

Jack Kerouac in Berkeley: Reading *The Dharma Bums* as the Work of a Buddhist Writer

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BERKELEY AND THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA are now home to many Buddhists. However, when author Jack Kerouac arrived in Berkeley in 1955, there were not many European-American Buddhists in the Bay Area. Kerouac, who thought of himself as a Buddhist, found another in Berkeley poet Gary Snyder. Some then—and now—have disputed whether while Kerouac was in Berkeley in 1955 and 1956 he was a “real” Buddhist, and whether his novel *The Dharma Bums*, written about his friendship with Gary Snyder, gives expression to real Buddhist insights and teachings. In what follows I wish to persuade the reader that Kerouac, who at the time wanted to devote his life to expressing dharma in writing, was indeed a Buddhist at the time, and that one of his most Buddhist books, *The Dharma Bums*, conveys authentic Buddhist messages.

There is no doubt that Kerouac was a quintessential “Beat” writer, and that he became a national spokesman for a media-created “Beat Generation.” In 1954 and 1955 the “East Coast Beats,” Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, came to California and met members of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, such as Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Lew Welch. This latter group, known as the “West Coast Beats,” joined the “East Coast Beats” to make the Beat Movement a national movement.¹

The contemporary critical response in the United States to two of the most revolutionary initial works of the movement, Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Allen Ginsburg’s *Howl*, was overwhelmingly negative. Critics and the popular press saw these works and their authors as repudiating all civilized values. These two works apparently urged America’s youth to abandon all moral restraint in favor of free and continual booze, drugs, and the unrestrained sexuality of jazz. America was not prepared to see these authors and their friends as engaged in a serious spiritual quest and their works as religious texts. But that was how Ginsburg and Kerouac saw themselves and their works.

 JACK KEROUAC AND *THE DHARMA BUMS*

It was hard to ignore the religious nature of Kerouac's and Gary Snyder's quests as described in *The Dharma Bums*, in which Kerouac used himself as a model for the narrator (Ray Smith), Gary Snyder as the model for the hero of the novel (Japhy Ryder), and Allen Ginsberg as the model for Ray Smith's poet friend (Alvah Goldbook). But that best-selling novel, the first book Kerouac published after *On the Road*, was largely dismissed by literary critics as superficial, a kind of playing with Buddhism on the part of an author who was irresponsible, immoral, and undisciplined. It had a more conventional narration than *On the Road*, did not speak as clearly from the writer's immediate consciousness, and was not as consistently written in the marvelous "spontaneous prose" that distinguished *On the Road*. Though many have since acknowledged the importance of Beat writing to American literature, *The Dharma Bums*, perhaps in part because of its very explicit religiousness, has been ignored in most literary studies of Kerouac's work.

There is a significant divide in the studies of Kerouac's work in general and *The Dharma Bums* in particular. Those who write within fields like American literature, American studies, and even American religion do not see the Beats and Kerouac as primarily depicting or drawing on Buddhism in their writing. They rather see Kerouac and his friends as freshly appropriating traditions already present in American literature: romanticism, transcendentalism, the poetry of Walt Whitman, and so on. There are many intriguing parallels between the transcendentalists and the Beats: "Their romantic longing for lives led apart from the unnatural rhythms of city life, their certainty of correspondence between the natural and the supernatural, their sense of the prophetic role of the poet...."² Like the transcendentalists, the Beats were highly critical of the deformations of real religious insight and motivation in the established religions in the America of their time. And like the transcendentalists, the Beats were drawn by the wisdom traditions of the East. But to speak only of American influences on the vision of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder is willfully to ignore the extent to which Buddhism, Chinese culture, and Japanese culture were real sources for the insights and values of the Beats.

In general, scholars within American literature have not felt a need to arrive for themselves at an understanding of Buddhism and East Asian cultures in order to interpret and judge the work of Kerouac and others. But beginning in 1953, Kerouac in fact spent several years in concentrated Buddhist reading, study, and practice. It is fair to say that Buddhism became central to his life and writing for the next few years. Kerouac obtained and carried with him for constant re-reading Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*.³ Goddard's anthology contained the *Heart and Diamond Sutras*, the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra*, and the *Awakening of Mahayana*

Faith (Dasheng qixin lun), as well as the *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Hui-neng. During this period Kerouac also sought out every sutra and book on Buddhism he could find at the New York Public Library and elsewhere, and clearly knew both the *Lotus Sutra* and the Pure Land sutras by 1956. Evidence of his wide reading can be found in his recently published work *Some of the Dharma*. *Some of the Dharma* was begun in 1953 as reading notes, but it evolved into an all-encompassing four-hundred-page work of nonfiction “chronicling his thinking, incorporating reading notes, prayers, poems, blues poems, haiku, meditations, letters, conversations, journal entries, stories, and more. Kerouac felt he had discovered a powerful new form, and the Buddhism he explored with it became an important element of his worldview.”⁴ In January of 1955 Kerouac wrote to his literary agent, “From now on all my writing is going to have a basis of Buddhist Teaching free of all worldly and literary motives.”⁵ Kerouac completed *Some of the Dharma* in 1956, and began fruitless efforts to get it published. He wrote *The Dharma Bums* in 1957.

