Lonesome Travelers: Dwight Goddard, Jack Kerouac, and an American Dharma

by: Matt Stefon

In May 1954, Jack Kerouac wrote Allen Ginsberg a lengthy letter, much of which described his recent discovery of Buddhism. Inspired by a reading of Thoreau's *Walden* that winter, Kerouac had been consuming all of the literature on Buddhism he could find. In hopes of sparking his young friend's interest, he included "*For your beginning studies*" a partial bibliography of what he had been reading. Though all would be helpful, the "best book… by far" that Kerouac could recommend was a thick anthology entitled *A Buddhist Bible*

> because it contains the Surangama Sutra and the Lankavatara Scripture, not to mention the 11-page [sic] Diamond Sutra which is the last word, and Asvaghosha's Awakening of Faith… the Tao [and] sources—from the Pali, the Sanskrit, the Thibetan [sic], Chinese, Burmese and modern.[1]

Though Kerouac read widely, something about Dwight Goddard's compendium of Buddhist texts grabbed his interest and piqued his enthusiasm, and throughout his study of Buddhism, he kept Goddard's *Bible* close to his heart, carrying it everywhere he went, memorizing many of its sutras, and mining its selections for insights as well as for both material and themes for his later books.[2]

Kerouac was not the only student of Buddhism to accord Goddard's magnum opus such high standing and importance as a "first book"—but he continues to be Goddard's most high-profile disciple.[3] Indeed, Kerouac appears to have thought so highly as to have mentioned his teacher in several works written during the period when

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[1] Jack Kerouac, letter to Allen Ginsberg, early May 1954, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*. Ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1995), 415-416.
[2] See Ginsberg, "Negative Capability: Kerouac's Buddhist Ethic," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Fall 1998, 8.
[3] Robert Aitken, in his foreword to the most recent edition of Goddard's *Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), notes that "with some frequency," the book has appeared on his student's "first books" lists (vii).

his study of Buddhism was most intense. One cannot miss Goddard's presence in the meditation and practice notebooks published as *Some Of The Dharma* (1997).[4] In the closing essay of *Lonesome Traveler* (1960), "The Vanishing American Hobo", Kerouac credits Goddard with perfectly encapsulating "the original hobo dream" in the poem he composed and affixed to page 406 of his *Bible* as a preface for his translation of the *Daodejing*: "Oh for this one rare occurrence/Gladly would I give ten thousand pieces of gold!/A hat is on my head, a bundle on my back,/And my staff, the refreshing breeze and the full moon."[5] Goddard's *Bible* plays a prominent role in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), and toward the end of the book, Japhy Ryder breaks to Ray Smith the bad news that even "our old friend Dwight Goddard who spent his life as a Buddhist… suddenly returned to Christianity in his last days."[6]

How Kerouac could have known such a tidbit about a man whose life was obscure even in his day and whose writings, save for the best-selling *Bible*, were scattered in libraries and in the collections of a few scholars and ministers across the country and occasionally overseas, is itself unclear.[7] Beat scholars generally relegate Goddard to a footnote in the Kerouac legend; if the relationship between the two is touched upon, it is only superficially explored and, if explored at all, generally confined to the *Buddhist Bible*. But as the above quotes demonstrate, to do so is to by-pass and, thus, entirely miss

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[4] In *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), John Lardas notes that the notebooks that became *Some of the Dharma*, "[i]f anything [serve] as a record of intensive self-analysis in keeping" (246) with Goddard's injunction "to energize effort to follow the Noble Path, to become Buddha" (Goddard, "Introduction," *A Buddhist Bible*, xxxii).

[5] Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible*, 406; Kerouac, "The Vanishing American Hobo," *Lonesome Traveler* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

[6] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 202.

