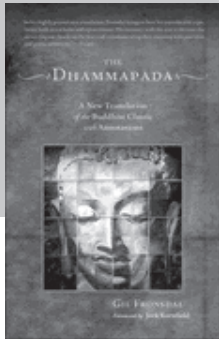


Book Review



The Dhammapada:
A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic with Annotations

Gil Fronsdal, foreword by Jack Kornfield
Shambhala, 2006
Review by Judy Roitman, JDPSN

In 1988, a violent prisoner on death row in Arkansas named Frankie Parker was thrown a copy of the *Dhammapada* by a contemptuous prison guard when Frankie asked for a Bible. It changed his life, and by 1996, when Frankie's execution was moved to an earlier date by then-Governor Mike Huckabee, he was regarded by those who knew of him as a remarkable example of the power of dharma to liberate us in even the most difficult conditions. Buddhists from many traditions around the world chanted for him both before and during his death.

If you're going to have a Buddhist sutra thrown at you while on death row, you couldn't have a better one than the *Dhammapada*. Written in short, simple verses with clear imagery and a sense of urgency, it is in large part a description of how things work, coupled with instructions on how to live. It's not hard to imagine the impact of the first verse on someone who, like Frankie, had murdered in a state of drunken rage and was now waiting to be killed by the state:

*All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,
And suffering follows
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.*

Unlike many Buddhist sutras, the *Dhammapada* has no location—no Deer Park or Vulture Peak. Buddha is not speaking to particular people—no Ananda, Subhuti, Sariputra. In fact, it is not clearly stated who is speaking—no “thus I have heard”—and, as Fronsdahl's excellent notes and commentary point out, in other suttas (to use the Pali term) Buddha attributes some of the verses in the *Dhammapada* to other speakers. It is a loosely organized (emphasis on “loose” rather than “organized”) compilation of verses, rather than one continuous work, such as the *Diamond Sutra*, or a compilation of long chapters, such as the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

Where it is firmly situated is in the strand of early Buddhism that flowered into contemporary Theravada. Merit and evil are clearly distinct; good companions are to be searched out and bad companions to be avoided; fools are fools and sages are sages. Of course the point of the *Dhammapada* is that fools can become sages by attaining the truths it speaks and by following the guidelines it sets forth for correct conduct and correct practice.

Much of it is directed towards people living a monastic life, who are exhorted to live a life free of anger, lust, and attachments in order to attain “happiness, the stilling of formations, the state of peace” and, ultimately, to be liberated from birth and death. But while the rhetoric is not the Mahayana rhetoric of compassionate bodhisattvas, it is clear that self-absorption is not the point:

*Engaged in the Buddha's teachings,
Even a young bhikku
Lights up this world
Like the moon
Set free from a cloud.*

Despite the prominence of prescriptions for a monastic life, the *Dhammapada* has been, fairly continuously, perhaps the most popular of all sutras. It remains so to this day, with over fifty translations. One reason for its popularity may be the simplicity and directness of the language. Another is its classic formulations of truths that everybody knows but would rather ignore: that anger begets only anger, that nothing protects you from death, that it's better to do good than evil... It makes it clear that you must change your life, and tells you how to do it. It presents classic formulations of particularly Buddhist ideas, such as the truths of impermanence, suffering, and not-self, but these do not dominate. And then there are the images, precise, quietly powerful, and to the point. For example:

*As long as even the slightest underbrush of desire
Between man and woman is not cut away,
For that long, the mind is bound
Like a suckling calf is to its mother.*


*Destroy attachment to self
As you could an autumn lily in your fist.*

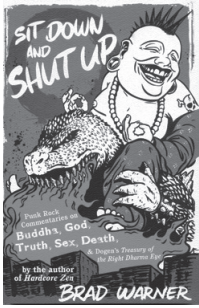
So you can approach the *Dhammapada* simply as poetry. Whether you take it further is up to you.

My first experience of the *Dhammapada* was not, as Frankie Parker's was, a life-changing event. What I saw was a coffee table book with lush photographs that seemed designed to create a serene mood rather than any kind of wisdom. I never actually read it; the person who owned it considered it somewhat dull. I had no idea of its importance over thousands of years of Buddhist culture. It seemed a kind of popular offering, nothing like the real thing, whatever that was. Just one of those things that the counter-culture had grabbed on to. I guess I belonged squarely in the chapter called *The Fool*.

I could not have been more wrong, and Gil Fronsdal's version does a wonderful job of disabusing anyone inclined to dismiss the *Dhammapada* as mere pleasant popularizing. First of all, there are Fronsdal's credentials. He has practiced for decades in both the Soto Zen and Theravada traditions. He received dharma transmission in the Soto lineage; he also was a Theravada monk for many years and now is a Theravada lay teacher at Spirit Rock and at a center in Redwood City. And he has a Ph.D. in Buddhist studies, so he has the scholarly credentials to approach an ancient Pali text and its commentaries. With full knowledge of the impossibility of his task, he seeks to present the *Dhammapada* on its own terms, that is, without the subtle distortions that come naturally when you see through modern Buddhist eyes. And he wants to do all this in English that is as clear and direct as the original Pali.

