

Visions of Enlightenment: Aspects of Buddhism in Jack Kerouac, Allen  
Ginsberg and Gary Snyder

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Abstract of thesis entitled:

Visions of Enlightenment: Aspects of Buddhism in Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder

Submitted by Chan Tsz Shan

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This study investigates the directions and methods Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder take in developing their understandings and interpretations of Buddhism. It intends to show how the writers have developed from various Buddhist concepts different visions of Buddhist enlightenment that reflect their own concerns in the tumultuous years known as the Beat generation.

The Buddhist concepts this study looks at in relation to the writers include the notion of emptiness, consciousness and universal Buddha-nature. Jack Kerouac employs particular narrative strategies to interrogate the condition of the phenomenal world with the notion of emptiness; Allen Ginsberg's changing understanding of the Buddhist notion of consciousness continues to affect his expressions of the relation between self, mind and consciousness; Gary Snyder's adaption of the concept of Buddha-nature reconstructs nature's fundamental relation to man. This study proposes that a common expression found in the three writers is that the condition of the phenomenal world and the perception of ultimate reality depend on the condition of the mind, or in Ginsberg's terminology, on the consciousness.

This study also looks at the complications and constraints in the writers' Buddhist pursuit in the 50s and 60s America. It discusses how the representation of Buddhism to which they were exposed affects their responses, adaptations and interpretations of the Buddhist concepts they came to know. Finally, this study intends to show how the writers have constructed different visions of Buddhist enlightenment through their works.

本文探討凱魯亞克、金斯堡和史耐德在建立對佛教觀的過程中所採取的方法和方向，以及他們對佛教悟境的理解如何反映自身對時代的看法。

本文探討作者對佛教概念包括“空觀”，“識”及“佛性”的理解及詮釋。魯亞克利用敘事方法探討佛教的空觀以及現象世界的關係；金斯堡對識的理解不斷演變，影響他對自我，思維和意識的看法。史耐德調整佛教觀念，重構自然與人類的根本關係。本文嘗試指出，三位作者同樣認為，個人對現象世界，以及對絕對現實的感知取決

於人的思維和意識。

本文同時探討三位處身五十至六十年代美國的作者，在研究佛教時所遇到的限制，以及他們所接觸的佛教文獻如何影響他們對佛教觀念的回應，調整和演繹。最後，本文期望展示三位作者如何透過作品，建構他們對佛教悟境的各種想像。

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## Contents

Introduction	1
1. Jack Kerouac and the Concept of Emptiness	20
2. Gary Snyder and Autonomous Nature	43
3. Ginsberg and the Sunyata Consciousness	70
Conclusion	95
Bibliography	100

## Introduction

Since the Beat artists came onto the scene in mid-century America, discussions on and interpretations of their spiritual dimensions as reflected in their writings are as diversified as other critical judgments they have received. Brief surveys and concentrated studies of the Beat movement in both literary and religious fields have discerned some palpable forms of spiritual interest on the part of these writers. John Tytell's *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* identifies a "mythic outlook" (3) in the writers and connects them to their spiritual ancestors, the American Transcendentalists. Robert Ellwood, in *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace*, introduces the relevance of the group to the fifties religious scene with the remark that "there were significant ways in which the Beats was a spiritual movement, even if a muddled and underground one" (164). Lardas's *The Bop Apocalypse* takes religion as "the most pressing interpretative category" (14) in the attempt to "take the Beats at face value" (14). John Clellon Holmes, a contemporary of the Beat writers, wrote in a due commentary entitled "This is the Beat Generation", an article Allen Ginsberg endorsed in the *New York Times Magazine*, that the Beat writers were individuals "with a perfect craving to believe" (6), who comprehended the problem of modern life as "essentially a spiritual problem" (6). As Stephen Prothero noted, even some of the more persistent criticisms in the early reviews have also focused on the issue of religion and spirituality

(8). She quotes Norman Podhoretz who criticized the group as “spiritually underprivileged and crippled of soul” (8).

Writers who have participated in the creative exchanges that spurred the Beat movement portray their time and experiences with spiritual sensibility. The opening chapter of Gary Snyder’s prose collection *A Place in Space* starts with the line “in the spiritual and political loneliness of America of the fifties you’d hitch a thousand miles to meet a friend” (9). Allen Ginsberg mobilized a stream of imageries with spiritual implications in an interview conducted in 1965 to describe his “Blake experience”: the sky was felt to be an ancient existence through which he saw the depths of the universe. “The sky was the living blue hand itself, or that God was in front of my eyes – existence itself was God” (123). Jack Kerouac’s often cited remark that “Beat” also stands for “beatific” speaks of the spiritual aspirations and energy that characterize the movement.

Studies that cover the spiritual dimensions of the writers often refer to a relation between their various personal dilemmas and some broader crisis each writer finds himself to be a part of. How these crises are perceived vary for each writer, but in general the crises often raise important questions of the human conditions and of the social, cultural and political realities in 50s and 60s America. Richard Eberhart wrote that *Howl* “lays bare the nerves of suffering and spiritual struggle” (25) at a time when “the mechanistic civilization kills the spirit” (25). Matt Theado found that Jack Kerouac had

“taken himself to the edge of experience” (170) which all seemed to end up in futility, confusion and sorrow, a stream of sensations he cannot explain (170) on that piece of “romanticized” (144) American land. Rod Phillips traced Gary Snyder’s “social critique of America’s relationship with wilderness” (34) to the unattained “universal intimacy with the whole of nature” (34) that extends “beyond the human realm” (34). The political and ecological realities of America were not examined only as social, cultural or political phenomena, but were encountered instead from an oblique spiritual angle that points to a sense of lacking and deficiency these realities reveal. The adoption of a spiritual angle from which the writers penetrate these events opens up a new perspective on society. In this vision, the flourishing of religious mood reveals the many paradoxes between the superficial reality and the deeper labyrinths of the national psyche.

According to Robert Ellwood’s study of the fifties, it seems that the proliferation of religions in America pointed to an awareness of a darker, skeptical depth of despair. This was spurred by an existential crisis that lay beneath the superficial optimism grounded on economic growth. The spiritual marketplace in which an array of religions came in abundant supply also reveals the futility of materialism. The availability of the array of religions also opens up an anxious negotiation between the national faith in individual liberty and the ambivalent American religious ideals that seemed to endorse both individual faith and a spiritually unified nation (Ellwood, 12-15).

The writers associated with the Beat movement then sought an eclectic religious imagination that would embrace both the American spiritual traditions and the alternative religions in the face of their troubled conditions and crises in mid-century America. Such imagination, however, is not doctrinal. It is, as John Lardas noted, “volatile, discordant, and unsystematic” (15), “rife with metaphysical subtleties” (15) that incorporates aspects of American spiritual, literary and aesthetic heritages traditions as well as everyday life sensations that include bop jazz, road journeys and even drugs. As seen from Ginsberg’s famous line “existence is God”, there is a dependence on the heightened attentiveness of minute to minute perception and on the rhythms and sensations of everyday happenings . This illuminates a transcendental condition inherent in both the universe and individual existence. There is a sense of savouring every subjective experience and sensations as a path to the ultimate, universal reality that can be perceived directly from the happenings of the world. The writers have sought intensively to discover the various linkages between individual perception and the ultimate reality, between the individual human condition and that of the universe, which are at the same time abject and glorious, deficient and complete. As Jack Kerouac wrote in *Dharma Bums*, “the mind is nothing but the world” (64). There is an intense interest in sensing and examining a reality which is different from the one “presented to them” (Lardas, 10) with the vehicle of individual perceptions.

Buddhism is one of the sources of inspiration that the writers have adopted to search for an alternative understanding of reality and its implications. The religion is of interest to the Beat writers due to its sophisticated understanding of the relations between the individual mind, the phenomenal world and the ultimate reality. However, the immediate appeal they found of Buddhism seems to lie in its status as an alternative religious tradition representing freedom from the raging conformism and religious tensions in postwar America. Buddhism itself also has a long history of being associated with “freedom” and “intuition” in the American intellectual background: as Prothero noted, the Transcendentalists Thoreau and Emerson in the nineteenth century had explored the writings of Hindus, Buddhists and Confucians (13) although there was always confusion between Hinduism and Buddhism. To these thinkers, the Asian religions meshed smoothly into their transcendentalist outlook which, as Lawrence Sutin suggested, stresses that “the workings of God [were manifested] in the workings of nature” (205). Asian religions also seemed to “stress the role of spiritual intuition alongside of science and intellect” (205). The Buddha was a figure Thoreau used to promote the universal transcendental states, an instance of liberation from all the constraints that doctrines and institutionalized religion had imposed on the human spirit. The Buddha was not strictly represented as a figure of yet another religious system; he is invoked to express Thoreau’s reaction against the provincial religiosity:

“I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another. I have no sympathy with the bigotry and ignorance which make transient and partial and puerile distinctions between one man’s faith or form of faith and another’s – as Christian and heathen. I pray to be delivered from narrowness, partiality, bigotry. I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha, the Great Spirit as well as God”

(Journals, 34)

Freedom is also a quality the writers associated with the Beat circle found in Buddhism although different writers expostulated on it from different angles according to their individual concerns. For Gary Snyder, freedom, in the Buddhist sense, is the dissolution of the self into nature. He wrote: “I perceived that there was a kind of freedom and mobility that one gained in the world, somewhat analogous to the wandering Buddhist monk of ancient times [...] The word for Zen monk in Chinese, *yun shui*, means literally “clouds and water”, [...] “to float like clouds, to flow like water [...]” (On Kerouac, 1). For Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the Buddhist sense of freedom, in the broadest term, refers to the liberation of consciousness and the appreciation of the spontaneous mind with all the sensations, memories and thoughts it records. Ginsberg recounts the saying of a Tibetan Buddhist Gelek Rinpoche “My mind is open to itself” (Meditation, 137).

However, the feature of Buddhism that the writers found the deepest relevance is the sophisticated explanations of the link between consciousness and reality. In early Buddhism, there was already a differentiation between the mind, unconsciousness and consciousness. The mind, if not subjected to meditative training, is

a dynamic and changing entity that can be influenced by sensory stimuli, impressions and desires. The unconscious refers to a layer of dormant tendencies beneath the conscious surface, providing extra stimuli for the conscious mind to pursue its many cravings and desires grounded in ignorance. Consciousness, however, involves a completely different set of idea. As Carl Olson in *Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction* pointed out, consciousness in Buddhism is “the medium in which empirical existence takes place” (97). He continued to explain:

“This accounts for cognitive or perceptive consciousness. Consciousness is also the medium in which trance states move one forward spiritually. And consciousness is the basis of all conscious and unconscious psychological manifestations of those within the realm of [endless] rebirth. In fact, the phenomenal world is shaped to a large extent by consciousness. Consciousness, in other words, has the power to affect the origination or cessation of the world. Moreover, it is indispensable for birth, growth, and the development of existence”.

(97)

Olson then elaborated on the ways consciousness interacts with the phenomenal world and the role it can play in an individual’s striving to realize the ultimate reality:

“There are two fundamental modes of consciousness: empirical and discriminating. The first mode arises when sense objects stimulate sense organs. This mode has an innate tendency to become attached to objects of sense perception and thus forfeit its freedom and become dependent. The other mode of consciousness has the power of discrimination between opposites such as happiness and suffering, pleasure and pain. Thus it can recognize the impermanence of the world, which suggests that it has the power of transcending itself and even changing the structure of life.

Consciousness cannot, however, know the ultimate reality because reality is beyond the sense to which consciousness is bound. In order to transcend this bondage, one needs to acquire spiritual states by refining one's consciousness by means of meditation"

(97).

"[By practicing meditation], a person can [...] progress to right mindfulness, a term that denotes bare attention. Mindfulness [...] helps the mind to realize the conditioned and conditioning nature of all phenomenal entities. It assists a person to again freedom from habitual actions and responses. Finally, mindfulness can liberate the mind by producing insight into the true nature of things".

(97)

From these passages, Buddhism has a system of thinking that links up closely the mind and the phenomenal world, the consciousness and the ultimate reality. For Jack Kerouac who did not fully grasp the concept, the impression of such linkages is appealing for his attempt to glimpse the ultimate reality from the sensations of the phenomenal world recorded in his spontaneous mind. It also is a highly intriguing concept for Allen Ginsberg who had been interested in the ideas and expressions of universal consciousness, the American consciousness, the individual consciousness and the unconscious. The Buddhist sense of the ultimate reality, which is described as "immeasurable, nothingness, emptiness and signlessness" (Olson, 100) also inspired Kerouac's literary investigation of the reality in relation to the First Noble Truth in Buddhism, which suggests that human existence within the world is unsatisfactory, imperfect and impermanent. Another concept of the impermanent self also found expression in some of Allen Ginsberg's later writings when he was trying to resolve the

many aspirations, anxieties, joy and turbulences encountered throughout his life.

For Gary Snyder whose Buddhist interest lies basically in the lineage of Japanese Zen Buddhism, what is of central importance is how an individual can achieve the oneness with nature through the trained mind. The Zen tradition emphasizes the meditation on the ordinary and the natural to achieve transcendental wisdom. The Zen preference for “acting naturally and spontaneously” (230), as Carl Olson noted again, extends to its relationship to nature:

“From the Zen perspective, human beings have a very close relationship to nature, but nature is also in the person. [...] All nature is alive and vital. Not only can a person enter into a relationship with nature; it is probably more accurate to say that a person already is nature. Nature is not something out of which a person emerges, and it is certainly not something that a person feels that he or she must conquer. We already are nature, even before we become aware of it or realize our relationship to it”

(230)

In Snyder’s works, there is an attempt of the poetic mind that runs parallel with the natural order of the universe to perceive the common essence between nature and man. The heightened sense of awareness, being, solidarity and unity is one of the salient features in the poems.

The writers’ explorations of Buddhism has spanned different periods of time even though they were all acquainted with the religion in the 50s and have influenced each other’s perspectives and interests. Their investigations into the religion have inspired some of their major writings. Gary Snyder traveled to Japan in 1956 to engage in

formal Zen studies and practices one year after the Six Gallery Reading and he has maintained a keen interest in Zen and Asian religious traditions. He started the compilation of *Earth House hold: Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma* during his stay in Japan and has continued to incorporate his Buddhist understandings to his poetic works such as "Riprap".

Jack Kerouac embarked on his autodidactic Buddhist study around 1953-54 after reading Thoreau's *Walden*. The discovery of Buddhism coincided with his commitment to the spontaneous prose style and also his rethinking of the meanings of religious ecstasy. As he studied the translated versions of Buddhist scriptures, mainly the Mahayana lineage, and meditated on their meanings, he compiled a book of notes entitled *Some of the Dharma* and also a life account of the Buddha, *Wake Up*, based upon his readings. Other works that display prominent Buddhist influences include *Dharma Bums*, *Visions of Gerard*, *Mexico City Blues* and *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*. In the later years of his life, Kerouac relinquished his Buddhist pursuit in disillusionment and reverted to his Catholic faith in which he was raised.

Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist interest started earlier than Kerouac, but he did not embark on a serious contemplation of the religion until his encounter with a Tibet Buddhist practitioner in India who advised him on the illusory nature of vision in the 60s. Ginsberg's commitment to Buddhism has intensified throughout out the years as he

continued to study under the guidance of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Ginsberg's interpretation of the religion has also continued to evolve as reflected in his poetic works from "Sakyamuni Coming Out of the Mountain", "Angkor Watt", "and Wichita Vortex Sutra" to "Ego Confession".

