

Inspired by the notes I found in Jack Kerouac's *Desolation Peak: Collected Writings* (Rare Bird Press, Sal Paradise Press), I subsequently entered into a study on the Diamond Sutra, an essential Buddhist teaching that penetrated Kerouac's thoughts and ruminations during his summer as a fire lookout along the Cascade Range in 1956. A 9th century text of "wisdom that cuts as a thunderbolt" was the lone reading material Kerouac brought along on his two-month station, and it seeped into the bedrock of Kerouac's consciousness during his ascetic retreat on Desolation Peak, as reflected in his journal entries. Amidst boredom, silence, mania, despair, longing and bliss, the words of the Most Honored One, the Tathagata "Beyond Coming and Going," echoed inside Kerouac's mind and reflected onto the scribbled pages of his notebook.

Kerouac, on the advice of his friend Gary Snyder, signed up for his self-inflicted exile with a specific intent. As described in his novel *Desolation Angels*, "When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves on mules and I'm alone I will come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain." His intimacy with The Diamond Sutra produced determined moments of insight, like **There's no doubt in my mind any more about Buddha's teachings- he is truly the Awakener from this hopeless mess- It is truly a message from the bliss and the blessedness surely to be believed which reigns in the Golden Eternity.** Yet, as the summer wore on and his time away from society drew longer, as he was forced to confront himself, alone and isolated, Kerouac descended towards a complicated existential frustration which he could not resolve. **The vanity of Buddhism is insufferable- Who cares about interpretations?- let the others talk.**

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My own personal history with Buddhism began in high school- on a whim, I purchased E.A. Burt's *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*. A course on World Religions had opened my eyes to the basic foundations of Buddhist thinking i.e. the Four Noble Truths, the Middle Way, etc., and my teenage brain decided there was more for me to explore. What might have propelled me in this direction? At that phase in my adolescence, I had become jaded and lugubrious by my own religious upbringing, Catholicism. Promises of heaven, of life after death- by high school, I saw behind the veil and I uncovered a tacit understanding that most Catholics don't 'believe' in lofty resurrection promises. The dogmatic arguments, the Aristotelian concepts, the guilt- there were those elements as well, but mainly what turned me off was all the unhappiness and displeasure I saw in the eyes of those close to me. Adults, like my parents, my aunts and uncles, teachers, coaches- Catholics who by my account behaved like angry children, who were ill equipped to live a peaceful, satisfied life. Whatever they were doing was not working. Two common types I encountered were the dissatisfied martyr and the penitent criminal- neither appeared to me as wise sages. Those Catholic men and women I knew personally, they were clueless as to what their lives were about, how they fit into the universe. They didn't have anything worth passing on to me- so I decided to stop listening. I may have judged harshly. I may have judged quickly. But I was young, vibrant, and ready to reject a program which I had inherited from my mother and father. And so a rebellious, marijuana smoking teenager plucked out a pocket-sized book on Buddhism one evening in a Barnes & Noble. A pilgrim, searching- a fool, stumbling and bumbling about.

Since that fatal bookstore evening decades ago I have (stumbling and bumbling about) read, studied, meditated, visited prayer centers, participated in retreats, and sought to apply various Buddhist concepts in my personal life. There have been periods of intense ardor in which my engagement with Buddhist practices and study could not be stifled, and equally there have been periods of complete disinterest. The moon waxes and wanes- and over the past four years, with my children arriving, with 'life' really coming at me in full velocity- I haven't made a concerted effort to expose myself to Buddhist principles or concepts. I haven't actively sought out new techniques, bought new books, made new

courses of study. However, I have prayed, I have brought myself stability and stolidness through technical breathing, I have cultivated hope by acknowledging the evanescent nature of negative emotions, I have reflected on karma and been mystified at the origins of my children, I have been quick to not 'take them as my own' or take anything for that matter as my own- in many ways, Buddhism penetrates my day to day existence without me consciously deciding "I ought to approach this in a Buddhist way." It doesn't happen perfectly (chuckle), and it doesn't happen all the time (I'll be the first to admit there's plenty of work for me to do), but I have noticed mindfulness tools can appear in my possession when I need them most.

Finishing Kerouac's *Desolation Journals* immediately propelled me to shift back into a course of scholarship- I had never read the Diamond Sutra, and Jack's notes intrigued me. It had been so long since I had engaged with material from a philosophical or wisdom tradition in order to pursue insights and knowledge and personal 'eurekas'- insights which might be of use at this stage of my life. It is abundantly clear to me that the wisdom of Eastern saints can be beneficial for a middle-age family man in modern America- tortured by conversations on where to send our kids for daycare, long hours at the office, bagging diapers and prepping meals and wiping up spills, clothes and haircuts and birthday parties and savings accounts- grounding, centering, breathing- no lie, as I admitted previously, I need all the help I can get.