Allen Ginsburg rightly complained about this failure on the part of scholars of American literature and culture to appreciate that Kerouac was a sincere Buddhist, and to learn anything about Buddhism themselves in order to understand Kerouac. Defending *The Dharma Bums* in the *Village Voice* in 1958, he pointed out that his friend had had a genuine religious experience.⁶ Later, at a conference of Kerouac scholars and enthusiasts, he offered some instruction in basic Buddhism that would open up Kerouac’s work of poetry called *Mexico City Blues* to a deeper, more accurate interpretation.⁷

On the other side of this divide is a sprinkling of scholarly essays on Kerouac and Buddhism, particularly on Kerouac’s novel *The Dharma Bums*, by those whose chief interest is in Buddhism.⁸ While perceptive concerning aspects of Buddhism that can be seen in Kerouac’s work, the authors have a limited knowledge of the American context of the Beats. The present essay will inevitably also fall into that category. But the ideal study, toward which the present author would like one day to aspire, would be one that could combine and give proper weight to both sources of influence.

In reading *The Dharma Bums* as a reflection of Kerouac’s Buddhism, we must understand from the outset the dilemma posed by the apparent autobiographical nature of Kerouac’s novels. Kerouac has been called “the Great Rememberer,”⁹ and surely it is true that the thoughts and actions of Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder in large part correspond to what we know of the real lives of Kerouac and Gary Snyder. Yet Kerouac makes his memories of real persons into fictional characters within the context of a story that has to have a plot such as few real lives have. In *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac is also trying to make a religious point, and for that purpose no doubt edited his memories to make his fictional double more saintly than he himself had been. It can be misleading when biographers of Kerouac rely heavily on

his novels as source material, as most do. For these reasons we will refer throughout to the fictional characters by their fictional names, while giving some of what we know about the real persons from other sources that chimes with their fictional representations.¹⁰

The Dharma Bums chronicles Ray/Jack Kerouac's trip from New York to San Francisco in 1955, his meeting of Japhy/Gary Snyder while he was living with Alvah/Allen Ginsburg in Berkeley, California that fall, and his return to his sister's home in North Carolina for the winter of 1956. It also tells of his return from North Carolina to San Francisco to live with Japhy/Gary Snyder in Mill Valley, California in the spring of 1956. In those broad outlines the novel certainly follows Kerouac's life.

JAPHY AND RAY AS BUDDHIST PRACTITIONERS

Much of the novel draws a contrast between Ray Smith's attempts to practice Buddhism and those of Japhy Ryder, ways that correspond to what we know of the real ways of practicing Buddhism of Kerouac and Gary Snyder. But as the narrative time of the novel moves forward, Kerouac makes clear that he the author and Ray Smith the character also tremendously admire Japhy's way of practicing Buddhism, and as the novel progresses Ray clearly becomes influenced by it.

Ray Smith, the narrator, makes clear his self-identity as a Buddhist right away during the first important episode in the book, Ray's meeting with a hobo on a train during his own trip on the rails from southern California to San Francisco.¹¹ This hobo shares with him a prayer by St. Teresa in which she says that after her death she will return to earth by showering it with roses from heaven, forever, for all living creatures (p. 5). Ray says that this "St. Theresa bum" is the first genuine Dharma Bum he had met (p. 9). Of himself he says:

I was very devout in those days [fall of 1955] and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I have become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now [1957] I am grown so old and neutral.... But then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an old-time bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world (usually the immense triangular arc of New York to Mexico City to San Francisco) in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener), and as a future Hero in Paradise. I had not met Japhy Ryder yet, I was about to the next week, or heard anything about

“Dharma Bums” although at this time I was a perfect Dharma Bum myself and considered myself a religious wanderer (p. 5).

Within the context of Kerouac’s life and the original sources of the Beat Movement, the “St. Theresa bum” and Ray’s sense of himself as “an old-time bhikkhu in modern clothes wandering the world...in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener)” connect to the strong interest he and other East Coast Beats also had in the down-and-outer, Oswald Spengler’s “fellaheen,” as the bearer of a new consciousness. In his *Decline of the West* (1939) Spengler said of the fellaheen that they are characterized by a “deep piety that fills the waking consciousness...the naive belief...that there is some sort of mystic constitution of actuality.”¹²

But both here at the beginning and as the book unfolds it is very clear that Ray Smith is interested in something more specific than this general notion of the Beat. He is quite serious about his intention to practice the poor, simple, homeless life of meditation and prayer, not only as a hobo or fellaheen, but specifically as a Buddhist monk.

In fact, one of the central structural devices of the book is the contrast it draws between Ray Smith’s idea of bhikkhuhood and Japhy Ryder’s model of Buddhist monastic life. Ray Smith, who before the novel opens has spent months at a time living as a self-described *bhikkhu* devoting full time to meditation in the woods near his sister’s house in North Carolina, is committed to homelessness, to wandering. At one point he says that American culture, which he compares to a madhouse, leaves him no alternative: “The only alternative to sleeping out, hopping freights, and doing what I wanted I saw in a vision would be to just sit with a hundred other patients in front of a nice television set in a madhouse where we could be ‘supervised’” (p. 121).

