



*Jack Kerouac's Interpretation of Buddhism,
with particular reference to The Dharma
Bums*

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Introduction

In the 1950's a group of writers emerged who were soon to become known as the 'Beat Generation', a term coined by one of the most prominent members of the Beats, Jack Kerouac (1922-1969).¹ During this dissertation, I will not be referring to a whole generation, but to a small, yet significant collection of writers, including Kerouac, Gary Snyder (1930-present), Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) and William Burroughs (1914-1997). This group of writers proceeded to play a significant role in introducing Buddhism and eastern thought to the west through literature. In this thesis, I will critically analyse Kerouac's understanding of Buddhism, why he was inspired by eastern thought, and how he incorporated such thought with the Catholic beliefs that characterised his childhood. I will use his novel *The Dharma Bums* (1957), a story he wrote in just ten days and nights at his catholic mother's house in Florida,² about a man living a simple life, hitchhiking and mountain climbing across America, to explore influences on Kerouac's own spirituality.

In the first chapter, I will explore the life of Jack Kerouac and look at his Catholic upbringing and the death of his brother, and the affect that these events had on him mentally and spiritually. Catholicism is important to mention as it has a big impact on his writing even in his days of Buddhist experimentation which lasted from around 1954, when he first started reading the works of Dwight Goddard (1932),³ to 1957, when he returned to Catholicism.⁴ The chapter will also include a look at the state of America in the 1940s and 1950s. The forties and fifties, when Kerouac was writing most of his novels, was a time of instability for society which was recovering from the Second World War, leaving people in a state of confusion and paranoia.⁵ Following on

¹Scott A. Mitchell, 'Buddhism and the Beats', *Oxford Bibliographies*, available at: <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0109.xml>

²Rick Fields, 1992, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: a narrative history of Buddhism in America*, London: Shambhala, p.222.

³Nicosia, Gerald, 1983, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*, New York: Grove Press, p.457.

⁴Carole (ed), 1995, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, New York: Riverhead Books, p.27.

⁵Knox, Sara L., 1993, 'The Genealogy of Treason: 'Ethel Rosenberg and the Masculinist Discourse of Cold War'', *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, pp. 32-49, p.34.

from this I will examine the post-world-war consumerism that grew with the economy, promoting materialism and leading to a society of conformism that threatened to eradicate individualism. This sparked Kerouac and the Beat Generation's mission to restore their own individualism and promote others to do the same, and this they would go on to do through new religious thought and literature.

Having sought to understand the state of the American context in which this movement arose, I will start to question why people will have wanted to look east for spirituality. Though there were encounters with Asian Buddhism as far back as thirteenth century, when missionary and trade activity were on the rise, it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth century that European travellers attempted to understand Buddhism.⁶ In the twentieth century, Buddhism was still new and there was not a great amount of literature on it, D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) and Goddard, however, were prominent figures in bringing Buddhism to America in the early/mid twentieth century. As well as Suzuki and Goddard, the Beat Generation played a great role in popularizing Buddhism, not only for their audience, but with each other, improving and challenging each other's beliefs and practices. It is therefore important when discussing Kerouac's Buddhism to explore the relationship between Kerouac and the other Beats, particularly Gary Snyder, a Beat who was well educated in oriental studies,⁷ and who, more importantly, is the character of Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*.

In the second chapter of this thesis I will look at *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and analyse Kerouac's use Buddhism throughout it. My choice of novel is due to an observation that, although texts such as *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (1969) and *Wake Up* (1955) show Kerouac's attempt to write his own Buddhist text, *The Dharma Bums*, through a descriptive, semi auto-biographical narrative, gives us an insight into his personal exploration of Buddhism. Through Ray Smith, Kerouac's alter-ego, we are given an insight, not only into what Kerouac believed Buddhism to be, but to his

⁶Though the earliest ever contact is thought to have been around the third century BCE with no record of more contact for hundreds of years after. Gethin, Rupert, 1998, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.273.

⁷Anon., 2009, 'Gary Snyder', *Poetry Foundation*, available at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/gary-snyder>.

thoughts on the philosophy and practice of it, how these thoughts developed, and how he felt it was best to practice his religion. I say *his* religion for I will be considering his religious affiliation to be not strictly within one particular religion, but with his own fusion of both Catholicism and Buddhism, which I will discuss in chapter three. I will briefly explore the relationship Ray Smith (Kerouac) and Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder) to highlight Smith's personal interpretation of Buddhism and compare this to Ryder's Zen beliefs and lifestyle. By looking closely at the text I will bring to attention Buddhist concepts that are being explored by Kerouac, including the Buddhist ideas of mediation, emptiness, 'not-self', and the renouncer tradition. Lastly, I will compare Smith's journey in *The Dharma Bums* to the Buddha, giving a brief insight into Siddhartha Gautama's journey to enlightenment and why this may have influenced Kerouac.

In the third chapter, I will be considering the importance and the subsequent impact that the nineteenth century Transcendentalist movement had on American spirituality, especially in regard to the introduction of eastern thought. The main body of this chapter will explore the interreligious aspect of Kerouac's religiousness. As will be demonstrated in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac never fully abandoned his Catholic childhood faith, and used many references to both Christ and the Buddha in his literature, for example in *Wake Up* (1955) he names the Buddha the 'Jesus Christ of India.'⁸ Rather than fully adopt Buddhism and leave Catholicism behind, Kerouac will be shown to have formulated his own faith from both. I will discuss how his pluralistic attitude furthers the move towards individualism and anti-conformity, removing oneself from religious authority and focusing on the self, permits the sense of freedom that was lacking.