Given the fact that all writers embarked on their Buddhist pursuit within the contexts and constraints in mid-century America, their understandings and expressions of the religion have often been described as idiosyncratic or eccentric, if not baffling, flawed and problematic. In their day, the representation of Buddhism often gave contradictory accounts of the major precepts of the religion, resulting in many forms of confusion and ambiguities. As Tony Trigilio noted in *Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*, the Tibetan Rinpoche who was a major source of guidance to the poet had sought to "claim the authority of a lineage" (xi) with controversial pedagogical methods known as "Crazy Wisdom" that esteems utter freedom that verges on indulgence. The translated scriptures that Jack Kerouac consulted entitled *The Buddhist Bible* by Dwight Goddard provided no clarification on the term "emptiness". In the translation of a brief Buddhist text commonly known as the *Heart Sutra*, Goddard wrote:

"The Blessed One was sitting apart absorbed in Samadhi, and the noble Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was meditating on the profound Prajna-paramita, thinking thus: Personality is made up of five grasping aggregates--form, sensation, perception, discrimination and consciousness--all of which the Blessed One has taught us are by nature dream-like and empty."

(221)

By aligning the state of emptiness to a dream-like quality, Goddard unintentionally related emptiness to a fixed state of reality. However, emptiness is a realization attained when the nature of things is fully revealed after the deconstruction of erroneous viewpoints and differentiations. Emptiness does not point to a reality that is opposed to a solid, real, and un-empty existential condition; it points to a state of absolute clarity when all dualism and differentiation cease to function. Emptiness also allows one to penetrate the impermanent nature of all matters. Kerouac, however, had struggled, as reflected in his writings, with the concept of emptiness as a description of reality, a dream-like state in which nothing is real and substantial. Even texts deemed as more authoritative might also risk some degrees of misrepresentation. As Josephine Nock-Hee Park explained, the Japanese master D. T. Suzuki, in an effort to popularize Japanese Zen, had “reconfigured Zen for American consumption: he translated Zen into terms of profound religious experience familiar to American audiences [...] Zen hitches American transcendental ideals to an Eastern guiding star” (62). The writers developed their views of Buddhism based on sources available to them and tested them within their individual worldviews and concerns. Buddhism has also transformed part of their original vision. Ginsberg’s more recent comment of his important poem *Howl*, as Lewis Hyde noted, spoke of a Buddhist influenced worldview: “at that time I believed in some sort of God and thus Angels, and religiousness – at present as Buddhist I see an

awakened emptiness as the crucial term. No God, no Self, not even great Whitman's universal Self [...]” (6).

Kerouac, Ginsberg and Snyder have also been subjected to the criticism of their orientalist tendencies. For a long time they have been regarded as enthusiasts of the exotic East. Reed Whitemore expressed in 1970 his disapproval of the “sudden Easternness that descended on the American sensibility” (201) whereas Josephine Nock-Hee Park found Gary Snyder's adaptation of Zen into his advocacy of environmentalism “a potent new instantiation of an American Orientalism [...]” (60). Their orientalist tendency, however, is more complex than “easy Easternness”. It belongs to a family of attitudes and approaches whereby, as J.J. Clarke described in *Oriental Enlightenment*, “Western thinkers have drawn Eastern ideas into the orbit of their intellectual and cultural interests, constructing a set of representations of it in pursuit of Western goals and aspirations” (10). While the writers have clearly not escaped the idealism and the cultural imagination of the East as a remote and enigmatic land holding the secrets of some kinds of mystical transcendence, they looked on the East both as an object for study and a culture for veneration. The writers were also not satisfied with their initial impressions of the exotic East and have made sustained efforts to investigate the various Buddhist traditions to, as illustrated by Gary Snyder's case, reconstruct the common understanding of the surrounding world where nature is no longer respected and

understood. For Ginsberg and Kerouac, the implications in Buddhism have also been used to reflect on human existence, the self, the phenomenal world and the ultimate reality within the fabric of American experiences. Such concerns have extended beyond the issues of power, cultural hegemony and dominance that orientalism often recalls. It is also through Buddhism that they start to question contemporary American culture and experiences.

In the end, what these writers commonly seek is the mysterious experience of the “enlightenment” that Buddhism promises. In their vision, an enlightened individual has the capacity to fathom the ultimate reality, the root causes of the sorrow and chaos of this phenomenal world, the nature and meaning of human existence in which joy, sadness, anxieties, aspirations and all kinds of volition and sentiments arise and converge. An enlightened individual is also able to enjoy a fundamental and spontaneous relationship with nature that he or she is fully acquainted. Buddhist enlightenment is the vision and state they actively sought for, which has nevertheless remained elusive. This study attempts to trace the aspects of Buddhism that the writers are interested in and relate them to their individual concerns. It also tries to reveal a common interest in the writers to explore how the mind can achieve an alternate understanding of the phenomenal world and ultimate reality in which their dilemmas can be better accounted for and resolved.

As suggested by previous paragraphs, this study focuses specifically on three writers associated with the Beat movement, namely Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. All three writers have explored and appropriated Buddhism to considerable depths. The Beat movement was chosen for this study since Buddhism, cast as an alternative religion in 50s-60s America, was of interest mainly to the underground scene. The Beats were the most prominent underground literary group in terms of making a creative, relevant and sustained effort to employ Buddhist ideas as presented to them. There were, of course, predecessors, but the Beats' strong mutual influences created a body of Buddhist-inspired writings showing more distinctive conceptual developments in terms of Buddhist ideas. Their writings illuminate some of the directions the appropriation and adaptation of Buddhism was taking in mid-century America.

. Both Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were pivotal and prolific members of the group, with Kerouac even providing the name for their movement. Many writers associated with the group have also written Buddhist-inspired poetry or prose, yet the writings of Kerouac and Ginsberg show more distinctive conceptual patterns in their appropriation of Buddhism, and a more persistent intellectual effort in contrast to the more sporadic interest of other writers. Kerouac and Ginsberg also informed and inspired each other in their respective understandings and thinking of the religion in their correspondences and discussions, so both writers are examined in this study to trace a

noteworthy development characteristic of Buddhist influenced writings of that particular time. Gary Snyder is covered in the study to show how the creative current of the movement has taken on different paths outside the Beat circle to create more diversified Buddhist interests and literature. Snyder was close to Kerouac and Ginsberg in their initial exploration of the religion, but he left America for Japan to pursue the formal study of Zen, and returned later with a fresh body of Buddhist-inspired writings.

All three writers embarked on their Buddhist quest from similar sources, *Koans* and Zen writings, but Kerouac gradually developed an interest in the concept of emptiness and its implications for the validity of perceptions and for the inquiry into the intrinsic essence of the mind, the phenomenal world and existence. Kerouac will be examined in the first chapter as he was the first among the three to explore Buddhism in his fiction. His concept of “spontaneous prose”, formed during a period of extensive reading in Buddhist texts, has also inspired Ginsberg's poetic styles. After a period of intensive Buddhist studies, however, Kerouac reverted to Catholicism in his later years. His agonized oscillation between Catholicism and Buddhism also became a concern for Snyder and Ginsberg.

Gary Snyder who took a detour to the East in search of the orthodox Zen will be examined in the second chapter. The recurring idea in Snyder's writings is one that explores the dissolution of the self into nature in the fulfillment of the universality of

Buddha-hood present in both man and nature. Snyder is examined after Kerouac in this study to reveal the predicaments both writers faced concerning the problem of Buddhist orthodoxy at that time. While Kerouac sought an orthodox understanding of Mahayana Buddhism, he also yearned for a public acceptance of his own reading of Buddhism. He defended in frustration the right to create a western lineage of Buddhism:

“For Mrs. Sasaki to say that “it was a good portrait of Gary but he doesn’t know anything about Buddhism” is just so typical of what’s wrong with official Buddhism and all official religions today – woe, clashing, divisions, sects, jealousies, formalities, do-goodism, actionism, no repose, no universal love-try, no abandoning of arbitrary conceptions for a moment. [...] Why should the Japanese make the chief claim on Buddhism when it came from an Aryan Indian, and Bodhisattva Bodhidharma came from the West?”

(Sutin, 70)

As for Snyder, many ideas and interferences seemed to have cut into his attempts to seek and bring into America a more orthodox picture of Buddhism. His serious quest for Orthodox Zen Buddhism did not result in the production of Buddhist writings that would be positively called orthodox by critics and scholars alike. As Snyder produced works at a time when America, his home nation, and Japan, the site for his Buddhist pilgrimage, were forging a trans-Pacific alliance to secure political and economic interests, his works were thought to reflect the cultural agendas of the two nations rather than the Orthodox Buddhism that Snyder claimed to be employing.

Allen Ginsberg is read in the final chapter. Ginsberg is the only writer among the three to have converted to Buddhism. Ginsberg's perspective towards religion in

general is more eclectic than Kerouac. Brought up in the tradition of Judaism, he embraced Buddhism with the same kind of attention he would devote to his lifelong inquiry into the relation between consciousness and selfhood. Ginsberg's Buddhist understanding has also deepened throughout the years until his death. The poet seemed less concerned than the other two writers with the judgment of orthodoxy the public might pass on to his Buddhist thoughts. Meanwhile, while he chanted mantras in public and gave popular lectures on Buddhist studies, his most thorough application of Buddhist ideas have always occurred in more inward, private poems as compared to the more outwardly political ones. The final chapter will examine more closely the nuanced development of this poet in his understanding and appropriation of Buddhism.

Thus this thesis is arranged as follows: Chapter one focuses on Jack Kerouac's struggle with the Buddhist concept of emptiness and the First Noble Truth, as well as on how his ambivalence towards the promises of Buddhist enlightenment has affected his literary strategy and critical perspective adopted in his reflection on himself and his community. Chapter two focuses on how Gary Snyder's rigorous study of Japanese Zen for what he sees as a repository of enlightened intuitions about nature influences his poetics and his representation of the Eastern spiritual tradition. Chapter three focuses on Allen Ginsberg's evolution of his notion of consciousness in relation to what he calls the "Sunyata consciousness" which influenced his views on reality and the

self. A final note is that this study will also focus on the writers' interpretations of and creative adaptations of the various aspects of Buddhism in their literary works rather than the discrepancies between their subjective understandings of the religion and an orthodox understanding of the religion in the belief that the writers' imperfect understanding of Buddhism has contributed to noteworthy aspects in their literary works as the writers engaged themselves in the process of reflection, response and adaptation.

## Jack Kerouac and the Concept of Emptiness

In the opening page of his less well-known piece *Wake up - A Life of the Buddha*, Jack Kerouac presents his observation that the figure of Buddha has been misrepresented as a popular oriental icon detached from historical existence and spiritual significance:

“Buddha means the awakened one.

Until recently most people thought of Buddha as a big fat rococo sitting figure with his belly out, laughing, as represented in millions of tourist trinkets and dime store statuettes here in the western world. People didn't know that the actual Buddha [...], died at the age of 80 a lean venerable wander of ancient roads and elephant woods, was [...] no slob-figure of mirth, but a serious and tragic prophet, the Jesus Christ of India and almost all Asia.”

(1)

In defining the Buddha as a tragic prophet, the first paragraph of *Wake Up* gives the impression that it is a work which gives a characterization of the enlightened one and an account of Buddhist enlightenment as the writer envisaged and understood it. According to Paul Maher's informative biography, Kerouac turned to Buddhism in the hope that religion “would be the key to correcting all of the negative character traits that he felt skewed his behaviour” (285). Maher's conclusion implies that the Buddha's monologue in *Wake-Up*, as quoted below, mirrors the frustrations of Kerouac himself who feared for his indulgence in lust and alcohol:

“I fear birth, old age, disease, and death, and so I seek to find a sure mode of deliverance. And so I fear five desires – the desires attached to seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching – the inconstant thieves,

stealing from men their choicest treasures, making them unreal, false,  
and fickle – the great obstacles, forever disarranging the way of peace.”

(Maher, 296)

Maher also characterizes Goddard's *The Buddhist Bible*, the source of Kerouac's Buddhist inspiration, as a book that “sought to awaken a new faith from the bedrock of self-doubt” (284). Maher's perceptive remarks on the intention behind Kerouac's Buddhist pursuit and his sentiment of self-doubt offer a reliable background for interpreting Kerouac's Buddhist involvement.

The extent to which Jack Kerouac's writings are influenced by Buddhism has been a tenacious question, and equally controversial is the nature of his Buddhist engagement. Answers to such questions often involve a critical judgment on how much Buddhist understanding Kerouac displays in his works. Alan Watts' remark in 1956 that Kerouac “has Zen flesh but no Zen bones” is an example of early criticisms that try to succinctly conclude how accurate an understanding of Buddhism is shown in Kerouac's writings. Sarah Haynes's commentary in 2003 on Kerouac's study notes on Buddhism *Some of the Dharma* that it “details, as a Buddhist text, the essentials of Mahayana Philosophy [...] providing [...] a combination of personal narrative and reflections and retellings of Buddhist doctrine” (17) suggests that there may be other previously unacknowledged aspects of Buddhism in Kerouac's works apart from Zen Buddhism. More importantly, Haynes' study attends to the complex narrative intention of Kerouac's writings, which can often be read as personal reflections on a newly acquainted religion

rather than an exegesis expounding on Buddhist doctrines.

Before S. Haynes there have been criticisms that analyze how Jack Kerouac practically explored Buddhism for various, often psychological purposes. John Tytell, in his seminal study of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs suggests that “for many beat writers, Buddhism is a form of psychic ballast, and their study of various schools of Eastern thoughts became both a means of reconditioning themselves from Western habits of mind and feeling, and a way out of the morass of Self into which they had plunged” (65). Gottschall, reading Kerouac, contends that the writer seems to “use Buddhism as another form of discourse with which he can criticize American nationhood, gender and race, and the quest for individual self-fulfillment” (144). Biographical criticisms such as Maher’s often strive to take the issue further to explore Kerouac’s Buddhist engagement in relation to his Catholic upbringing as well as his many troubles, desires and psychological needs. This kind of criticism also tends to shed more light on Kerouac’s attitude towards Buddhism. Manuel Luis Martinez describes Kerouac’s religious dilemma as a struggle to reconcile the “opposition between Catholic activism and Buddhist passivism (326). Martinez’s comment seems to imply that Kerouac considers Buddhism to be passive, yet its passivism presents a kind of desirability and necessity in his spiritual and religious orientation.

Thus the investigation of Kerouac’s Buddhist engagement involves the

identification of his Buddhist influences. This is, however, a thorny issue for many reasons. The existence of various schools of Buddhism makes it difficult to decide with which school Kerouac's writings have formed the deepest and closest allegiance. However, the fact that it is Zen Buddhism that reached the broadest public and incited the highest degree of interest in mid-century America leads to the neglect of Kerouac's interest in other Buddhist lineages apart from Zen. This partly explains the division between Alan Watts and Sarah Haynes, for the former, as a pioneering American Zen Buddhist in the fifties, regarded Zen Buddhism as the orthodox representation of the quintessential Eastern mind upon which Kerouac's Buddhism should be gauged. Sarah Haynes, on the other hand, has discovered the overlooked currents of Mahayana Buddhism in Kerouac's writings as she reads Kerouac's writings as a document on the evolution of Buddhism in contemporary America.