Ray has also been practicing the Buddhist *bhikkhu*’s restraint of body, speech, and mind. One author notes that in this novel Ray is practicing almost all of the Buddhist precepts with remarkable faithfulness. (The one he was not practicing, not surprisingly, is the precept against intoxicating liquors. More on that below.) He has put in an entire year of celibacy. He says that he did so “based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death and I had really no lie come to a point where I regarded lust as offensive and even cruel” (p. 30; see also p. 29). He continues during the course of the novel to practice celibacy, apart from a few lapses. Of these his initiation into *yab-yum* (Ch. *shuang xiu*) with Japhy’s girlfriend Princess is the most notable.¹³

Japhy, according to Ray, has learned Chinese and Japanese and become an Oriental scholar and discovered the greatest Dharma bums of them all, the Zen lunatics of China and Japan. He too is practicing a kind of monastic simplicity. In Berkeley, Ray visits Japhy’s small house, “a twelve-by-twelve

foot shack, with nothing in it but simple Japhy appurtenances that showed his belief in the simple monastic life" (p. 18). In this house Japhy studies, meditates, and works on translating the poems of Hanshan. He is cultivating a Japanese-style garden such as one might find in a temple: "He had a few odd boulders and rocks and funny little trees to establish his Japanese tea garden" (pp. 18–19). Later, Ray stays for a while with Japhy in Japhy's cottage on the hill above Sean Monahan's house. On the door of the cottage "there is a board with Chinese inscriptions on it. Inside I saw the beautiful simplicity of Japhy's way of living, neat, sensible, strangely rich without a cent having been spent on the decoration" (p. 164). Such "beautiful simplicity" is something that Japhy connects with his East Asian Buddhist practice.

But the celibacy that Ray has adopted is not a part of Japhy's Buddhist practice. Japhy says that he distrusts any Buddhism that puts down sex. Japhy experiences a remarkable success with women, and even in his retreat cottage above his friend Sean Monahan's house he organizes parties every weekend. Abstinence from alcohol and other intoxicants is also not an essential practice on Japhy's Buddhist path.

Both men imagine that they desire a solitary withdrawal from society as the optimum condition for meditation and for writing. The Chinese poet Hanshan, Ray learns, is one of Japhy's great heroes and the chief model for his Buddhist practice. According to Ray, Hanshan was "a poet who got sick of the big city and the world and took off to hide in the mountains" (p. 20). Ray writes that when he wondered why Hanshan was Japhy's hero, Japhy answered: "Because he was a poet, a mountain man, a Buddhist dedicated to the principle of meditation on the essence of all things, a vegetarian too by the way though I haven't gone on that kick.... And he was a man of solitude who could take off by himself and live purely and true to himself" (p. 22). Japhy has in fact experienced almost totally solitary summers as a fire lookout in the High Cascades. During these summers he only communicated with other people by radio. Japhy's vision for his immediate future is a solitary search for temples and solitary Buddhist meditators in Japan. He says: "I'm going to Japan and walk all over that hilly country finding ancient little temples hidden and forgotten in the mountains and old sages a hundred and nine years old praying to Kwannon in huts and meditating so much that when they come out of meditating they laugh at everything that moves" (p. 45). Ray too hopes for a solitary life of prayer and meditation, completely withdrawn from social institutions. He writes: "I wanted to go off somewhere and find perfect solitude, and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind and be completely neutral from any and all ideas. I intended to pray, too, for all living creatures. I saw it was the only decent activity left in the world. Rest and be kind and do nothing else, practice what the Chinese call do-nothing" (pp. 105–106).

But there are important differences. Ray emphasizes the wisdom that sees the emptiness of things, that all is a dream already ended. Japhy emphasizes the wisdom that sees the realness of the empty; rather than abandoning all activity except for meditation and prayer, he thinks it is better to be alert to the empty reality and act within it as if it were real. In an extended night of talk the day after their hike up the Matterhorn in the High Sierra Mountains, Japhy suggests that in fact the world is the mind, and the mind is the world, and everything is real. He accuses Ray and Alvah of carrying on like they were in a dream, "shit, like they were themselves dreams or dots. Pain or love or danger makes you real again, ain't that right Ray like when you were scared on that ledge?" Frontiersmen are Japhy's heroes, "because they are constantly on the alert in the realness which might as well be real as unreal, what difference does it make, Diamond Sutra says 'Make no formed conceptions about the realness of existence nor about the unrealness of existence,' or words like that" (pp. 96–105).

Japhy values actions as a way of practicing Buddhism. He makes notes on natural phenomena on their two-day hike on Mt. Tamalpais, studies and translates while in Berkeley, and works cutting wood while in Marin. When Ray comes back to California to stay with Japhy in Marin, he has spent a summer of meditating and doing nothing. He is looking forward to seeing Japhy, for he thinks that during the summer away he has become enlightened to the central insights of Buddhism. Japhy, disappointingly, doesn't want to hear about his experiences. He tells Ray: "I don't want to hear your word descriptions of words words words you made up all winter, man, I want to be enlightened by actions" (p. 169).

And during their two months or so together in the cabin in Marin, Japhy asks Ray more than once why Ray is doing nothing all day, why he doesn't work. One such dialogue runs as follows: Japhy said, "Why do you sit on your ass all day?" Ray says, "I practice 'do nothing.'" Japhy: "What's the difference? Burn it, my Buddhism is activity" (p. 175).

MOUNTAINS AS PURE LANDS

There are two themes in the book that combine to make up the book's central Buddhist message, that America can be a Pure Land, a Buddha Land. The first theme is the association between purity, American mountains, and Buddhist realization. Japhy teaches Ray that mountains are the place where buddhas and "true emptiness-marvelous being" are most directly experienced. Mountains, in Japhy's view, are the place where progress on the path toward buddhahood can be made. Japhy's sense that profound religious transformation is associated with nature and with mountains shows not only that he is heir to Western transcendentalists and literary

Romantics, as well as American explorers and naturalists like John Muir. It also shows that Japhy's Buddhism, and through him Ray's Buddhism at the time of the novel, has come to them through Chinese and Japanese Buddhist wisdom and imagination.¹⁴

From the start Ray sees Japhy as free, pure, and devoted to finding the deep springs of life because he is not from a city. Japhy, he says, is "a kid from eastern Oregon brought up in a log cabin deep in the woods with his father and mother and sister, from the beginning a woods boy." Later he says:

Colleges [are] nothing but grooming schools for middle-class non-identity which finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time while the Japhys of the world go prowling in the wilderness to hear the voice crying in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of the stars, to find the dark mysterious secret of the origin of faceless wonderless crapulous civilization (p. 39).¹⁵

But it is the description that Ray provides of the landscape and scenery and of his own internal experiences on Japhy's and Ray's hike up the Matterhorn in the Sierras that best demonstrates both men's conviction that it is in the mountains that one is in a Pure Land where buddhas teach and buddhahood can be attained.