Overall, my thesis will be looking at how Kerouac interpreted Buddhism, and how both his peers and his Catholic faith shaped his understanding of it. I will work to understand how Kerouac used Buddhism to guide his own spirituality, and how this is portrayed through *The Dharma Bums*.

⁸Kerouac, Jack, 2008, *Wake Up*, London: Penguin, p.7.

Chapter One: Kerouac's life, the Beats, and the turn towards Buddhism

In this chapter I will give a brief overview of the life of Jack Kerouac, giving details of his religious upbringing as a catholic, the fear of death that came from the death of his brother and the from Second World War, and the impact these may have had on his spirituality. Following on from this I will examine what was happening in America at the time including the rise of capitalism and the imposed fear of the communists that threatened conservative America, triggering a state of paranoia. I will then discuss Eric Fromm's (1955) theory of collective insanity and apply it to this context; for though America may have appeared to prosper, its citizens were suffering from post-war confusion and instability. A brief introduction to the key figures of the Beat Generation such as Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg will then be given, after which I will look at how and why they, as a group, moved towards Buddhism. In the early/mid twentieth century there was little literature on Buddhism. Consequently, the Beat Generation had a great influence on informing each other's Buddhism, it is therefore important, when discussing Kerouac's Buddhism, to include the relationship between Kerouac and the other Beats.

Jack Kerouac was born on the 12th of March 1922 to French Canadian, Catholic parents Leo Kéroack and Gabrielle L'Evesque.⁹ As Richard S. Sorrell discusses in his work on novelists and ethnicities (1982), Catholicism was incredibly important for French Canadians. Nationalism and Catholicism became united when the church was established as the protector of the nationality's heritage in the nineteenth century.¹⁰

⁹Nicosia, Gerald, 1983, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*, New York: Grove Press, p.21.

¹⁰Sorrell, Richard S., 1982, 'Novelists and Ethnicity: Jack Kerouac and Grace Metalious as Franco-Americans' *MELUS*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism, pp. 37-52, p.40.

Importantly for this thesis, the church taught the dominance of spirituality over the material,¹¹ an attitude that is akin to the Buddhist belief system which centralises itself around state of mind and the realisation of impermanence of the physical world,¹² a belief system that Kerouac would later explore. Kerouac's older brother Gerard died at age the age of nine of rheumatic fever when Kerouac was four years old. Gerard was thought of by both his mother and the nuns who taught him at St. Louis de France Parochial School, the same school that Kerouac attended, as a martyred saint, influencing Kerouac's obsession with suffering as a means to attain sainthood.¹³ This obsession made Buddhism appealing, suffering or *Dukkha* in Pali, and the cessation of *Dukkha* is regarded as expressing the orientation of all Buddhism,¹⁴ rather than neglecting suffering, Kerouac found a system of beliefs that acknowledged it. Gerard's death had a significant impact on Kerouac's life; visions that Kerouac later wrote about in *Visions of Gerard* (1963) became a common occurrence, one of which included a man walking towards what he later thought, in his days of Buddhist experimentation,¹⁵ to be the Buddhist Pure Land.¹⁶

Death became a prevalent thought for Kerouac as a child, the night time would 'terrify him with its black suggestion of death and mourning.'¹⁷ This was also a reality for many people in America as a result of World War II (1939-1945), beginning when Kerouac was seventeen years old. As Nicosia acknowledges, such a sensitive, intelligent man who had at a young age started to question his life and, in particular, his religion, claiming that 'if he were God he would change a great many things,'¹⁸ will understandably start to question the nature of success¹⁹ after a time of so much death.

¹¹ Sorrell, 1982, p.40.

¹² Gethin, Rupert, 1998, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.193.

¹³ Sorrell, 1982, p.40.

¹⁴ Gethin, p.59.

¹⁵ Kerouac's experimentation with Buddhism roughly lasted from around 1954, around the time when he was trying to get *On The Road* published, which he describes as his 'pre-enlightenment work' (Giamo, Benedict, 2003, 'Enlightened Attachment: Kerouac's Impermanent Buddhist Trek', *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 2/3, pp.173-206, p. 174), to 1957 when he wrote to Gary Snyder saying that 'his Buddhism was dead', deciding to return to Catholicism. Tonkinson, Carole (ed), 1995, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, New York: Riverhead Books, p.27.

¹⁶ Nicosia, Gerald, 1983, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*, New York: Grove Press, p.26.

¹⁷ Nicosia, 1982, p.29.

¹⁸ Nicosia, 1982, p.46.

¹⁹ Nicosia, 1982, p.58.

Not only was conservative America affected by the war but by the paranoia and ‘fear of conspiracy’²⁰ that came with the Cold War, President Eisenhower’s injunction (1953) that removed past drug or alcohol abusers, people with mental illnesses, and those considered too soft on communism, from the government,²¹ and the execution of communists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (1953).²² The Rosenbergs, prosecuted in 1950 for conspiracy to commit espionage, were, as Sara Knox (1993) describes ‘scripted characters to parade before an audience of their enemies and executioners’;²³ tactfully publicised to both demonstrate the power the government had over the disloyal, and increase the ‘fear of conspiracy.’ As the government became stricter against communism, the fear generated from the execution and injunction of 1953 aiding them, Eisenhower’s capitalism took over.²⁴ As the article ‘Buddhism as the Beat Generation’ (1995) published in *Tricycle* (Buddhist magazine) states, all this increasing anxiety ‘manifested itself in a sharp surge in consumer spending.’²⁵ After the Second World War the economy in America grew as capitalism grew; by the fifties it had achieved global dominance.²⁶ As a result culture became driven by a cycle of ‘work, produce and consume’,²⁷ and this can be applied to the consumerist culture that *The Dharma Bums* (1958) rebels against. America is spoken of with aversion, the character Japhy Ryder believes he is born into America because of bad karma; he says ‘nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom.’²⁸ The fifties was said to be a time of ‘intolerance for difference’; mass produced goods, great corporations and prefabricated towns²⁹ removed individualism and freedom as people become products of a consumer society. This is much like life in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) in which Huxley portrays a world of caste systems, genetic engineering and brainwashing, where

²⁰Knox, Sara L., 1993, ‘The Genealogy of Treason: ‘Ethel Rosenberg and the Masculinist Discourse of Cold War’, *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, pp. 32-49, p.34.