The diverse social, cultural and intellectual backgrounds that inform the criticisms create many discrepancies in regard to questions about how a Westerner like Kerouac can be said to have been initiated into Buddhism. Haynes, comparing Buddhist scriptures with Kerouac's writings, finds the Buddhist notions of "emptiness, impermanence, mind essence and transience" (6) relevant to Kerouac's writings and suggests Kerouac possessed some knowledge of Buddhism. Robert A.F. Thurman compares Kerouac's writings with the "vast psychological literature of the Buddhists [in

which] there are many analyzes of the various stages of enlightenment; [so] according to [the Buddhists] it is quite possible to be enlightened to a certain degree and still prey to human failings” (xi), suggesting that Kerouac has attained a certain degree of enlightenment, as reflected in his works.

The source of Kerouac’s Buddhist reflections also adds to the complications with regard to the whole issue of his Buddhist influence. As Maher noted, Kerouac’s favourite source for Buddhism is Dwight Goddard’s *Buddhist Bible* which contains “selections from Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and modern sources” (284), including the translated texts of the Indian Lankavatara Sutra,<sup>1</sup> the Diamond Sutras<sup>2</sup>, the Heart Sutras<sup>3</sup> as well as the Chinese Buddhist Sutra of the Six Patriarch Hui-Neng<sup>4</sup>. The title *Buddhist Bible* already implies a performance of cultural translation, the product of which has, however, served as the major foundation for Kerouac’s Buddhist pursuit. Meanwhile, the resurgence in the interest in Kerouac led to publication of his less well-known works, enlarging the scope for sampling in the studies of Buddhist influences to which the writer was subjected. Watts’ conclusion was drawn upon a single work *Dharma Bums* while Sarah Haynes, James T. Tones and Ben Giarno could engage with

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as the Sutras of the Appearance of the Good Doctrine in Lanka. It teaches that the world is an illusory reflection of ultimate, undifferentiated mind and that this truth becomes an inner realization in concentrated meditation.

<sup>2</sup> Mahayana Buddhist text that emphasizes the illusory nature of phenomena. It takes the form of a dialogue between the Buddha as a teacher and a disciple as questioner in the presence of fellow monks and bodhisattvas.

<sup>3</sup> Mahayana Buddhist text that discusses the ultimate facts of reality and the three ways to view the reality to attain liberation.

<sup>4</sup> The sixth great patriarch of Zen Buddhism and founder of the Southern school, which became the dominant school of Zen, both in China and in Japan.

more obscure works such as *Some of the Dharma*, *Mexican City Blues* and *Scripture of Golden Eternity* in their discussions.

With regard to the texts themselves, Kerouac seems interested in using the novel genre and its specific narrative strategies to reveal and negotiate the complex working of perspectives towards Buddhism. In his works which are considered to be under some kinds of Buddhist influence, there are often some highly visible yet superficial references to Buddhism which should invite diverse interpretations rather than be viewed as an unambiguous representation of Kerouac's understanding and attitudes towards Buddhism. Kerouac tends to manipulate the voices of the characters and narrators who make Buddhist references to present layered views on the religion, while the whole piece of work itself seems to be shaped by something more substantial pertaining to the "superlative law" Kerouac sees in Buddhism. At the heart of Kerouac's Buddhist enquiry seems to lie the questioning of the realities of Buddhist enlightenment. Kerouac did not confront the nature of enlightenment: in *Some of the Dharma*; he terms Nirvana only as a state of holy ecstasy without explicitly equating Nirvana with the concept of enlightenment. Instead he approaches the concept of enlightenment from the periphery. He interrogated and tested the validity of the range of insights known as to him as derivative to the state of enlightenment by setting up a narrative in the context of the counter-culture scenes in mid-century America,.

*Dharma Bums* is the most salient example of such an enquiry, showing how Kerouac's narrative serves the dual purposes of inspecting the Buddhist notion of enlightenment and its reception by the public, especially in the counter-culture circle. As Deshae Lott noted, *Dharma Bums* is the most often cited example in critical analysis of Buddhist influence on Kerouac's writings (173). This work also provides the most prominent example in which the superficial influence of Buddhism is rendered deliberately conspicuous through character references and narrator comments. Like Kerouac's other fictions, this piece contains explicit references to actual people, Kerouac himself and his many acquaintances included. Whereas readers easily slip into the presumption that the characters are portraits of their corresponding individuals rather than fictional creations, and that Ray Smith, the narrator and character in the novel, is speaking with the embedded voice of Jack Kerouac, such a reading is not validated by the author's ambiguous authorial intention. Kerouac has not chosen to present the work as a strictly autobiographical narration in which all narrative comments have to be recognized as true claims of some sort made by a narrator, who, despite the pseudonym, has a self-referential relationship to the outside world of the real, historical Jack Kerouac.

Kerouac's method ensures that at least three layers of interpretation co-exist whenever Buddhist references are made: First, the references to Buddhism may be taken as the articulations of restricted perspectives on Buddhism held by particular persons, the

narrator included, in the specific contexts dramatized in the novel. The Buddhist understanding held by these characters is not necessarily the same as the one the author possesses. The second possible interpretation is that Kerouac is projecting his voice onto the narrator; the utterance of whom represents the author's comment on Buddhism itself. The author's commentary functions independently from the fictional universe and can extend to the domain of real life. The third possible interpretation is that Kerouac is projecting himself into a fictional universe, taking and manipulating the distance between himself, the fictional narrator and other characters to negotiate his engagement with the whole notion of Buddhist enlightenment.

In *Dharma Bums* and *Wake-Up*, one presumed insight derivative to enlightenment that Kerouac interrogates most intensively is the concept of emptiness. Kerouac has a persistent interest in the Buddhist notion of emptiness. This is not unusual for as J.J. Clarke noted, the idea of emptiness is one of the most well-known Buddhist concepts in the West although it is often misconstrued as nihilism. Kerouac's perspective on emptiness, however, is different in the sense that he is receptive to the conviction that in the Buddhist tradition the realization of emptiness is a crucial step towards the attainment of enlightenment. In *Wake-Up*, Kerouac recounts, based on the Lankavatara Sutra, the Buddha's words to his chief disciple Ananda about the intrinsic nature of all matter and perception:

"...all the time the intrinsic nature of space is what is always there, real

Enlightenment, and the intuition of Essence is the real emptiness”

(111)

“Like the other great elements, Perception does not have its place or origination in causes and conditions and combinations, but response to them and obeys and is conducted through them as through a tube: nor does it have its own nature, because it appears in only a limited way, as for instance, Perception of thought, which is limited and impermanent. [...]The intrinsic nature of Perception is the real emptiness...”

(112)

It appears that from this passage, Kerouac interprets emptiness as a denial of a permanent nature of matter and perception, and that the intuition of such emptiness, which is the liberation from arbitrary conceptions, is Buddhist Enlightenment. This understanding is not strictly nihilism because this nothingness does not describe the negation of the meaning of existence; rather it is presented as a neutral analysis of the ultimate reality of existence<sup>5</sup>. However, Kerouac does seem to see that in Buddhist philosophy there is a tendency to negate the phenomenal reality, or at least, the significance of such negation in the presumed value of the enlightened wisdom of

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<sup>5</sup> Kerouac does perceive this kind of enlightenment to have a tragic streak for he introduces the Buddha as a “serious and tragic prophet” (7). Meanwhile, his understanding of emptiness may not be as comprehensive as the scholarly analysis today which suggests that emptiness does not deny existence; rather, it denies the presence of an “eternal, independent, self-causing, invariant, essential self-nature or selfhood in any thing or person” (Lusthaus, 35), It does not contend that matter or selfhood is unreal or nonexistent; it simply means that all matter, including selfhood, come into form due to specific cause and conditions. Everything is connected with everything else, and there are no “independent identities”, soul or “self-essence” (Lusthaus, 40) beyond and behind such causes and conditions.

emptiness.

The idea of emptiness first appears at the end of the first chapter in *Dharma Bums*. This bears significance because it puts the narrator Ray Smith's articulation of emptiness in a specific context. The whole story is a flashback told by Ray Smith, who recalls his youthful experience of hitchhiking. In his journey he encountered an old man who had led a miserable life in poverty and homelessness, and Ray, out of the idealism in practicing his Buddhism, shared with the man his food and wine for charity. Ray's superficial religious fervour is reflected in his almost puerile but callous reverence for the old man who keeps a ruffled magazine page with a short prayer by Saint Teresa; Ray felt more impressed by, and possibly elated at the man's religiosity than concerned about the man's deeper sorrows. After their parting, Ray spent a happy, carefree night on the beach, eating, admiring the night sky with "Avalokitesvara's ten-wondered universe of dark and diamonds" (284), a religious description that curiously echoes the piece of commodified and futile spirituality that the sad old man kept as solace about Saint Teresa returning from death and showering the earth with roses from heaven. Afterwards, he fell asleep, and dreamt about his home and his father running after an "ephemeral uncatchable train" (285). Waking up suddenly to the grey dawn, he sniffed, for the reason that "he had seen all the horizon shift as if a sceneshifter had hurried to put it back in place and make him believe in its reality" (285). He heard his voice saying "it is all the same thing' in the

“void that is highly embraceable during sleep” (285).

Ray's notion of emptiness is about the peculiar satisfaction derived from the self-proclaimed ability to see through the false assumption that happenings in the world are significant enough for the attention and worry people give to them. Ray undermines the significance of his repressed emotional disturbance caused by unresolved family tensions, the momentary confusion thrown upon him by the homeless man, and his bewilderment in the face of the transience of joy, by convincing himself that everything simply comes and goes without being attached to a consequential reality. Everything is, in essence, the same thing; nothing is comparatively more deserving of attention than anything else. From the structure of this chapter, it seems that Ray's notion of emptiness is meant to call for critical reflection. Kerouac himself may have tried to represent in Ray a common mentality and emotional landscape of Buddhist spiritual seekers in his days. There is a sense that such a notion of emptiness was being used by the younger generation to suspend reflection, numb sensitivity and withhold responsibility towards social and personal problems. There seems also to be an expression of frustration with incomplete knowledge and an admission of conflicting attitudes towards the whole Buddhist idea of emptiness itself if we consider the possibility of Kerouac using the narrator as a figure on which he projects his own past. The creation of Ray Smith also allows the writer to perform a fluid, voluntary severing and re-connection with a self

involved in the Buddhist vogue that Kerouac harbours ambiguous feelings about.

In later chapters of the novel, the Buddhist quest for enlightenment is subjected to more critical commentary bordering on satire. Rosie, a female companion delirious with drugs, declared to the group that she had flushed a list of their names and all their sins into the toilet only to have them accidentally retrieved by a cop that she had mistaken to be a sanitary agent. She screamed in “sheer terror” (358) that “a new revolution of police is coming” (358) to which Ray “laughed” (358) and responded that it is the “rucksack revolution” (358) arriving instead. The idea of rucksack revolution first appears in chapter thirteen envisioned by Japhy Ryder:

“...a world full of rucksack wanders, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privileged of consuming [...] I see a vision of great rucksack revolution thousands 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”

(351)

This energized, confident declaration of the imminent advent of a rucksack revolution has often been cited to justify Kerouac’s romantic ideals and to “introduce his “prescription for spiritual well-being” (Phillips, 59). Often, such a reading is oriented towards assessing or documenting the impact *Dharma Bums* has on Kerouac’s readers who, fascinated by the series of adventures in *On the Road*, are intrigued by the Buddhist adventures recounted in the book. However, the readers may have missed the subtlety in

the overall design of the novel. In fact, even Kerouac himself had believed that the book would only incite more popular interest in Buddhism rather than spark a serious spiritual quest, let alone initiate a call for reflection on the society's vogueish Buddhist quest.

In chapter fourteen following the dismissal of Rosie's warning, Ray, tremendously annoyed by her refusal to accept that "life is just a dream" (361), continues to preach his Buddhism to the woman. Rosie, still under the effect of drugs, climbed onto the rooftop with a bathrobe to hide, and was spotted by a patrolling Irish policeman. Seeing her fear come true, she ran over the roof-edge, and the young policeman, anxious to rescue a citizen, made a "flying tackle" (361) for the frightened Rosie, got hold only of her bathrobe and the woman fell naked to the sidewalks six flights below. Ray's conclusion about the whole incident is "Poor Rosie – she had been absolutely certain that the world was real and fear was real and now what was real [...] at least, she is in heaven now and she knows" (362). Here, Buddhist emptiness and the whole Buddhist quest are placed in an absurd condition: Ray, the Buddhist enthusiast, has a careless, indifferent engagement with the religion. His obsessive preoccupation with the idea that "all life is a dream" results in a comic tragedy in which Rosie was "enlightened" in death. Life, Kerouac shows, is not a dream as Ray asserts. A critical commentary on the obsession with Buddhist emptiness is made through constructing a contrast between Ray's conviction that "all life is a dream" and the readers' realization that it is Ray's

indifferent, callous Buddhism that reduces what was “real”, which is Rosie’s death, to fragments of dream with little significance.

Besides, it is probable that Kerouac sees the whole idea of emptiness, despite supporting many of his observations in lives’ sorrows and frustrations, as offering ineffectual solutions to real-life problems. In his times, Buddhism is only paid a kind of lip-service by the generation of “spiritual seekers” like the old man and other social outcasts to entertain them so that their sorrows are masked and their troubles explained away and forgotten. On the other hand, Kerouac does seem to think that notions such as “all life is a dream” is not what Buddhism is about, that it is not all there is about Buddhist philosophy. Kerouac interrogates in a later chapter the idea of emptiness by putting the Buddhist notion of emptiness he knows into the focus of family dispute that finally turns into a farce, making the concept ridiculous and superfluous and Ray a hopeless eccentric. In this episode, Ray speaks eloquently of the Buddhist concept of emptiness, referring to how things “appear” (386), “come and go” (386) when they are only “made up of atoms” (386) and how an orange is in fact empty because it only exists when the perception of matter springs up in the mind, an idea which his family “still don’t care less” (386). After the significance of the whole notion of “emptiness” as a philosophy is trivialized, the narration moves ironically towards the exultation of Ray who believed that he had, after realizing the emptiness of an orange, attained

Buddhahood. This episode is apparently a satire, but what is being satirized is not as clear as it seems. Ray's naivety in believing he has attained complete knowledge of Buddhism, his inability to find the right circumstances to apply his Buddhist philosophy, the impracticality and irrelevance of Buddhist logics in everyday life are all possible objects for the satire. Whether the whole quest for Buddhist enlightenment is just another instance of pointless fuss similar to the impractical entanglement with theological theories in his days becomes a question for Kerouac.

His use of satire is also extended to a particular notion that the phenomenal world originated in the mind, and is therefore by essence empty because its existence depends on the activities of the mind. The belief that the phenomenal world originated in the mind is a result of an inability to differentiate between the mind and consciousness in Buddhism. In early Pali texts, the mind is one of the sense faculties constantly receiving impressions and thoughts rather than a spiritual essence as opposed to material substance. Consciousness, on the other hand, is a basis that explains the continuity of experience, time and even death and rebirth according to Buddhist belief. Kerouac's misunderstanding leads to a doubt over whether the reality can really be a product of mind. In passages which the dharma bums were discussing the dharma, Japhy Ryder says with great enthusiasm:

“Great Plum Zen Master was asked what the great meaning of Buddhism was, and he said rush flowers, willow catkins, bamboo

needles, linen thread, in other words hang on boy, the ecstasy's generally what he means, ecstasy of mind, the world is nothing but mind and what is the mind? The mind is nothing but the world [...]"