The account of this first of their hikes and climbs together takes up a rather large section of the book (pp. 35–94). Ray says before their sleep on the plateau: "What a night of true sweet sleep this will be, what meditations I can get into in this intense silence of Nowhere" (p. 48). Ray as narrator uses the term "pure" over and over again, as well as "diamond," to describe the landscape of the hike. Ray says it is "a pure sweet night" as they enter the foothills of the Matterhorn (p. 43). He continues: "A deer was in the road, looking at our headlamps, petrified, before leaping into the shrubbery by the side of the road and disappearing into the sudden, vast, diamond silence of the forest" (p. 44).

The next morning he awakens to a "beautiful morning—red pristine shafts of sunlight..." (p. 50). "The first thing I knew Aurora was paling the eastern hems of Amida..." (p. 48).

He notes that the road to the beginning of the trail "was dusty, a dirt road, but the lake was cerulean pure." As they start on the trail he notes that "it's pure morning in the High Sierras" (p. 54). "Here we are by this fresh pure lake walking along in this good air," and he draws a contrast with the bar in San Francisco, "The Place," in which they might have spent the morning (p. 55). As they climb higher, he exclaims, "Oh, this is like

an early morning in China and I'm five years old in beginningless time" (p. 59). He realizes that all around him are jewel-like colors, like those of the Pure Land: yellow aspens, the blue lake, and so on (pp. 58–60). Kerouac throughout *The Dharma Bums* deploys a prose that borrows images and tone from Buddhist sutras. The use of vivid descriptions of jewel-like colors in the landscape characterizes the narration of this whole section of the book, as it does the Pure Land sutras and the descriptions of buddha-fields and Pure Lands in the *Lotus Sutra*.

There is a sense of eternity in time to the landscape, along with a strong sense of the presence of buddhas. Ray notes that the "trail had a kind of immortal look to it" (p. 61). He speaks of "golden eternities," and "ecstasy" (p. 62). Japhy says that the mountain itself is a buddha, and as they near the top, Japhy says that to him the large rocks at the top looming above them are buddhas. When they reach the plateau on which they intend to camp, the same kinds of description continue. Ray says: "Here now the earth was a splendidous thing...pearl pure lucid water" (p. 66). The stream "was cold and pure like snow and the crystal-lidded eyes of heaven" (p. 67). Japhy says to Ray: "Ray, when you're up here you're not sittin [*sic*] in a Berkeley tea room. This is the beginning and the end of the world right here. Look at all those patient Buddhas looking at us saying nothing" (p. 68).

In a scene that is one of the climaxes of the hike, the two men sit on the edge of the plateau and pray and meditate (pp. 68–72). The plateau high on the mountain is a place that inspires and sustains prayer. Ray writes:

The stars began to flash. I fell into deep meditation, felt that the mountains were indeed Buddhas and our friends... . It was beautiful. The pinkness vanished and then it was all purple dusk and the roar of the silence was like a wash of diamond waves going through the liquid porches of our ears, enough to soothe a man a thousand years. I prayed for Japhy, for his future safety and happiness and eventual Buddhahood. It was all completely serious, all completely hallucinated, all completely happy (p. 71).

Like the Land of Bliss, the Pure Land.

The night they spend on the plateau is a happy one for Ray. He reports that, as with the advanced bodhisattva: "My dreams were pure cold dreams like ice water, happy dreams, no nightmares" (p. 77). Japhy too feels that he is in a land of bliss, and tells Ray that mountains will continue to provide a land of bliss for Ray as they have done for him: "Japhy began to shriek and hoot and whistle and sing, full of pure gladness. Nobody was around to hear him. 'This is the way you'll be on top of Mount Desolation, this summer, Ray.'" Ray replies: "I'll sing at the top of my voice for the first time in my life" (p. 206).

For Japhy the Pure Land is not a dream or a hallucination, but is found by becoming close to matter, to the empty that is also the real, provided it is not obscured by a head full of notions: "The closer you get to real matter, rock air fire and wood, boy, the more spiritual the world is. All these people thinking they're hardheaded materialistic practical types, they don't know shit about matter, their heads are full of dreamy ideas and notions" (p. 206). Japhy says en route up the mountain that the only thing wrong with Ray is that he doesn't know to get out in the mountains, where he can be surrounded by the real material/spiritual world (p. 69).

Ray for his part embraces the idea that there is something wrong with him when he is in the city. He realizes the hiking will do him good, get him away from drinking, perhaps make him appreciate a whole new way of living (p. 55). When they reach the plateau, true to Japhy's prediction, Ray finds that he has "absolutely not a jot of appetite for alcohol" (p. 73). Part of the appeal of mountains to Ray is his growing belief that in this Pure Land he can break the grip of drinking.¹⁶

PURIFYING A BUDDHA-FIELD

The book's second theme combines with the first to make up the book's central Buddhist message, that America can be a Pure Land. Both men are committed to becoming buddhas and purifying a buddha-field.

