Karuna and Agape, or Buddhism and Christianity in Kerouac's 1954-Letter to Robert Lax

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Abstract: This paper is an analysis of Jack Kerouac's 1954-letter to Robert Lax and it emphasizes that the American author's (temporary) conversion to Buddhism was not a mere reaction against his Christian belief and tradition, but the result of a natural, informed realization of the possibility to accept, to celebrate distinction, to bridge the differences through compassion. The analysis partly mirrors Jack Kerouac's own etymological method and highlights the differences between his own and the traditional interpretation of the terms karuna and agape. The conclusion is that, even though Kerouac's understanding of certain religious concepts might sound subjective, it provides the reader with a valuable perspective on the two spiritual traditions which enabled the American author to naturally turn to Buddhism, albeit temporarily; it also facilitates the analysis of his writing.
Keywords: modern and contemporary American literature, Jack Kerouac, karuna, agape, Christianity, Buddhism.

Citation suggestion: Matiu, Ovidiu. "Karuna and Agape, or Buddhism and Christianity in Kerouac's 1954-Letter to Robert Lax." *Transilvania*, no. 11-12 (2022): 105-108.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2022.11-12.14.

While he was in Richmond Hill, Jack Kerouac wrote a letter to Robert Lax, signed "Jack K.", in response to the "card about Ulysses" he had received from him, or from another "Bob", even though that would probably only matter on earth, not "in heaven." The letter is dated October 26, 1954, and it lays out Kerouac's understanding of the binomial "Karuna and Agape", followed by a "political" note on Totalitarianism.[1] Even though the letter seems to be an attempt to bridge heaven and earth (Kerouac ends the letter with the greeting, "See you in the world"), the letter itself eventually remained earth-based, dependent upon earthly values (it was sold for $14,000 in 2020).

Kerouac remembers that "Agape" (used in the New Testament with two meanings: love and the fellowship meal in the early Christian Church) is "the seed soul & center of Christian feeling," which he refers to as "Christian Trustfulness," the attribute of the true Christian who "worries about the suffering of others." He perceives *agape* as "CARE & REVERENCE," namely that "Care" which is linked etymologically to *Cear* ("taking heed" in Anglo-Saxon), *Kaeri* ("complaint" in Icelandic), *carus* ("dear" in Latin), and *Cark* ("great care", derived from "Cearig", "anxious" in Old English)[2]. Beyond his obvious interest in the etymology of the word, Kerouac refers to "agape" as a foundational concept, a generator of connections to the outer world, as liminal space between him and the other(s).

On the other hand, or the other element of the binomial, "KARUNA" is interpreted as "the soul of Buddhism," translated, according to Kerouac, by Harold Smith as "the pathos of compassion redressing human sorrows."[3] In Kerouac's world, the "world of Duluoz" (according to Nancy Grace, "[...]Duluoz and his Legend are nothing if not a vibrant representation of the nation's mythic heritage as a New World grown out of and superseding the Old"[4]), Buddhist concepts are translated into English through the filter of Latin, a language which laid the foundation of the Old World and which still transfers knowledge (or meaning) to the New World. Thus, the pathos ("suffering emotion of the mind") of compassion (from the Latin, "con-passionem, suffering from...")

"redresses" (from "redirigo", "to again lay straight") the "suffering" of humanity. Kerouac's conclusion is that "Karuna is the Buddhistic return to again straighten the sorrowing world, the rediscovery of the lost path of the Buddha of Old, the straight & narrow path of pathos & compassion, fleshy gate to bright emptiness."[5]

Kerouac's "emotional" interpretation of *karuna*, is derived from the works of D.T. Suzuki, the promoter of Zen Buddhism in the West, whom he actually met. In the subchapter on the representation of The Bodhisattvas, from a chapter dedicated to "The Buddhist Statues and Pictures in a Zen Monastery," Suzuki, defines *Karuna*, represented by Fugen in the Avatamsaka (Kegon), in simple terms as "love," opposing it to Prajna. In Suzuki's interpretation, "Prajna points to annihilation and to identity whereas Karuna points to construction and to multiplicity. The one is intellectual and the other emotional; the one unifies and the other diversifies."[6]

Kerouac's parallel between Eastern philosophies and Christianity is not, however, an original finding or the result of some instant awakening of the westerner exposed to the light of Buddhist principles, but an older idea derived from the apparent similitude between some of the concepts present in both traditions.