[7] In a 1933 *Boston Globe* article, "Vermonter Joins Monks of Thibet," A.J. Philpott notes Goddard's reputation among the residents of Thetford, Vermont, as a "mystery man." Both Chas. A. Cummings, a friend of Goddard's, and David Starry, who once interviewed Goddard, notes his penchant for reticence and for maintaining privacy. See Cummings, "A Worthy Follower of Buddha", *The Vermonter*, June 1940, and David Starry, "Dwight Goddard—The Yankee Buddhist", *Zen Notes* 27:7 (July 1980).

out on the richness of a relationship that is not merely one between writer and reader or even between teacher and student but is instead a relationship in which student emulates and dialogues with his teacher, all the while transforming, and even striving to trump, the learning received from his master through an interpretive feat of his own creativity.[8] Kerouac's inclusion of the "hobo" poem highlights Goddard's function as a mythic—spiritual and experiential, as well as literary—authorial hero in the ever-unfolding mythology that Kerouac crafted for himself as a "lonesome traveler." A detailed comparative study between both men and their respective visions of Buddhism is beyond this paper, so instead it aims to shed light on a continuity between each man's vision of the prophetic role that Buddhism could play in America as well as the common means of promulgation: writing. Eschewing biography and history save to juxtapose the writers and to highlight points of the teacher-student dialogue between them, this paper is concerned with three aspects of the "American Dharma" whose wheel was given a new turn by Goddard and was commandeered by Kerouac: the importance of the individual's quest for enlightenment, which is personified by the seeker as "lonesome traveler," as a pilgrim or a "bhikkhu;" the concomitant injunction to rely on personal religious experience as both method for reaching *and* path toward enlightenment; and the centrality of literature in promulgating the "Word and the Way" of Buddhism in America.[9]

Goddard's work is mainly intended for the individual to work out his own salvation for himself through control of the mind. But goal of egolessness aside, "Buddhism is above all," wrote Goddard in *The Buddha's Golden Path* (1929), "an

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[8] As Lardas points out, "Given Goddard's directives, Kerouac viewed Buddhism as a means to reinvigorate his literary creativity as well as a spiritual path." (246)

[9] Ben Giamo adapts Kerouac's statement on Buddhism being both the "Word" and the "Way" for the organizing motif of his *Kerouac, The Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000).

experience that one must interpret for himself."[10] This statement recalls the words of Goddard's former mentor and collaborator, D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966), that

> when the doctrine of enlightenment makes its appeal to *the inner experience* of the Buddhist and its content is to be grasped immediately without any conceptual medium, *the sole authority* in his spiritual life will have to be found *within himself.*[11]

But Goddard, concerned with interpreting Buddhism for "modern [Western] conditions, gave this a "practical" spin (with emphasis on "practice"). Coming from a missionary background—he served the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Foochow, China—Goddard became interested in reforming missionary work so it *cultivated* man's spiritual condition. In the early 1920s, he studied at the Nanjing-based "Buddhist-Christian Monastery" of Karl Ludvig Reichelt, a Norwegian Lutheran missionary who believed that Buddhism and Christianity were closely related in spirit and that Buddhism's influence would both perfect Christianity and cure the spiritual ailings of the West.[12]

Goddard was inspired by Reichelt's experiment in promoting study and mutually respectful dialogue between Buddhist monks and Christian ministers and missionaries. However, such a plan would be of no benefit to humanity if such study was limited only to clergy or even to scholars. Further, the sermons, lectures, and meditation presentations held in some cities in the wake of the 1893 Parliament of World Religions, were a "weak" method because

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[10] Goddard, *The Buddha's Golden Path: The Classic Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Square One Books, 2002), 1. Goddard packaged a "practical" Buddhism as a series of three "adventures"—"Through Restraint of Physical Desire to Emancipation", "Through Right Mind Control to Enlightenment", and "Threough Concentration of Spirit to Tranquilization"—that would bring the practitioner to Enlightenment once, "first of all," he or she may arrive at "a clear mind." (10, quote on page 1)
[11] D.T. Suzuki, *Essays In Zen Buddhism, First Series*, (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 73-74.
[12] *Buddha's Golden Path*, vi; Rick Fields, *How The Swans Came to the West*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 184-186.

