

Kerouac's Bodhisattva Ethic: A Response to 'Devotion to Solipsism'

There is no doubt Jack Kerouac was a man of many flaws including a limited understanding of Buddhism. These flaws and limitations should not dismiss his literary achievements or, what I argue for here, his attempts at a bodhisattva ethic. This response focuses upon Jack Kerouac as a bodhisattva while highlighting points made by Dew in 'Devotion to Solipsism'.

Kerouac's preoccupation with Buddhism was primarily in the realm of Mahayana Buddhism, the branch that upholds the bodhisattva as the ideal figure. While Kerouac had limited knowledge of Buddhism, he certainly gravitated towards Mahayana philosophical ideas regarding the bodhisattva and those related to metaphysics and ontology.

Dew is correct in noting Kerouac's role as a bodhisattva (Dew: 2). It is perhaps a narrow rendering of 'bodhisattva' that leads Dew to read Kerouac as solipsistic. A common rendering of the term 'bodhisattva' is "an enlightened being". Unfortunately this presents an inaccurate and incomplete definition of the bodhisattva as the ideal figure of Mahayana. From a Mahayana perspective, a bodhisattva certainly can be an enlightened being working to alleviate the suffering of all beings. But a bodhisattva is also one who *intends* to reach awakening for the sake of other sentient beings. Thus, the ideal is also of a bodhisattva who is unenlightened or still flawed yet having made the vow to reach enlightenment to help others. It is within this more complete definition of bodhisattva that Kerouac's ethic fits.

Kerouac's writings attest to his perspective regarding his own bodhisattva-ness:

...considered a criminal and insane and a sinner and an imbecile, myself self-disappointed & endlessly sad because I'm not doing what I knew should be done a whole year ago when the Buddha's printed words showed me the path ... a year's delay, a deepening of the sea of troubles, sickness, old age creeping around my tired eyes, decrepitude and dismay, loss of solitude & purity—I must exert my intelligence now to secure the release of this Bodhisattva from the

chains of the City (*Some of the Dharma*, 185).

Here Kerouac is presented flaws and all. We also see Kerouac the bodhisattva and again several pages later.

TO EXPLAIN THE DHARMA to ordinary Americans, like say, Southerners, I will substitute the expression Mind Essence for the Mind of God, using upaya skill thereby to help their understanding; then should a perceptive listener ask me 'Who made God?' I can say 'Mind-only' (*Some of the Dharma*, 198).

These passages represent Kerouac as a bodhisattva in the fuller understanding of the ideal. Here Kerouac reflects the classic characteristics of a bodhisattva. Namely *upaya* or skillful means, here in the form of teaching the dharma to those without prior knowledge of Buddhism, and *prajna* or wisdom, wisdom to breakthrough the suffering.

It is evidenced in *Some of the Dharma* and other writings (including *Tristessa*) that Kerouac's Buddhist practice often had the suffering of others in mind. This is clearly rooted in compassion (*karuna*), another key characteristic of a bodhisattva. Further attesting to his bodhisattva-ness, Kerouac makes declarations that are indicative of the concept of *bodhicitta* – a mind intent on enlightenment. *Bodhicitta*, as a prerequisite for a bodhisattva, should be cultivated as a stage within the evolutionary process towards becoming a bodhisattva. This evolutionary process eventually results in “communication between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’ [being] established” (Kawamura: xv). Regarding *Tristessa* Dew notes, “the wish to communicate is a recurring and ardent desire in this text...” (Dew: 17). *Tristessa* and *Some of the Dharma* present Kerouac struggling with immersion into Buddhism and the evolutionary process this entails. The effort to communicate through the text is an example of Kerouac working the bodhisattva path. Ultimately the flaws aren't what matter it is the intention or *bodhicitta* that gives Kerouac the status of a bodhisattva.

Troubled and unenlightened Kerouac plodded through a fusion of Catholicism and Mahayana philosophy, through *maya*, in search of an experience of *shunyata* or emptiness. Following this line of thought Dew notes, “this claim that ‘All is Well’ and “Heaven is Nigh” becomes the central refrain of Kerouac’s religious thought, reiterated throughout his literary work, coupled frequently with the notion that the world is illusory in its transient forms... (Dew: 1-2). Read from a Mahayana perspective this is simply a reiteration of the concept *yathā-bhūta*, “The way things are in actuality; ...used to designate the true nature of phenomena or direct experience unmediated by the superimposition of false concepts such as the idea of an inherent and permanent identity or self. As such, the term is used in Mahayana synonymously with emptiness, actuality, suchness...” (Keown).

I agree with Dew as he notes, “at times it seems that Kerouac wants “Enlightenment” just as he wants to be a great and famous writer” (Dew: 15). However, I view this disconnect as Kerouac the flawed human who is no different than any other Buddhist working towards enlightenment. Where Dew sees solipsism I see a man unable to break free of conventional reality or in Kerouac’s terms *maya*. The textual portrayal of Kerouac frequently differs from the Kerouac of real life, yet I do not think this is a reason to disregard his attempts to live and teach a bodhisattva ethic. An alternate Buddhist view would be to focus on the intention behind Kerouac’s writings and actions. He certainly was a man who expressed a bodhisattva ethic through his intention, which were often in the right place even as he struggled to integrate Buddhist ideas into his life. Ultimately Kerouac couldn’t break free of the *maya* he envisioned, whether it was alcohol, attachment to family, or issues of identity, he struggled to transcend these conventional realities. While highly unconventional, Kerouac was a bodhisattva flaws and all.

Sources

Dew, Spencer. "Devotion to Solipsism: Religious Thought and Practice in Jack Kerouac's *Tristessa*."

Kawamura, Leslie. *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhism*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981, p. xv.

Keown, Damien. "Yathā- bhūta." *A Dictionary of Buddhism*. 2004.