(286)

To this remark, Ray Smith's reaction is an exuberant yelling "The President of the United States suddenly grows cross-eyed and floats away!" The unlikelihood of the President floating away immediately repudiates the notion that the mind is the world.

Kerouac's investigation of Enlightenment is thus two-fold: what it seems to consist of theoretically, its validity and meanings in the empirical world, as well as the broader question of the possibility of its attainment in contemporary America. Kerouac's commentary extends from the Buddhist philosophy itself to include various Buddhist practices in 50s America. The most concentrated study occurs in the character Japhy Ryder, a poet and a keen student of Chinese and Japanese poetry, well-informed in a range of Buddhist schools and traditions. Kerouac is particularly keen in his questioning of Japhy's orientalist tendency in his Buddhist pursuit. In fact, this concern of Kerouac coincides with that of the literary critics Robert Kern and Josephine Nock-Hee Park in their 90s and 00s studies of Gary Snyder, the American poet upon whom this character is based. The difference, however, is that Kerouac offers an insider's perspective into the issue as opposed to that of later scholars who have not been personally involved in the Buddhist quest. Kerouac manages to reveal something more personal than orientalism, which is the obstacle he sees for reaching enlightenment in those days. Japhy Ryder's

access to Buddhism is through a range of commodified oriental curiosities such as green tea, “wooden jujū prayer beads” (330), Japanese gardening catalogue and other kinds of mysticism such as “meditation postures” (330). Japhy’s wholehearted devotion to such pursuits is “completely serious” (331) yet also “completely hallucinated” (331) from Ray’s perspective. Japhy’s situation reveals a particular kind of dilemma: the “spiritual marketplace” (Ellwood, 20) in which all kinds of spiritualities, Buddhism included, are in plentiful supply inspired the most boisterous and genuine yearning for enlightenment, yet the effort and hope of the wisdom seekers often accidentally and foolishly fell into the trap of orientalism which promises only false religiosity and self delusion.

The very limited avenues for serious religious engagement in the marketplace and also the confused motives of individuals have posed a permanent difficulty for enlightenment. Japhy Ryder is unlike the madcap Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* who rages on without direction; Japhy’s zeal and energy are devoted to one single purpose only, which is the study of Buddhism. His Buddhism, however, turns out to be as directionless and misguided as the road journeys of Dean because his devotion only leads to a self-constructed Eastern myth which makes him feel “completely happy” (331). Kerouac writes in the front page of the novel that the work is dedicated to Han Shan, an ancient Chinese poet and Buddhist hermit. The most notable passage about Han Shan in the novel is that of Japhy wrestling with the prepositions and articles in his translations of

Han Shan, his effort sometimes ending in hilarious results (294). Japhy's futile attempt to achieve a satisfactory translation of Han Shan suggests the reality of Buddhist enlightenment will continue to elude the effort of Japhy. Ray's attitude towards such kind of futile Buddhist practice can be characterized as sympathetic: whatever Japhy did, he looked on with unobtrusive amusement and wonder as he made lighted-hearted fun of him. The irony is directed to Ray himself after he recognizes that Japhy's delusion is, in many ways, no different from that of him. Ray Smith sees himself and Japhy Ryder as sharing the same kind of spirit; they are the "ever young, ever weeping" (460), the same kind of "lunatics" (356). The irony is probably directed to Kerouac himself as well. Kerouac, like these characters, was just another stereotypical "Dharma Bum" in the same universe he depicts. The Buddhist dharma bums he creates may in fact be a satirical image of the real Kerouac himself. In the end, the attitudes of Ray, Japhy and Kerouac seem to converge: they believed that the quest for Buddhist enlightenment is justified despite the absurdity for it is a humane quest for ecstatic transcendence, the feeling of "beatific" that Kerouac famously uses in his definition of the Beat generation.

Kerouac's uncertainties about the promise of Buddhist Enlightenment are expressed through subjecting the Buddhist references made by the dharma bums and to oblique commentary of various kinds as analyzed. However, there may seem to Kerouac other steps to Enlightenment that do not seem to need much awakening effort, for he has

already witnessed them in life. Buddhism's appeal for Kerouac lies in its one very unique feature among other religions: it values the recognition of the imperfect conditions of human lives and the reality of human sufferings. In fact, the awakening to the imperfect nature of human experience is the first step to Buddhist enlightenment, which leads to the nirvana, the cessation of suffering, a state that Kerouac has mistaken to mean ecstasy. In Kerouac's works, imperfection is represented by unfulfilled vision: in *Dharma Bums*, enlightenment is never really on the horizon: whatever paths that lead to enlightenment are forestalled or interrupted – each chapter of the book ends with some moments of epiphany that seems to lead to wisdom, but the moments are quickly forgotten as the following chapter begins. The cycle goes on and enlightenment is never attained. Kerouac's fictional universe is also characterized by a sense of transience: the alternation between joy and sorrows, the frequent and unpredictable arrivals and departures of characters who are “simply there” (Dickstein, 180) and also the final parting between Ray and Japhy. In *Dharma Bums*, while the notion of emptiness is rigorously interrogated, the realization about impermanence and the imperfect conditions in the reality are not subjected to questioning – in fact, they make up the undertone of the novel.

The ambivalence in Kerouac's responses to Buddhist enlightenment reaches more depth in *Vision of Gerard*, a more intimate account of childhood scenes based upon

the author's memory of the death of his brother. In his work, he reveals his uncertainties about Buddhist enlightenment by depicting a mind devoted to both Catholicism and Buddhist enlightenment struggling against the more powerful, confounding and overwhelming force of the unsettling aspects of the existential world. This piece, representing a marked departure from Kerouac's spontaneous prose and road adventures, sketches a portrait of a seeming saintly young boy Gerard whose existence and death provokes deep fear and confusion that continues to sink deep into the mind of his younger brother Ti-Jean. The problem with Gerard is that his Catholic innocence and tenderness are partial. As the narration tells, Gerard loves animals; he once saved an innocent mouse from the trap and made it a pet on which he lavished his love, but when it was killed under the instinct of their family cat, Gerard's tenderness for animals suddenly vanished as he unleashed his rage upon the cat, leaving Ti-Jean "amazed and scared in the corner, as one might have felt seeing Christ in the temple bashing the money changer tables everywhichaway and scourging them with his seldom whip" (11). The cruelty manifested in childhood innocence has no place in either Catholicism or Buddhism: whereas Gerard's saintliness is ambiguous according to Catholicism, it has been severely undermined by the Buddhist concepts of compassion. The broader, nagging question of innocence and evil cannot be sufficiently resolved in Buddhism due to its unique existentialist vision as Kerouac understands it. Robert Hipkiss summarizes

Kerouac's vision as below:

“Kerouac interprets the Buddhist attitude towards the illusions of our sense as follows: first because they are factitious they are essentially meaningless; second, because they are meaningless there is no point in labeling them good or evil; third, because the world has no true reality and there is no good and evil, there is nothing for us to do in it except to exist, to accept the wonder of illusion, to be kind to all who are afflicted by it and to know that death marks the end of it and a return to the perfect void.’

(66)

This is a vision that Kerouac oscillates between acceptance and repudiation. Gerard's existence cannot be properly registered in religious meanings for he satisfies neither the Buddhist nor the Catholic virtues and principles. The struggle between Catholicism and Buddhism only undermines both religions' spiritual comfort to Kerouac. In the beginning of *Visions of Gerard*, Ti-Jean writes:

“it was only many years later...with the discovery of Buddhism, Awakenhood – Amazed recollection that from the very beginning I [...] was destined, destined indeed, to meet, learn and understand Gerard and Savas and the Blessed lord Buddha – to awaken to pure faith in the bright one truth: All is well, practice Kindness, Heaven is High”.

(14)

To awaken to pure faith is about declaring “All is well” and putting behind the existential enquires. Practicing kindness is a solution to the questions but not a satisfactory answer. Buddhism is perhaps not the “psychic ballast” as Tyrell suggests for Kerouac; it is comforting only in the sense that the author finds a common insight into the imperfect conditions of human existence from the perspective of a distant Eastern faith.

The essential questions remain: how well does Kerouac understand Buddhism and what seems to be his overall attitude towards Buddhism as seen from his works? Answers to these questions may start from examining how much Kerouac knows about the Buddhist teachings, especially those related to enlightenment. As seen from *Some of the Dharma* and *Wake Up*, Kerouac is acquainted with the terminology of the basic precepts in Buddhism but not their implications. He shows the awareness of an individual who reads extensively about the Buddhist concepts related to imperfect human conditions and impermanence. He also demonstrates an enormous amount of interest in understanding the intricate relationships between perception, sensation, reality, sufferings and the existence of self.

However, as the research conducted by Haynes illustrates, it was not until Kerouac read the Lankavatara Sutra that he realized suffering could actually cease. This is, as Hayne indicates, a peculiar phenomenon because “in the Surangama Sutras that [Kerouac] must have read in Goddard’s Buddhist Bible, the possibility of enlightenment is clearly written (169)”. As the writings of Kerouac show, he has not associated Buddhist enlightenment with the cessation of suffering; rather he interprets the awakening to the sorrowful truth of emptiness and impermanence as the most important vision in Buddhist enlightenment. It is the psychological reaction to this truth that Kerouac tends to ruminate on and write on. His attitude towards Buddhism is therefore

ambivalent as the religion seems to have confirmed his reluctant conclusion concerning the imperfect conditions of the human world.

Regardless of all the controversies, the impact of Kerouac's Buddhist writing is more profound than commonly thought. In one way or another, it is Kerouac's partial knowledge of Buddhism rather than comprehensive knowledge that led to his interest in and doubts about Buddhism. He has outlined important Buddhist precepts for his readers and has also revealed his psychological responses to and personal engagement with the Buddhist precepts with a range of narrative strategies and contexts. His works reveal the complexities of the Buddhist idea of enlightenment, its various stages and prerequisites. Despite his confusion over the Buddhist concepts, Kerouac has created a fictional universe that focuses on an individual's psychological responses to Buddhism. Although the superficial Buddhist references instead of the more agonizing struggle with the religion often command more interest and create more lasting impressions on the readers, Kerouac's works have strived to serve as an introduction to Buddhism for the American public instead of presenting an orientalist, "evocative and idealized" (Sutin, 305) vision of Buddhism.

## Gary Snyder and the Autonomous Nature

Gary Snyder's tie with Buddhism is well-known. This is not surprising considering that he is the only one associated with the Beat artists to devote ten years of intensive study to Zen in Japan. The sheer amount of Buddhist references in his interviews, talks, prose and poetry demonstrate clearly this interest. However, how do we judge the nature and results of his Buddhist involvement? These are the questions that have caused considerable critical debate in regard to Snyder. In most of the criticism, there seems to be a tacit understanding that Buddhism has been represented and appropriated by Snyder to suit his interests, concerns and agenda, which can be summed up in terms of the advocacy of ecological concerns. Thomas J. Lyon discusses how Zen Buddhism served as the right kind of discipline for Snyder in "codifying and directing the natural drive" (36) rooted in the American West in his poetry towards "a system of world-relevant ecological thoughts" (36); "In moving East, Snyder is actually moving West" (36). Robert Kern mixes together Snyder's Buddhist and Taoist interests as part of an "ancient Chinese spirituality" (237) that the poet has transformed in his works into "a contemporary American possibility" (237) while cautioning that this "ancient spirituality" might not correspond to the reality itself since the figure representing this spirituality is partly the poet's invention.

Despite the wealth of criticism, no critic seems to have focused on the

orientalism question more explicitly and forcefully than Josephine Nock-Hee Park, who highlights recently the politicalized nature of Snyder's East-West engagement. In proposing what Snyder has constructed is an "interlocking structure of Zen and environmentalism that can be understood as a potent new instantiation of an American Orientalism constructed out of transpacific accords" (84), she argues that orientalism is a mutual construct between the West and the East for the East has been capitalizing on the West's oriental imagination to further an expansion of an Asian cultural agenda. Citing studies of Judith Snodgrass and Robert Sharf, Park notes that Japanese Zen was "part and parcel of Japanese nationalism and expansionism" (61), "dubbed as the spirit of the East" (61) when it was exported to America by Japanese delegates who "transcended sectarian differences within Buddhism" (61) declaring Zen as the "the full exposition of the Buddha" (61). Zen thus bore a kind of "enigmatic transcendence that benevolently recasts [...] the long-held caricatures of Oriental otherness" (62). The Zen that Snyder came to know had already been modified by the East to accommodate the various needs of the United States in the 50s. Park named a few of those needs suggested by Robert Ellwood and Thomas Merton: America was looking for something "excitingly exotic but not intimidating" (62), a "guiding star that hitches on American transcendental ideals" (62) and the promise of harmony when "everything seems to conspire to breed conflict, division, incomprehension, confusion and war" (62)

Park's analysis thus regards orientalism as a crucial factor that sustains Snyder's Buddhist engagements. Both Snyder and the Japanese acquiesced in the American orientalist sentiment for its instrumental values in accomplishing their respective objectives: Japan catered to it as part of the strategy to fulfill the imperial ambitions, whereas Snyder purposefully registered "an oriental otherness" (65) upon his return from Japan to add to the appeal of his advocacy of environmentalism. The important question here is whether Gary Snyder, caught up in an environment and an occasion for East-West exchange for which orientalism is an integral part, has achieved anything apart from or beyond another instantiation of the orientalist imagination.

Another concern is how the West, in the exploration of the Eastern spiritual traditions, can avoid the trap of mysticism and "enigmatic transcendence" which is characteristically orientalist. Finally, it also involves the problem of selectivity: in aspiring to some kind of Eastern "enlightenment" that is believed to hold the key to certain aspects of the western concerns, a person from the West may approach his source with presumptions and unintended selectivity that in turn affect his or her encounter with and understanding of the East. It has to be noted that works by the Japanese delegates including those of the very influential D.T Suzuki are only one of the sources that inform Snyder's Buddhist ideas, and are probably not the one that made the most striking impression on Snyder in determining the character of his Buddhist quest. Snyder has

attempted to move beyond orientalism, but his focused search for an enlightened view of nature from “the East” assumes that “the East” agrees on one, and only one, fundamental principle when it comes to nature despite differences in history, culture and temperament. Snyder, has for example, overlooked the role of cultural contexts and principles in the shaping of Buddhism in both China and Japan: in fact, both countries have their own traditional views of nature before the arrival of Buddhism from India.

Snyder is aware of the pitfall of orientalism, as indicated in an interview conducted in 1979 when he was asked to talk about Zen and more importantly, his relation to it:

“We all know by now that Zen is not aesthetics, or haiku, or spontaneity, or minimalism, or accidentalism, or Japanese architecture, or green tea, or sitting on the floor, or samurai movies (laughter). It’s a way of using your mind and practising your life and doing it with other people”

(The Bioregional Ethic, 153)

Snyder here cautioned against relying on cultural markers to interpret Zen, but his comment also reveals a popular conception that Zen is cultural-bound. For the American public, however, the pathway to the specific cultural context had manifested itself as a set of exotic cultural markers that they began to consider superficial and insufficient. Aspiring to go beyond the cultural markers in his understanding of Zen, Snyder has, on the other hand, played down the significance of the specificities of the individual cultures that act as a crucial force in shaping local Buddhism. Snyder’s focus is on the one

enlightened, connected idea rather than the cluster of Buddhist sectarian differences. For Snyder, this connection is an enlightened view of nature, and this outlook replaces the variety of cultural, textual and religious contexts in which the various sects of Buddhism were developed. It has to be noted that Snyder's interest in Buddhism might not have occurred at all if he did not harbour a love for nature, and that Snyder's introduction to Buddhism did not seem to him an exposure to anything new and novel at all, but a belated encounter with a strong, familiar, yet inarticulate impression irrelevant to any encumbering foreign cultural implications. In "The East-West Interview", Snyder described how his Buddhist interest was inspired by a Chinese landscape painting in the Seattle Art Museum which demonstrated to the young Snyder an uncanny ability to understand and portray the spirit of nature with which he had known intimately since childhood. He described the encounter as a "shock of recognition" (4) that "blows his mind" (4):

"My shock of recognition was very simple: 'It looks just like the Cascades.' The waterfalls, the pines, the clouds, the mist looked a lot like the northwest United States. In the next room were the English and European landscapes, and they meant nothing. It was no great lesson except for an instantaneous, deep respect for something in Chinese culture that always stuck in my mind..."

