Leonard Cohen, Buddhist

An address to the White Heron Sangha, San Luis Obispo CA March 30, 2014

[Note: Song titles link to current YouTube movies of performances]

Like Henry David Thoreau and Jack Kerouac, two prominent North American writers who found in traditional Buddhist texts and practices a validation for their own renegade spiritual explorations, Leonard Cohen is another rebel hero whose life and work can profitably be examined from a Buddhist perspective.

Unlike those two great outdoorsmen who died young, Cohen has never expressed much appreciation for nature, and he’s still at the height of his game at age 80. But he’s often been compared to the irreverent Cold Mountain poets of Ancient China, who Kerouac and his friend Gary Snyder referred to as “dharma bums.” Like Thoreau and Kerouac Cohen combines longing for transcendence with earthy iconoclasm, and always writes about himself. Also, like Thoreau at Walden Pond and Kerouac on Desolation Peak, Cohen spent an important period of his life in monastic isolation—6500 feet up in the San Gabriel Mountains above Los Angeles, where studying sutras and meditation practice offered refuge from a secular world of distractions and a source of creative inspiration.

All three writers have produced large bodies of work and have attained the status of cult heroes, attracting devoted followings worldwide. Cohen has published 14 books of poetry, 2 novels, and 19 albums of his own songs, which have in turn been covered in more than 2700 commercial recordings by other artists. He has given hundreds of filmed and written interviews and is the subject of seven documentary films and an array of scholarly websites, the most authoritative of which is The Leonard Cohen Files containing over 1000 pages, listing 3.4 million visitors, and hosting a 25,000 member discussion forum. Already the subject of several full-length biographies, including the highly regarded 600 page I’m Your Man by Sylvie Simmons that appeared in 2012, Cohen’s 80th birthday this year is marked by the publication of six new books about him and his art.

A blend of religious and erotic themes has permeated Cohen’s work since his first album 47 years ago. Like the medieval courtly love troubadours whose songs about illicit passion inspired the devotional poetry of Dante, Petrarch, and John Donne, Cohen sings of the links and tensions between body and mind, in particular between sexual and spiritual desire, links and tensions that lie at the heart of Classical, Jewish, and Christian mystical traditions:

Suzanne (1967)

And Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching
From his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said “All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them”
But he himself was broken
Long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone
And you want to travel with him
And you want to travel blind
And you think maybe you’ll trust him
For he’s touched your perfect body with his mind.
For Cohen desire is intrinsically tragic. It drives him to endure and to inflict betrayal, and it induces harrowing guilt. And yet it is this force and its consequences that bring him close to the Divine, that render him “holy and broken,” as it did the Hebrew Bible’s King David, who fell in love with another man’s wife and had her husband murdered. Cohen identifies with him as a psalmist of penitence, woe and praise.

**Hallelujah (1984)**

You say I took the name in vain  
I don’t even know the name  
But if I did, well, really, what’s it to you?  
There’s a blaze of light in every word  
It doesn’t matter which you heard  
The holy or the broken Hallelujah

While continuing to observe Jewish customs that he inherited from his prosperous Montreal family, when Cohen moved to Los Angeles in 1969, he was attracted by the Buddhist teachings of Kyozan Joshu Sasaki, a Rinzai Zen monk who had established Mt. Baldy Zen Center in the facilities of an old Boy Scout Camp. Cohen regularly spent time there, studying and attending retreats and sesshins. The two developed a close personal friendship, often staying up late drinking expensive whiskey and cognac. Cohen’s affection was undeterred either by the Roshi’s lack of English or by the scandal of his continuing sexual abuse of nuns and acolytes. (Sasaki retired in 2012 but is still alive at age 107)

The themes of brokenness and transcendence in songs Cohen wrote began to take on an explicitly Buddhist tone, echoing the four noble truths: the suffering of the self and the flaws of the world are inescapable; only by acknowledging and submitting to that is it possible to find redemption:

**Anthem (1992)**

The birds they sang  
at the break of day  
Start again  
I heard them say  
Don’t dwell on what has passed away  
or what is yet to be.  
Ah the wars they will be fought again  
The holy dove  
She will be caught again bought and sold  
and bought again  
the dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.

In 1995, his career as songwriter and performer at its height and engaged to be married to the talented and stunning actress, Rebecca de Mornay, Cohen unexpectedly abandoned the role of public celebrity and took up full-time residence at the monastery, where he worked as cook and as private secretary to Roshi. This high-profile retreat attracted much media attention. His sojourn there was chronicled in a 45-minute French documentary film and by many reporters, among them the well-known writer, Pico Ayer, who wrote a lengthy article about it in *Shambala Sun*. 