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However, despite my initial enthusiasm, there were also quiet reservations. I recalled an intense feeling of disillusionment the last time I paged through E.A. Burt's collection- my last forays into jnana yoga. At the crux of my dissatisfaction was the concept of the bodhisattva, Buddhism's equivalent of a Christlike figure. Upon achieving Enlightenment and freedom from samsara, from the wheel of coming and going, from craving and desire, birth and rebirth- the bodhisattva, filled with a heart of compassion, remains amidst the milieu of forms in order to assist other sentient beings in their own liberation projects. After perfecting one's own self, move on to the aid of others. At surface level, the progression made clear sense- images of airplane oxygen masks in laminated safety pamphlets. But the more I worked with the idea, the more I couldn't understand how a bodhisattva's heart became filled with compassion. If every person is a no-self of interconnectedness, if this world of form that passes by in the face of eternity is empty by nature, if there is no inherent individual, if any kind of 'striving' or 'progress' or 'enlightenment' is in fact the doings of a crafty ego construct- what could possibly be at stake? What moves the bodhisattva to compassionate action? If I've arrived at the other shore- if my perfection is reflected in my paramita - why row back? If there's no soul, if there's only emptiness, if the void rules- again I ask, what is at stake in this cosmology?

Kerouac himself wrote, **I'm going to go on reading the Diamond Sutra but I'm not going to be taken in by any ideas of transcendental compassionate communicate, for it's just a nothing- nevertheless, may Dostoevsky be blessed in his grave.**

In many ways, I had come to understand Buddhism as a doctrine of neutrality, even a form of subtle nihilism (the enemy of aforementioned Fyodor). Avalokitesvara, the one who pays heed to the tears of the world- she merely listens, and sheds no tears of her own. I wrestled with that notion- of being at peace with the suffering of the world, listening silently, and not reacting. There was too much distance. At the center of the Buddhist program I found equanimity, balance- but I did not find an impetus to love. Love as an action- love as a guiding principle- love as a battlefield. I could not embrace the decisive finality which Buddhism confronted me with- it doesn't matter, there is nothing to attain, stop reacting, never mind.

The truth is not human, it has no feelings, but do what you want, use your body according to its functions. If you have a loving heart use your loving heart according to its functions. It doesn't matter any way.

Hardly a call to arms.

-O-

I'm not comparing myself to Jack Kerouac.

But I can relate to him- as an alcoholic, as an artist, as a seeker.

I can also relate because my previous contact with Buddhist teachings had not fully penetrated into my heart, either- in truth I was more enamored by the radical concepts about loss of ego, about dissolution into candle spluttering Nirvanas and equalizing the draining tidal forces of emotion. I was attracted to haiku satori brevity. I certainly took away practical lessons on equanimity, on centeredness and balance- but the Buddha did not propel me out into the world to shepherd other sentient beings to enlightenment via compassion. Buddhism was about my journey, from self to no-self, from chains and moksha to samadhi liberation. I took enormous quantities of LSD and psilocybin in the name of "ego annihilation." Even after receiving the gift of sobriety, I spent many a night trying to convey different lessons to my wife, to my siblings, to friends who would listen- explaining why their viewpoint was limited, why there was a better way to see things, why their dramas weren't so dramatic, why nothing was that big of a deal, why it wasn't worth the bother. And it never worked.

This is why, several years ago, I shelved my books on Dzogen and DT Suzuki.

This is why, like Catholicism, I regarded Buddhism as a fallible human structure of thought rife with pitfalls and limitations.

This is also when my first child appeared like an unmerited blessing, and I stopped worrying about what I 'knew.' Because I knew, once and finally, that knowledge of the academic variety brought no peace. Bookishness brought me no happiness. It brought no assurance. There was nothing worth knowing that life itself did not teach. Those first months with my son- all my existential quagmires vanished. All my enlightenment hopes disappeared. It became about action- activity- taking care of a person who was completely unable to take care of himself. What difference did it make if I knew the twelve links of dependent origination? Who cared if I'd memorized the world systems around Mount Meru? Feed this helpless creature. Clean him up. Go to work so you can pay his medical bills. Make dinner for his mother. And in my failures, I came to embrace my humanity. I became less concerned with perfection, with enlightenment, and more concerned with assiduous persistence, with forgiving myself for my many shortcomings but continuing to *act*.