Ray and Japhy, as well as the Kerouac and Snyder of this period on whom they are modeled, share a sense of mission to make America their own buddha-field. In this American buddha-field they will purify society of false values and teach and awaken sentient beings. But their ideas about how to do this differ. It is Ray who most naturally thinks in terms of buddha-fields, but it is Japhy who lays out the most compelling vision for what America as a purified buddha-field would be like and how he expects to work toward that end.

Both agree that America, this *sahā*-world, is far from being a Pure Land. Both Ray and Japhy are critical of what America has become in the post-war period, the cold-war period of prosperity, the rush to experience the isolated conformist life of the suburbs, "the organization man," the threat of the bomb, and the newly available wealth of electric appliances and TV. Early on Ray mentions Japhy's anarchistic ideas about how Americans don't know how to live (p. 14). In Japhy's view, cold-war Americans with their culture of conformity and repression, of working to consume, have given away all their freedom. Japhy says:

You know, when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repres-

sion and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all human values.... My karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom. That's why I was always sympathetic to freedom movements, too, like anarchism in the Northwest, the old-time heroes of the Everett massacre, and all (p. 31).

For Japhy, Buddhism is a freedom movement.¹⁷

Japhy makes this point in the section that I call "Japhy's manifesto" on pages 96–102. He's been reading Whitman, who reinforces his notion about the "Zen lunacy bard of old desert paths." He says:

See, the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume....¹⁸

On the positive side, Japhy expresses the hope that the work he and his friends will carry out toward the creation of a buddha-field in America will make an enormous difference. The passage above continues:

I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousand or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures, that's what I like about you Goldbook and Smith, you two guys from the East Coast which I thought was dead.

Ray later says about Japhy: "What hope, what human energy, what truly American optimism was packed in that neat little frame of his!" (p. 209). On page 98 Japhy expresses some of the hope and optimism that Ray finds characteristic of him. Japhy says: "Just think how great and wise America will be, with all this energy and exuberance and space focused into the Dharma." On page 203 Japhy again expresses his sense of his role in history when he says: "Think what a great world revolution will take place when

East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing. Think of millions of guys all over the world with rucksacks on their backs tramping around the backcountry and hitchhiking and bringing the word down to everybody."

The strongest statement of Japhy's sense of the possibility that he and Ray may create a buddha-field as the ultimate outcome of their dedication and vow is found in what he says to Ray on their last two-day hike on Mt. Tamalpais:

Japhy was feeling very good. "Goddammit, Ray, you'll never know how happy I am we decided to have these last two days hiking. I feel good all over again. I *know* something good's gonna come out of all this!"

"All what?"

"I dunno—out of the way we feel about life. You and I ain't out to bust anybody's skull, or cut someone's throat in an economic way, we've dedicated ourselves to prayer for all sentient beings and when we're strong enough we'll really be able to do it, too, like the old saints. Who knows, the world might wake up and burst out into a beautiful flower of Dharma everywhere" (pp. 210–211).

Japhy in fact has concrete plans that he thinks will help to bring this transformation to pass. On the Mt. Tamalpais hike he tells Ray something about his plans:

Japhy was in high spirits. "Goddammit it feels good to get away from dissipation and go in the woods. When I get back from Japan, Ray, when the weather gets really cold we'll put on our long underwear and hitchhike through the land. Think if you can of ocean to mountain Alaska to Klamath a solid forest of fir to bhikku [*sic*] in a lake of a million wild geese. Woo! You know what woo means in Chinese?"

"What?"

"Fog. These woods are great here in Marin, I'll show you Muir Woods today, but up north is all that real old Pacific Coast mountain and ocean land, the future home of the Dharma-body. Know what I'm gonna do? I'll do a new long poem called 'Rivers and Mountains without End' and just write it on and on on a scroll and unfold on and on with new surprises and always what went before forgotten, see, like a river, or like one of them real long Chinese silk paintings that show two little men hiking in an endless landscape of gnarled old trees and mountains so high they merge with the fog in the upper silk void. I'll spend three thousand years

writing it, it'll be packed full of information on soil conservation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, astronomy, geology, Hsuan-tsang's travels, Chinese painting theory, reforestation, Oceanic ecology and food chains" (p. 200).

Japhy also draws on Native American tribal models. On the same hike he tells Ray:

"Ray, by God, later on in our future life we can have a fine free-wheeling tribe in these California hills, get girls and have dozens of radiant enlightened brats, live like Indians in hogans and eat berries and buds." [Ray replies:] "No beans?"

[Japhy:] "We'll write poems, we'll get a printing press and print our own poems, the Dharma press, we'll poetize the lot and make a fat book of icy bombs for the booby public" (p. 201).

Ray, for his part, sees himself as making a contribution to humankind. When earlier, carrying his backpack, he is mistaken for a prospector for gold or uranium, he reflects: "What I was going to hunt for was infinitely more valuable for mankind in the long run than ore" (p. 108). But his ideas are different from Japhy's. Close to the end of his first stay in California, he reflects:

But I had my own bangtail ideas and they had nothing to do with the "lunatic" part of all this. I wanted to get me a full pack complete with everything necessary to sleep, shelter, eat, cook, in fact a regular kitchen and bedroom right on my back, and go off somewhere and find perfect solitude and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind and be completely neutral from any and all ideas. I intended to pray, too, as my only activity, pray for all living creatures; I saw it was the only decent activity left in the world.... I didn't want to have anything to do, really, either with Japhy's ideas about society (I figured it would be better just to avoid it altogether, walk around it) or with any of Alvah's ideas about grasping after life as much as you can because of its sweet sadness and because you would be dead someday (pp. 105-106).