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Cohen was forthcoming with explanations for his retreat: it was an escape from the ordeal of stage fright and the pressures and intrigues of the entertainment business; it was an alternative to marriage, which he regarded as “the hardest spiritual practice in the world”; it was a cure for his excesses: “…I had been drinking tremendous amounts on the road and my health was shot.” The monastery provided a hospital, he said, for “people who have been traumatized, hurt, destroyed, maimed by daily life.” (Simmons, p.406)

At Mt. Baldy, he found what he needed:

What happens in meditations that last ten, fifteen hours is that you run through your top ten erotic fantasies, ambition fantasies, revenge fantasies, global ratification fantasies. You run through them all until you bore yourself to death, basically, and the faculty that produces opinions and snap judgments and unrealistic scenarios for your own prominence, after you run through them for a number of years, they cease to have charge. They bore themselves into non-existence. You see them as diversions from another kind of intimacy that you become more interested in—and that is what Socrates said: Know Thyself. source

Three years into his residence Cohen took ordination as a Zen monk, and was given the name Jikan, which translates as ordinary silence, the silence between words.

At Mt. Baldy Cohen said he experienced moments when “the sky opens up and you get the word…. what rushes in, in the same way that light rushes into a room when you switch on the light, is another kind of mood that overtakes you. (Simmons, p.416) That sensation is evoked in the song “Love Itself,” recorded in the 2001 album, Ten Songs, dedicated to Sasaki.

**Love Itself (2001)**

The light came through the window,
Straight from the sun above,
And so inside my little room
There plunged the rays of Love.

In streams of light I clearly saw
The dust you seldom see,
Out of which the Nameless makes
A Name for one like me.

I’ll try to say a little more:
Love went on and on
Until it reached an open door –
Then Love Itself
Love Itself was gone.

All busy in the sunlight
The flecks did float and dance,
And I was tumbled up with them
In formless circumstance.

I’ll try to say a little more:
Love went on and on
Until it reached an open door –
Then Love Itself
Love Itself was gone.
Then I came back from where I’d been.
My room, it looked the same –
But there was nothing left between
The Nameless and the Name.

All busy in the sunlight
The flecks did float and dance,
And I was tumbled up with them
In formless circumstance.

I’ll try to say a little more:
Love went on and on
Until it reached an open door –
Then Love itself,
Love Itself was gone.
Love Itself was gone.

The Leonard Cohen Forum contains extensive discussion of this song, including links to YouTube films recording a dharma talk about it that closed a 2009 fourteen day intensive retreat in Santa Barbara conducted by a meditation teacher named Shinzen Young. Young claims that this is Cohen’s version of Sasaki’s teachings about the oscillating expansion and contraction of the universe which “generates a vibration which is space.” The true Master, according to Young, reaches a condition of detachment from this vibration and thereby finds nirvana, which is the experience of “Love Itself,” and then arrives at a state collapsing the distance between ultimate reality and the finite illusory ego—between the Nameless and the Name. At this point, “Love Itself is gone.”

One commentator on the Forum claims that this doctrine is not specific to Sasaki but belongs to the tradition of Thathagata Zen. He relates the lines

And I was tumbled up with them
In formless circumstance.

to those in The Heart Sutra:

Form is emptiness
Emptiness is form
Emptiness is not other than form
Form is not other than emptiness

Another participant plausibly traces the imagery of sunbeams entering and leaving the room to writings of the sixteenth century mystic, St. John of the Cross. And a Canadian Professor of Literature draws parallels to Dante’s account of becoming one with God at the end of his Divine Comedy.

Cohen’s stay at the monastery also generated abundant artistic creativity. In his few free hours, he wrote poems later assembled in a large collection, The Book of Longing; he composed music on a crude computer synthesizer, and he produced hundreds of remarkable drawings, a number of which he emailed to the editor of The Leonard Cohen Files and later included in The Book of Longing.

http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/jikan.html

http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/mystimpr.JPG
After five years of respite at Mt. Baldy, Cohen reported that in 1999 he was seized by “a state of acute depression and deep distress” that forced him to leave. The Book of Longing suggests other motivations as well:

http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/dearroshi.html

In several interviews he explained that he moved on because “I had completed that phase of my training.”