> coming under the influence of Buddhism for only two or three hours a week and then returning to the cares and distractions of the worldly life, they fall back into the conventional life of the world.[13]

Convinced that some form of *sangha* (monastery) was necessary to "[give] the seeds of Buddhism more favorable conditions and longer time [to take] root," Goddard proposed an itinerant brotherhood, "The Followers of Buddha," who would winter at his "refuge" in Santa Barbara, summer at Goddard's estate in the Green Mountains of Vermont, and "motor back and forth" by way of a van fitted with bunks, "teaching and explaining the Dharma to those they meet by the way, selling Buddhist books, distributing literature, seeking new members and wider support for the Brotherhood" that folded a year later, having only attracted one full-time brother.[14]

Along with Goddard's *Bible*, Kerouac read Goddard's plan for the brotherhood, and was inspired to begin his own "zendo bendo." The "zendo" never materialized: Kerouac, already at heart a pilgrim, was attracted to the "life of freedom from, dependence upon, and conformity to , the conventional life of the world" that Goddard was offering—several passages from Goddard's pamphlet are found throughout *Some of the Dharma*, especially (and in emphatic capital letters) the injunction for the brother who "IF MARRIED… MUST MAKE SOME SATISFACTORY ARRANGEMENT WITH HIS WIFE SO THAT HE IS NO LONGER RESPONSIBLE FOR HER SUPPORT OR THE SUPPORT OF ANY CHILDREN THERE MAY BE."[15] Goddard's blueprint for an

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[13] Goddard, *Followers of Buddha: An American Buddhist Brotherhood*, (Santa Barbara: J.F. Rowny Press, 1934.

[14] Letter from Dwight Goddard to James Bissett Pratt, 17 June 1934. James Bissett Pratt Papers. Archives and Special Collections. Williams College.

[15]Letter from Jack Kerouac to Gary Snyder, 24 June 1957. Printed in *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, Ed. By Ann Charters, New York: Penguin, 2000, 52; *Followers*, 13; *Some of the Dharma*, ; Ben Giamo offers the most in-depth study to date of Kerouac's borrowings from Goddard. However, like other Kerouac scholars, Giamo confines his study to Goddard's *Buddhist Bible*, while the influence of his

itinerant, wandering life of "having no abiding place"—of following "the plan that Buddha, Jesus and Saint Francis followed"—would encourage the young dhyana bhikku to remain" awake, active, and earnest."[16] Encouraged in his "practical" life, "full of faith and optimism and good cheer," and delighting in "nature's silences and solitudes," Kerouac would try "to build upon his own foundation," to "restrain his likes and his dislikes," and to "maintain austere detachment… concerning his own personality," that he may "actualize the realization of Buddha" within every moment of his daily life.[17] *Some of the Dharma* is Kerouac's struggle to live up to the ideal of Buddhahood as interpreted by Goddard.[18] In fact, in his "wandering [through] the world [turning] the wheel of [the] Dharma," this "oldtime bhikku in modern clothes" apparently considered paying a visit, albeit two decades late (the brotherhood folded in 1936; Goddard died, on his birthday, three years later), to his hero: Among long quotations and exegesis of Goddard's writings, Kerouac wrote in *Some of the Dharma* that "Dwight Goddard is at 60 Las Encinas Lane, Santa Barbara, California—Wow."[19]

If neither achieved merit by founding an institutional sangha, both Goddard and Kerouac must be credited with promoting awareness among the American public of the Buddha's Golden Path. Of the two, only Goddard both studied at seminary and at monasteries *and* was ordained (twice: as a Congregationalist minister in 1894, and as an

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blueprint for organizing the "Brotherhood" is overlooked. Further, deeper study of Kerouac's reading of Goddard is needed and, one hopes, will become possible with the upcoming opening to the public of Kerouac's notebooks in the Berg Collection at the New York City Public Library.

[16] *Followers*, v.

[17] *Followers*, 13-17.

