

# Dharma punx: a book review

Literature



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BUSTER**

The book “ Dharma Punx” was written by Noah Levine, the son of bestselling author and BuddhistteacherStephen Levine. As a writer, he uses a natural, conversational and empathic voice to narrate his story in order to reach out to others who have gone through the same ordeal as he did.

This book, which was written in a very thorough narrative serves more or less as hisautobiography, focusing primarily on what would probably the most turbulent moments of this life when drifted from one “ movement” to another, from punk rock to drugs and alcohol which nearly sent his life crashing down to the point of self-destruction orsuicidewhich he attempted several times, hence the title of the first chapter is “ Suicide Solution” (Levine, 2003, p. 1).

The starting point of Levine's story was at the detention facility where he was confined and at the time, he was going through withdrawal symptoms as the adverse effects of drugs and alcohol were being flushed out of his system. It was at this point that he would begin to retell his tale on how he got into that situation. Born in 1971, his parents hailed from the “ hippies” generation of the 1960's where they revolted against the establishment at the height of theVietnam Warand one of their mantras was “ Make Love, Not War!

” as well as the overflowing freedom of expression of their generation that also indulged in free drugs and sexual promiscuity as well, thereby making the term “ psychedelic” an understatement for their generation that turned to drugs as a way to escape a harsh, brutal and cynical reality they wanted to repudiate. They were trying to create their own brand of utopia but

somehow, this would not be perfect as well, and this would be reflected in Levine's own family.

In his childhood years in the late 1970s and early '80s, Levine loved to skateboard but partly out of curiosity and influence, he got hooked into punk rock and often watched punk-rock concerts as well as looking the part of a punk rocker by the time he was in his teens. Punk rock was to his generation what the psychedelic “hippie” movement was to his parents. Levine said that the situation of his generation made them turn to this fad – like him, the youth of his generation had to cope with problems like broken homes, irresponsible parents who were either alcoholic or drug dependents; there was no responsible adult who could guide them.

His parents had divorced by then and he would spend time with each of them, shuttling between their homes in California and New Mexico. Both his parents remarried but his mother's second marriage was fraught with trouble and the irony of that was she met her second husband in a meditation retreat while his father was able to move on and remarry a woman whom he truly loved and gave him a happier marriage (Levine, 2003, p. 5). However, without his “enlightened” father around to guide him, the younger Levine was susceptible to the temptations of the materialistic world.

By the time he was six years old, he already began smoking marijuana and was also trying out other banned substances as well like cocaine. This also came hand in hand in partaking of alcohol which would stay with him for most of his youth. He was so addicted into drugs and alcohol that by the time he was in high school, he had become very violent, often getting into trouble ranging from brawls to vandalism that he was arrested several times

for such behavior, something he appeared to have welcomed, owing to his punk rock influence, his own way of defying authority.

He eventually dropped out of school and lived like a vagrant, often stealing to support his habit (Levine, 2003, pp. 21-24). In his recent detention in 1988, the point where he was at his very low that his road to “enlightenment” would begin. When his father visited him, he was the one who had set him on the path by encouraging him to try meditation (Levine, 2003, pp. 3-4). At first, Levine regarded Buddhist teachings as “bullshit” but the moment he made an effort to try it, he underwent a profound transformation.

He began the 12-step program and started attending meditation sessions. He was eventually released and he started on a new path in life. Over the next few years, Levine worked hard on his spiritual growth, even practicing celibacy and taking a pilgrimage to the Far East in search of enlightenment and even meeting and learning from the Dalai Lama himself! He would eventually finish his studies by getting a college degree but he did not stop there.

He went further and obtained a graduate degree in counseling psychology as well. He followed in his father's footsteps by also becoming a Buddhist teacher and of all the places where he would like to teach, he chose to be at the very same detention facility where he used to be remanded. Although he is a totally reformed and transformed individual, there is one thing from Levine's past that he has not repudiated, his passion for punk rock. He still listens to punk rock, and still acts, looks and dresses the part.

He still sports tattoos but the difference now is that his tattoos are Buddhist-inspired such as the lotus flower and Sanskrit inscriptions, making Levine a look-alike of Hollywood actor Vin Diesel famous for his role as agent “XXX” where he would also sport tattoos. One of the things Levine discovered about Buddhism is that it is very open-minded into tolerating anything that would compliment it. Buddhist teachings, particularly the Zen school of thought, say that if an individual can be one with that particular subject, that is also Buddhism.

Levine himself will attest that punk rock, contrary to what conservative thinkers may think, is not anathema to society at all. This is, of course, looking at it from a Buddhist perspective. Other people tend to view punk rock as wild, violent and to a certain extent, destructive. As Levine would also admit, he turned to punk rock as a way of defying the status quo of his generation, much like his parents were part of the “hippie” movement as an expression of defiance of the status quo of their own generation as well (Levine, 2003, p.

34). The nice thing about Buddhism is that it has a way of channeling the excess energy away from the destructive path. If there was one other thing that Levine learned from his enlightenment, it is that death is not the answer to his problems when he was attempting to commit suicide. For most people, to take one's life is the way of the loser, notwithstanding the “samurai” concept of suicide where they would take their own lives to erase the stigma of the shame. It does not apply here and this can be interpreted in several ways.

From the Hindu/Buddhist perspective, there is the concept of “ karma” and reincarnation where one's conduct in the present life would have an influence on what will become of them in the next. While these beliefs recognize death (as a natural occurrence), it does not encourage people to commit suicide. Based on “ karma,” the one who commits suicide might find himself or herself reincarnated in a much lower life form because of this and surely, no one would like to be reborn as an animal or a microscopic organism!

In most beliefs, death is not the end, but rather the beginning of the next phase, provided it would be allowed to take its natural course. Committing suicide would disrupt the grand design for the individual in the universe. One notable aspect of Buddhist Dharma is the direction one's path will be, depending on the choices made. Levine's somewhat troubled past serve as the basis of his writings and teachings. " We all sort of have a different doorway to dharma or spiritual practice. Suffering is a doorway.

For me it was the suffering of addiction, violence and crime which opened me at a young age, 17 years old. I was incarcerated, looking at the rest of my life in prison and thought, 'Maybe I will try dad's hippie meditation bullshit. ' Suffering opened me to the possibility of trying meditation. " (Levine, 2003, p. 246) All in all, “ Dharma Punx” is not only an autobiography, it is a spiritual journey of one individual who has endured probably the worst life can throw at him, send him on the wrong direction but through corrective “ enlightenment,” was able to bounce back and become spiritually whole again.

And if the spirit is “ whole,” the physical body will follow as well. Noah Levine went through hell and came out of it intact. If this were to be applied in international relations, one thing Buddhism can teach is violence and hatred is not the answer to the problems in the world. Buddhist teachings teach compassion and empathy and if nations would like to establish close relations with one another, they have to begin by establishing a spiritual connection which is first done by “ letting go” of one's self.

Buddhism teaches that the reason why there is so much suffering in this world is due to worldly desires. In international relations, the struggle for power often puts nations at odds with one another and this often leads to wars. Buddhism teaches the opposite, in letting go of these desires and to empathize. In doing do, not only are friendly relations established, but one's own interests will be met by others and one need not worry about it anymore.

Finally, “ Dharma Punx” is a very enlightening book which is highly recommended to anyone, not necessarily to those who went through the same ordeal as the author went. The author had been there and had done that yet he would not encourage anyone to go through it. Nevertheless, the book is very helpful for anyone who needs to be steered to the right direction of realhappinesswhich is something no worldly goods can provide.