²¹Anon., 1969, ‘Buddhism and the Beat Generation’, *Tricycle*, <http://www.tricycle.com/special-section/buddhism-beat-generation>.

²²Knox, Sara L., 1993, p.34.

²³Knox, Sara L., 1993, p.32.

²⁴Mauk, David & Oakland, John, 2009, *American civilization: an introduction*, London: Routledge, 5th ed., p.230.

²⁵Anon., 1969, ‘Buddhism & the Beat Generation’.

²⁶Mauk, David & Oakland, John, 2009, p.230.

²⁷Tonkinson, 1995, p.viii.

²⁸ Kerouac, Jack, 1994 [1958], *The Dharma Bums*, London: Flamingo, p.29.

²⁹Frank, Thomas, 1997, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.10.

life is lived only for pleasure;³⁰ embodying what the ideological world of consumerism would be in reality. But it is in the imperfect, simplistic living of those in the rare savage reservations that the main character Bernard Marx finds happiness and individuality. Like Kerouac, Huxley lived through the war, in his foreword to *Brave New World* he states that if we do not learn from events such as World War II, we will have a future of ‘ruinous warfare,’ with no peace and no individuality.³¹

In the documentary *What Happened to Kerouac?* (2012) which consists of interviews with many of Kerouac’s closest friends and peers, Edie Kerouac, his first wife, explains her first-hand experience of the condition the war left people in: ‘we thought we’d be dead. People don’t realise the intensity the war put on you,’ people lived with the thought ‘today we live and tomorrow we die’ and this, she says, is what led Kerouac to write what he did.³² One could read this through the lens of Freud’s perception that religion is a defence against the fear of death.³³ As I will discuss in chapters two and three, Kerouac’s literature demonstrates a constant search for faith, exploring both Catholicism and Buddhism; taking Freud’s theory into account and the multiple studies done by the likes of Herman Feifel,³⁴ who found that individuals are more likely to turn to religion if they fear death, we can understand why Kerouac was drawn to religion; he was searching for a way to overcome this fear.

As stated by Edie Kerouac, the intensity of the war generated instability and a fear of death for those alive at the time. In *The Sane Society*, Published in 1955, around the time Kerouac was writing, Erich Fromm turns the focus off individual insanity and instead argues that western society as a whole may be lacking in sanity.³⁵ As Fromm points out, though the western world, especially the United States, may have achieved

³⁰Daisetz T. Suzuki likewise believes society has come to this point, he thinks there is no room in our hearts for enjoying life in any other way than ‘running after excitement for excitement’s sake’. Suzuki, Daisetz T., 1959, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.287.

³¹ Huxley, Aldous, 1994 [1932], *Brave New World*, London, Flamingo, p. 6 of ‘Foreword’.

³² *What Happened to Kerouac?* Documentary, 2012, directed by Lerner, Richard, USA: 3DD, disc 1, 1:45:00.

³³Lazar, Aryeh, 2006, ‘Fear of Personal Death as a Predictor of Motivation for Religious Behavior,’ *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 179-189, p.180.

³⁴ Feifel, Herman, 1959, ‘Attitudes towards Death in Some Normal and Mentally 111 Populations’ in H. Feifei (ed.), *The Meaning of Death*, pp. 114-130. New York: McGraw-Hill.

³⁵ Fromm, Erich, 2013 [1955], *The Sane Society*, New York: Open Road, p.13.

vast material wealth, it is in fact the west that appears to be the most mentally unbalanced. He looks at figures for alcoholism in 1948, exposing the United States as the most affected by it with 3,952 per 100,000 people considered to be alcoholics,³⁶ (Kerouac himself died of alcohol related problems)³⁷ and identifies the United States as fourth in the table assessing the amount of ‘destructive acts’ (homicide and suicide) in countries.³⁸ Edie Kerouac’s description of post-war America corresponds to Fromm’s argument of collective insanity by revealing the impact the war had on the majority of people, requiring us to consider the significance of the damaged state of society as oppose to just the individual. Insanity is a theme throughout Beat literature, reflecting the mental unbalance of the society in America at the time, which Fromm has observed. This is exemplified by the character of Dean Moriarty in Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), published two years after *The Sane Society*. His erratic behaviour escalates throughout the novel; Sal Paradise (the narrator) at one point describes him as a ‘hurricane of energy,’³⁹ he is the instigator of the many spontaneous journeys they go on, being constantly ‘on the road’, incapable of settling down in one place with one job or one woman. This theme of instability and insanity contrasts the ‘American Dream’ which embodies the social ideals of the Founding Fathers such as a life of wealth and prosperity.⁴⁰ Suzuki defines this modern age as ‘a state of complete slavery’ to such ‘ideas and notions, fashions and traditions,’⁴¹ an outcome of the materialistic orientation of a consumer society.⁴² As Alfred Hornung (1999) states, the realities of the industrialised modern America of this time were far removed from such ideologies,⁴³ instead, the instability of Moriarty would have been more relatable to people who were still suffering from post-war confusion. This indicates why Kerouac had such an impact on his readers; as William Burroughs states, ‘art tells us what we know and don’t know we know’;⁴⁴ Kerouac is illuminating the presence of ‘alienation, the restlessness, the dissatisfaction’ in society at a time when people were being told

³⁶Fromm, 1955, p.17.