[18] John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*, University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2000. Lardas observes that "Ironically, Goddard's instructions only legitimated Kerouac's penchant for narcissistic contemplation [because] If anything, *Some of the Dharma* is a record of intensive self-analysis in keeping with Goddard's commands." (246)

[19] *Dharma Bums*, 5 and *Some of the Dharma*, 213; See Goddard's Obituary in the *New York Times*, July, 1939 (courtesy of the Thetford Hills Historical Society).

honorary "lay monk-novice" in Japan).[20] Kerouac was a voracious and enthusiastic reader, and he especially cherished Goddard's *Bible,* which he carried everywhere, read frequently, and memorized. In America, literature has become its own form of Dharma transmission, and Goddard and Kerouac were two of Buddhism's most important and enthusiastic exponents in the American "field." Following Goddard, Kerouac passed that enthusiasm onto countless Americans, whether they formally took refuge in the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as did Goddard, or they proclaimed a "Buddhist" spiritual identity upon reading and applying the truths of the sutras to their own experiences.[21]

It is important to realize, however, that Goddard's *Buddhist Bible* is not merely a collection of sutras and other writings. The *Bible* is an expression of Goddard's *interpretation* of Buddhism, expressed in a reader-friendly manner for the American interested in or enthusiastic about the faith; and Goddard admits as much: "The editor," he writes in the preface of the 1938 edition, "has always kept in mind the spiritual needs of his readers. This Buddhist Bible is not intended to be a sourcebook for critical literary and historical study."[22] As Goddard's interest in ecumenism between the "Buddhist" East and the "Christian" West grew, he collaborated with Asian scholars. He met Bhikshu Wai-Tao, a Chinese "Daoist-Buddhist" monk, and collaborated on translations—Wai-Tao doing most of the actual translation as his Chinese was not good, he did not read Japanese, and he knew neither Pali nor Sanskrit. Goddard's chief and crucial role was

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[20] See Robert Aitken's foreword to Goddard's *Buddhist Bible*.
[21] The literary nature of American popular religion (and not merely of American Buddhism) has been widely noted. However, I pick up and freely interpret this conceit from "Boomer Buddhism", a book review written by Stephen Prothero for the 26 February 2001edition of *Salon.com* (dir.salon.com/books/feature/2001/02/26/buddhism/index.html?sid=1015732), in which Prothero notes and even implicates Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* in American Buddhism's "oddly bookish Buddhist vogue."
[22] Goddard, *Buddhist Bible*, xxxi.

played as *editor*: He rearranged sutras, "omit[ting] a great deal of matter not bearing directly upon the theme of the particular scripture, and [occasionally interpreting] where it seemed *necessary and advisable*, in order to provide an *easier and more inspiring* reading."[23] Such editing was necessary for the "ordinary" Western, Christian, practical mind who "love[s] an ordered sequence, beginning with a supposed premise and advancing by logical steps to a conclusion."[24] Such ordering of the sutras, he knew, would not be appreciated by his teachers—Suzuki jokingly posed to the reader of "their" translation of the *Lankavatara Scripture* whether "Mr. Goddard [has] ruined the sutras?" Robert Aitken, an American Zen master who has written the most comprehensive biography of Goddard to date, notes that Goddard's edits gave the texts "coherence," albeit a "problematic one."[25] Goddard himself knew that he was a "poor disciple in practice [and] no exact scholar." However, he surmised, "I think I do have a gift of imagination by which I can see into and analyze and express in a clear and inspiring way. It is my 'stuff.'"[26]

This "stuff"—this trope of a writer-pilgrim who falls upon feats of imagination to interpret scripture and work out his own enlightenment while trying "to awaken [the] faith [of his readers] and to develop faith into aspiration and full realization"—is another contribution transmitted by Goddard to Kerouac. With devotion, Kerouac read Goddard's writing—especially his reworkings of the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Lankavatara Scritpure*, and the *Diamond Sutra*. The latter—the scripture "hard and sharp… that will cut away all

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[23] *Buddhist Bible*, xxxii, my emphasis.
[24] Letter from Dwight Goddard to Ruth Everett, 1 March 1933. Reprinted in *Zen Notes* 28:4 (April 1981), 5.
[25] *Buddhist Bible*, xviii.
[26] Letter from Dwight Goddard to Ruth Everett, 14 March 1933. Reprinted in *Zen Notes*, April 1981.

