that are passing through the mind. We can start to question our own thinking, which I think is vital for addicts since so much of the thinking of an addict is misguided and driven by craving and obsession. Mindfulness

helps us start to really deconstruct our thoughts and emotions. There's sort of an understanding of that in the 12-Step world, but Buddhist teachings and practices get at that more directly.

I think that when I go through the Buddhist teachings, the Middle Way, it's just full of things that are relevant for a person in recovery—everything from the five precepts, which include not using intoxicants to things like right intention. In Buddhism, the end doesn't justify the means. In Buddhism, the means *is* the end. And that means our motivation is just as important as the actions we take. That's something that people really resonate with because they see that you can't always succeed. Sometimes you make mistakes, but then there's the sense that you're on a path, you know what you want to do, you're not going to be punished just because you made a mistake, and you're actually going to be able to start again. That sense of right intention is a tremendous touchstone for people and very supportive of people. I'd also say that the emphasis on compassion and forgiveness, which are two really important Buddhist ideas, are really important for people in recovery—especially having compassion and forgiveness for ourselves.

Bill White: Do you see the theme of compassion related to the service ethic that's so common in recovery mutual aid groups?

Kevin Griffin: Yes. That is where there's another direct correlation and connection between the two paths. I was just talking about that on Sunday at the close of a retreat. I was talking about the 12th Step and how it says that having had a spiritual awakening, we try to help others. That spiritual awakening isn't a selfish thing. It's not about me having an experience. It's about me healing myself so that I can help to heal others. That's exactly what the Buddha did, and that's exactly what is taught in Buddhism as well.

Bill White: Kevin, with many people in 12-Step recovery involved with BRN, do you find that people develop a much deeper understanding of the Steps through the Buddhist teachings?

Kevin Griffin: I don't want to speak for other people. I certainly have seen people develop a different understanding of the Steps. For myself, I feel that I have a deeper understanding of the Steps, but I don't think that Buddhism is necessary to have a deep understanding of the Steps. I think it's just one of the ways that can help you find a way into the Steps, but I've seen people who were purely 12-Step people who had pretty profound understandings of the Steps. At the same time, I think there is generally a somewhat superficial understanding of the Steps that gets passed around. I don't really want to stand in judgment of anybody's program. It's not really my job to do that.

Bill White: You referenced earlier some people feeling uncomfortable in the more Christian-oriented meetings. Do you think there are other dimensions of Buddhism that attract people who've not been particularly comfortable within 12-Step programs?

Kevin Griffin: Well, the concept of God is one of the things that's hardest for people, and Buddhism doesn't have a theistic approach to spirituality. I've translated the Steps through a Buddhist's lens to offer people a different way of understanding what a higher power might be, and that seems particularly appealing beyond just people in recovery. I think that Buddhism is really a religion that appeals to many people in our current historical period because it is

somewhat scientific. It's logical. It's not based on a faith so much as a practice. And in our culture, there are a lot of people who've grown away from traditional religious life but want something that has both a spiritual and an intellectual component to it. There are many people who do not want to abandon their intellect at the door of the church or temple.

Bill White: You've mentioned meditation and mindfulness. Are there other practices drawn from Buddhism that serve as a daily recovery maintenance function for people in recovery?

Kevin Griffin: Yes, certainly in terms of formal practice, many people do some kind of prayer—things like loving kindness, which is usually called a meditation but I think it's a prayer: "May I be happy, may all beings be happy." Many people incorporate that kind of practice into their formal daily lives. And of course, there are the insights that they have when they're meditating or when they're studying that they take with them into their daily lives.

These aren't original to Buddhism, but when we start to develop compassion, then perhaps when we're on the road and someone cuts us off, instead of getting angry with them, we can think, "Okay, that person's probably got some kind of a problem they're caught up in." So, I think that quality of mindfulness is not something that stops when the meditation bell rings. It's something you can carry with you throughout your day, and the meditation is really just a way of establishing that.

The same is true of loving kindness or compassion or the insights into permanence and the whole attitude of "letting go" and non-attachment. These are attitudes that are obviously really supportive of recovery. Bringing Buddhism and recovery together are ways of intentionally bringing these things into our daily lives and trying to live by those principles. It's the same thing as the 12-Step practices; a lot of the principles are the same.

Bill White: For our readers, how could people who are interested best contact the Buddhist Recovery Network, either to become a member or to get more information?