My essential truth became simplified- direct your energies, with a selfless love, towards your family. Everything became straightforward. The bar to measure myself against became clear. And as a result, my life transformed- it shifted towards 'the active living' more so than I could previously remember, at least since my own childhood. Less in my mind- and more in my heart.

COMPASSION= sad love (?)

For me, I realized COMPASSION= active love (!).

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Buddhism provided me with a logical prescription against suffering- but life has shown me that suffering and love are one in the same, they are not mutually exclusive. Two sides of one coin. Codependent elements, entangled. If I train my mind to avoid attachment, if my goal is to extinguish the flame- then why would I expect my heart to trudge out into a hopeless world of pain and misery and death? What motivation could there possibly be? While peering over Kerouac's words and reflecting on my own life, I determined that Buddhism seemed more of a way of thinking, but not a way of living. From *Desolation Angels*, "God how right Hemingway was when he said there was no remedy for life." I sensed in Kerouac, who was also knowledgeable in the elegant theorems of Siddhartha Gautama, a dearth of satisfaction.

We don't need an antidote- we need a path to the center of our pain.

A mark of wisdom means nothing- a wound of suffering is what makes us human.

When I gaze over my son, and especially over my daughter, the impressions of joy I feel are framed by a chiaroscuro of doubt, of sadness- her future, a beautiful woman in a complicated world, a world of rape and murder, of torment, of sadness, of bullies and social hierarchies, of boys and lies. I know this world. I've lived in it, through it- I know what it can do to people. My heart aches when I think of her future, when I envision moments where I can't protect her, when she will be treated unfairly, harmed. It doesn't matter if I acknowledge the limited conceptions of my limited mind. It doesn't matter if I assess the situation through the lens of interdependent arising. I cannot let go of my discriminative thoughts, I cannot help but and cravings for her life to be one of comfort, of happiness, of love. I cannot, and I will not. I am happy to suffer, and strive, for her and for such idealized outcomes.

If I disconnect from the wheel of samsara- how can I hunger and thirst for righteousness? How can I exercise my will, in the Kantian sense, and fulfill the dignity of my humanity? How can I really say that I love my daughter?

Many of the frustrations expressed in Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*, his novel which preceded his time as a fire lookout (in which he described Desolation Peak, among other adventures), mirrored my own disenchanted feelings after becoming entangled with Buddhist frameworks. Kerouac wrote, "I look at the distant fires in distant mountains and see the little imaginary blossoms of sight discussed in the Surangama Sutra whereby I know it's all an ephemeral dream of sensation- What earthly use to know this? What earthly use is anything?" Along those lines, later in the book, he utters "Now I'm *back* in that goddam movie of the world and *now* what do I do with it?" An answer to his own question, "'I don't know, I don't care, and it doesn't matter' will be the final human prayer."

There was too much mentality and cruelty in the world.

Here was the impasse I had reached, at least in terms of my relationship with Buddhist ideology and philosophy.

But now, with Kerouac's blessing, with the pages of the Diamond Sutra, with fresh eyes- I pressed forward.

I read the words of the Most Honored One. I reread them again, and again. A passage I kept returning to read, "Practice charity and compassion without regard for appearance, without regard to form." I interpret these words as do good for the sake of good, not for personal advancement or to merely appear as a 'good' person- and I find there to be an immense value to such a dictum. But still, a piece

was missing- I was not compelled. Because if there is no soul, no personal self, no universal self, *anatta*- no permanent essence, anywhere- who would be practicing charity and compassion? Who or what would such charity and compassion be impacting? How does such a worldview hold anyone accountable, if nobody is home?

I read the short manuscript again.

Again and again.

Then I found my entryway. Although the Most Honored One tells his disciples there is certainly no 'self' in the atomic sense of the world, no permanent soul or locus of identity- he simultaneously tells his disciples to "discard all notions of the non-existence of such concepts"- because all concepts and ideas are limited, "unreal." So even though notions of 'self' ought to be discarded, so too should notions of 'no-self.' The Buddha essentially chuckled and revealed, "Abandon everything- especially what I just told you."

I set down the printout I had been underlining.

Every concept, every thought, every idea, every word- every mental process at its core is unreal.

Exit your cranium.

Enter your heart.

