

BEAT SCENE

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**JACK
KEROUAC'S
DHARMA
FRAGMENTS**

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THIS IS THE BEAT GENERATION

JACK KEROUAC

DHARMA FRAGMENTS (1954)

Excerpt from *The Buddhist Years*, edited by Charles Shuttleworth

Dharma Fragments

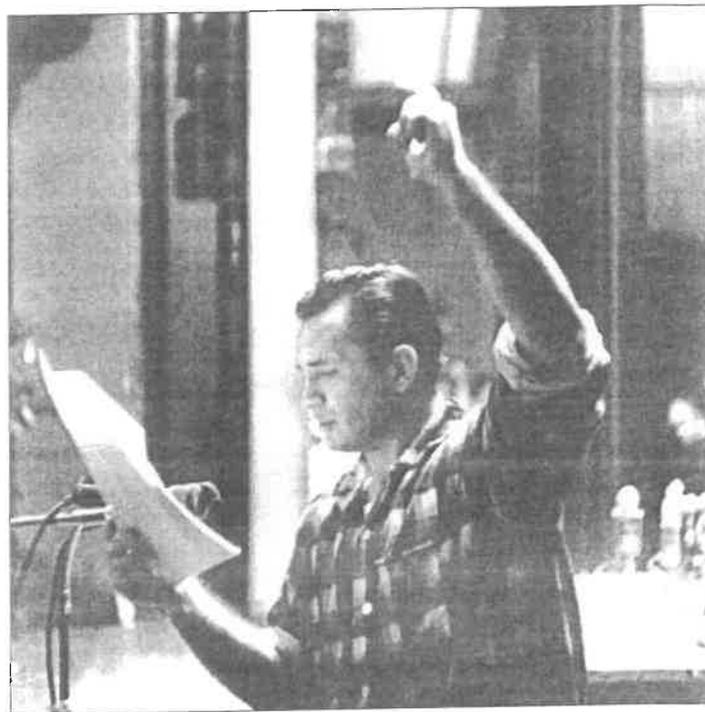
1.

THE DHARMA

The Mind itself is not fantastic, but what rises from it.

The Mind is in an eternal state of pure emptiness, it never had a beginning, never will end, like the sound of hearing in a silent room when you realize that No-Noise is eternally pure, empty and unbroken but all noises taking place outside the room are impure accidental fantasmis imprinting on the clear hearing surface-calm of the ear sea, as the winds of Ignorance ripple the mirrored emptiness on a lake. Hearing itself is not fantastic, only what it hears is fantastic, improbable, troublemaking: sounds, The Mind is pure, holy, continuous, endless, but the thoughts that rise from it are impure panicky passing things, limited and mortal, such as the Four Great Elements of Fire, Water, Earth and Air, and the Six Senses of Ear, Eye, Tongue, Nose, Body and Discriminating Mind, a combination of Four and Six telling you all you need to know about how the world is made. The whole world rises from the non-fantastic Mind, completely fantastic. Yet we spend every day working, worrying, hurrying, coping, trying, dying, disappearing and reappearing, raging, gnashing, killing, lusting, politicking, ambitioning to degrade what we take to be selves of others, stealing, groveling and sniveling and all because we took the fantastic emanations from the empty center of the world, which is silent universal mind, to be the real world. It's only the false mind-made world working in that combination of Four and Six. The real world has no combination and is no less empty and is the Mind itself, unmade, unborn, everywhere peacefully causeless. The Dharma.

This very teaching of the Dharma is also false, like the world, because it too is mind-made, it is like a finger of falsity used to point at the truth of



emptiness. Just so, this unreal world of seemingly real miserableness is nothing but an apparition of falsity used to direct all of we sentient beings ultimately to the truth of perfect emptiness, which is Nirvana, or Heaven, whether now or in kalpas and epochs to come.

This is the faith not only of Gotama Buddha but that of the Buddhas of old whose lost ancient path through the woods of the world Gotama only rediscovered when he sat under the Bo-Tree vowing

not to get up till it should come to him the long forgotten way of saving all living beings from their miserable delusion of life and death in all the Ten Quarters of the Universe, 500 years before Christ the Saviour Hero of the Western World.