Kevin Griffin: Well, the website is BuddhistRecovery.org, and there is a contact person at the site who readers can contact.

Bill White: So, the best contact is through the website?

Kevin Griffin: Yes. At this time, we're mostly just providing this storehouse of information. We tried to organize a second conference last year, and it just seemed that because of the weakness of the economy, not many people could travel to LA to make it. So at this point, I see us oriented much more towards the website. At the website, there is a directory of Buddhist Recovery meetings, and that's certainly the best resource for people who are interested.

Bill White: One of your early contributions to the recovery literature was your book, *One Breath at a Time*. Could you describe what readers would find in that book?

Kevin Griffin: Sure. The book has twelve chapters that go through the twelve steps. The chapters contain a lot of my own personal story and stories of other people in recovery to illustrate ways of understanding the Twelve Steps through the Buddhist teachings. It starts with an introduction to Buddhism and to meditation. One of the things I really like to emphasize is for

people to not make meditation into such a struggle. In the book, I also share a lot about my own difficulties and challenges. In the 12-Step tradition, the way we work together is by telling our stories, and so I felt that the best way for me to illustrate these principles and practices was through stories.

Bill White: And what about your most recent book?

Kevin Griffin: It's called *A Burning Desire*, and it's about higher power. Information on that book and a lot of related books is available on the Buddhist Recovery website.

Bill White: As you reflect back on your involvement with BRN, what have you found most personally meaningful from this involvement?

Kevin Griffin: I think what's most meaningful for me is seeing that there's a whole community of people who want to pursue this blending of teachings. When I first was sober back in the '80s, I didn't know anyone else in recovery who was interested in Buddhism, and I used to talk about it and try to get people to go on retreats and to meditate. The longer I was sober, more and more people came along who were interested in Buddhism. Being able to form an organization that would serve as a magnet for people who share this interest is very gratifying and comforting for me.

Bill White: Have you observed much growth in BRN since it was founded five years ago?

Kevin Griffin: The organization has not grown that much, but I think that the movement has grown. I think that one of our great challenges is to find a way to be of more service to the community and to discover what our value is. Right now, there's more of a shift towards localizing Buddhist recovery groups or the network. I'm working with a group of Buddhist Recovery teachers in the Bay Area to see if we can kind of start a local chapter of the Buddhist Recovery Network that will be more of a grassroots organization. I think the Network is starting to see the value of this being a more grassroots organization rather than a big international umbrella organization. If some of the local groups built up into local chapters, then that would really help the international organization.

Bill White: I referenced earlier some of the writing you had done on how to run meetings. Would that be a good resource for people who wanted to start a local Buddhist Recovery meeting?

Kevin Griffin: It's the only thing I know of that's online that gives people a model or guidelines for how to start a group and what to think about when you're starting a group.

One of the difficult challenges that people face is that in 12-Step groups, they can be totally peer-led. Buddhism is more of a hierarchical religion because it takes a lot of practice and a lot of study and insight to master the subtleties of its teachings and practices. It's not just something you can pick up in one book or a single meditation class. In fact, what can happen when a peer group gets together is you can have the blind leading the blind. People who have only a half-understanding of Buddhism can really confuse each other when trying to grasp an ideal like "not self" or the idea of acceptance. A Buddhist Recovery group, from my viewpoint,

should have someone who's a leader who has pretty solid grounding in both Buddhist practice and Buddhist philosophy. Of course, that limits the number of groups that can spring up because there just aren't that many people like that.

Bill White: From what you've described, it sounds like the role of teacher or guide is much more important in the Buddhist tradition than the sponsor role in a traditional 12-Step program.

Kevin Griffin: Yes, it's very different from that. Traditionally, to become a Buddhist teacher, you have to be authorized by some other teacher. It's a role that has been passed down from one teacher to the next, and it's a beautiful tradition. For those who prefer egalitarianism, they might consider such a system elitist, but it's worked pretty well for 2,500 years.

Bill White: Kevin, thank you for spending this time with us sharing your experience about Buddhism and addiction recovery.

Readers wishing to learn more can do so at <http://www.buddhistrecovery.org/> and www.kevingriffin.net. Kevin's books are available at http://www.amazon.com/One-Breath-Time-Buddhism-Twelve/dp/1579549055/ref=sr_1_1?s=books

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