(94)

Further investigation of the paintings informed Snyder that it was an awakening moment realized in the "cultural meeting" (94) of ancient Chinese poetics and Buddhist

spirituality which happened during “the highest period of Chinese poetry – the early and middle Tang Dynasty Zen masters and the poets who were their contemporaries” (4). It was this fascination and perceived shared understanding of nature between Snyder and the Zen masters and poets that provoked his interest in Buddhism. The intense response evoked by the painting might have presented to Snyder an experience which assured him that the communication between the West and the East in the matter of nature could be direct, intuitive and internal.

Snyder then spent some years in the university studying oriental languages and cultures before he decided to go to Japan to pursue the Dharma. The reason, as he continued to disclose in the East-West Interview, is that he believed that the traditions he saw in the Chinese painting is “still alive” (4) in Japan. This statement reveals the primary objective of Snyder, which is the discovery and recovery of ancient Chinese spiritual and poetic tradition through studying Zen in Japan. Regarding China and Japan as “the East”, Snyder tends to construct an impression of Eastern spirituality that draws indistinct boundaries between Zen (Ch’an) in China and Zen Japan, between Zen and other sects of Buddhism, and finally between Zen Buddhism and Eastern spirituality as a whole. Meanwhile, as Snyder looks to Japanese Zen as the last preserver of Eastern spiritual tradition that knows and values nature with an enlightened depth and sophistication, he tends to equate Japanese Zen with “the East” in a facile way, stressing

more the similarities rather than the differences in his expostulation of Eastern cultures and practices.

In *The Black Country*, Snyder groups together a set of poems set in Japan under the section of “Far East” whereas in the essay “Blue Mountain Constantly Walking”, he quotes at the beginning a Buddhist exegesis by Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen in Japan and establishes it as the distilled essence of the Eastern spiritual context, a reference point and framework for further discussion of other Asian religions and spirituality:

“The mountains and rivers of this moment are the actualization of the way of the ancient Buddhas. Each, abiding in its own phenomenal expression, realizes completeness’.

This is the opening paragraph of Dogen Kigen’s astonishing essay *Sansuikyo*, “Mountain and Waters Sutra”.

Virtually all of Japan is steep hills and mountains dissected by fast shallow streams that open into shoestring valleys and a few wider river and shrubs.[...] Sacred mountains and pilgrimage to them is a deeply established feature of the popular religions of Asia. When Dogen speaks of mountains he is well aware of these prior traditions.

(200-01)

In Zen, for Snyder, is a flourishing of Eastern cultures that converged in a breath-taking fluidity, splendor and vitality which boils down to an empathic tradition that interacts most intimately and intuitively with his love and understanding for nature. “Eastern culture” is more of the interrelated variations within an overriding totality than a

cluster of individual cultures. As Rick Fields noted in his *Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, what interests Snyder is the “sense of how Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism were interrelated” (213). It can be argued that Snyder’s attempt to understand Eastern spirituality through the prism of his specific knowledge of Zen acquired in Japan has inadvertently resulted in the re-contextualization and overgeneralization of the variety of Eastern cultural and spiritual traditions based on Japanese Zen. For example, as Robert Kern rightly points out, the character of Nature in Snyder’s poetic works show traces of not only Buddhism and but another “ancient Chinese spirituality” as well, which is Daoism, but Snyder seldom spells out the differentiation clearly for his readers.

The two traditions, Snyder’s view, overlap in a broader concept, which is the inter-dependence and complementary relation of all beings in Nature. From Zen, Snyder derived the concept of universal Buddha-nature in every living object, and from Daoism he devised the concept of nature being a spiritual vessel. The natural space bears a body of transcendental forces mutually generative and supportive. While nature abounds in spiritual energy, its law operates like water, which has no fixed shapes or rules; it is spontaneous and one can never come to the end of it. Thus in writing “to float like clouds, to flow like water [...]” (On Kerouac, 1), Snyder evokes the Zen idea about the dissolution of self into nature, and the Daoist idea of what such nature is: it is flowing, formless, spontaneous and nurturing.

The influence of Daoism seems to interact with Native American mythologies as well in Snyder's portrayal of animals. As in James Miller's study of Daoism, wild creatures in Snyder's poem roam in the sacred mountains, acting as the intermediaries between transcendental realm and the human world. In Snyder's poetic universe, however, the animals can only transmit the dignified moment of spiritual epiphany to man when both parties participate in the spirit of the wild. In "Piute creek", the persona and the wild animal regarded each other in alertness: "Cold proud eyes/Of Cougar or Coyote/Watch me rise and go". In "Long Hair", the deer and the hunter, according to the legend, rival each other in wit, strength and tenacity in the hunt to such an extent that the Deer assumed the role as hunter once a while:

"The Deer shoots the man,  
who is then compelled to carry its meat home  
and eat it. Then the deer is inside the man.  
He waits[...] When enough Deer have occupied  
enough men, they will strike all  
at once".

In both poems, man obtains a kind of enigmatic transcendence through his contact with wild animals when he acts according to the rhythms and rules of the wild. In "This poem is for deer", however, man fails in both aspects. In this poem, the deer is a wild and almost mythological creature lurking in the mountains. It speaks in the opening, "I dance on all the mountains/ On five mountains/when they shoot me/ I ran to my five mountains". The deer was like a sacred spiritual being that "howl[s] like a wise man/ Stiff

springy jumps down the snowfields/ Head held back/ forefeet out/Keeping the human soul from care/on the autumn mountain". In the hunt, man, however, is no match for the spirit of the animal. He is "drunken-eyed", scaring and shooting small animals idly. Eventually he kills the deer by chance, when it is crossing its boundary to the human domain, blinded by the "headlights" of cars. Ripping open the body, the hunter, however, gains nothing of the spiritual energy the deer intends to impart. He feels "in pain" until "the deer" would "come down" and "show pity to him".

Meanwhile, Snyder's interest in nature and his prior knowledge of Chinese poetry leads to a reverence for poems, which, despite their description of nature, may bear other thematic concerns. His reading of Tu Fu who laments the ravages of war by juxtaposing the empty city with wild nature in two poetic lines turns out to be, for Snyder, a eulogy to wild eternal nature:

"Such is Tu Fu's

The country is ruined: yet  
    mountains and rivers remain.  
It's spring in the walked town,  
    The grass growing wild.

Tu Fu is not a Buddhist, yet his way of being and working came close to the essence. Burton Watson says of Tu Fu "...he was versed in the lore of herbs and medicinal plants, and perhaps this knowledge gave him a special appreciation for the humbler forms of natural life. Some of his poems display a compassion for birds, fish or insects that would almost seem to be Buddhist inspired. Somewhere in all the ceaseless and seemingly insignificant activities of the natural world, he keeps implying truth is to be found".

On the other hand, Snyder's dominating interest in nature leads him to appreciate and popularize poems which have received less attention in the traditional Chinese literary cannon. The set poem by Han Shan is a notable example which will be discussed further.

However, it is important to note that in his construction of what Josephine Nock-Hee Park terms as the "interlocking structure between Zen and environmentalism", Snyder does not subject Japanese Zen to the type of orientalist imagination as the mystical and unfathomable, for it is historically justifiable that Zen puts more notable emphasis on nature than other Buddhist sects. Similar to the process of its transmission from India to China that involves an interaction with Taoism and Confucianism, in Japan Buddhism also interacted with native cultures and traditional concepts such as Shinto, as Buddhism has the advantages in its emphasis of the existence of multiple pathways to enlightenment that suit different individuals, and in an implicit sense, different cultures. Shinto ideas, according to Simon P. James, maintain that natural beings are all inhabited by divine spirits. It possibly had some formative influences on Zen as evidenced by the "pervasive idea in Japanese thought of the inherent enlightenment (*hongaku-shiso*) of grasses and trees, rocks and mountains" (James, 65). Dogen re-interpreted the concept of Buddha-nature which originally means that all sentient beings indiscriminately possess an inherent, universal potential for enlightenment. This is the concept Snyder adopts in

“Blue Mountain Constantly Walking”. James gives a thorough discussion of the process and its linkage with traditional Shinto beliefs:

“The Mahayanist Mahaparinirvana Sutra had asserted that ‘All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha-nature’. Dogen translated the line as ‘All sentient being, all beings are the Buddha-nature’. In translating the line this way he meant to reject the notion that beings *posses* Buddha-nature [...] on the contrary for Dogen they *are* Buddha-nature. [...] Dogen also expressed that ‘the very impermanency of grass and tree, thicket and forest, is the Buddha-nature’. This extension of Buddha-nature to the natural world resonated with indigenous Shinto Beliefs in the ubiquity of natural spirits [...] for Dogen, the cherry blossom is Buddha-nature”

(22)

Suzuki also emphasized the values of Zen philosophy for its understanding of nature when he is not representing it only as the “Spirit of the East” in “The Role of Nature in Zen Buddhism”:

“In Zen there is no such separation between worker and observer, movement and mover, seer and the seen, subject and object”.

“The mountains are really mountains when they are assimilated into my being and I am absorbed in them. Nature becomes part of my being as soon as it is recognized as Nature, as *pour-soi*. I am in Nature and Nature is in me. Not mere participation in each other, but a fundamental identity between the two. Hence, the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers, they are there before me.

(288)

Thus in relating environmentalism with Zen, Snyder has not strictly, to borrow Said’s words, “displaced, excluded, and made supererogatory any such real thing” (21). He has rather demonstrated an interest in the truth by citing the original texts of Zen so as to interrogate the conventional understanding of how enigmatic Zen relates to the popular

Beat Zen. Said's criticism maintains that Orientalist texts produced by the West are mere "representations" (21), the value of which does not lie in "the correctness or its fidelity to some great original" (21). On a practical level, however, Snyder has sought to move beyond D.T. Suzuki's discourse of the "mystical" Zen which the poet had neither adopted nor promoted in his works. Still, Snyder has not given attention to the fact that the East is not "a real thing", but many real things. Here it is at this moment when we feel more compellingly the fact that the "East" which Snyder has been working as a single concept actually involves different nations with diversified cultures. What Snyder was learning about was not Buddhism only, but a cultural-bound Buddhism of Japan.

Meanwhile, what is at stake here seems to be the essence of the religion itself because its broader philosophical implications are significantly reduced and its fundamental objective, which is the realization of enlightenment and the cessation of suffering, is eclipsed by his attempt to equate authoritatively his "interlocking structure of Zen and environmentalism" with "Buddhism". A salient example is his recounting of the Buddha's life cycle from birth, enlightenment to death in which he stresses all the words about nature and animals in the Buddhist scripture and attaches an extra layer of significance to them, ending the story with the line "[Buddha] died after eating a *mushroom*; and was grieved over by countless humans, gods and *wild animals*". The whole of the Buddha's life is compressed into a narrative that shows the spirituality of

the ecological cycle and inter-dependence of natural lives and deities. Moreover, in reconfiguring Buddhism and making it subservient to his promotion of environmentalism in America, Snyder is not totally immune to the accusation that he is imposing a kind of popularized Western image on the East. Finally, in using Japanese Zen and poetics to represent Eastern spirituality and the Eastern view of nature, he risks over-simplification and even mis-representation of the East. The sense of solidity he attributes to rock and bark, for example, seems due to the influence of the aesthetics of Zen and not other eastern traditions.

In addition, a more prominent sign of Snyder's orientalist tendency seems to be the sense of nostalgia which infused his fascination with Zen. After the initial encounter with the ancient Chinese painting, Snyder's study of Zen became guided principally by his primary interest to search for the lost relations between nature, humans and the spiritual governed by the enlightened principles derived from some archaic origins in different parts of the world. Buddhism, as Snyder explained, is "part of [the] planetary heritage" (Myths & Texts, i) of Eastern ancestry, a recourse which can be revitalized, mobilized and adapted for the benefits of the contemporary society, East or West since he believed that the tradition had lost its vitality in many cultures. In reading Zen as one of the missing pieces for him to complete the chart that traces the Eastern and Western ramifications of an ancient spiritual idea about how man and nature relate,

Snyder looks at Zen essentially as something whose spirit is rooted in the ancient past. The East is only meaningful and admirable for its ancient spirituality. In *Earth House Hold-Technical notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*, a collection of journals, reading notes, reviews and essays published after Snyder's intensive period of Zen study in Japan during 1956 – 1966, he described his first visit to a Zen monastery:

“Poking about in the abandoned monk’s rooms – a smell of an old unused mining cabin or logging shanty – a cupboard of bindles the boys left behind, a drawer full of letter, notebooks, seals; like magazine and coffee cups full of dust...

The old dark smoky kitchen where Han Shan might have worked. Now making udon noodles out of wheat flour batter with a pressing-and-cutting machine you crank by hand”.

(36)

Han Shan, the ancient Chinese poet and mountain recluse who never resided in Japan was made a transient imaginary presence in this poem. His absence left behind rooms of dust and imbued contemporary monastic practices with a paradoxical sense of spiritual profundity and hollowness. In his later volumes of works, Snyder continued to rehearse a similar sentiment.

Terry Eagleton says not many people today would be disturbed by the notion that the reader does not come to the text “miraculously free of previous social and literary entanglements, a supremely disinterested spirit or blank sheet on to which the text will transfer its own inscriptions [...] Most of us recognize that no reading is innocent or without presuppositions but fewer people pursue the full implications of this readerly

guilt (20)". Snyder's reading of Zen literature and practices was influenced by subjective projections and expectations of which he might not be completely aware but had contributed to a course of selection, gap-filling and re-contextualization occurring on many levels during the reading process. In his prose, interviews and talks, Snyder may not have differentiated between his specific reading of Buddhism and other authoritative, more comprehensive readings of Buddhism possibly for a combination of reasons. It is conceivable that he did not wish to undermine the persuasiveness of the advocacy of environmentalism. It is also possible that he did not really see the differentiation itself and, in being aware of his selective reading of Buddhism, he is content to emphasize those aspects most relevant to his own philosophy. In his reflections on the different paths taken by him and Jack Kerouac in their understanding of Buddhism, Snyder expresses his regret over what he sees as an unnecessarily pessimistic Buddhist interest in Kerouac that needs a "corrective"<sup>6</sup> although he added the careful, but willful remark that it was beyond his interest to name any criteria to judge whether an individual is a "real Buddhist".