arbitrary conceptions and bring one to the other shore of enlightenment," and in which the only dharma that the Bodhisattva needs to realize in order to liberate all sentient beings is that there are "no dharmas," "no Bodhisattvas," and "no sentient beings to save"—provided Kerouac with one of his favorite tropes for the salvation that enlightenment would bring.[27] *The Dharma Bums* opens with Kerouac's alter-ego, Ray Smith, meeting a Dharma Bum who carries in his pocket a prayer in which Saint Theresa promises to shower rosebuds on all suffering beings as a sign of compassion. This passage mirrors Goddard's rendering of the passage of the *Diamond Sutra* promising that "wherever this scripture shall be observed and studied… will become sacred ground… over which the devas and angels will hover like a cloud [and] sprinkle upon them an offering of celestial flowers."[28] References and re-envisionings of the *Sutra* frequently appear, especially as poems, throughout Kerouac's work, and especially in *Some of the Dharma*, as in the following "American haiku":

dharmas belong to
phenomena—in emptiness
there are no dharmas

and in the following poem, which is one fragment of Kerouac's manifesto in which he publishes himself as a Buddhist writer—This is his "Bodhisattva Vow":

The diamond sound on a still
Winter night when you're looking at
The starry sky is like the sound of
The innumerable Lotus Lands radi-

[27] *Buddhist Bible*, 107.
[28] *Buddhist Bible*, 97.

Ating from your sight's center between

& among the actual stars…

…dreamlikeness—it will be

the causing of "others"'s Karmas

--But I vow to return to assist

in the universal emancipation

eventually to come—[29]

Kerouac's struggle to live up not only to the Bodhisattva ideal but to the ideal of a missionary bhikku writer of a new "American Dharma" is highlighted by his *Some of the Dharma* notebooks. At the height of his study, Kerouac connects his hero Goddard with their mutual hero, Henry David Thoreau, and sets himself as their direct literary and spiritual heir:

I will travel light like a Buddhist ascetic

right here in this Western world…

…homeless Western world road

O hobo no truck

Thoreau and his lovely 19th century

hut at Walden Pond, Massachusetts.

I shall be a bhikku,

Hikin' thru

Indiana, Georgia, India,

Alabama, Appalachian

fire rangers smoke

[29] *Some of the Dharma*, 255; my emphasis.

jails, fines, boys,

Nature and Dwight Goddard.[30]

I interpret Kerouac's statement about "hikin' thru" Dwight Goddard as both a pun and an annunciation of his deeper spiritual and literary intention of surpassing as well as continuing Goddard's promulgation of a literature-based "American Dharma."[31] Goddard only attempted one (not very good, though very sincere) novel (*A Nature Mystic's Clue*, 1925); Kerouac wrote his own *legend*. Goddard realized early that his genius was as an interpreter rather than a poet (though most of his works end with, and each section of his *Bible* begins with, a poem, instructive in Nature, recalling the stilted, didactic poetry of the Victorian era). Kerouac was a spontaneous genius, although in the end he found that writing "systematic books of literature" was stressful and promoted, rather than extinguished, his writerly ego, "that awful abstract 'I' of writing." Impugning his work as "history making among… fools," and praying that "this writer should be a no-writer," Kerouac concludes of the "new career of Buddhist-writing" for which Goddard had lain the path that "THE KARMA IS A-WEARYING."[32]

While both Goddard and Kerouac pursued their respective paths to enlightenment and to the fulfilling of the Bodhisattva ideal through literary careers, one would make a mistake and would commit a disservice to view their Buddhisms, as Philip Whalen esteemed Kerouac's, as "pretty much literary."[33] But writing served both men with a deeper purpose: Both men saw their fellow Americans as living in a deep spiritual

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[30] *Some of the Dharma*, 143.
[31] Kerouac writes in *Some of the Dharma* that "I must give up all ideas of literature as they are established on these/very shelves… and create for the sake of an Ameican Dharma a fitting new kind of written form that will not kowtow/to established cupidities nor at the same time be a piddling notebook." (255)
[32] *Some of the Dharma*, 159, 221.
[33] *Jack's Book: An Oral History of the Beat Generation*, 217.

poverty and as mired in a dark spiritual crisis; and both realized—Romantic visions of an "American" sangha aside—that the way to wake the nation out of slumber was to follow the Buddha's own advice: to help them to look inward, find the path in the darkness, and light their own ways.