³⁷Nicosia, 1982, p.697.

³⁸ Fromm, 1955, p.16.

³⁹ Kerouac, Jack, 1972 [1957], *On the Road*, London: Penguin, p.158.

⁴⁰ Hornung, Alfred, 1999, ‘The Un-American Dream’, *American Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 545-553, p.547.

⁴¹Suzuki, 1959, p.373.

⁴²Hornhung, 1999, p.456.

⁴³Hornung, 1999, p.545.

⁴⁴ Charters, 1992, p.xxxi.

how to live. Instead of promoting the ‘American Dream’ which is unattainable for many, Kerouac advocates a personal and social change where individuality is valued, rebelling against the homogeneity of conformism. Burroughs believes the Beat Generation to be an even greater threat than the communists to the conservative America mentioned earlier in this chapter, for this very reason. Kerouac, among others, started to rebel through literature and lifestyle, rather than through politics, in an attempt to bring back individualism. This triggered a counterculture which Burroughs, who was part of the same movement as Kerouac, believes resulted in a freer America.⁴⁵ The movement became known as the ‘Beat Generation’, I will now briefly explain how the movement emerged.

Kerouac met Lucian Carr, and Allen Ginsberg, at Columbia University in 1944. With the aid of Benzedrine and Marijuana, Ginsberg and Carr had attempted to develop a concept of ‘post-human post-intelligence’, which they called their ‘New Vision’ within literature; defined by Ginsberg as an ‘uninhibited expression of art’ through ‘true expression’.⁴⁶ This uninhibited expression is arguably one of the core aspects of the Beat Generation’s work, particularly in Kerouac’s spontaneous prose; he attempts to write with no ‘selectivity’ of expression but following free deviation ... into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought.’⁴⁷ Joined by other likeminded writers such as William Burroughs and Gary Snyder, they formed the foundation of what was to be known as the Beat Generation. Although ‘beat’ had bad connotations for its association with drugs, Kerouac assured people that he did not intend it to mean ‘juvenile delinquents’, rather it meant ‘characters of a special spirituality ... staring out the dead wall window of our civilization.’⁴⁸ The movement were far from delinquent; they were spiritual, philosophical thinkers, keen to study foreign thought and keen to distance themselves from the materialism that was growing fast in America.⁴⁹ They were ‘beat’ down by post-war America, thus motivating them to find security and peace elsewhere. The move away from the values of American society is prominent throughout *The Dharma*

⁴⁵Foley, Jack, 1998, ‘Beat’, *Discourse*, Vol. 20, No. 1/2, *The Silent Beat*, pp. 182-197, p.194.

⁴⁶Charters, 1973,p.53.

⁴⁷Weinreich, 1987, p.2.

⁴⁸Charters, Ann, 1992, *The Portable Beat Reader*, London: Penguin, p. xviii.

⁴⁹Charters, 1992, p. xviii.

Bums where both the narrator Ray Smith, and the novel's hero, Japhy Ryder, repeatedly express a rebellion against American values 'with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values.'⁵⁰ Smith, as the Beat's did, attempts to restore 'real human values' to both themselves and the people of the America, who in their suburban houses, as Smith says, would not see him spending the night sleeping under a pine tree because they were 'all looking at the television anyway';⁵¹ the television embodying the new consumer culture where materialism serves to distract the uprooted civilization.

Kerouac's move away from American commercialism towards Buddhist practice in the early 1950's was heavily influenced by his peers, who in turn he also influenced. It is important to briefly mention some of these key figures; perhaps the most significant person to mention here is Gary Snyder (1930-present). He had a significant impact on Kerouac's life and literature and is depicted as the oriental scholar Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums* (1958) who influences Ray Smith (Kerouac) in literature and religion. As a young boy Snyder developed an interest in Chinese landscape paintings, having grown up on a small farm he felt a strong connection with nature, and after the destruction to the pacific Northwestern forests in America he started to look towards the eastern cultures that appeared to him to live more harmoniously with nature.⁵² In 1949, after reading Ezra Pound⁵³ and Arthur Waley's translations of Chinese classics,⁵⁴ his interests in Indian culture intensified and he decided to formally study Buddhism.⁵⁵ He met Whalen at this time and together they shared their interest in Buddhism and began reading the Zen works of D. T. Suzuki, considered one of the most key figures in bringing Buddhism to the west,⁵⁶ and also R. H. Blyth's translation of *Haiku*.⁵⁷ The interest in Haiku poems also appears throughout *The Dharma Bums*, an indication of

⁵⁰Kerouac, 1958, p.29.

⁵¹Kerouac, 1958, p.183.

⁵²2009, 'Gary Snyder', *Poetry Foundation*, available at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/gary-snyder>

⁵³Early twentieth century writer Ezra Pound played a significant role in popularising Chinese poetry (Fields, 1992, p.163). In *The Dharma Bums* Ryder (Snyder) tells Ray that Pound is his favourite poet. (Kerouac, 1958, p.25).

⁵⁴Tonkinson, 1995, p.2.

⁵⁵Tonkinson, 1995, p.2.

⁵⁶Fields, 1992, p.34.

⁵⁷'Haiku' meaning a Japanese poetic form. Tonkinson, 1995, p.3.