Thomas Parkinson has lauded Snyder's achievement: "he has created a new culture" (22). It has to be noted that Snyder is also recognized for his contribution to the

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<sup>6</sup> In an essay on his relationship with Jack Kerouac, Snyder writes "our interchanges on Buddhism were on the playful and delightful level of exchanging the lore, exchanging what we knew about it, what he thought of Mahayana [...] We're working with all of these things[...]and if I thought that there was some point where I would say, "Jack, you're thinking too much about how the world's a bad place," that would be my sense of a corrective and his understanding of the Buddha-dharma..."

formation of American Zen Buddhism<sup>7</sup>. In this acknowledgment is perhaps a more acceptable verdict which states that the influence of Zen Buddhism on Snyder's works is more evident than other sects, and that there is something distinctively American in Snyder's Buddhism. A survey of previous studies indicates that the American influence in Snyder's poetry include at least the poetics of Ezra Pound and Kenneth Rexroth (Kern, 240), the literary tradition of the Pacific Region (Phillips, 14), the intellectual heritage of nineteenth century Transcendentalism (Lyon, 42), as well as the Native American consciousness (Castro, 131). These influences, as with Buddhism, interact in the various dimensions of Snyder's project to achieve the right relationship between man, nature and the spiritual. As Michael Castro succinctly summarizes, "achieving an intimate knowledge of the land for the sake of psycho-spiritual health, of achieving chthonic being, is [...] crucial to Gary Snyder" (132). In a sense Snyder's venture is a modified version of Emerson's provoking question "why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe" as he asked in *Nature*.

Snyder relates to Zen Buddhism to search for the role and fundamental identity of nature in its relation to man. In this respect, Snyder aims at an update on Thoreau as well with whom he may have noted a deep connection. Sherman Paul once remarked that he knows "no one since Thoreau who has so thoroughly espoused the wild as Gary Snyder – and no one who is so much its poet." (58). The difference is that

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whereas Thoreau's *Walden* calls for a renewal and liberation of the individual, a self-transformation in which nature has a crucial, but ambivalent role to play, Snyder attempts to show nature as it is in his poetry.

As Sherman Paul indicated, Emerson had suggested that Nature is "the continuing handiwork of God" (xv) and her phenomena "the present expositor of the divine mind" (xv). Man can have "access to the entire mind of the Creator" (xv) because "the ideas he had in his communion with Nature were Ideas, the constitutive Reality of the universe as well as the reality of his mind" (xv). Thoreau, as Moldenhauer puts it, shared Emerson's thinking in his regard for nature as "an expression of the divine, its phenomena, when rightly seen, revealed moral truths" (77). Nature then, does not seem to have itself a fundamental, subjective identity delineated, and in its relationship with God and man it is only the serving entity with little agency. Nature is by itself neither divine nor profane, but a system in which hides the education God has intended for man to live only if its "operation" (Cisco, 25) is carefully observed and perceived. Nature does not sustain a unique kind of divine spirit of its own, and neither does it possess subjectivity in itself: it stands to receive the divine principles from God, exemplifies them in its own sublimity and awaits man to discover them for their spiritual renewal.

While it seems rather certain that Thoreau sees the spiritual existing in every man, Nature, in his writings, is burdened with the irremovable conception of purity and

impurity, temptation and liberation. In "Higher Laws" of *Walden*, Thoreau describes an awakening of the natural instinct of hunting in man once he is released into the wild, an irrational desire which must be controlled so that the "grossest sensuality can be transmuted into purity" (150). It is uncertain whether nature has unleashed and encouraged the sensual and the "animal" (150) in man rather than inspire his intuitive communion with God. As John Pickard notes, nature, in a disturbing way, seems to have "kept alive the predatory instinct in man and satisfied his physical needs along with his spiritual hunger" (87). If nature contains God, it also "admits rank and savage which destroys the divine" (87). It is also possible, on the other, that nature is serving to initiate man's awareness of his shortcomings so that he can purify them through devotion, discipline and attentiveness in awakening his higher nature. The nature of Nature, like the divine truths it expresses, is enigmatic and thus cannot be fully comprehended. In striving to achieve a complete union with it, one is almost doomed to fail, and in the end it is only the yearning that persists; to really know nature and the divine is only theoretically possible.

Snyder tries to resolve this dilemma. His ideal is for nature, the human and the spiritual to restore their complete universality: humans do not need to transcend because they and Nature share the same inner being in them. In this sense, humans have the potential to be elevated to the same plane of existence of Nature. This is partly due to the

fact that the removal of God in Snyder's poetry releases Nature's ambivalent position as both a subservient and sublime entity in relation to man and to God. In Snyder's writing, nature exists in its own right; it has a "pure subjectivity", as Suzuki claims. The character of nature can be illustrated in his set of *Cold Mountain poems*, loosely translated from the set poems of a Chinese poet Han-Shan of the Tang Dynasty. The name Hang-Shan, Snyder explains, literally translates as "Cold Mountain", and when Han-Shan talks about Cold Mountain, he "means himself, his home, his state of mind". This ancient Chinese poet, Snyder explains, is a "mountain madman in an old Chinese line of ragged hermit" for he was considered to be an outcast in the cannon of Chinese poetry for his rough language and departure from the mainstream norms. Roaming in the mountain terrains, Han-Shan is the very example of man who has become the very spirit of the wild, free nature itself.

In the first stanza of the set poem, Han-Shan, or Snyder, writes "The path to Han-Shan's place is laughable, / A path, but no sign of cart or horse. / Converging gorges-hard to trace their twists /Jumbled cliffs – unbelievably rugged. / A thousand grasses bend with dew, / A hill of pines hums in the wind. /And now I've lost the shortcut home, Body asking shadow, how do you keep up?" In this stanza the subject Han-Shan is looking for his lost place through wild nature, and if Han-Shan is interpreted as a state of mind he wants to return to, later stanzas seem to suggest that he has achieved his

purpose: "Men ask the way to Cold Mountain/Cold Mountain there is no through trail/ In summer, ice doesn't melt/ The rising sun blurs in swirling fog. / How did I make it? My heart's not the same as yours. If your heart was like mine/ You'd get it and be right here." Here Han-Shan's place, or his state of mind, is substituted by "Cold Mountain" itself, and the poet, having found the commonality between his inner nature with the outer nature itself, begins to discourse on the way to reach this kind of enlightened condition that returns to the inner and outer natures simultaneously. In Snyder's writings, the aspiration for man is not to merge with nature to reach a divine truth, but to become it, and later embody it to others who are unenlightened in their potential to become at one with nature. However, there is nothing particularly "holy" in nature or and in the truth itself, simply a common state of existence that is found universally in man and every living being on earth.

Snyder seems to have derived this idea from the Buddhist thinking of Buddha-nature. Enlightened individuals, according to Buddhism, will realize that there is no individual difference in terms of the true nature of beings, which is the seed of enlightenment and Buddhahood. In Zen Buddhism, meditation sessions, the study of koans and the observation of the simplistic operation of the natural laws reveals not the divine workings for man to learn, but a revelation of the reality of that Buddha-nature itself. Snyder appears to have taken this understanding to revise Thoreau's

transcendentalist thinking and so to return the subjectivity and active agency to nature itself. In "Piute Creek" (*RipRap*), Snyder writes

"A clear, attentive mind  
Has no meaning but that  
Which sees in truly seen.  
No one loves rock, yet we are here.  
Night chills. A flick  
In the moonlight  
Slips into Juniper shadow:  
Back there unseen  
Cold Cougar or Coyote  
Watch me rise and go".

In this poem, every element of nature, including animals, the night chill and the moonlight, regains its active power. Meanwhile, the mind of the human and these beings exist in relation to each other. Both parties exist in a transparent and almost encompassing way, inhabiting the same space in nature. The human mind is not engaged in complex meaning making processes but remains as what it is, a still, alert and mindful presence of observation and sensitivity to the visible and invisible element in nature. The human is both humble and dignified.

It is the rigorous training of the mind itself that allows man to reach his enlightened state in nature. Critics have been attentive to the role of the Mind in Snyder's poetry. Snyder himself refers to the Mind in various collections, prose and poetry alike. In "Poetry and the Primitive" (*Earth House Hold*), he quoted Levi-Strauss to express the view that "mind in its untamed state" (118) interacts best with nature. In the final stanza



from no man” whereas the Space poet writes poems that “fly off the edge” to the metaphysical realm. The Mind poet serves his vocation best:

“A Mind Poet  
Stays in the house.  
The house is empty  
And it has no walls,  
The poem  
Is seen from all sides,  
Everywhere, At once.”

(40)

The condition of the “Mind poet” is similar to Snyder the poet in his Buddhist contemplation of nature in his last poem of the selected poetry collection *No Nature*:

“The vast wild  
the house, alone.  
The little house in the wild,  
the wild in the house.  
Both forgotten.

No nature

Both together, one big empty house”.

(381)

The “house” refers to both the wild nature itself in which the poet resides and a little house built in the wild land. Reading this poem along with “As for Poet”, the house may also refer to the condition of a mind which permits a free transmission between the outer and inner nature. In this condition the mind can accommodate a little house which in turns accommodates the wild. When the boundaries between big and small, external and internal, reality and perception are broken, nature is no longer a solid identity: it is

infinite and existent. For Snyder, the Buddhist notion of emptiness means a restoration to the original state of all things released from the confinements of human conceptions. As Snyder says “there is no single or set ‘nature’ either as ‘the natural world’ or ‘the nature of things’. The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open and conditional” (v).

Snyder’s concern with the Mind is not only an attempt to better appreciate nature in its own right. It has broader implications with relationship between the poetic mind, language and nature in American Poetry. Geoffrey Hartman noted that the American poets harbour the drive to purify language and Mary Arensberg related the drive to Emerson’s integration of language and nature. However, Arensberg noted that many American poets, compared to the English Romantics, do not find an American self in nature, which is an “empty spirit” or a “vacant space”, and the result is an anxiety over language. Snyder attempts to affirm that the “emptiness” rather than “nothingness” of nature can be read as an attempt to restore nature to its original state, and thus language to its purified state. The burden, then, will be for Snyder to not contaminate it. As a result, Snyder had to use the poetic mind that corresponds to the pattern of nature. Language is not only “signs of natural facts”, as Emerson says, but a system of signs that exist as individuals that run parallel with nature. In “Rip Rap”, the role of the poetic mind

and language in relation to nature is developed with more maturity and sophistication by the poet:

“Lay down these words  
Before your mind like rocks.  
    placed solid, by hands  
In choice of place, set  
Before the body of the mind  
    in space and time:  
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall  
    Riprap of things:  
Cobble of milky way,  
    Straying planets,  
These poems, people,  
    Lost ponies with  
Dragging saddles  
    and rocky sure-foot trails.  
The worlds like an endless  
    four-dimensional  
Game of *Go*.  
...”

In these stanzas, the mind takes on different forms. The body of mind, as Thomas Parkinson remarks, may refer to the poetic faculty of man. The idea expressed in the poems represents the poet’s more marked development of Buddhist thinking. In this poem, the poetic faculty, which is the trained mind, is a parallel to the order of the universe and the manifestation of the subtle interconnections between the different faces of matter. The solidarity of the mind results in the solid, balanced placing of the rocks.

Thus Snyder’s Buddhist engagement cannot be read simply in terms of orientalism. In many ways, Snyder attempts to update the American knowledge of the

East in terms of spirituality and poetics to accomplish a renewal of the American intellectual heritage and also a restoration of an enlightened principle that is universal and that has existed and should continue to exist in both East and the West. Zen Buddhism remains an important influence in his poetics which speaks to readers of diversified cultural background about its elements and inspirations through the prism of Snyder's experience and creativity.

## Ginsberg and the Sunyata Consciousness

In previous chapters, I try to examine how Kerouac's ambivalence towards the promises of Buddhist enlightenment has affected his literary strategy and critical perspective adopted in the reflection on himself and his community. I have also tried to look at how Gary Snyder's rigorous mining in Japanese Zen for what he sees as a repository of enlightened intuitions about nature influences his poetics and representation of the Eastern spiritual tradition. Both writers have identified in Buddhism concepts relevant to their subjective experiences within the world. Kerouac examines the notion of the world being "both real and dream", as Ginsberg remarked in "Retrospect on Beat Generation" (132) with the concept of emptiness whereas Snyder explores nature's fundamental identity in relation to man with the concept of Buddha-nature. Buddhism is among the many theoretical bases available for the writers to articulate and conceptualize their perception of the world, which has in turn promoted a popular understanding of the Buddhist traditions. As for Allen Ginsberg, it is his belief in the capacity of consciousness to transcend the conditioned selfhood that finds resonance in Buddhism.

Although the poet's notion of consciousness has evolved throughout the years, he maintains that consciousness can unfold into an awareness and manifestation of an ultimate notion of selfhood. In an explanation of the relationship between writing poetry and the awakening of consciousness, he wrote: "writing poetry is a form of

discovering who I am, and getting beyond who I am to free awareness of consciousness, to a self that isn't who I am. It's a form of discovering my own nature, and my own identity, or my own ego, or outlining my own ego, and also seeing what part of me is beyond that" (Biography, 3). In this remark, Ginsberg suggests that the "self" contains parts that transcend a person's known nature, identity and ego. The awakened consciousness can perceive and manifest those parts of the being that goes beyond the common awareness of identity and self informed by the conscious intellect. Heightened awareness of subjectivity can push beyond the conditions that form the subject and awaken the consciousness to reveal epistemologically a more expansive selfhood that is previously unknown and hidden from the subject. Ginsberg's notion of consciousness is influenced in part by his predecessor Walt Whitman. In an introduction to Whitman, Harold Bloom suggested that the poet's notion of consciousness is made up of three components: soul, the self and "the real Me", with the soul referring to character, the self referring to identity and the "real Me" referring to a kind of American Gnosis (10). Bloom's opinion of the "real Me" is echoed by M. Jimmie Killingsworth who finds "visions of personal, political and metaphysical union" in Whitman's works (28). Ginsberg himself has also believed that the "real Me", embedded in his consciousness, contains both the American Gnosis and "the universal soul" (Killington, 20) as represented by Whitman's "kosmos".

What is of significance to his notion of consciousness in relation to Buddhism occurs at a point concerning what consciousness should transcend to reveal the ultimate selfhood. There is an obvious evolution of his notion of selfhood from his 1966 prophetic declaration that “we will all have seen some ray of glory and vastness beyond our conditioned social selves, beyond our government, beyond American even” (*Public Solitude*, 127) to his 1990 rumination of the *Diamond Sutra* that that “All conceptions as to the existence of the self, as well as all conceptions as to the non-existence of the self; as well as all conceptions as to the existence of the supreme self, as well as all conceptions as to the non-existence of the supreme self, are equally arbitrary, being only conceptions” (*Kerouac’s Ethic*, 369). In the 1966 manifesto, Ginsberg suggested that the consciousness could transcend the adherence to social and communal identities and even the American consciousness whereas in 1990, he seemed to suggest that consciousness could transcend the very idea of “the self” as well as the intricate workings of the conscious mind that produces such conceptions. Ginsberg, therefore, when under the influence of Buddhism, is more inclined than Kerouac and Snyder to undermine the solidity of his subjective experiences by noting how the mind is “constantly produce[s] thoughts, memories, future projections, prophecies” (*Meditation*, 134). Even visions that define existence and the objective reality should be transcended because they are merely the arbitrary products of the transitory mind. Consciousness should not be bound by the

perceived notion of self as well as the perceived forms of the world, which are only “conceptions”:

“It is possible to take our existence as a “sacred world”, to take this place as open space rather than claustrophobic dark void. It is possible to appreciate the esthetic play of forms in emptiness, and to exist in this place like majestic kings of our own consciousness. But to do that, we would have to give up grasping [...] or ignorant grasping and clinging to our notion of what we think should be [...]