About a thousand years ago, when Yuen-tso translated a sacred manuscript written by the Sixth Century Master Chih-Chi, in China, he wrote: "As we look outward upon the world, we see corruption everywhere—people hankering after amusements, seeking to gratify their own selfish comfort, trying to rationalize their prejudices, deliberately blinding their eyes to their own enlightenment. How few there are who comprehend the way to practice meditation! Instead of studying this book, they keep it hidden away in a bookcase and their labor is in vain. But again I bring the teaching to the 'engraver of wooden blocks' for another republishing and I hope that everyone who reads it will profit by its teachings. Moreover, I hope that everyone who reads it will practice its teachings and gain thereby a personal realization of its immeasurable treasure."

1 - The quote is from BB 438 ("Dhyana for Beginners") with only one change: the word "meditation" substituted for "Dhyana."

2.

Buddha is an Indian word meaning Awakened One. Buddhism teaches awakening from the dream of living things. The founder, who is called Buddha, was a human being born Prince Siddhartha, and was the son of a Maharajah of the Gotama tribe reigning in a great palace in the forests outside Kapilavastu, Gorakpur, India, five hundred and sixty-three years before Christ. When Prince Siddhartha was twenty-five he suddenly became depressed onto death. "Why are we born just for suffering, decay, old age and death?" he asked, and turned away from the delights of royal existence. His father instructed beautiful girls to dance and distract him with enticing postures, but he sat out the day staring through them; and at nightfall they lay in a great sleeping party throughout the hall. Prince Siddhartha saddled his great horse and rode forth into the wilderness to retire from the world, as was the custom in those days. He left behind Suddhodana his father, his beautiful wife Yasodhara, and his son Rahula, and a life of power and leisure, to go and seek self-realization of Noble Wisdom in the woods of India. Finding a ragged mendicant in the forest, he desired his old robes and exchanged his royal garments for them. Then he took his sword and cut off his beautiful blond hair. Then he ordered his servant to take his horse back to the

palace and inform his father the Maharajah what was being done. Then he wandered off into the woods in the beggar clothes, seeking the holy men for instruction.

3.

Being a Tathagata
transformation
you yield yourself up
to all beings
for the sake
of their emancipation
by practicing
continual conscious compassion
because all things
and all creatures that tremble at punishment
are different forms
of the same
Solitude of the
Lovelight of Compassion
and therefore
are already in Nirvana
now.

* * *

Being a Tathagata
transformation you
yield yourself up to
all beings for the
sake of their emancipation.
No more desires, discrimina-
tions nor ego. You
practice continual conscious
compassion;
which is Noble Wisdom,
which is Reality,
and all creatures tremble
at the fear of punishment
In the Solitude of the Lovelight
of Compassion —

4.

"Someone may enquire why I was led to write this Commentary.—My first and main purpose was to save all sentient beings from suffering and to bring them to eternal happiness. I had no desire to gain by it worldly fame, riches or honor.—I felt impelled to present the Lord's Teachings in all their profound wisdom but to explain them briefly, succinctly, but clearly and adequately."

2 - Kerouac is echoing a line from the Dhammapada: "All men tremble at punishment, all men fear death; remember that you are like unto them, and do not kill, nor cause slaughter" (WCI 336). See also WU 77; SOD 211, 323, 328.
 3 - The quote is from BB 360-61 (A[vaghoc-a's Awakening of Faith]), using dashes instead of ellipses.

These pious antecedents, saints, who did not write for glory, should be my constant models in this elucidation of the Dharma and the Eternal Brightness that I am going to try to unfold for the sake of those proceeding via a narration and interpretation of my whole lifetime in America, from bawling babe baptized in the Catholic Church, through youth and dubious manhood stained by crime, adultery, doubt, defeat, idiocy and proud poesy, to the sudden discovery and realization of Mind Essence and the vast opening up to interior radiances and holy tranquility.

