

Kevin Griffin
Week One, *Letting Go and Going Forward: A Buddhist Recipe for Change*
December 7, 2015
“The Elements of Change: Awareness, Motivation, and Action”



Hello. I'm Kevin Griffin and this is a Tricycle Retreat called "Letting Go and Going Forward, a Buddhist Recipe for Change."

My work is often involved with recovering addicts and alcoholics. I am one of those people, and so particularly using the Buddhist teachings for this kind of transformation involves a huge letting go around addiction and all the states of mind that go with those diseases. We want to see if some of these teachings that apply to that kind of extreme recovery are applicable to people who don't identify as necessarily having a disease or addiction.

The way the Buddha talked about our relationship to self is very much like the way we describe addictions, a kind of clinging that causes suffering, and this is kind of the essence of what the Buddha talked about. I want to see if we can find the elements of Buddhism that directly relate to this process of change of letting go. When we look at what the Buddha taught and how he encouraged people to look inside themselves, he started by teaching mindfulness, by asking people to be aware of their own inner life and their own outer life, their relationship to the world and to other people around them.

This practice of mindfulness—hich by the way, I'd like to encourage you right now to see if you can practice mindfulness as you're listening to me—means letting your attention rest here, undistracted. Maybe feeling your body, letting go of thoughts and doubts, and letting the information come. This practice of mindfulness the Buddha taught isn't really an easy practice in the sense of necessarily making you feel good right away. It's one of the distinct features of Buddhism that the Buddha doesn't start by making grand promises of redemption or happiness. He, instead, asks us to look at our own suffering, the first noble truth, to see what the truth is about our lives internally and externally. What he points out is that what causes our psychological suffering is the way we become attached to (what we call in the recovery world) people, places and things, including ourselves or our ego.

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The starting point of awareness is where we start in terms of change. If we don't see the problem, we can't bring a solution. Indeed, this is a characteristic that people are familiar with in the addiction world: what we call *denial*. We deny that there is a problem or we don't see it. We're blind to it. I think it's also true that this denial exists outside the recovery world as well, in the daily kind of places where we get stuck, where we don't see how we are creating our own suffering. We develop a tendency to blame others or to think that we need to change others and the world in order to be okay ourselves. "If only I had the right job or the right partner," "If I had more money," all the things that we grasp at that we, sort of, see as ways to fix ourselves and our lives.

With this practice, we're really turning inward and trying to see, "Where am I creating that suffering myself, rather than blaming the world?" Which doesn't mean at some point we might not want to engage the world and see what we can change, skillfully. But not out of a feeling of grasping or a desire to control, but really out of a place of wisdom and compassion. As we grow in awareness, we start to see these inner conflicts, these elements of grasping the practice of mindfulness, watching our own mind, watching our thoughts, watching the worlds that we create with our minds, starts to reveal to us the places that we're stuck.

This then leads to the second aspect of change, following awareness: motivation. What motivates most of us to change is this awareness of suffering. When we see that something isn't working in our lives, that's when we become willing to change. That's what inspires us to change. A second aspect of motivation is also the desire to be happy or the belief that we can be happy. So in the recovery world, we see that people might get sober or get clean because their addiction is so painful. But at a certain point, what's going to sustain that is finding a happy life in recovery; Buddhism takes the same route, beginning by addressing our suffering. We come to our practice out of some stress, anxiety, or imbalance in our lives. But soon we discover that there's another life to be lived that's not just about getting rid of discomfort or things that don't work, but embracing a new life. The third aspect of motivation is our faith or our belief.



In the 12-step model, we start by seeing the suffering, seeing the addiction, seeing how powerful that is, our lack of control over it. Then, we realize that there's another way to approach it. The second step in recovery is about believing in a path: a path to recovery. In the Buddhist model, this is what the Buddha talks about as the third noble truth. The realization that, if our suffering is caused by clinging, then the answer to that, the way out of that, is to let go, and that it is possible.

One of the critical teachings in Buddhism is that things are created through action. They're internal and external actions, thoughts, words, and deeds, the law of karma. Anything that is created by action, can be uncreated by what we could refer to simplistically as reversing the action.

Of course, this is again what we do in an addiction model. Addiction is created by doing the same behavior over and over, and it's ended by stopping that behavior. The motivation is the key element to change. It's quite possible to see that your life isn't working or that you're suffering, without really being willing to do anything about it. Unfortunately, that's a somewhat common place. People get stuck in a place of real despair of seeing that things aren't working, yet not really believing in their own capacity for change because they've been stuck in patterns for so long. Or not believing that there are any available tools out there. Maybe, they've tried various things and they haven't worked.

This belief in the possibility of change is actually key to any growth. In the West, Buddhism is seen as a non-faith-based religion. We have this terminology that we apply to traditional Western religion, and a lot of people who come to Buddhism in the West are looking for an alternative to those belief systems that require us to take on a belief in things that are unbelievable. And Buddhism doesn't do that. There are some ancient teachings that are maybe a little less believable, but the fundamentals of Buddhism: believable. But they nonetheless require trust.



If you've ever gone to a meditation center or tried some meditation practice, you wouldn't do it if you didn't believe that it would be helpful, that it could help you to change. Why would someone go and sit with their eyes closed for half an hour doing nothing if they didn't think it was going to bring about some change?

Even though we don't think of that as a kind of religious faith, it actually requires quite a bit of faith. What the Buddha points out—and what I think is the essence of faith—is that it becomes the driving energy behind our action. If we believe that we can't change, we won't take the actions that bring about the possibility of change. Belief determines the whole direction of our lives. If we believe that it's possible to change, then we're open to possibilities, to looking at options, at things that can help us. Once there is this awareness and there is motivation, there is the negative motivation of wanting to get away from the suffering, there's the positive motivation of wanting to be happy, wanting freedom, and there's the belief that change is possible. Then, we're actually ready to do the work.

It's important to see that these stages are really necessary in order to get to the place. If we just jump in to taking the action, without seeing clearly the problem, there can be this grasping after a fix, without real clarity. But when we see clearly what the problem is, and we really get inspired to change, there's a tremendous energy to engage in a new way of living and new way of being.

That brings me to the main piece of this teaching, which is the plan of action. What are we going to do? How do we change? What are the things that bring about the change?

Before I get into that, I want to say that even once we start to work with a plan of action, we'll often have to refer back to these first two stages, to remembering or seeing the suffering and reengaging and really looking for motivation. This process of a spiritual path isn't one of just steady progress. It's one in which there are many ups and downs, many challenges, and lapses and, of course, in the addiction world, we talk about relapse, and one of the key phrases (you hear it at the end of every 12-step meeting) is, "Keep coming back."

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This is true for any spiritual path, and it is what the Buddha is pointing to as right intention. We have to keep coming back to our intention. It's so easy to get lost, even when we are following a plan. Plans become routinized or lose their energy, or we just forget. We fall back into those habits. The things that we need to change on this kind of path are so deeply conditioned that they aren't simply uprooted by making a decision or taking on one meditation practice. They're very deeply conditioned and often require us to come back and address again this whole process.