Without delving into much detail or attempting to ignite a polemic discussion with the fervent defenders of Christian or Buddhist identity, suffice it to mention that to Suzuki, as to many other promoters of Buddhism in the West, the Mahayanistic Dharmakaya, "the *raison d'être* of the universe", is ultimately comparable both to the Christian God and the Vedic Brahman. Asian pluralism, religious syncretism, with a long history in Christianity itself, or probably mere compassion were among the reasons why the mid-twentieth century American avant-garde embraced and promoted Eastern philosophies and beliefs. Suzuki argues that

> "The Dharmakâya may be compared in one sense to the God of Christianity and in another sense to the Brahman or Paramâtman of Vedantism. It is different, however, from the former in that it does not stand transcendentally above the universe, which, according to the Christian view, was created by God, but which is, according to Mahâyânism, a manifestation of the Dharmakâya himself. It is also different from Brahman in that it is not absolutely impersonal, nor is it a mere being. The Dharmakâya, on the contrary, is capable of willing and reflecting, or, to use Buddhist phraseology, it is *Karunâ* (love) and *Bodhi* (intelligence), and not the mere state of being."[7]

The comparison between Dharmakaya and God is facilitated through the agency of *Karuna*, or Agape, or Love, which assumes the role of a point of convergence, while their relation with the universe keeps them apart, confined to their own system of belief. God, the Demiurge, on the one hand, transcends the world he created, while, in Mahayanism, the universe is a manifestation of the *dharmakaya*, who, therefore, does not transcend it. *dharmakaya* (the body of the truth), a term which also appears in the *Trikaya* doctrine, has a cosmic magnitude indeed, but it also refers to the body of Buddha's dharmas, i.e., good qualities. Even though, *dharmakaya* was not totally depersonalized[8], "[i]t was part of the de-personifying project of the Buddha, in which the expression of the body should be understood as a metaphor representing a metaphysical aspect of the Buddha and his teaching," as an external principle able to transform the "internal state" of the candidate to enlightenment; then, "[w]hen the idea of *tathagāta* (thus-coming) and further *tathagātagarbha* (womb of thus-coming) were developed later, however, the idea of *dharmakāya* has transformed into the practitioner's subjective potentiality to achieve the same quality of the nature that Buddha had."[9]

The metaphysical concept of *dharmakaya* opposes the more material idea of *rūpakāya*, or a "physical aspect" of the historical person Siddhārtha Gautama, of his relics. The Sarvāstivādins, representatives of the Sarvastivada (or Vaibhashika) school, who believed that the dharmas are eternal and that they exist outside of the mundane, were the first to ever distinguish between the concepts of *dharmakaya* and *rūpakāya*. One of the first solutions to the controversial relationship between the two concepts was the concept of *saṃbhogakāya* or "the body of enjoyment", integrated into the *trikaya* doctrine, according to J.J. Makransky and G. Nagao, by the authors of the Yogācāra texts *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and *Abhisamyālaṃkāra*.[10]

Sambhogakāya is one of the three bodies of Buddha, along with *dharmakaya* and *nirmanakaya* which are explained by the *trikaya* doctrine, with its three "facets of the holy": "*Dharmakāya* could be realized only by the Buddhas, *Sambhogakāya* by the great Bodhisattvas, and *Nirmāṇakāya* by all sentient beings".[11] Even though Buddhist scholars often refer to the *trikaya* doctrine as essentially comparable to the Christian Trinitarian dogma, there are multiple differences which might prevent such comparison, at least from a Christian standpoint (one of them is the fact that the Christian Trinity includes three persons, the Triune God, not three manifestations of a unique principle).[12] To Buddhists eyes, Jesus Christ himself is nothing else but a mere "manifestation of the Dharmakâya in a human form," the only difference between him and Shakyamuni being the contexts in which the *dharmakaya* decided to reveal itself to the mortals on earth: the Judaic and the Indian worlds. Moreover, to Buddhist ears, many passages in the Bible sound just like interpretations made by Buddhist scholars (such as for instance, many of the verses in the Pauline Epistles).[13]

Up to this point, it is somehow obvious that Kerouac's (temporary) shift from Christianity to Buddhism was

facilitated by the latter's "compassionate" way of looking at other beliefs, its politics of tolerance in relation to other religions. Moreover, some of the terminology employed by the scholars who promoted Buddhism in the West, sounds very similar to the terminology Kerouac himself was used to as an educated Roman-Catholic. His apparently shallow interpretation of fundamental terms such as "love" is probably due to his readiness to embrace open-minded Buddhism and his desire to "open" his rigorous Christianity to the eastern belief. Even though, *karuna* is not necessarily totally interchangeable with the Christian "love" (*agape*), according to Suzuki, it may be used as its synonym "if we understand by love a sacrifice of the self for the sake of others (and it cannot be more than that), then karuna can correctly be rendered love, even in the Christian sense." Suzuki goes even further and defines the *dharmakaya* as love, in an attempt to draw another parallel between the non-personal Buddhist "body of essence" and the personal triune God of Christianity ("we do not see any sufficient reason against speaking of the love-essence of the Dharmakâya and the Bodhicitta," i.e. the mind of enlightenment, the "Intelligence-heart")[14] who is Himself defined as pure love: "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8).[15]

Therefore, Kerouac's analysis of the two terms stems from a quite "inclusive", "syncretic", open Buddhist approach to Christianity and from his wish to build a bridge that could eventually help him achieve a smooth transfer toward eastern spirituality. Within this context, the "political" section of his 1954-letter to Robert Lax emerges quite naturally from his brief discussion of "pathos", understood as "[s]uffering emotion of the mind", and "compassion", interpreted as deriving from the "Latin CON-PASSIONEM, suffering from...". Sometimes, Kerouac's interpretation of certain words goes beyond the realm of linguistics and is meant to serve a well-defined, particular purpose.