Snyder's influence, where Smith attempts to write his own. For example, in chapter eight, Ryder teaches Smith about Haikus while the two climb mount Matterhorn.⁵⁸ Snyder's interest in the Japanese tradition led him to leave America and go to Japan to immerse himself in formal Zen practice in its original land. Though no longer in America, Snyder continued to influence the Beat Generation, remaining an integral part of the movement that helped bring Buddhism to American through literature.

Alongside Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, a political activist who protested against the Vietnam War, for gay rights and for freedom of speech, was a significant member of the Beat movement and helped to formulate the 'New Vision' of Literature mentioned earlier.⁵⁹ *Howl* (1956) is arguably one of the most renowned pieces of work to come out of the Beat movement and remains widely accredited. Like Kerouac, Ginsberg incorporates themes of multiple religions in his work and is reluctant to have a fixed spiritual and ethnic identity. Ginsberg says in one interview 'Yes, I am a Jew, but at the same time you see I am not a Jew. I am not Allen Ginsberg.'⁶⁰ This reflects Ginsberg's struggle with his Jewishness, like Kerouac he referenced his childhood religion in most of his work, but he does not have 'an exclusive Jewish frame of reference' as we know from his interest in Buddhism; Ginsberg views identities as something to remove oneself from rather than embrace.⁶¹ Themes of Judaism, Buddhism and Christianity resonate throughout his work, his poem *Kaddish* (1961) takes its title from the Jewish prayer, and he also writes of sutras such as *Sunflower Sutra* (1955). Ginsberg was heavily influenced by William Blake whose work also explored religion; Blake believed that religion should be an individual process and that 'all religions are one,'⁶² suggesting a pluralist attitude like that adopted by Kerouac (see chapter three). Ginsberg had what he referred to as 'vision of Blake' where Blake read to him his poem *Ah, Sunflower*, a poem that talks of a youth who 'pinned away with desire,'⁶³ which led

⁵⁸Kerouac, 1958, p.53.

⁵⁹ 1997, 'Allen Ginsberg', *Academy of American Poets*, available at: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/8>

⁶⁰Svonkin, Craig, 2010, 'Manishevitz and Sake, the Kaddish and Sutras: Allen Ginsberg's spiritual self othering', *College Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 166-193, p.166.

⁶¹Svonkin, 2010, 167.

⁶²See Blake's poem titled *All Religions are One*: Blake, William, 1795, *All Religions are One*, copy A, pl. 4. *The William Blake Archive*. Ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, Available at: <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/copy.xq?copyid=aro.a&java=no>, last accessed: 03/03/14.

⁶³William Blake, 2006, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, London: Tate Publishing, p. 43

Ginsberg to write his own poem *Sunflower Sutra*, a pilgrimage like, prophetic poem.⁶⁴ When reading Suzuki's work and his description of *Satori* as 'an insight into the unconscious,'⁶⁵ he decided that it 'seemed to be the right fitting word' for the vision he had experienced, sparking his interest in Buddhism.⁶⁶ Ginsberg went on to spend much of his life studying under Zen masters and Gurus, though it was not until he travelled to India years later and met Tibetan Lama Dudjom Rinpoche that he found 'personal relevance' in it, despite being acquainted with Buddhism even before Kerouac,⁶⁷ As well as Ginsberg and Snyder, Whalen also studied under Zen master in America, and later became ordained as a monk. Considering the limit of literature on Buddhism at the time and the fact that Suzuki, one of the few to have written about it, who focused predominantly on Zen, it is no surprise that the Beats would eventually be heavily associated with Zen thought and practices.

This chapter has looked at the key protagonists of the Beat movement, their backgrounds, and the emerging interest in Buddhism as a response to both society and their life experience. As Fromm brings to attention, America was affected by high levels of alcoholism, homicide and suicide. By exploring historical context of this time, including the execution of the Rosenbergs and the war, and the capitalist induced cycle of 'work, produce and consume'⁶⁸ we can understand what may have led to this 'collective insanity'⁶⁹ and begin to understand the appeal of Buddhist thought and practice. I have explored the impact that both the post-war fear of death and the conformity of a consumer society can have on people like Kerouac, Ginsberg and Snyder. As stated by Thomas Frank, it was a time of 'intolerance for difference,' the Beats worked to remove themselves from this conventional society. They did this through experimenting with new religious ideas from the east like their Transcendentalist predecessors, who I will discuss in the third chapter, and by writing

⁶⁴1997, 'Allen Ginsberg', *Academy of American Poets*, available at: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/8>.

⁶⁵Heinrich Dumoulin observes Suzuki's use of 'unconscious' as a 'significant discovery,' for it brings together modern psychology and Zen Buddhism, expressing what Zen masters mean when they speak of 'seeing into one's nature.' In Dumoulin, Heinrich, S.J., 1963, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, London: Faber and Faber, p.278.

⁶⁶Fields, 1992, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: a narrative history of Buddhism in America*, p.210

⁶⁷Tonkinson, 1995, p.90

⁶⁸Tonkinson, 1995, p.viii.

⁶⁹Fromm, 1955, p.13.

literature that expressed the discontent they felt with America.

Chapter Two: Buddhism in *The Dharma Bums*

In this chapter I will take a closer look into Jack Kerouac's interpretation of Buddhism and analyse how it is depicted through the novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958). I will start by looking at the relationship between Ray Smith (Kerouac) and Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder) and continuing on from this, I will analyse Smith's interpretation of Buddhist, particularly from the Mahayana tradition, including the concept of emptiness or

sunyata. Next, I will examine how Smith's beliefs occasionally differed from his peers, most of whom practiced Zen, but I will also suggest that Zen may be more suited to the west and their way of life. Lastly, I will compare Kerouac's theme of a wanderer to the ancient Indian tradition of renouncers and to the Buddha himself, giving a brief insight into Siddhartha Gautama's journey to enlightenment and why this may have influenced Kerouac.