These glorious saints of the East, pious beyond description, wrote for no glory but the glory of their Teacher who said all things were empty as he and they themselves. They should be my constant models in this study of the Dharma for signs of its eternal Brightness in some of the scenes of my life in America. I write of myself not only because I have not known a Bodhisattva-Mahasattva in this life, or at least recognized one on the road or in the street, or a Pratyeka or practicing Sage of the Order, least of all a Buddha, to venerate and translate, though if I have

not seen Buddha in my mind he need not appear in streets and roads, for the ground is holy; I write of myself because it is in myself that was accomplished the beginnings of Self Realization of Noble Wisdom, and only there the story begins, the confession of the sins of self by getting in the Ganges of lifetime, the laying bare of contact with Buddha in mysterious samadhis of holy ecstasy wherein I have seen the actual light of golden waterfalls, swirling completed, prickling with silence, the million trillion eyes of all the Tathagatas watching across time that separates us from the void, where they sit, each cross legged and shining, on primal dewdrops, waiting for the fools and sufferers to hurry on back.

My first memory of life was of this. "Don't try it, life is not worth living," I was advised in the dark excitement at the lip light of the world—

BLAKE: "My mother groaned

4 Kerouac marked this paragraph for deletion, replacing it with the one that follows, but I have included it because of its value autobiographically

Thanks to Jim Sampas, Literary Executor, the Estate of Jack Kerouac, for his kind permission to publish this piece.

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JACK KEROUAC

The Buddhist Years

[Rare Bird Books]

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In what seems to be something hot on the heels of *Jack Kerouac Self Portrait* - it isn't quite that - *Jack Kerouac: The Buddhist Years* must come as a wild and welcome surprise for his many readers in this other, newer century. A few years back a few observers, me included, thought it, the archive, might be exhausted soon. It seems not. Jack Kerouac's devotion to his writing life and the archiving of it was a strong one, consistent. As it says in a promotional blurb for this book - 'Further volumes are planned.' That's got to be good news.

If Kerouac hadn't wanted these previously unpublished works to go out into the world he surely would have destroyed them, no?

The story here is that Jack had a seven year period of deep Buddhist study. It may not have been on a Gary Snyder or Philip Whalen level, it was his own, highly personal, some might say idiosyncratic approach. But there is no question he was serious about it.

The literary executor of the Kerouac estate has gone on record to say recently, "The Kerouac archive is so rich and so vast...While he was alive, he wrote incessantly, and he saved it all, hoping that it would prove of value to others. It's a huge record of his life - his feelings, perceptions, and especially with The Buddhist years, his spirituality."

A key section of the book appears to be something he, Kerouac, called *The Story Just Begins* - "The joys of life elude the angry man. The only wrong I've ever done is believe that wrong exists and to go around with that idea in my head and look at everybody through such eyes."

Beat Scene spoke to editor Charles Shuttleworth about this newly published writing which has existed in the vaults of The New York Public Library for a number of years.

Many people might read Buddhist - and think it is a straight ahead 'religious text' book? But that's not true, is it?

Charles Shuttleworth: No, it certainly isn't. The first several pieces are Jack's reflections on his birth and coming into consciousness, when he first started questioning the nature of existence. There are several stories about his family. One of them, entitled "The Heart of the World: The Legend of Duluoz" arguably belongs as part of his Duluoz Legend, a first installment that predates the events in *Visions of Gerard*; and he used parts of it when he wrote *Visions of Gerard* a year later. He also tells several stories of what first led him to immerse himself in Buddhist study: his upset over the breakup with Alene Lee (Mardou Fox in *The Subterraneans*) had him feeling suicidal, and in Buddhism he found solace. There are also poems, musings, and the longest piece in the book, entitled "The Legend of Three Houses" is a fantastic tale that includes Old Bull Baloon (a cross between William Burroughs and W.C. Fields) on a road trip with seven-year-old Ray Smith, who has been raised in an orphanage and has Buddhistic perceptions, heading for a rendezvous with an equally young Cody Pomeray, Jr. (Neal Cassady).