But in addition to praying, he also mentions teaching as a bodhisattva, an awakened being. At the end of his first stay in California, he reflects on his own destiny: "The following week I packed up and decided to hit the road and get out of that city of ignorance which is the modern city.... Suddenly I became aware that there was a lot of teaching for me to do in my lifetime" (p. 113).

He gets together with Japhy in the city for the last time this trip, and the two come across a black woman preaching outdoors in the park. She urges her listeners to recognize and embrace "a new field" that they are being given. Ray is charmed by the woman's message, but Japhy does not like her Christian language and themes. Ray says, among other things: "'Don't you hear that big old gal calling you and telling you that you have a *new field*, a new Buddha-field boy?' Japhy was so pleased he wrinkled his eyes and smiled. Ray continued: 'Whole Buddha-fields in every direction for each one of us....'" (p. 114).

He leaves the Bay Area and hitchhikes to his sister's home in North Carolina, trying out life as a backpacker, sleeping out. In some towns it is forbidden; the police are aggressive in rounding up hobos and bums. During his stay in North Carolina he has mystical experiences, including what seems like enlightenment. He has a vision of Dīpaṅkara Buddha and the Pure Awakened Land, and imaginatively experiences the bliss of the buddha-fields (p. 149).

In January, his meditations begin to bear fruit; he feels that "Everything is all right forever and forever" (p. 137). He realizes that "everything is empty but awake" (p. 144), and concludes that "it means that I have become a Buddha" (p. 145). He wants to write Warren Coughlin, "Yes Coughlin it's a shining nowness and we've done it, carried America like a shining blanket into that brighter nowhere Already." His sense clearly is that his work of becoming a buddha and purifying the buddha-field of America is already done.

"Everything's all right," I thought. "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form and we are here forever in one form or another which is empty. What the dead have accomplished, this rich silent hush of the Pure Awakened Land."... I have nothing to do but do what I want and be kind and remain nevertheless uninfluenced by imaginary judgments and pray for the light. Sitting in my Buddha-arbor, therefore, in that "colyalcolor" wall of flowers pink and red and ivory white, among aviaries of magic transcendent birds recognizing my awakening mind with sweet weird cries (the pathless lark), in the ethereal perfume, mysteriously ancient, the bliss of the Buddha-fields, I saw that my life was a vast glowing empty page and I could do anything I wanted.... I knew now that I was a bliss-heir (pp. 147-149).

From this point in the novel, Ray sees his search for buddhahood as already accomplished. He thinks that his experience has been described by the famous Chinese Chan Oxherding Pictures, and that his current state is depicted in the final picture in which the seeker and finder of

the ox has returned to the world and is drinking with the butcher in the market. Japhy, though, is not so convinced that Ray's attainment is really so unshakeable.

Ray's approach to purifying his buddha-field is to see himself as a teacher, as a messenger, and as one who prays for all sentient beings. At the end of the book, Ray spends sixty days living the life of the Chinese Buddhist poet Hanshan on Desolation Peak, where he has a meditation vision of Avalokiteśvara: "Avalokitesvara the Hearer and Answerer of Prayer said to me 'You are empowered to remind people that they are utterly free' so I laid my hand on myself to remind myself first and then felt gay, yelled 'Ta,' opened my eyes, and a shooting star shot." Freedom through a realization of emptiness and a realization that everything is mind and can therefore be changed, poverty as freedom and a way to freedom, the bliss of awakening, kindness, and compassion—these are the messages that Ray wants to bring to America as a way of purifying his Buddha Land.

Japhy and others keep bringing up the subject of Ray's heavy drinking. Japhy says: "How do you expect to become a good bhikku or even a Bodhisattva Mahasattva always getting drunk like that?" Ray replies: "Have you forgotten the last of the Bulls [i.e., the Oxherding Pictures], where he gets drunk with the butchers?" Japhy: "Ah, so what, how can you understand your own mind essence with your head all muddled and your teeth all stained and your belly all sick?" Ray: "I'm not sick, I'm fine. I could just float up into that gray fog and fly around San Francisco like a seagull. D'I ever tell you about Skid Row here, I used to live here—" "I lived on Skid Road in Seattle myself, I know all about that." Ray as narrator thinks that at the end of the long episode in which this dialogue occurs he has won the point—drinking is not a problem for an awakened Buddhist. But if Ray stands in some measure for Kerouac himself, later events showed that drinking was a problem for this particular Buddhist, and may have contributed to his eventual failure to persist on the bodhisattva path.

As Kerouac was writing this book, his most famous novel, *On the Road*, was on the best-seller list. The Beat Generation was suddenly a colossal media event, attracting a great deal of unfair criticism. Kerouac had an opportunity to make a difference in America. He seized this opportunity to try to lead a spiritual revival as the best way of giving American culture hope for the future. Leftists criticized this attempt as not being based on any economic and social analysis, and as we know, in the sixties the leftists eventually won out. Kerouac wrote many more novels that are generally regarded by literary critics as more serious and more accomplished than *The Dharma Bums*. But *The Dharma Bums* introduced the public to a romanticized and simplified version of the ideals, teachings, and practices of Buddhism in general. It also introduced readers to the wisdom of Zhuangzi, Hanshan, Japanese haiku poets, and Buddhist masters. It also introduced readers to

the long tradition in China and Japan of celebrating a life of wandering outside the settled world, and particularly in mountains, as a purifying and revivifying route to the deepest kinds of human understanding of the world, the void, and the self. It also introduced readers to the notion that life's deepest meaning could be found in purifying the self and benefiting others, empowered by the dharma.

