

*Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha*. Prepared by Jack Kerouac.  
 Introduction by Robert Thurman.  
 New York: Viking, 2008  
 \$24.95

From 1953 to 1956, Jack Kerouac immersed himself in the literature in English about Buddhism such as Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* (1932) and the work of D. T. Suzuki. The information he obtained, he absorbed and soon began to write about Buddhism. That it caught on in America is in large measure due to his personal charisma, and to *Dharma Bums* (1958). No popular 20th-century writer played as important a role as Kerouac in bringing Buddhism into mainstream American life. Kerouac spent a great deal of time and energy trying to persuade Allen Ginsberg to become a dharma bum. He meant *Some of the Dharma* to convert Ginsberg. Written in the mid-1950s, it wasn't published until 1997.

According to Paul Slovak, Viking publisher and the editor for the book, Viking worked from Kerouac's original typescript of *Wake Up* that was provided by the estate. "We strived to reproduce the manuscript exactly as it came out of Kerouac's typewriter," Slovak explained. "We remained consistent with Kerouac's punctuation, we retained his underscores in the original typescript and set extracts exactly the same." Slovak also notes that the typescript "was very clean – there were perhaps seven or eight places where a word or two was crossed out or added by Kerouac, or in one instance four lines x'd out, and we followed all these edits of his."

*Wake Up* is introduced by Robert Thurman, [describe him] A marvel and a delight, the introduction is both personal and philosophical, and probably the best single work about Kerouac and Buddhism. Thurman explains that he read *The Dharma Bums* in 1958, when he was 17 years old, that he "ran away from Phillips Exeter Academy and went looking for the revolution." From 1958 until 1961, he

hitchhiked in a “frenetic” way across the United States, and his wandering, he says, were not unlike the cross-continental journeys of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty described in *On the Road*.

Thurman tackles head-on many of the difficult issues and problems that face critics of Kerouac’s work. He presents basic biographical information: Kerouac sat and meditated by himself for hours in 1955 when he wrote *Wake Up*. He examines the relationship between Kerouac’s Catholicism and his Buddhism. He writes about Kerouac’s understanding of Buddhist duality and causation, and Kerouac’s view of the difference between “emptiness” and “nothingness” which, he argues, is “especially significant.”

Thurman argues that Kerouac derived his ethics from Buddhism, which included ceasing to practice four different kinds of negative behavior: “sexual lust”; “unkindness to others”; “greediness and stealing”; and “insincerity and lying.” While Thurman believes that Kerouac was a flawed Buddhist, he admires him greatly and recognizes him as “the lead Bodhisattva” and a genuine “American predecessor” of today’s Buddhists. I urge everyone who cares about Kerouac to read Thurman’s essay, which is a model of cultural criticism: gentle, firm, all embracing and always down to earth.

Now, to the book itself. *Wake Up* is under 150 pages, but it contributes significantly to the fascinating picture of Kerouac’s spirituality, revealing the depth of Kerouac’s identification with the Buddha and showing him as a writer whose explicit aim is to proselytize for Buddhism. “I have designated this to be a handbook for Western understanding of the ancient Law,” Kerouac writes in a note at the beginning of the book; “The purpose is to convert” (5). Thurman devotes time to this passage, and rightly so, explaining that Kerouac did not “mean to enroll people in any formal Buddhist denomination, but rather to convert them to the heart’s purpose in life, to the grand

wisdom vision of the divinity within, and of the natural love and kindness in relationships” (xvii).

To convert his readers, Kerouac westernized the Buddha. He presents him as “the Jesus Christ of India.” At the same time, he makes him into a kind of handsome, heroic movie star. When Kerouac describes the Buddha’s departure from the beautiful Princess Yasodhara and his rejection of the pleasure of the world to embark on his spiritual journey, he thoroughly sees himself in the Buddha and the Buddha in himself.

Pure Buddhists might object to Kerouac’s treatment. But Kerouac is conscious and deliberate about his approach, aiming to reach readers who know little or nothing about Buddha, trying to make the Buddha seem less strange and less trivial than popular American culture presented him. As Kerouac explains, “Until recently most people thought of Buddha as a big fat rococo sitting figure with his belly out, laughing, as represented in millions of tourist trinkets and dime store statuettes” (xviii). Kerouac systematically deconstructs this tourist stereotype of the Buddha, substituting a more complex human being with an abiding sense of wisdom. He uses many of the Buddha’s own words, which is why, on the title page, under *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha*, “authorship” is described as follows: “Prepared by Jack Kerouac.” In a sense, Kerouac is not the author of this book. He has not created the main characters or the central narrative – though he offers his own interpretations, and synthesizes facts and information—and in many instances the words are not his, either. “This book follows what the Sutras say,” he explains. “It contains quotations from the Sacred Scriptures of the Buddhist Canon, some quoted directly, some mingled with new words, some not quotations but made up of new words of my own selection” (5). Kerouac thoroughly absorbed the language of the Sutras, and it is difficult to say where he is quoting directly and where he is adding words of his own. In a way, it’s the height of audacity. But he plays the role of the

ventriloquist with love, appreciation, and humility, and most readers will probably forgive him.

In *Wake Up*, Kerouac is a compelling religious teacher because he presents spiritual concepts clearly and with the aid of familiar images and metaphors. Some of the writing is as beautiful and poetic as any writing in Kerouac's work, as, for example, this perfectly crafted sentence near the end of *Wake Up* in which he writes, "Like the great elephant robbed of its tusks, or like the ox-king spoiled of his horns; or heaven without the sun and moon, or as the lily beaten by the hail, thus was the word bereaved when the Buddha died."

Kerouac fans will probably find *Wake Up* appealing. It is also a useful introduction for students who are eager to learn about Buddhism. Indeed, it may wake them up from their slumber in the material world and introduce them to the realm of spirituality. Even long time dharma bums may find that it offers new insights into an ancient religion. Though it was written more than 50 years ago, it speaks to America and to Americans, who, as Kerouac himself observed, often oscillate from one extreme to another and might benefit from a sense of balance and harmony with the universe.