(Kerouac’s Ethics, 370)

In Ginsberg’s experience, it is the encounter with the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner Dudjom Rinpoche that eventually “release[d] him from an obsessive attachment to [the] mystical vision” he had had of Blake (Tonkinson, 91). The poet elaborated on this in his regret over Kerouac’s obstinate clinging to a Buddhist inspired vision

“He had some kind of *satori*<sup>8</sup> [...] but in the instruction one gets in ancient sitting practice is: as soon as you see your thoughts, renounce them, let go. Don’t cling to thought, don’t try and sanctify it, don’t try and make it a reference point, keep the space of mind open. [...] Kerouac’s *satori* was clinging both to despair of suffering, fear of suffering, and permanent Hell, fear of a permanent Heaven.”

(Kerouac’s Ethics, 364-65)

Ginsberg’s Buddhist studies have always revolved around the exploration of the unknown nature and capability of the consciousness in revealing an ultimate selfhood which is beyond conceptions. His interest in consciousness explains his special attention to Tibetan Buddhism, a lineage more popular in the poet’s days for its sophisticated insights into the more mysterious terrains of human consciousness. In the notes Ginsberg compiled for his poems written before 1972, one can already find a few “Buddhist

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<sup>8</sup> Terminology of the Japanese Zen to mean enlightenment occurring in a sudden, spontaneous moment.

terminology" (757) that is more commonly found along the lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. At this stage Ginsberg interpreted the terminology in terms of the vastness and transformative power of the individual consciousness, the "microcosm" (Lardas, 82) that mirrors the universal consciousness, the "macrocosm" (Lardas, 82). Some examples are "Mandala: Map of psychological universe, generally Hindu-Buddhist" (770) and "...Mantras, powerful words in Sanskrit, which do not carry any mental symbolism, no intellectually expressible meaning, but are supposed to be directly effective as a transforming soul-influence" (775). In later periods, however, he began to conceive the universal consciousness as "Sunyata consciousness" (Retrospect, 133).

Ginsberg has probably conceived "Sunyata consciousness" to be the Buddhist equivalent to the "kosmos" and the "universal soul". The poet should have come across the term "Sunyata" when he formally came under tutelage of the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1972. In a public lecture entitled "First Thought, Best Thought" given in 1974, Ginsberg described "Sunyata" as a "great, elevated, cosmic, noncosmic" (106) "eternal consciousness" (Interview, 126). He later refers to Sunyata as "the consciousness of Sunyata" in 1992 (Retrospect, 133). Ginsberg's deliberate framing of Sunyata as a "consciousness" after 1972 indicates a personal understanding of the concept differentiated from its original meaning of emptiness. Whereas emptiness is traditionally understood as a state when no

differentiation and dualities arises or as a recognition of the absence of a permanent, autonomous essence in all matter and the human self, it is seldom perceived or implied as an animate, autonomous and neutral body of consciousness which, in addition to manifesting the truth of emptiness, also holds “all its transcendental wisdom including panoramic awareness and oceanic [...] vastness” (Retrospect, 133).

The goal for the practicing Buddhist then is not only to realize the condition of emptiness, but to get connected with the “consciousness of emptiness”, meaning that one has to observe with absolute clarity how the movement and rhythm of his or her own consciousness is actually a miniature of that of the sunyata consciousness. Individuals in possession of a more awakened consciousness, which signifies a more advanced state in the pursuit of Buddhist enlightenment, are more closely and deeply connected with the “Sunyata consciousness”. Ginsberg once noted that the Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are venerated for their “insight or mind-consciousness” (Spiritual Biography, 4). Here, the “insight” is not produced by any intellectual process happening in the mind-consciousness; it is transmitted directly from the eternal consciousness. The “mind-consciousness” of the spiritual teachers is conceived as a body of unmediated insight conflated with the Sunyata consciousness. From another quotation provided by Ginsberg of his later spiritual teacher Gelek Rinpoche “My mind is open to itself”, it seems that the consciousness of individuals and the Sunyata consciousness is conflated

in the moment of spiritual wakening. For the not yet enlightened, however, it is also possible to get a glimpse of the “Sunyata consciousness” because it is always, in its reverberations, mirrored in the consciousness of every individual. The key is to observe the “first flashes” (Interview, 166) of thought that occur in the mind. As Ginsberg mentioned in “Meditation and Poetics”, “ordinary mind includes eternal perceptions” (136). The first thought is always the great “sunyata thought” (First Thought, 106).

The idea that the first thought is always the Sunyata thought is also extended to the poet’s thinking of the conception and formulation of poetic ideas in the poetic mind. According to the poet, the “first thought” is the best material for poetry. Ginsberg also compared the incantation of poetry with “the wind mak[ing] a sound in the leaves” (First Thought, 102), twisting Shelley’s invocation of the wind to “make me thy lyre” by supplanting the “wind” with “the consciousness of Sunyata”. It is also where the concept of spontaneity sets in, and where Ginsberg’s theory about how to reveal the hidden self within the consciousness becomes potentially problematic. Ginsberg maintains that the spontaneous mind, before being subjected to the consciousness working of the intellect, is open to moment to moment movement, changes and “surprises” (Meditation, 135). A spontaneous mind is also the ordinary mind to which “the most vivid perceptions may come” (134) so “there is no problem of dredging up [...] great symbols from the unconscious” (137). The ambiguity, however, occurs in is whether the spontaneous mind

is reflecting the spiritual truth of the universal consciousness instead of the common workings of the conscious mind.

Even the teachings of Trungpa as represented by Ginsberg are equally ambiguous on this point. In the Beat circle, one of the perceived contrasts between Zen and Tibetan Buddhism lies in their different regards towards the value of heeding the spontaneous mind in the attainment of enlightenment. Zen Buddhism, as represented to Gary Snyder, lays greater emphasis on the training of the mind. Diane Collinson *et al* in their introduction to Eastern thinkers, discuss how the rigorous meditation techniques promoted by Dogen, who is an important influence on Snyder, was considered a “hindrance on the path to enlightenment” (337) by a later Japanese Zen master Bankei whose key feature of Zen teaching is “spontaneity” (337). Meditation in Zen is known as a hard discipline, a deliberate training of the mind for the revelation of its original, innate essence. On the other hand, Tibetan Buddhism, as Ginsberg came to know it and related in “Meditation and Poetics”, encourages an individual to take a “friendly attitude” (134) towards the spontaneous movement of the mind without the pressure to train it to any prescribed content of enlightenment. However, to what stages of enlightened consciousness does the friendly, or undifferentiated observation of the spontaneous mind leads to is unclear.

If the spontaneous mind has the possibility of mirroring both the conscious

mind as well as the universal consciousness embedded in the individual consciousness, the spontaneous mind should therefore be a highly unstable, tumultuous plane on which both the known conscious and some forms of unknown consciousness emerge. Such a phenomenon finds expression in Ginsberg's poems which often reveals the dynamic, unpredictable and chaotic experience of the subject navigating in the spontaneous mind infiltrated with the known conscious mind, the perceptible unconscious as well as the visions of the universal consciousness. The poet arrives at a resolution about how the three can co-exist in a less tumultuous manner, along with and supported by the development of a more stable understanding of the Sunyata consciousness, as reflected in his later poems such as "Ego Confession".

The earliest published poem to contain Buddhist reference entitled "Sakyamuni Coming out of the Mountain" sees Sunyata simply as a vision of spiritual truth that has no apparent intricacies with individual consciousness. The poem thus casts the relation between the subject and Sunyata in a straightforward manner. Written in 1953, the poem is meant to be an interpretation of an ancient Chinese painting which depicts the moment after the awakening of the Buddha. The poem lays emphasis on the psychological landscape of the Buddha as a sage who bears the burden of a visionary. The sage as a spiritual seeker has a self and consciousness independent from Sunyata, interpreted in this poem as "nothingness", meaning no essence or the non-existence of

any eternal, divine truth and salvation in the “absolute world” since “the land of blessedness exists in the imagination”. “Nothingness” is the sorrowful vision finally realized by the sage, whose triumphant moment is also a moment of sober and solemn defeat:

“He drags his bare feet  
                  out of a cave [...]  
faltering  
                  into the bushes by a stream,  
                  all things inanimate  
But his intelligence –  
                  Stands upright there  
                  tho trembling:  
Arhat<sup>9</sup>  
                  who sought heaven  
                  under a mountain of stone  
sat thinking  
                  till he realized  
                  the land of blessedness exists  
in the imagination –  
                  the flash come:  
                  empty mirror –  
how painful to be born again  
                  wearing a fine beard  
                  reentering the world  
a bitter wreck of a sage[...]

This poem, written in third person, does not involve apparent effort of the poet to explore his own consciousness. Here “intelligence” comprises the unified whole of both the conscious and the unconscious compared to the condition of an empty mirror receiving

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<sup>9</sup> Noted provided by Ginsberg: Arhat: Asiatic name for Sage or Mage or Saint or Holyman.

the flash of the futile vision relating to the absence of the land of blessedness. The empty mirror may also refer to the clarity of mind of the sage in his unmediated perception of the truth of nothingness which manifests its essence on the mind. In short, the poem does not involve any permeation between the Sunyata vision and the sage's mind because such a vision is not yet understood as a consciousness. In fact, it is also similar to the empty mirror itself which reflects and projects images of truth instead of emerging or infiltrating into the sage's individual consciousness to transmit the truth. In this sense, the sage's subjectivity does not inherently contain Sunyata; it is something external to the individual consciousness.

A later poem "Angkor Wat" written in 1963 begins to invoke Buddhist figures to delve into the unique unconsciousness in face of the impending Vietnam War. Going on a pilgrimage to the Buddhist temples on a foreign piece of land, namely Cambodia, the speaker is physically removed from the American land and also his connection with the American Gnosis. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War has also jeopardized the experience of American Gnosis. In the poem, the American experience is represented by the speaker's fleeting encounters with Americans who, despite their casual appearance, all seem to bear the markings of the war:

"american husbands in sportshirts with clear,  
bright eyes and legs spread in  
the velocipedomotor bripping  
on holiday from US Army Saigon



Raindrops dripping in  
Floor rock crevasses  
    on the broken crown of the  
gray lotus [...]  
    Buddha's faces on the  
Many towers"

(322)

Meanwhile, there is an uncertainty on the speaker's side concerning whether the Buddhist figures, manifested as statues, are enacting the conventional symbolic meanings and spiritual attributes they embody in the Buddhist tradition. There is also the fear of the unknown engendered by an uncertainty about the true faces of figures as the speaker cannot penetrate the superficial appearances of the statues to achieve spiritual reunion. Descriptions of the physical appearance of the figures abound in the poem, for example, the figure of Avalokitesvara is described to have a "huge face" and "a big mouth" but there is little reference to the experience of his virtue. Ginsberg himself explained in his composition notes that the principle virtue of Avalokitesvara is compassion, but the figure is perceived by the speaker to be an indifferent, foreboding presence in the face of the pending violence and calamity in the Vietnam War, evoking a neurotic experience instead of peace:

    "Angkor – on top of the terrace  
In a stone nook in the rain  
Avalokitesvara faces everywhere  
    high in their stoniness  
    in white rainmist  
Slithering hitherward paranoia  
    Banyans trailing

High muscled tree crawled  
Over snaky toes spread  
Down the lintel's read  
    cradle-root  
    elephantine bigness"

(314)

The foreign and nontraditional Buddhist figures are the sites on which the speaker projects his internal, unconscious anxiety. The speaker's inner psychological landscape of confusion, anxiety, revulsion and guilt is mirrored by the outer landscape of decay, irregularities and metamorphosis occurring in the persona's body and in the Buddhist figures. The central figure Avalokitesvara appears in the ruins of Angkor Wat, transforming from a figure of "stoniness" (314) to a figure with "big mouth" "smiles" (321) and a later figure "with pyramid of faces all mixed up" (324) when the speaker in spiritual doubt says "I hope Buddha's been there". The instance when Avalokitesvara assumes his posture of indifference with his "stoniness" is also the time when the speaker experiences the fear of illnesses and even death, "riding in the rain/ anxious [...]/ shivering/ and throat choking/ with upsurge/ of stroke fear/cancer Bubonic/heart failure" (314). The moment when Avalokitesvara is seen to have the menacing big mouth that signifies appetite is when the disagreeable desire emerges: "the smiles/ of Avalokitesvara with his big mouth like/ Cambodian Pork Chops – the boys/ and why do I not even faintly desire those/black silk girls in the alley of this/ clean new tourist city? (321)"

Tony Trigilio remarked that "Angkor Way" marks "the beginning of

Ginsberg's development of a Buddhist poetics that would not reject desire and appetite". Meanwhile, it has to be noted that the desire and appetite is not in a harmonious relationship with the Buddhist religious experience represented in the poem. Since there is an apparent ambiguity about the effectiveness and efficacy of the symbolic meanings of the figures as delineated in the Buddhist tradition, there is an anxiety over the possibility that the speaker's religiosity is false although his religious experience is authentic according to Louis Hammann's definition. It is because the speaker, as well as the poet's subjective imaginations of and responses to the Buddhist figures are incongruent with the religious tradition he knows and understands. Adding to the complications is the instance when the speaker expresses directly his desire to take refuge in the Buddha:

““I am afraid where I am  
'I am inert' ... 'I'm just doing my  
Professional duty' ... 'I'm scheming  
Murders' ... 'I'm chasing a story'  
I'm not going to eat meat anymore  
I'm taking refuge in the Buddha Dharma<sup>10</sup> Sangha<sup>11</sup>  
Hare Krishna Hare Krishna...”

(317)

The peculiarity about this stanza is that Ginsberg maintained in his composition notes that by the line “I'm taking refuge in the Buddha”, he meant “I take my refuge in my Self, I take my refuge in the nature of my Self, I take my refuge in the company of my

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<sup>10</sup> The teaching of Buddha.

<sup>11</sup> The community that practices the teaching of the Buddha.

fellow Selves" (779). The difference between the "Self" and the Buddha is that in the self there is both the religious yearning for salvation as well as the secular anxieties, fear, abomination and desires. In a later stanza the speaker confesses that he is "nothing but a false Buddha afraid of/ my own annihilation" (318). The poem thus places the speaker in a predicament when he cannot reconcile between his desire for redemption and also the desire to acknowledge positively his own desires and anxieties. At the end of the poem, the speaker returns to America where there is no trace of Buddha around, nor is there any presence of Buddhist spiritual forces. It seems that even the presence of the redemptive Buddhist force may have emerged temporarily from the illusory desire of the speaker for redemption and also from his response to the atrocity of war. In short, "Angkor Wat" does not present a reconciliation between the individual self, or the consciousness, and any universal soul expounded in the Buddhist faith because it fails as an alternative for the subject to achieve any stable personal and spiritual reunion. Instead, it casts Buddhist religious experience as a convenient and effective channel for the liberation of unconscious.