Increasing problems with alcohol led to Kerouac's death at age forty-seven. One troubling aspect of reading *The Dharma Bums* is that we as readers can never be sure if Ray's visions and insights are coming from a profound transformation of consciousness or if they are coming from alcohol. And in the Buddhism of Ray and Japhy in *The Dharma Bums*, it seems easy to attain realizations of emptiness, ecstasy, and freedom, realizations that Ray at least interprets as attainment of the goal. The degree to which the East Asian Buddhist paths are, for most, ones that require constant attention, discipline, and hard-won self-knowledge is not so apparent here.¹⁹

At the end of his time with Japhy, Ray dreams of a "little seamed brown unimaginable Chinese hobo" coming from the mountains into a crowded, dirty marketplace:

This one was a Chinese twice-as-poor, twice-as-tough and infinitely mysterious tramp and it was Japhy for sure.... I woke up at dawn, thinking, "Wow, is that what will happen to Japhy? Maybe he'll leave that monastery [in Japan] and just disappear and we'll never see him again, and he'll be the Han Shan ghost of the Orient mountains and even the Chinese'll be afraid of him he'll be so raggedy and beat" (p. 208).

If Japhy is modeled on Gary Snyder, we have the advantage of knowing what in fact has happened, since the fictional Ray said these words and Kerouac wrote the book. Gary Snyder once said after Kerouac's death that Kerouac had used Buddhism to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish in the twentieth century, and he (Gary) had used Buddhism to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish in the twentieth century. Kerouac was inspired by his Buddhist faith and practice to write this book. He hoped to spark a new birth of real freedom, a purification and expansion of America's heart, in a cramped, conformist, materialist period.

While striving to purify his own Buddha Land, Gary Snyder, for his part, has fulfilled many of the dreams that Japhy Ryder enunciates in this book. He has lived simply and independently in the mountains. He has gathered a tribe around him and has founded a meditation hall. As a naturalist and a poet, he has written *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and other closely observant studies of nature. He has turned his reader's attention to the concrete material world as both empty and extremely

important. He has urged those who wish to see a renewal of sustaining values in America to study the economics and ecology of their own watersheds, and has advocated global sustainability. The forms and the subjects of his written transmissions of liberating wisdom correspond well to what the fictional Japhy declared would be the contents of his "endless scroll."

Kerouac in *The Dharma Bums* wrote sentences and paragraphs of depth and beauty, conveying his strong sense that the *sahā*-world is already pure. More than that, he held out to his readers with passion and heartfelt simplicity a belief in an America transformed into a Buddha Land by ordinary people awakened to wisdom and compassion. These ordinary people were to be, like Kerouac, liberated by Asian Buddhist scriptures and practices, freely appropriated and changed by an independent, egalitarian, overly self-confident, and youthful American spirit. The result was a book that touched hearts and transformed lives.

We can see now that a great deal more knowledge of Asian Buddhist teachings and practices would have helped Ray, and presumably Kerouac as well. Yet Kerouac showed in his creation of Ray and Japhy that he was remarkably well informed about Buddhism. This is all the more impressive when one takes into account the translations of Buddhist texts available in the 1950s; these were limited in number and often unreadable. There is no doubt he succeeded in contributing to the purification of America as a Buddha Land. With *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac helped other bodhisattvas to set up centers for Buddhist practice in America. He called a generation to value wisdom and spirituality more than conformity, material goods, and success. If his Buddhism was adopted in part to solve personal problems involving love and sex, if the Buddhism of his imagination remarkably resembled the Roman Catholic Christianity of his childhood, in my judgment it is nonetheless true that for a few years beginning in 1953 Kerouac was a Buddhist. Kerouac as a Buddhist stressed wisdom and insight into emptiness as the source of real freedom. He valued renunciation, daily practice, and cultivation in solitude. Most importantly, Kerouac gave Ray the heart of a bodhisattva who sought to pray continually for the benefit others. He sought to transform America into a land of true freedom, a Buddha Land.

NOTES

1. Some of the credit for this revival goes to Carole Tomkinson, Stephen Prothero, and the American Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*.
2. Stephen Prothero, introduction to *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tomkinson (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), p. 7.
3. Dwight Goddard, ed., *A Buddhist Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1938]).
4. David Stanford, introduction to *Some of the Dharma*, by Jack Kerouac (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997), p. ix.
5. Stanford, introduction, p. x.
6. Allen Ginsberg, "The Dharma Bums," *Village Voice* 12 (November 1958): pp. 3–5. Also in *The Village Voice Reader*, ed. Daniel Wolf and Edwin Fancher (New York: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 311–315 and *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952–1995*, by Allen Ginsburg (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).
7. Allen Ginsburg, "Kerouac's Ethic," in Ginsburg, *Deliberate Prose*, pp. 361–373. First published in *Un Homme Grand: Jack Kerouac at the Crossroads of Many Cultures Jack Kerouac A la confluence des cultures*, eds. Pierre Anctil, Louis Deupont, Remi Ferland, and Eric Waddel (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990).
8. E.g., Margaret E. Ashida, "Frogs and Frozen Zen," *Prairie Schooner* 34 (1960): pp. 199–206 and Robert P. Jackson, "The Dharma Bums," *American Buddhist* 2 (October 1958): p. 1.
9. Allen Ginsburg, "The Great Rememberer," in Ginsburg, *Deliberate Prose*, pp. 348–357. First published in *University Review* 25 (November 1972): pp. 20–22, 36.
10. Others have suggested that the reason why the narrator is given the name Ray Smith rather than any of Kerouac's other names for fictionalized versions of himself—he was already employing "Deluoz" as a name for himself in other unpublished novels, for example—is that he wanted to disclaim any serious intention with this book, which was written on demand from his publisher and often is thought of as a pot boiler. I suggest rather that Kerouac knew that he needed for the sake of the "plot-line" of this novel to make claims about his experience of awakening on Desolation Peak that were not true to his actual experience. He returned to that subject and told a somewhat different story in his novel *Desolation Angels*.

11. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976 [1958]), p. 5. All references in this essay are to the Penguin Books edition first published in 1976.
12. Quoted in Prothero, introduction, p. 12.
13. One of these lapses involved a blonde in a convertible with whom he hitched a ride on his way to San Francisco. He omitted this episode from *The Dharma Bums*, but reported it in another novel.
14. For an account in English on the sacredness of mountains in Japanese Buddhism, see the work of Alan Grappard. On the sacredness of mountains in China, see the work of Raoul Birnbaum.
15. This overlooks Ray's previous description of Japhy as an Oriental scholar. If Japhy is modeled on Gary Snyder, then Kerouac deliberately ignores the profound ways in which we and Ray know that Japhy/Gary Snyder profited from his college experience at Reed College, which gave him an opportunity to learn about Native American mythology and Chinese culture.
16. In chapter 8 of the *Lotus Sutra*, in which Śākyamuni Buddha describes Pūrṇa's future Pure Land, he says that "there will be no evil ways and no womankind, for all living beings will be born transformed and have no carnal passion." In his *Buddhism For Today: A Modern Interpretation of the Three-fold Lotus Sutra*, 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1979 [1976]), Nikkyo Niwano comments on the latter sentence as follows: "This implies that though a person has a human body, it is as though he did not have a body; the Pure Land is surely such a place" (p. 127). In my view Ray, like Kerouac himself in this period, is disciplining himself as his version of a *bhikkhu* with respect to celibacy, homelessness, and possessionlessness in order to gain a kind of freedom that includes freedom from the body. He seeks to become a person who though he has a human body is as though he did not have a body. Alcohol enables him to reach *samādhi*, but it also is a tie to the body. It is in the Pure Land of the mountains that Ray for a moment hopes to reach a freedom from alcohol. Kerouac's biographers point out that his intense interest in Buddhism and celibacy followed a love affair that ended in devastating heartbreak. In the novel we are not told anything of any event in Ray's biography that might partially explain why Ray favors celibacy and feels that desire is a cause of suffering.
17. I owe this insight and this phrase to discussions with my former student at the University of Tennessee, Sean Blevins.
18. Later Ray repeats Japhy's critique of suburban America. "Everything was fine with the Zen lunatics [i.e., his group of friends], the nut wagon was too far away to hear us. But there was a wisdom in it all, as you'll see if you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after

house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show; nobody talking; silence in the yards; dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of on wheels" (p. 104).

19. This point is well made by Margaret Ashida, "Frogs and Frozen Zen."

- Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*. I recently started going to a weekly Kadampa Buddhism and meditation class at a local Unitarian church with a friend of mine. I'm far too skeptical to jump into or out of religions easily, but I h "Yeah man, you know to me a mountain is a Buddha." Kerouac gives us the rambling masterpiece of a sentence with no punctuation and yet chock-full of description and character. The poverty/liberty of "hopping a freight", the locale firmly rooted in hippy California (Los Angeles, Santa Ba Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*: "Hopping a freight out of Los Angeles at high noon one day in late September 1955 I got on a gondola and lay down with my duffel bag under my head and my knees crossed and contemplated the clouds as. Here, Jack demonstrates his versatility between the road thing with Neal from Denver to NY to Mexico City and now to a Berkeley friend who Allen Ginseng has met at poetry readings in San Fran and his cottage Zen retreat on Milvia St. in Berkely..Kerouac is excited to meet Gary Snyder, of the Northwest woods, a man with roots in political anarchy, communal living, Indian lore, mountaineering, and academic studying of Chinese and Japanese Kanji. He meets his new friend and iconic iconoclast, Japhy Ryder to be incarnated on the Akashic pages of DB. Jack ventures to Mien Mo Mt.(?) with Gary and his librari - Jack Kerouac -- *The Dharma Bums*. I'd be willing to bet that a lot of people these days may not know much about Jack Kerouac. I wonder if his work is read in high school or college English classes? It should be. Probably banned in Texas or Alabama, like Salinger's *Catcher In The Rye*. If you're a fan of the Beats writers, this is a must read. While it wasn't my favorite work of his that I've read so far, it shows maturity, spiritual depths, and reflective, peaceful, thought that I wasn't expecting from Kerouac. This novel shows his growth as a writer, and it makes one want to reflect upon nature and look into themselves. Read more. Helpful. Jack Kerouac in Berkeley: Reading *The Dharma Bums* as the Work of a Buddhist Writer. Miriam Levering. Gary Snyder. These two works apparently urged America's youth to abandon all moral restraint in favor of free and continual booze, drugs, and the unrestrained sexuality of jazz. America was not prepared to see these authors and their friends as engaged in a serious spiritual quest and their works as religious texts. But that was how Ginsburg and Kerouac saw themselves and their works. Read more. Last Updated: 30 Sep 2020. Discover the world's research. Join ResearchGate to find the people and research you need to help your work. Join for free. ResearchGate iOS App.