He has succeeded admirably. While his translation can be read through on its own (and I recommend this on a first pass), his excellent and unobtrusive end-notes let the reader know of alternate textual readings and give important background information—who was that elephant Matanga anyway? His short introduction guides us through the structure of the text, and his shorter afterword situates the text in the vast continent of classical Buddhist texts. Finally, for the dedicated scholar, he has an appendix which cross-references the many verses which appear, either as is or in parallel form, in other Buddhist sutras.

In short, an exemplary book, a classic work given its just due. One of the blurbs on the back cover says, "A book to be treasured." Exactly. 



Sit Down and Shut Up: Punk Rock Commentaries on Buddha, God, Truth, Sex, Death, and Dogen's Treasury of the Right Dharma Eye
Brad Warner, New World Library, 2007
Review by Judy Roitman, JDPSN

Brad Warner's first book, *Hardcore Zen*, made him a celebrity in the western Zen world. He wrote it while living in Japan, fulfilling one of his life's dreams by working for a maker of Japanese monster movie films, and also seriously practicing and studying Zen with Gudo Nishijima, who authorized him as a teacher. After writing it, he became popular on the American Zen lecture circuit, and eventually moved to the Los Angeles area where he still works for a Japanese monster movie company, has a Zen center in Santa Monica, keeps up with music and musicians (he started out in punk rock), travels around teaching Zen, and maintains a popular blog (hardcorezen.blogspot.com). His persona comes off a little as in-your-face (in most of his pictures he tries mightily to scowl), but the impression I always get is of a kind of sweetness born of idealism and hope. In 2007, Nishijima named him president of Dogen Sangha International, Nishijima's organization, which has a number of groups both within and outside of Japan.

I highly recommended his first book and I highly recommend this one. It has a dual structure: a narrative of his adventures filming (and playing in) the reunion concert of his old punk band Zero Defects, intertwined with a commentary on Dogen's *Shobogenzo*. Somehow it works. Furthermore, his commentary on Dogen is remarkably clear. Since Dogen is a notoriously difficult writer, whether in translation or in the original Japanese, this is quite an accomplishment. And, under the punk rhetoric, Warner turns out to be quite scholarly, commenting carefully on Chinese characters, etymologies in Chinese and in Sanskrit, and how the Chinese affects the interpretation of the Sanskrit.

His language and imagery owe a lot to pop culture, especially punk rock culture. That's one of the strengths and (I'm not sure if he'd appreciate this word) charms of the book. Buddhist practice and Dogen's teachings don't belong to ancient India, China, or Japan (unfortunately, Korea isn't on his radar screen). They belong to us, all of us, right here, and right now.

You can start with the title. "Sit down and shut up" is not ordinarily a nice thing to say to someone. It's not polite. It's (almost) shocking. But it is exactly where meditation practice starts; it's the heart of what we do in the dharma room. How better to say it?

An extended example of his rhetorical strategy is in the chapter on the Hyakujo's Fox kong-an (Hyakujo is

the Japanese name for Pai Chang). He quotes Dogen's commentary: "Great Buddhist practice is just great causes and effects themselves. Because these causes and effects are inevitably perfect causes and complete effects, they can never be discussed as falling or not falling, or as unclear or not unclear. If the idea of not falling into cause and effect is mistaken, the idea of not being unclear about cause and effect must also be mistaken."

How can we deal with this kind of conundrum? After all, when you parse the logic (itself not that easy to do), Dogen just said, in effect, "if *this* is false, then *not this* is also false." Warner gives a number of illustrations to contrast what he calls the subjective, or thought, interpretation ("Either the new Beck album sucks, or it doesn't") and the action interpretation ("If I hit the low E-string real hard... in terms of thought we can say that it's the right note or it's not. But in terms of action, it is just what it is."). After using a hapless TV weatherperson to discuss how cause and effect really work, he concludes, "What we call cause and effect and real cause and effect are two different things. Just like you can't drink your Kool-Aid out of the word *cup*."

For another example, here's how he deals with the notion of interdependence: "... it's just like how when you poke a safety pin through your nose you feel pain in your nostril and not in your left big toe, even though both your left big toe and your nostril are part of one single human body. The universe may feel pain, or joy, ... or whatever, in that part of it called 'Bob Canastaberry' and not in that part of it called 'Amy Logenbottom.' Yet in ways you can't possibly hope to notice, as well as in ways that are hopelessly obvious, whatever affects one part of the universe affects the whole thing."

He goes on to talk about how hard this was for him to really take in, describing his teenage self: "The idea that I might be one and the same as all the idiots of the world who I despised so vehemently made me gag." And goes on to point out the moral consequence, that interdependence is not a soft and pretty idea but a truth difficult to live by and impossible not to live by: "See, for one thing, when you see things this way, it's im-fogging-possible to blame anyone else for what's wrong in your life... I could no longer point a finger at the Republicans or at the NRA... or at the System or anyone else... Don't make any excuses or exceptions for any reason whatsoever. Accept all responsibility yourself..."

Somehow, through the loopiness (literally—arguments are not straightforward and digressions abound), the in-your-face rhetoric, the pop and punk culture imagery, the personal stories about his life and the lives of his friends... Buddhist teachings that may seem abstract and hard to understand begin to seem like common sense, absolutely inevitable, no big deal. And because he continually loops back to his experience as a practitioner, it becomes very clear that these teachings are not ideas you learn with your brain, but truths you perceive through your practice and, because of the grounding in practice, your life. 