Amongst the whole vast configuration of things, something happened: the Buddha admitted, plainly, that all his own teachings were merely vehicles, metaphors, and ultimately untrue. Fingers pointing at the moon. His aim was not to save us through the mind, through concepts, but rather to reveal the truth of the mind- which is its own untruth. By way of the mind, he invited his followers to enter into their heart. Dante venturing through the center of Hell in order to escape its grips- into the confusion, into the unreal, into the eternal incomprehension of the void- back home. This is the essence of **Abide and be silent**, it is our mother's voice from the porch. Come home. Be still. To reside in the heart of a true self (whether no-self or self-same, who cares), the heart of benevolent community, the heart of God- beyond the confusion, the "unreal", the mentality, the rationalizing, the right and wrong, the up and down. Alas, there is nothing essential to hold in your mind- but there are plenty of essential ways to love.

I closed my eyes. A deep breath. Then a voice in my head quipped, "Why wasn't this a little more clearly spelled out?" A wry smile. Shouldn't there have been a disclaimer, a forewarning, a note in Burt's prologue- Buddhism isn't for intellectuals, it isn't for hipsters, it isn't for connoisseurs of the esoteric or abstruse. I had approached Buddhism since my teenage years as something to 'get hip to', to gain an edge over those square, conservative models I saw rotting in place all around me. But my entry point had been the limiting factor! Right thinking isn't about lining up concepts and twisting your head straight. It isn't about gaining insights, sharpening your intellect, achieving an angle which 'dumb' people aren't able to see. It's about completely removing your head from off your body! It's about parachuting out from the limitless skies of thought. It's about landing, to silence the mind- and establishing a footing within your heart. It became brilliant, diamond clear to me- this is the jewel of Buddhism's crown.

Exit your cranium.

Enter your heart.

I thought of a poem I cherish by the Chinese mystic Han Shan:

*Here is a tree older than the forest itself;
The years of its life defy reckoning.
Its roots have seen the upheavals of hill and valley,
Its leaves have known the changes of wind and frost.
The world laughs at its shoddy exterior
And cares nothing for the fine grain of the wood inside.
Stripped free of flesh and hide,
All that remains is the core of truth.*

In light of my recent discovery, Han Shan's verse brought on a cascade of fresh interpretations. "Stripped free of flesh and hide" came to mean a removal of mental constructs, of any 'knowledge' or 'philosophy' or conceptual systems; "All that remains is the core of truth" came to mean the center of truth is not in the head, but in the heart. The truth cannot be explicated or explained. It can only be lived, a loving awareness, a compassionate interaction with the world around you. And that loving impulse is the creative life force of the universe- it not only propels the bodhisattvas, it propels existence. It is the ground of being, "older than the forest itself." It's not about trying to understand why a compassionate response is required, it's about removing all the obstacles and clutter in your mind so that a compassionate response becomes the only natural thing to do.

Exit your cranium.

Enter your heart.

I recalled another poem I cherish by the Indian saint Asvagosha:

*Like as the birds that gather
In the trees of the afternoon
Then at nightfall vanish all away
So are the separations of the world*

Once you eliminate the separations of the world, there is only unity- there is only love. And in order to eliminate the arbitrary notions of separateness, the limiting concepts- it's not about unlocking the mind or changing the way you see the world; it's about putting an end to your evaluations. It's about moving away from the mind, and reorienting to the heart. It's about living in an interconnected reality, a world in which everything is at stake because every apparent locus represents the entire whole. Every action is the most important action you can take, and every act of love can save the world.

Exit your cranium.

Enter your heart.

And this crossover may be where Kerouac failed, or where Buddhism failed him. I won't say he missed it entirely because I believe part of him sensed it. From *Desolation Angels*, "Now she (his mother) understood Mexico and why I had come there so often even tho I'd get sick of dysentery or lose weight

or get pale... ‘these are people who have *heart!*’” He could identify it in others, that *heart*, that active compassion in the face of suffering. But did he identify it in himself?

To be clear, I’m not chastising the man in any way. My intention is not to be critical of his life, his decisions, or his work- I’m merely trying to understand him better. I’m an archaeologist flipping through candlelight notebooks, pouring over lines of prose, uncovering hints and deciphering riddles, hungry for secrets.

The Duluo legend, Kerouac’s oeuvre of novels and poems and manuscripts- his writing was done on a sacred instinct, directed by his muse. It was also done with careful consideration both in terms of form and content- ‘intellectualized’ in the sense that he followed a prescription of spontaneous bop prosody to illuminate the ‘bookmovie’ of his life. He placed a great deal on the aesthetics and the practice of his craft, as a contemplative would. He wrote with a nuanced, multi-lingual, post-war voice as a reaction to his current social landscape and to American literature as a whole. He wrote with passion- but did he write as means to illuminate the key Buddhist concept of compassion?