2. You're the editor, what are your highlights, which elements stick out for you? Particular sections?

Charles Shuttleworth: One of my favorites are "The Long Night of Life," a story that includes thoughts about human history, his parents, and his first memories, including a story when he was three years old and Gerard hurt himself sledding. Another is "The City and the Path," which tells the story of Peter Martin, who is living a meditative existence as a hermit in the Mexican desert, but by the end he longs to return to the excitement of New York City.

3. What are your thoughts on it all being published, finally?

Charles Shuttleworth : I've always gravitated to Jack Kerouac's more spiritual nature - his thoughts on the big questions that religions try to answer. What is life's meaning and purpose? Is there an order to the

universe? Is someone watching over us? How are we to deal with the knowledge of death; and what happens to us, to our loved ones, to everyone, afterward? Kerouac spent his life asking these questions, having been traumatized at age four with the death of his nine-year-old brother, Gerard.

Eight years ago, when I began delving into the Kerouac archives, the place I started was the journal he kept on Desolation Peak, but more broadly I was interested in Jack's whole Buddhist period because I felt strongly it had been understudied; and the writing I found reflects an artist still at his peak. Whether he's musing over the nature of reality or telling a story reflective of his Buddhist thinking, the writing is consistently and wonderfully Kerouacian, with great characterizations and turns of phrase. Jack contained multitudes, and I hope readers will be as thrilled as I am to experience this especially warm and thoughtful side of his nature.

4. For me, it's so sad that he couldn't get anyone to take it on in the 1950s and 1960s.

Charles Shuttleworth: You're referring to all of Kerouac's Buddhist writings, and to an extent I agree. I'm a big fan of *Some of the Dharma* in particular, which wasn't published until 1999. But that said, I think readers will find *The Buddhist Years* much more accessible. And Jack was able to publish *The Dharma Bums*, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, *Mexico City Blues*, and *Visions of Gerard* in his lifetime, all of which have always been favorites of mine.

With this new Buddhist themed book here, it will go on that part of the Jack Kerouac shelf that already includes *Some of the Dharma*, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha*. Who knows, there may be more Buddhist material yet to come? It was a crucially important phase of his life, initially sparked, as I understand it, by him reading Dwight Goddard's *Buddhist Bible*. Allegedly, he had this book on 'permanent' loan from a library while hitchhiking at one time. And, it must be said, whether he likes it or not, meeting Gary Snyder in the mid 1950s, around the time they convened in San Francisco for the Six Gallery reading - an event that was a line in the sand moment, possibly and understandably overshadowed by Allen Ginsberg's epic reading of *Howl*. It was, some might say, the Dharma Bum period of just a month or two, where Buddhism, in various shades overtook them all.

Kerouac, Snyder, Whalen, Ginsberg and the gang. Snyder's personality, adherence to his 'Buddhist' way of life, his self discipline, work ethic, it was all so impressive to an admiring Kerouac, then simply a writer in waiting. *On the Road* two years into his future, just a possibility. Of course it resulted in *The Dharma Bums*, a little book that Jack curiously at times dismissed as a 'potboiler', something to keep his name in the public eye. Especially in the wake of his 'Road' novel.

Jack often complained that his works were truncated, reduced from their full scope. Right from the onset he was a victim of this, his first published



novel, the neglected *The Town and the City* from 1950 was cut savagely. Is it possible that a fuller version of *The Dharma Bums* exists? Time will tell. There is/was a *Dharma Bums* scroll, It was sold for a considerable sum a few years back, not for the massive amount that the *On the Road* scroll went for, but a tidy sum nonetheless.

What Charles Shuttleworth says about the nature of this new Kerouac collection is reassuring, it isn't simply a 'Buddhist' volume. That scenario, while of fascination for many, might deter some future readers, the thought of a wholly religious tract. Though, given it's Jack Kerouac they might suspect it is a road he might travel. It highlights his spiritual side in times, still, where he is often simply regarded as 'The King of the beats.' What a ridiculous moniker to label him with, back then and more so today. A man who can write - "These pious antecedents, saints, who did not write for glory, should be my constant models in this elucidation of the Dharma and the Eternal Brightness ..." Deserves better testament than such thoughtlessness. ●