Kerouac has had a profound effect as a religious advocate; Robert A. F. Thurman, an enthusiast of Kerouac, explains in his introduction to *Wake Up* (1955) how, as a teen, he was 'exposed to perhaps the most accurate, poetic, and expansive evocation of the heart of Buddhism that was available at the time.'⁷⁰ Thurman calls Kerouac 'the lead bodhisattva' among his American predecessors because of his 'accurate ... evocation of the heart of Buddhism.'⁷¹ *The Dharma Bums* similarly uses the term *Bodhisattva*, which means 'one on the path to Buddhahood'⁷² who stays in *samsara* to both perfect spiritual qualities and help others. The term is used freely to describe both Smith and Ryder, an indication of the Mahayana influence on Kerouac. Unlike Theravada Buddhists who believe the path of *Bodhisattva* to be a heroic option, but one that is taken by only a few, Mahayana traditions believe that it is 'the only legitimate way of Buddhist practice'⁷³; for them, the path of *arhatship*⁷⁴ appears selfish and lacks compassion for others. Thurman, by describing Kerouac as a *Bodhisattva*, suggests a strong belief in the influence that Kerouac's writing can have on people, just as a true *Bodhisattva* would aid people in life and faith. Though there is stigma around the west's attempt to understand Buddhism⁷⁵, Kerouac himself readily acknowledged that his way of practicing Buddhism inevitably has to be watered down by Americanism, especially due to his fame. In a letter to Ginsberg he wrote of how his simple life plans

⁷⁰Kerouac, 2008, p.vii.

⁷¹Kerouac, 2008, p.vii.

⁷²Gethin, 1998, p.319.

⁷³ Gethin, 1998, p.228.

⁷⁴*Arhat* meaning 'an awakened Buddhist saint' (p.319) who has escaped from the cycle of *samsara*: the goal of Theravada Buddhists, while the *Bodhisattva* remains in *samsara* out of compassion for the suffering world (pp.228-229), Gethin, 1998.

⁷⁵ For example, see Ling, Trevor, 1979, *Buddha Marx and God*, London: Macmillan Press: Ling argues that the Western world misunderstands Buddhism as a religionless faith, (p.21) and that they will feel 'the impossibility of trying to convey the deep feeling which they [the Buddhist people of Asia] have for the Buddha' (p.28).

of *Bhikkhood*⁷⁶ ‘would have to be some American streamlined Bhikkhood’ because so far he had only attracted attention.⁷⁷ He could not live the Buddhist renouncer life that he had wished for so he settled, as Ray Smith does, with integrating Buddhism into his American lifestyle. But it is no longer uncommon to individualise religion in this way; there is no dogmatic authority that one must follow, and this is what Woodhead and Heelas in *Religion in Modern Times* (2000) call ‘the culture of choice.’⁷⁸

Kerouac was not interested in fame or politics; his success undermined his true intent, the Beat Generation evolved quickly into a political movement that he wanted no part of. What he did want was, firstly, recognition as a serious writer, and secondly, peace, and he attempted to acquire this through religion. But as the ‘King of the Beats’ he became the face of a political movement, his work being considered a powerful political statement.⁷⁹ *Big Sur* depicts the despair Kerouac felt; he does not want the fame he is given, and the people taking the title of ‘hipsters’, he believes, did not possess the true essence of the Beat Generation.⁸⁰ Ann Charters speaks of how what Kerouac wanted most was credit and feedback from critics, but all he received was a growing fan base, who, as *Big Sur* describes, would turn up at his door, expecting a young glamorous author.⁸¹ Conversely, Ray Smith, Kerouac's alter ego, embodies Kerouac's desire to be characterised as man in search of wisdom; he concentrates hard on attaining self-enlightenment, practicing self-discipline and meditating daily. Alongside his search for wisdom and the meaning of life, we witness the friendship of Smith and Japhy Ryder and the rise of the anti-west new consciousness developing through the enthusiastic, excitement of their late night talks. It is interesting to read conversations between Ryder (Gary Snyder), the ‘true Buddhist student’ as Charters states, and Smith (Kerouac) the ‘self-taught practitioner,’⁸² Smith describes himself and Ryder as ‘two strange dissimilar monks on the same path.’⁸³ And they are dissimilar:

⁷⁶ *Bhikkhu* in Pali means Buddhist monk. Gethin, 1997, p.319.

⁷⁷ Tonkinson, 1995, p.25.

⁷⁸ Woodhead, Linda, and Heelas, Paul, 2000, *Religion in Modern Times: an interpretive anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, p.345.

⁷⁹ *What Happened to Kerouac?*, 2012, disc 2.

⁸⁰ Kerouac, *Big Sur*, p. 48.

⁸¹ *What Happened to Kerouac?*, 2012, disc 2.

⁸² *What Happened to Kerouac?*, 2012, disc 1, 02:11:00.

⁸³ Kerouac, 1958, p.147.

