

# *The Buddha and Jack Kerouac Fistfight in Tusita Heaven*

By Nathan Robnett-Conover

The girl near me on the bus doesn't look like a nun. Red and yellow flowers crowd a dirty skirt she sports over a pair of worn jeans. Under her seat a small black and white dog lies stretched out next to a stickered banjo case. The Portland sunlight that filters through the bus's windows catches on the girl's nose piercing before coming to a rest on the blue flannel arm she's slung around a derelict backpack like a caring friend.

I met Mickey two years ago when she had yet to be baptized in the train-hopping, world-renouncing, utterly uncompromising legacy of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, when she still went to Reed College. Seeing her on a Portland bus in late November, it takes me a second to recognize her and another minute to decide how I—Macbook owning, YouTube-addicted, car-driving, meat-eating, Nathan—will approach her.

Mickey fascinates me in that she represents a manifestation, if an extremely colorful one, of a drive to renounce that's been a part of my life ever since I read Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* at fifteen. The book spurred me on to investigate the Buddhist teachings of Jason Siff, a former monk living in Idyllwild, California. What had before manifested as an aggressive and directionless search for truth suddenly found expression in a compassionate, allowing practice of meditation as taught by Jason. My encounter with the Dharma would shape the next seven years of my life by providing me with both a spiritual direction and the tools with which to question that direction.

Hearing the gentle investigative teachings of Jason Siff and

beginning to meditate daily felt like meeting the person I would marry. The vision of golden Theravadan robes shone in me with a bright lucidity. What could be a more worthy pursuit in life than to cultivate compassion and understanding in one's heart? What could be a better way to do this than to confront the mind directly? The self-evidence of this logic required no further articulation or justification. I would be a monk...

Someday. In the meantime, I had to find a girlfriend, lose my virginity, get drunk for the first time, learn to play the guitar, confront my creative side, contribute something meaningful to society, overcome a numbing depression, get into a good college, prove my manhood through a job, and negotiate the sea of stimuli permeating my generation's adolescence. Yet, time and again, the heady wine of ambition, or a girl's sweetness, transmuted on my tongue into an inconvenient body of knowledge: that of the suffering and ethereal-

ity of experience. C.S. Lewis describes pain as "God's cry to a deaf world." At least once every year, for the past seven, this cry crescendos for me into a vision of ordination and a confidence that the one task worthy of death's inevitable approach is an investigation of the mind and heart. Yet circumstance, culture, and my youth demanded patience. I found myself the inheritor of a poignant tension articulated by Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Hermann Hesse.

These writers understood the lure of a life free of compromise. Tolstoy's wife barely prevented him from selling off his estate and the rights to his books. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* gave the world the character of Alyosha; a youth whose teacher forces him to renounce his desire for the priesthood in order to live in



the chaos of the external world. Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* fictionalizes Hesse's lurching search for a substantial truth on the margins of a society from which he feels utterly separate. These writers recognized the breadth of spirit required to embrace compromise in the face of uncompromising truths such as death and God (two of the three were Deists). In their surrender of idealism exist a deep compassion and grace. A Buddhist interpretation of such compromise might point to its acknowledgement of the imperfection of human existence and the presence of dharma in all aspects of life—the First Noble Truth.

My idealism encountered this line of reasoning most directly this past winter. My recent work at a high school for at-risk youth in North Portland allowed me to experience "the world" in a way I hadn't before, due to my prior absorption in academia. Although the work felt meaningful (and humbling; the interview and first class both involved me sweating through my shirt), the realization that came from it surprised me. Even though I felt more put-together than I ever had before—I was meditating an hour-and-a-half every day, exercising regularly, and managing to avoid awkward silences when talking to a cute barista I saw weekly—all I found myself thinking was, "It's not enough." I knew where this led: I'd met the middle-class suburban householder and I wanted more. There are, in the world today, people as radiant as any saint of the past, and the common denominator between them seems to be a life of meditation. Our existence fades too quickly for us to compromise. Upon hearing my plans to ordain the next year, my parents expressed support: "We always expected this," my Dad told me over Skype.

My meditation teacher had a different idea. "Nate," Jason advised me, "you must wait until the other paths in your life dry up, leaving you with only this as an option. You should wait until you find yourself in a situation where ordination comes to you." My oldest friend's view regarding renunciation reflected Jason's: "Some renunciation is very visible. True renunciation is harder to see. It is more of a letting go." Such a view represented a whole-some one in another respect; it caused me to look directly at what drives my desire for such extreme changes in my life. Through the spiritual, the insatiable ambition of the American psyche finds its most subtle and difficult manifestation. Patience and gentleness forced me to look at this drive rather than act immediately on it.

Following this conversation, my disappointment and decision to postpone ordination drove me to ask again how one can lead a spiritually-uncompromising life in the midst of a world that requires compromise in every other aspect. I came up with love.

In A.D. 1177, the Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar wrote *The Conference of the Birds*. One section of this poem tells of a Sufi spiritual leader who falls madly in love with a Christian woman and burns his Qur'an at her request. He returns to his followers having converted and wiser than ever before. When taking him back, the followers grieve only that they did not shed their robes for a love as he shed his. I admire the Sufis because they loved God to

such an extent that they could easily slip and love a woman. Sometimes it seems impossible to tell whether Rumi writes for a lover or for the divine. Perhaps in working towards the selfless loving of those around her, the poet comes to a place similar to the ascetic. In reducing the manifestations of desire in their lives to a few forms—the Other or enlightenment—both figures—the selfless lover or serene renunciate—can look directly at the act of desiring and building self. By paying acute attention to the world, the poet, like the ascetic, can reach through it.

This brings us full-circle to the bus's punk priestess. When I interviewed Mickey about her decision to leave college for a life of train hopping and music, she told me that, despite its differences with the life of an ordained monk, her life led, in her eyes, to an essential truth. She said, "When you live outside of the law and social norms, you get a lot more extremes. I've seen people do amazing things and really fucked-up things in the past years, and I've been humbled by it. One of the biggest realizations I've gotten has been about humility." Through her full-bodied embrace of the world, Mickey came to a place talked about in the Suttas: a softening of the self. There are many roads to Kansas.

For the moment, I don't see a need to make a final decision between renouncing and embracing. Perhaps the soul burns like a sun. A seed of gravity draws it into itself only to have it ignite ever-more-complex elements within its body and expand into the dark again. Its oscillation into the space without and the material within brings it closer to singularity (or maybe just a knowledge of its rhythm). Perhaps the tension between poetry and meditation represents the most vital element of my spirit. Of course, this is all talk. It's all really about practice, practice, practice... and sometimes poetry.

Nathan Robnett-Conover is currently majoring in English at Portland State University and interning at Open Meadow, a high school for at-risk youth. He enjoys back-country skiing, running, and backpacking.