Even though his analysis might occasionally look shallow and biased, it unveils certain deeper meanings of words that without his interpretation would have remained inaccessible. One example in this respect is Kerouac's definition of "Karuna" as "the rediscovery of [...] the path of pathos & compassion"[16], followed by the rather surprising explanation of "pathos" and "compassion", which seems to ignore, at least partially, the etymology of the words. The Greek "pathos" (*πάθος*) simply means passion, suffering, emotion, while "compassion" derives from the Latin *compati*, an ecclesiastical term (the present active infinitive of the deponent verb *compatior*, according to Stelten's *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin*[17]) or *compassionem* (the accusative singular of compassion, meaning sympathy), itself a translation of the Greek *sympatheia* (*σύμπάθίā*). Compassion is thus more similar to *compassionem*, "suffering-with" rather than "suffering-from", to use Kerouac's pattern.

Nevertheless, Kerouac interprets them in a less linguistic and a more philosophical, spiritual, and religious manner, looking at the concept of "compassion" as one that acknowledges difference from the other, which, according to James E. Gilman (who cites Kierkegaard), is a perfectly valid interpretation, which acknowledges a "profoundly ironic experience":

> "[...] compassion does not concern itself with the distinctions and yet, on the other hand, it does concern itself with distinctions." This paradox is rooted in the fact that "[...] compassion by its very nature involves shared emotion experience it traverses (not transcends) that which distinguishes and distances one person or community from another. [...] In another sense, however, compassion does concern itself with distinctions, as Kierkegaard suggests, by affirming and loving difference between people."[18]

Jesus Christ himself provides the evidence for such interpretation of compassion in the biblical story describing the moment when a Samaritan woman met the Messiah (in John 4): "Jesus also affirms the woman in her religious difference, acknowledging and accepting that she worships in a place and way that differs from his own."[19] In other words, "[...]the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 4:21), or difference is acceptable and a prerequisite of an eventual, later straightening of "the sorrowing world," to use Kerouac's own words.

The second section of the letter, the "political note", starts from the assumption that mere compassion is never enough and requires immediate social and political action for the liberation of the working class from the spiritual and physical constraints of the mundane:

> "we must emancipate the workers from bondage to the coal mines of self-delusion and raise them to the purity of solitude, quiescence & concentration of mind in prayer & compassion – THE WHOLE WORLD A MONASTERY, ASCETISM, CHASTITY."[20] Thus, suffering *per se*, or working "in this Sea of Ignorance", according to the "western idea of 'work' is essentially Faustian and its Faustian Totalitarianism (read both Capitalism and Communism, Tit and Tat). Buddha is Antifaust but not Antichrist... Christ is magian."[21]

Kerouac's solution to what he describes as an entire world's crisis is a break from European tradition and spirituality, and a relocation to what might prove to be the best common ground between the western and the eastern worlds: the desert. There in the desert, in his own "hut", he is determined to ascend to a status that would enable him to "help all sentient beings find enlightenment and holy escape from the sin and stain of life-body itself," and reach, and be overwhelmed by Nirvana.[22]

In conclusion, Jack Kerouac's letter to Robert Lax is an excellent analysis of the concept of "karuna" as the point of convergence between Buddhism and Christianity and as one of the reasons for his (temporary) turn to eastern spirituality. Even though, the Christian "agape" is not an exact match for the "karuna" of Buddhism, Kerouac's etymological (and philosophical) analysis of the terms gave him access to an inclusive world able to accommodate the two traditions and thus provide the aspiring hermit with an accessible path to enlightenment. His attitude is rooted in the belief that a Buddha, or a Christian saint, must play an active role in both the spiritual and social liberation (or enlightenment) of the other, through active compassion "in solitude, poverty, and contemplation."[23]

Notes:

1. *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, ed. Ann Charters (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 446.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Nancy M. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9.
5. *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 446.
6. *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, Second Edition (London & New York: Rider and Company, 1956), 161.
7. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahâyâna Buddhism* (London: Luzac and Company, 1907), 46.
8. Suzuki, 46.
9. Eiji Suhara, "Buddha (Concept)," in *Buddhism and Jainism*, ed. K. T. S. Sarao and Jeffery D. Long, *Encyclopedia of Indian Religions* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 277.
10. qtd. in Suhara, 278.
11. C. D. Sebastian, "Yogācāra," in *Buddhism and Jainism*, ed. K. T. S. Sarao and Jeffery D. Long, *Encyclopedia of Indian Religions* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 1400.
12. Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahâyâna Buddhism*, 245.
13. Suzuki, 259, 261.
14. Suzuki, 296, 297.
15. *The Holy Bible: The New King James Version, Containing the Old and New Testaments* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982).
16. *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 446.
17. Leo F. Stelten, "Compatior," in *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin: With an Appendix of Latin Expressions Defined and Clarified* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
18. James Earl Gilman, *Faith, Reason, and Compassion: A Philosophy of the Christian Faith* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 131–32.
19. Gilman, 132.
20. Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 447.
21. Ibid., 447.
22. Ibid., 448.
23. Ibid., 447.

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