After a period, I began to feel that my knowledge had reached a certain point and I had a revelation: I realized I do not have a talent for religious studies. I did not feel conflicted, but relieved, relaxed: I no longer had to study anymore. It is not that I found what I was looking for, but I believed I had arrived at the moment of descending, so I asked my old teacher for permission…. I was not able to obtain an understanding of Buddhist concepts, I tired of trying. (source)

A week after coming down the mountain, he flew to Mumbai India to seek relief from his distress with another teacher, Ramesh Balsekar—a former bank president who gave informal talks on the Hindu concept of nondualism every morning in his apartment. For the next four months, Cohen lived anonymously in a small rented room, meditated, read, wrote and swam daily in a nearby hotel pool. When he returned to Los Angeles, his depression was gone. “By imperceptible degrees this background of anguish that had been with me my whole life began to dissolve. I said to myself, ‘This must be what it’s like to be relatively sane.’”(Simmons, p. 425)

Although Ramesh’s method of lecture and discussion contrasted strongly with the ritualized rigor of Rinzai Zen, they seemed to mesh well together. In a statement reflecting the lighthearted acceptance of one’s fate preached by Ramesh, Cohen mused, “I read somewhere that as you get older the brain cells associated with anxiety begin to die. So, I might have saved myself the rigours of monastic life if I had just waited until it happened.”(Simmons 425) That same whimsical spirit appears in self-portraits he drew during his occasional returns to Mumbai:

http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/kemps.html

http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/innerpeace.html

http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/teresa.html

His contentment coincided with a focus on his family: celebrating Friday night Sabbath dinners with the children and grandchildren who share his small house in a rough L.A. neighborhood and fostering the artistic careers of his son Adam and daughter Lorca. But this serenity did not diminish his creative energy. He began collaborating with two former back-up singers, Sharon Robinson and Anjani Thomas on several albums of their songs and highlighted their vocals and musical settings of his lyrics on his own, and he developed a long harmonious romantic relationship with Anjani, 25 years his junior.

Cohen’s resilience was manifested in his reaction to his 2004 discovery that his longtime financial manager and friend, Kelley Lynch, had embezzled nearly all of the $13 million worth of assets he had earned over a lifetime of royalties and concert ticket sales. Though he was embroiled for years in the ensuing litigation, which found her guilty but failed to recover most of the money, he never expressed vindictiveness or resentment. Instead, in order to restore his “retirement fund” and provide for his family, he decided, at age 74, to return to touring for the first time in 15 years. He travelled the world from 2008 to 2010, performing 84 three and half hour concerts to sold-out audiences enchanted with his self-effacing stage presence, which he maintained despite being showered with lifetime achievement awards from every quarter.

In 2012, no longer out of financial necessity, but to promote his new album entitled Old Ideas, he embarked on another two-year worldwide tour of over 100 concerts. He was adored not only by audiences but also by
his fellow performers and support staff. According to one, “He meditated in his dressing room, in the hour and a half of quiet time he liked to take between the sound check and the show. He meditated on airplanes too, back straight, eyes cast down, hands cupped in his lap.”(Simmons p.502)

Despite what sounds like the extended happy ending of a life story, Old Ideas balances sunshine against shadow, as suggested by its cover art.

One song, “The Darkness,” adopts the ghoulish voice of suicidal depression. “Different Sides” portrays a bitter fight between lovers. “Anyhow” and “Crazy to Love You” regards past affairs with hunger and regret. “Going Home,” “Show Me the Place,” and “Come Healing” are addressed to a vividly personified God by an awed and humbled penitent in the presence of approaching death. But that death is confronted with acceptance, consolation and even welcome.

I’d like to conclude by playing one song from Old Ideas that gives expression to an idea as old as the Psalms of David and as the Medicine Buddha Sutra. It’s a fervent prayer longing for surcease of all suffering and for the wholeness of Love Itself, offered by an old man at the boundary of his life. His deep bass chant accompanies childlike angelic voices in exquisite harmony.

Come Healing (2012)

O gather up the brokenness  
And bring it to me now  
The fragrance of those promises  
You never dared to vow

The splinters that you carry  
The cross you left behind  
Come healing of the body  
Come healing of the mind

And let the heavens hear it  
The penitential hymn  
Come healing of the spirit  
Come healing of the limb

Behold the gates of mercy  
In arbitrary space  
And none of us deserving  
The cruelty or the grace

O solitude of longing  
Where love has been confined  
Come healing of the body  
Come healing of the mind

O see the darkness yielding  
That tore the light apart  
Come healing of the reason  
Come healing of the heart

O troubled dust concealing  
An undivided love
The Heart beneath is teaching
To the broken Heart above

O let the heavens falter
And let the earth proclaim:
Come healing of the Altar
Come healing of the Name

O longing of the branches
To lift the little bud
O longing of the arteries
To purify the blood

And let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb

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According to recent reports, since the end of his tour last December, Leonard Cohen is back in L.A. working on another album for release later this year.