

## ABSTRACT

### WALT WHITMAN'S *LEAVES OF GRASS* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MODERN MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

With his publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 Walt Whitman opened the door to poetry of the modern era. Disdaining conventional forms, rhyme, specific meters, he invented his own form as a necessary framework for what he had to say. For Whitman, the message came first; all else was subservient to that. This paper is an examination of Whitman's life and his primary work, *Leaves of Grass*, as viewed through the prism of modern Mahayana Buddhism. The message he conveyed through his poetry and his life is compatible to a high degree with the message contained in Buddhist philosophy. This is not to say that Whitman was an expert in Buddhist thought. Rather, it is an assertion that he developed his own philosophy through extensive study and meditation and, by means of intuition and inductive logic, was able to arrive at a perspective on life that reflects the teachings of the greatest sages of Buddhism.

The unique quality of the work lies in the integration of poetic, philosophical, and religious elements into a single magnificent literary structure. There have been many examinations of *Leaves of Grass* over the years, beginning with his contemporaries and continuing until the present day. This paper does not speak to the validity of these previous works; rather it is an attempt to show that a Buddhist perspective gives the most comprehensive presentation of Whitman's message that has yet been achieved.

Martin Leonard  
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