Smith, in the beginning, claims he is not interested in Zen like Ryder, the oriental scholar, despite the fact that the majority of literature available at the time was concerning Zen Buddhism, such as the work of D. T. Suzuki and Dwight Goddard.⁸⁴ Smith 'didn't give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavors of Buddhism,' instead, he is only interested in 'the first of Sakayamuni's four noble truths.'⁸⁵ Ginsberg confirms in an article written for *Tricycle* magazine (1992), that Kerouac himself was 'interested in going back to the original historic sources,'⁸⁶ reading them in great depth and going on to do further research, he believed that Kerouac become a 'brilliant intuitive Buddhist scholar,' giving him more praise for his understanding of Buddhist than his other peers (particularly Snyder and Watts). and in what he calls 'Samadhi ecstasy' in which he attempts to understand the concept of *sunyata* (emptiness) and *anatman* ('not self'), though he does not specifically use the term but he understands the concept:

I know I'm empty, awake, and that there's no difference between me and anything else. In other word it means that I've become the Buddha.⁸⁷

His use of the word empty demonstrates an understanding of the Buddhist notion of emptiness or 'nothing-ness', Nirvana being the 'realm of nothing-ness,' a concept explained in both the *Diamond Sutra (Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita)* and the *Heart Sutra (Maha-prajna-paramita-hridaya)* both from the *Prajnaparamita* literature which goes back to the first century BC,⁸⁸ consisting of the sutras that the schools of Mahayana Buddhism are based on.⁸⁹ The two sutras were translated in Kerouac's time in *A Buddhist Bible* (1932) by Dwight Goddard,⁹⁰ a collection of Mahayana texts that played a significant part in informing Kerouac's Buddhism.⁹¹ Smith quotes the *Diamond Sutra* many times throughout *The Dharma Bums* for example:

⁸⁴Such as Suzuki, D. T., 1974 [1950], *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, London: Rider, and Goddard, Dwight, 1932, *A Buddhist Bible*, online version, available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/bb/bb00.htm>.

⁸⁵Kerouac, 1958, p.14.

⁸⁶Ginsberg, Allen, 1992, 'Negative Capability: Kerouac's Buddhist Ethic', *Tricycle*.

⁸⁷ Kerouac, 1958, p.123.

⁸⁸Conze, Edward, 1958, *Buddhist Wisdom Book: containing The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*, London: George Allen & Unwin, p.10.

⁸⁹Dumoulin, Heinrich, S.J., 1963, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, London: Faber and Faber, p.34.

⁹⁰ Goddard, 1932, p.212.

⁹¹Lawlor, William, 2005, *Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons, and impact*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, p.138. Kerouac even included some of A Buddhist Bible in *Wake Up*. (Kerouac, 2008, *Wake Up*, London: Penguin).

Diamond Sutra says “Make no formed conceptions about the realness of existence nor about the unrealness of existence” (p.83)

Edward Conze (1958), in his commentary and translation of the *Diamond Sutra* explains how our experience and what we consider reality is that of a dream.⁹² Things we think exist and our experiences do not actually exist, but, like things seen in a dream, they are ‘nevertheless seen and heard and one is aware of them,’⁹³ and this is the concept of ‘realness’ and ‘unrealness’ that Smith attempts to convey. The impermanence of all life suggested by this Buddhist teaching of ‘unrealness’ and emptiness promotes acceptance of the fear of death Kerouac had, as discussed in chapter one.

Kerouac and his alter-ego Smith’s understanding of these Buddhist concepts alongside his lack of interest in different national traditions arguably produces an understanding of Buddhism that is close to what is taught by the Buddha.⁹⁴ This is frequently overlooked when being categorized as a being a ‘*Catholic-Buddhist*’ (see chapter three), turning the focus off his understanding of Buddhism itself. Smith is seeking truth in *The Dharma Bums* through both Catholicism and Buddhism, he may not know as much about Buddhism as Ryder, but as Walpola Rahula argues in *What the Buddha Taught* (1959), it is for the academic to understand the birthplace and development of an idea, the truth seeker need only understand the ‘thing’ itself.⁹⁵ However, despite possessing his own personal beliefs about Buddhism, at least to begin with, Smith does tend to mould his beliefs around Ryder as the novel progresses. Ryder exemplifies qualities that he aspires to such as his knowledge of Buddhism, his self-discipline, and his experience with solitude, much like that of the ninth century Chinese poet Han Shan (meaning ‘cold mountain’), who lived of ‘hermit simplicity’ on a mountain.⁹⁶ Han

⁹² Conze, Edward, 1958, *Buddhist Wisdom Book: containing The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra*, London: George Allen & Unwin, p.10.

⁹³ Conze, 1958, p.70.

⁹⁴ As noted, Smith is interested in following the four noble truths, the ‘realities’ whose nature the Buddha finally understood the night of his awakening (Gethin, 1997, p.60), and it is this that creates the foundation of all Buddhist thought. By following the original teachings he attempts to abandon greed and desire, as well as the thirst for existence and non-existence (Gethin, 1997, p.59), the way in which the Buddha did to reach Nirvana.

⁹⁵ Rahula, Walpola, 1959, *What the Buddha Taught*, New York: Grove Press, p.6.

⁹⁶ 2003, ‘*Han Shan: Cold Mountain Hermit*,’ Hermitary: resources and reflections on hermits and solitude, available at: <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/han-shan.html>, last accessed: 06/03/14.

Shan's life of isolation on the mountain, writing poetry has had a noticeable influence on *The Dharma Bums*: firstly, the novel is dedicated to the poet, and furthermore, because Smith and Ryder's fascination with mountain climbing and spending time as mountain lookouts,⁹⁷ as they both do, mirrors the life of Han Shan.