In light of my previous reflections, I have to conclude that Kerouac didn’t *consider* his work in Buddhist terms. Yes, he discussed Buddhist concepts. He took expeditions with different teachings, he reflected on various texts, he explored the nature of his mind, he goofed haikus and even wrote his own version of the Buddha’s life- but he never allowed Buddhism to guide him out of the headspace and into the heartspace. And such a movement might have enabled him to reorient his work- not necessarily his voice, but his mission- towards the cultivation of a more compassionate world.

Kerouac’s work may have been a celebration of “Life,” a belief in “Life,” his means to confront the awful inevitability of death- but it was never explicitly tied to growing a loving awareness inside of his readers, or inside himself. Yes, this is the author who said, “Live, travel, adventure, bless.” I’m not arguing that Kerouac lacked a compassionate tone or a tender message in his work. He certainly possessed a compassionate heart by many accounts- the heart of a kind, tender, sympathetic, spiritually hungry man. But in my estimation, it was a heart of quiet sadness- not active rebellion. My argument, or observation, is concerned with the leap of faith from ‘head to heart’ which true Buddhism requires- at least in terms of understanding that mental processes ultimately lead to “unreal” nowheres. Kerouac was unable to process the conversion. He was a man of no roots, of no home- Buddhism ought to have provided him a warm shelter, a home to weather the incipient storms of his life, a home to protect him against his imminent self-destruction. But it never did.

A telling passage from his journal: **Here I am on Desolation Peak not “coming face to face with God” as I sententiously predicted, but myself, my shitty frantic screaming at bugs self- There is no God, there is no Buddha, there is nothing but just this and what name shall we give it? SHIT.** Here may lie the obstacle blocking the transition. A brother to an angel who died of rheumatic fever, Gerard- a brother who couldn’t help but hear his family’s whisperings of holy reverence for Gerard, the boy who should have lived. A friend to a poet who died on the beach head at Anzio, Sammy Sampas- a friend who fought off a tremendous guilt over not going to war, who secretly fantasized that he ought to have been the one buried face down in the sand. A son to Leo, the fallen lion, the breadwinner and protector of the family, a man of business and gregarious society- a son who could not live up to his father’s working class expectations, who couldn’t properly take care of his widowed mother, who couldn’t find a home amidst all his travels. A blend of many parts, a **wife-deserter, ship-jumper, drunkard, intimate of murderers and dope addicts and homosexuals and criminals and thieves, myself a dope-taker, contract-breaker with publishers, fugitive from the law, tax-evader.** Kerouac may have never granted his own self the forbearance of love. There are many indications that despite

his artistic accomplishments, he regretted the past and viewed himself in an extremely negative light. And self-love is a requirement before all other forms love- in order to love others, you have to love yourself. Oxygen masks and airplanes.

Unfortunately, Desolation Peak might have been Kerouac's last hope. After the thirty-four-year-old itinerant author finished his duties with the US Forest Service, Kerouac returned from his hermitage to the world of his desires- to his friends, to San Francisco, to New York, to transcontinental amblings from Mexico City to Tangiers, to more drinking and a deepening darkness of night. Within a year he became (in)famous for *On the Road*. Fame certainly did not catalyze the reaction. From then on, his output declined. His energy diminished. His drinking escalated. His vitriol spewed. His depression worsened. Among the pine boughs and rabbit hatches, with the Diamond Sutra in his pocket, if he'd realized how the honesty, the vitality and the vulnerability in his work might be used as a catalyst to invigorate the hearts of his readers- if he'd been able to move beyond the cognitive framework of Buddhism and enter the contemplative heart space of true divine monastics- if he'd been able to forgive himself for his own shortcomings and recognize the deep beauty of his own being (or non-being)- his trajectory might have taken an unforeseen turn. I wish I could send Jack a personal message of thanksgiving for his work, back across time for him to hear- I would explain to him how his thirst for living amidst the pain of alcoholism, in the face of death, and his honest reflections on that struggle, inspired another man to relish in "Life" over fifty years later.

Buddhism could have been the bridge to a new phase of his life, of his work, of his self image- it may have allowed him to continue to develop his voice and his mystic powers. Instead, in some ways, I think it contributed to his undoing.

But I refuse to judge him for what happened- despite everything, his suffering was done with a tender heart of courage.

I love him for what he did.

So now, **Abide and be silent.**