Another poem written before Ginsberg formally became a student of Trungpa is "Wichita Vortex Sutra" in which there is a crisis of having a spiritual vacuum awaiting reinvigoration on the American land after the onset of Vietnam War. Rolf Potts explained the significance of Wichita as a site of the American transcendental vortex:

“Ginsberg’s journey to Kansas [...] stemmed from his long-standing fascination with the state. In one sense, Ginsberg felt that Kansas was politically representative of Middle American support for war and the military-industrial complex — a stereotype that presaged its current “red state” reputation by several decades. But beyond political generalizations, Ginsberg saw Kansas as the mystic center of America, celebrated by Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* (“chants going forth from the center, from Kansas, and thence equidistant / shooting in pulses of fire ceaseless to vivify all”). The poet saw Wichita, the ultimate destination of his road-trip poem, as the symbolic heart of this transcendental American vortex”

(2)

However, the horror of war has become a devouring vortex that threatens to consume Wichita with the American transcendental spirits it enshrined. The corrupting force is represented by the proliferation of wartime propaganda that enshrouds the whole of Wichita. Here Ginsberg brings in another idea from Tibetan Buddhism that relates language to consciousness. The poet was inspired by the performative power of the mantra as a testimony of the human capacity to use languages vocally for spiritual liberation. Poetic languages, however, are regarded by Ginsberg to be especially powerful for when poetry is written spontaneously, it should be connected with the universal consciousness that holds immense spiritual power. In his public lecture entitled “First Thought, Best Thought”, he attempted an explanation of how “the mantric aspect of poetics” (102) allows the embodiment, liberation and transmission of consciousness in poetry. Ginsberg conceives the incantation of poetry to be the “most natural and easiest” (102) “exhalation, articulation, manifestation, animation [and] expression” (102) of the nature of the poet, and the metaphor he adopts is the vocal exhalation of the human

breath, a spiritual practice of Tibetan Buddhism, which holds that a breath exalted in a spontaneous voice is intimately connected to the human psyche. To help his audience understand this point, he asked them to start with “the considerations of breath, considerations of vowel, and relation between vowel and intelligence, vowel and soul, and how these are connected to the breath” (102). In the poem, the corrupted language at war-time signifies the corrupted consciousness that looms large on the American land:

“Language, language

black Earth-circle in the rear window,

no cars for miles along highway

beacon lights on oceanic plain

language, language

over Big Blue River

chanting *La illahga el (lill) Allah hu*

revolving my head to my heart like my mother

chin abreast at Allah

Eyes closed, blackness

vaster than midnight prairies [...]

(404)

“Black Magic language,

formulas for reality –

Communism is a 9 letter word

used by inferior magicians with

the wrong alchemical formulas for transforming earth into gold [...]

(409)

In the first quotation, language is seen to be able to flow into spaces and infiltrate into the consciousness as an invisible force. It contains, as Laszlo Gefin quotes from Ginsberg, a force field (285). In the second quotation, language is dramatized as having magical powers, a perspective similar to what Ginsberg found in Tibetan Buddhism. Language

has a natural, magical kind of power that produces vastly different effects and force fields depending on its user. If used in an inspired manner, language can express the transient; on the other hand, if it is distorted or abused, language can become a means of corruption. By making “a synthesizing act in language” (Gefin, 285) against the black magic, recalling his literary predecessors who use language with an inspired mind linked with the universal consciousness, Ginsberg “enacts the parallel progress of individual consciousness and universal consciousness” (285):

“Headline language poetry, nine decades after Democratic Vistas  
and the Prophecy of the Good Gray Poet [..]

Language, language  
Ezra Pound the Chinese Written Character for truth  
Defined as man standing by his word [...]

(408)

In the crisis of the spiritual void when war-time propaganda pervades the noises of public media, the speaker makes the gesture of invoking spiritual forces by honoring an array of spiritual figures including Christ, Allah and Buddhist gurus; he makes a mantra of the American language so as to break through the suffocating and permeating force of the abused languages:

“I lift my voice aloud/make Mantra of American language now,  
pronounce the words beginning my own millennium,  
I here declare the end of the War!  
Ancient days’ Illusion!

Let the States tremble,/let the Nation weep,

let Congress legislate its own delight/let the President execute his own desire-

this Act done by my own voice, nameless Mystery –”

(415)

As Ginsberg himself admitted, he did not “pronounce the mantra to work on all literal levels automatically” (312); the speaker’s declaration may not be effective in stopping the war. The idea is about the speaker’s individual consciousness being released in incantation and merged with all the sacred forces, which are all part of the universal consciousness to engage in a battle with the rest of the corrupted consciousness manifested physically in the distorted war-time languages of the media. Universal consciousness is recognized an undifferentiating field that encompasses all the great spiritual figures of different times and space, the Buddhist ones included. In this poem, therefore, the Buddhist spiritual force becomes more compatible with the universal consciousness than in “Angkor Wat”. The concept of Sunyata, written as “EMTPIINESS” in the poem, also designates an open field with enormous spiritual potential at a time of spiritual vacuum for the individual consciousness. The individual consciousness can now influence and merge with the universal consciousness of which the Buddhist spiritual force becomes an integral part:

“Prajnaparamita Sutra over coffee – Vortex

of telephone radio aircraft assembly frame ammunition

petroleum nightclub Newspaper streets illuminated by Bright

EMPTINESS –

Thy sins are forgiven, Wichita! [...]

(403)

“What would you do if you lost it?” written in 1973 and “Ego Confession” written in 1974 are poems that see a greater importance in the concept of Sunyata in the understanding and analysis of self. “What would you do if you lost it?” is a radical poem in the sense that the speaker, in contemplation of death, is trying to come to terms with the need to abandon his many attachments by imagining the stripping away of everything that defines his identity until nothing, not even the physical body, is left. There is an assemblage of objects that point to the speaker’s source of attachment, such as the “tattered copy of Blake” (99) that points to his attachment to poetic vision or “the harmonium that’s Peter’s” (99) that points to his attachment to literary creativity, memories and intimate relationships. The “it” in the title already suggests a radical loss that may refer to the physical life and creative life of the poet since the poet wrote that Sambhogakaya interpreted as “visionary communicative aspect of Buddha speech” is “eclipsed in candle-light snuffed by the playful cat” (99). The poem, thus, imagines scenes of complete annihilation when all things that occur in subject and object position are annihilated:

“None left standing! No tears left for eyes, no eyes for weeping,  
no mouth for singing, no song for the hearer, no more words for any mind.”

(101)

This poem equates emptiness with nothingness: Not only the personal attachment is destroyed, even the Buddha nature “Dharmakaya” is “forgot” (99). However, this poem does not directly confront the question of what makes up the core essence self, creating the impression that the self is only made up of memories, perceptions, sensations and the physical body.

“Ego Confession” is a poem that applies the concept of emptiness to explore the self. It works with the reconciliation between “ego” and “emptiness” which are often seen as incompatible. The Tibetan Buddhist practitioner Thubten Chodron explains the definition of “ego” in relation to the notion of emptiness in Buddhism as follows:

“Ego could refer to either the self-grasping ignorance which is the root of cyclic existence or the self-centered attitude which prevents us from developing compassion and bodhicitta (altruism) for all sentient beings. Self-grasping ignorance is the ignorance that not only is unclear regarding the actual nature of persons and phenomena (that is, that they are empty of independent existence), but also actively misconstrues their nature, conceiving that they exist under their own power, independently, from their own side”.

(1)

As seen from the quotation above, ego arises from the inability to understand the actual nature of persons and phenomena that are empty of independent, permanent existence. What is interesting about “Ego Confession”, however, is that this poem does not set off to deny the permanent essence of self but the ego itself. The poem sets off to examine the ego and seeks to dissolve it by implying its absurdity. The poem starts with a candid but extravagant outpouring of the myriad manifestations of the speaker’s ego – his ambitions

all kinds that border on self-centered obsession and fantasy, including spiritual enlightenment and fame:

“I want to be known as the most brilliant man in America  
introduced to Gyalwa Karmapa heir of the Whispered  
Transmission Crazy Wisdom Practice Lineage [...] prepared the way for Dharma in America without mentioning the Dharma –”

(107)

The speaker then declares that his “extraordinary ego” is “at service of Dharma and completely empty” (108). He then proceeds to recount more of his bold aspirations before dismissing them as “all empty all for show, all for the sake of Poesy/Exemplify Muse power to the young avert future suicide/ accepting his own lie and the gaps between lies with equal good manner” (108). By confessing his extraordinary ego and declaring its emptiness, the speaker does not automatically admit that he has realized the truth about the non-existence of a permanent, independent self. While the poem is often read as a “mockery of the convention of confessional poetry” (Trigilio, 146) by writing that what the so-called self can confess is only ridiculous ego rather than a solid self, the poem does not immediately imply that the ego is all that makes up the speaker’s conception of his “self”. After the dissolution of the ego, it appears that there is a moment of awakening which conveys the sense of a complete awareness of what the “self” actually is when the ego is no longer posing its obstructive barrier. The revelation is then followed by the self’s gradual dissolution into the unbounded consciousness of

emptiness.

“Solitary in worlds full of insects & singing birds all solitary

– who had no subject but himself in many disguises

some outside his own body including empty air-filled space forests and cities

Even climbed mountains to create his mountain, with ice ax & crampons & ropes, over Glaciers -”

(108)

This final stanza that marks an abrupt break with the previous stanzas in both content and style seems to suggest that it represents a moment of awakening after the ego is confessed and annihilated. What is left is a heightened sensation of solitude and clarity, and the realization that the subject, including the conscious and unconscious, had always been exerting its influence within itself only in the vast landscape of emptiness.

It is with such understanding that Ginsberg finally arrives at the comment that Kerouac lacked the “tool, the instrument” (369), which refers to formal Buddhist training, to “actually take in his body the notion of emptiness or examine it as a process of mind” (369). When he wrote “that the quality most pure in Kerouac was his grasp that life is really a dream as well as being real” and “that the “realization of dream as the suchness of this universe pervaded the spiritual intelligence of all beat writers”, he was using emptiness to describe not only the condition of reality but also the condition of mind. The awakened consciousness is the awareness, and manifestation, of this ultimate condition of emptiness. Throughout his life, Ginsberg’s study of Buddhism has intersected with his other aspirations and hopes, as reflected in “Sakyamuni Coming out of the Mountain”, for example, which seeks an alternative vision or in “Wichita Vortex

Sutra” that seeks the ways for a poet to confront the war-time impact in both the public and private domains. However, a persistent question still remains in regard to the insights of consciousness. How are the conscious, the unconscious and the universal consciousness related and ultimately unified to make up a more expansive self in which all his aspirations, desires and anxieties can be properly resolved in the Sunyata consciousness? To regard the notion of emptiness as that which recognizes the importance of observing the ego and its many manifestations such as desires and anxieties in the understanding of self is the resolution that the poet has arrived at in the end.

## **Conclusion**

In retrospect, Gary Snyder thought of the Beat generation period as a time when people were “reconsider[ing] the nature of the human individual, existence, personal motives, the qualities of love and hatred, and the means of achieving wisdom” (Notes, 13). In one of the earliest introduction of the Beat generation, John Clellon Holmes wrote: “[the generation]’s ability to keep its eyes open, and yet avoid cynicism; its ever-increasing conviction that the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem; and that capacity for sudden wisdom which people who live hard and go far possess, are assets and bear watching. And, anyway, the clear, challenging faces are worth it”. If the circle had comprehended the problem of modern days from a spiritual angle, they had also sought to comprehend it through exploring the incomprehensible aspects of their conditions since spirituality often relates to inexplicable experiences within the reality. The adoption of a spiritual angle that also comprises the Eastern religious tradition suggests that the writers were keen on pushing beyond boundaries in the understanding of their conditions for a different perspective and orientation to their problems. In this aspect, Buddhism as a far away Eastern religion that promises the experience of “enlightenment” was one of sources that appealed to the “wisdom” seekers.

Their continuous seeking of Buddhist enlightenment has influenced the subject matter, styles and undertones in their works. The different paths taken in their explorations of Buddhism accentuate the differences in their respective enquiry into the

human condition and their incorporation of American intellectual and cultural heritages. Drawing inspiration from the common heritage of transcendentalists, hitchhiking experiences, the “jazzy rhythms of the street” (Tonkinson, viii), the writers have integrated their interpretations and interests in the different strands of Buddhism into the terrain of American existential experience. Jack Kerouac tends to ruminate on the notion that the universal law governing the ultimate reality and existence itself is emptiness and imperfection. In *Dharma Bums* and *Vision of Gerard*, he interrogates such an idea through constructing a fictional universe inhabited by personas reminiscent of the actual figures in the real life, blurring the boundary between the real and the unreal. Through heightening the absurdity in the Buddhist references made by the dharma bums and the absurd condition of the lives of the bums themselves, Kerouac was both questioning and submitting to the notion that the emptiness is the governing principle of existence. When Allen Ginsberg wrote that Kerouac “qualified existence” (Retrospect, 133) as the “Golden Ash school” of poetry [...] Thus Beat: a dream already ended” (Retrospect, 133), he seemed to suggest that Kerouac manifested the law of emptiness in both his writings and his life.

Kerouac’s view of emptiness did not extend onto his contemplation of the nature of mind. Kerouac tends to consider emptiness as the cosmic law governing existence in the sense that “it is the mind that caused the world”, as he wrote in *The*

*Scripture of Golden Eternity*. The mind is a fluid entity that actively imagines and conceives a reality, but it is not by itself empty. This is different from Ginsberg who ultimately believes that both the mind and the ultimate reality is an empty consciousness. Such perspective, however, implies that while Ginsberg sees the mind as empty, he does not suggest that consciousness itself is empty since it is still represented as an entity; consciousness, however, perceives and manifests the ultimate conditions of emptiness.

Kerouac and Ginsberg's difference in considering the notion of emptiness also accounts for their respective approaches in examining the notion of emptiness. Kerouac tends to interrogate the concept by examining the events that made up the reality whereas Ginsberg directly refers to the layers of mind activities in his works. While Kerouac was no longer keen on Buddhism in his later years, the Buddhist notion of emptiness as he understands it still permeates his worldview and orientation to the happenings of his life. Ginsberg's comment in 1992 that beatific was "a dream" (*Retrospect*, 133), a "Heart Failure" that is a "big success" (133) seems to indicate an accord with the perspective that life is "both real and dream" (*Retrospect*, 132) made into a spectacle. What remains is the consciousness that perceives the emptiness of mind and of the reality.

Gary Snyder's perspective is different in the sense that he considers emptiness to be a condition when nature is restored to its original state that can be perceived only by an empty, spontaneous mind unbound by conceptions and completely dissolved into the

natural wilderness. Adapting the concept of the universal Buddha-nature inherent in all beings, Snyder represents nature as a self-substantiated entity with its own subjectivity that runs parallel with that of human beings. A common expression found in the writings of the three writers I looked at is that the condition of the phenomenal world and the perception of ultimate reality depend on the condition of the mind, or in Ginsberg's terminology, on the consciousness. The ultimate reality has many facets according to the individual perceivers, but their adaptation of Buddhism suggests that it is a vision of vastness, uncomplicated by imposed conceptions. This vision transcends and is also manifested in the unsatisfactory conditions in their times. The "wisdom" they sought by "living hard and going far" reeks of futility, as what Gary Snyder says of Kerouac's pessimism. Even for Snyder whose messages are more affirmative, his vision constructed upon the imagination of an ancient spirituality preserved in Zen seems more difficult to come into fruition.

The writers' representation of Buddhism displays a serious and creative effort in developing and adapting an Eastern religious tradition into the American intellectual heritages and contemporary concerns. How this effort should be interpreted and responded to has been a tenacious question in the field of literary criticism and religious studies. This study intends to show how the writers have developed from various Buddhist concepts different understandings of a Buddhist enlightened vision that reflect

their own concerns in the tumultuous years known as the Beat generation. Having popularized Buddhism in contemporary America, the writers have also opened up the space for discussion, investigation and literary representation of Buddhism, inspiring communications between East and West.

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