Although Smith admires Ryder, he is reluctant to engage in the practice *yabyum* which Ryder describes as a holy ceremony practiced in the temples of Tibet that represents sexual union of deities,⁹⁸ developed through Indian Tantric thought,⁹⁹ admitting that his Buddhist studies have taught him that lust is 'the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death.'¹⁰⁰ Smith, however, overcomes his reluctance to partake in the practice, but the internal struggle this causes him demonstrates the conflict between his desire and his attempts to live according to his Buddhist studies. Ryder justifies this sexual practice by maintaining that it is for religious purposes. Buddhist monks performing such practices would not do it to feed the desire but to reveal its nature and eradicate it, for it is thought that craving in a world where everything is changing, thus never being able to hold on to that which is being craved is, as Gethin states, the origin of suffering.¹⁰¹ However, there is no evidence of the desire being eradicated here, particularly for Smith who previously admits he has feelings for Princess,¹⁰² the woman taking part in *yabyum*; the label of a Tibetan Buddhist term justifies his desire. This is another good example of Woodhead and Heelas's 'culture of choice', Ryder, as a well-educated man, is able to choose parts that best suit his lifestyle from the wide variety of traditions and practices within Buddhism. This part of the novel both hints at Smith's different way of interpreting Buddhism, revealing his attempt to live as celibate, but also reveals that he is more suited to Zen, which allows for the freer life that Ryder exemplifies. In one conversation Smith's friend Alvah Goldberg expresses his indifference to Smith's interpretation of

⁹⁷Smith and Japhy hike together up Mount Matternhorn starting in chapter eight of *The Dharma Bums* (pp.47-80), and in chapter thirty two through to thirty four, Smith spends time as a mountain lookout, living alone in the Cascades mountains to look out for fires. Kerouac, 1958, pp.187-204.

⁹⁸Kerouac, 1958, p.27.

⁹⁹'Yab-yum', *Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias*, available at: <http://universalium.academic.ru/293608/yab-yum>, last accessed:06/03/14.

¹⁰⁰Kerouac, 1958, p.27.

¹⁰¹Gethin, 1998, p.70.

¹⁰²Kerouac, 1958, p.27.

Buddhism, which focuses on the self and detachment from materialism, asking him ‘don’t you think it’s much more interesting just to be like Japhy and have girls and studies and good times.’¹⁰³ To this he replies that he does not, though his continuous consumption of alcohol and giving in to his desire for Princess goes against this. Goldberg’s attitude is reminiscent of the western culture and consumerism mentioned in chapter one; to him, life is more interesting when living like Ryder and partying, as oppose to the solitude that Smith seeks. This indicates that the west is more generally suited to Zen. Christmas Humphreys explores this in *Zen Comes West* (1977) and states that one reason behind Zen’s popularity is due it’s the humour, as he says ‘laughter is an essential ingredient in its method of work. Every other school of Buddhism is full of woe.’¹⁰⁴ And the attraction to this attitude of Zen is depicted in Goldberg’s statement. Moreover, from its early stages Zen Buddhism distinguished itself from the *Sanga* (community of monks) with its freedom to take part in all the practical ways of life.¹⁰⁵ As D. T. Suzuki explains, Zen has no set of rules one must abide by, its flexibility can allow for adapting itself into other philosophies and thought. But it nevertheless remains ‘animated with a certain revolutionary spirit’ proving to be a destructive force when overloaded with conventionalism,¹⁰⁶ which can therefore lend itself to a westerner who is attracted to Buddhist spirituality and individualism but does not want a strict dogmatic religion, working particularly with Smith’s bringing together of Catholicism and Buddhism.

Looking at some of Kerouac’s novels, we can witness what Charters calls a ‘furious energy’¹⁰⁷ which finds its outlet in Buddhism, as heavily illustrated in *The Dharma Bums*; *The Dharma Bums is a*, a more peaceful narrative than his earlier work *On the Road*, in the former the narrator has more direction in his life, though he may still be on the road in terms of being unsettled. In *The Dharma Bums* being a ‘lonesome traveller’¹⁰⁸ is the desired way of life that will help him reach spiritual fulfilment. The

¹⁰³ Kerouac, 1958, p.30.

¹⁰⁴Humphreys, 1977, p. 180.

¹⁰⁵Suzuki, 1959, p.4.

¹⁰⁶Suzuki, 1959, p.63.

¹⁰⁷Charters, Ann, 1973, *Kerouac: A Biography*, San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, p.199.

¹⁰⁸Kerouac published an additional novel in 1960 that shared the theme of the road with *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* titled ‘lonesome traveller’. Kerouac, Jack, 1972 [1960], *The Lonesome Traveller*, London:

hitch-hiking ‘bums’ of *On the Road* have become enriched with conviction; they are now in search of Dharma. This brings us onto the concept of a wanderer (*Parivrājaka*) which prevails throughout Kerouac’s work. *The Dharma Bums* is reminiscent of the ancient Indian ‘renouncer’ and ascetic tradition where people had ‘gone forth from the household life into homelessness.’¹⁰⁹ Predominantly male, the renouncers and ascetics would go either on their own or in groups and be involved in the practice of austerities,¹¹⁰ meditation, and the development of theoretical and philosophical knowledge to justify such practices.¹¹¹ This is unsurprisingly appealing to a man surrounded by rigid conformity, a necessity to the growth of Eisenhower’s capitalism¹¹² (see chapter one). It is likely that this recurrent theme of a lonesome wanderer is also inspired by Thomas Wolfe (1900-1939), a dominating figure in literature when Kerouac was coming of age. Kerouac had mentioned to Ginsberg that he planned to write a novel modelled around Wolfe¹¹³ whose writing, as Jon A. Shaw describes, similarly demonstrates a preoccupation with ‘wandering, an endless quest, mourning and unalterable loneliness.’¹¹⁴ Weinreich discusses how the journey motif of *The Dharma Bums*, along with *The Lonesome Traveller*, uses the idea of the road as a metaphor and ‘learning as one goes on, especially in the Zen overtones.’¹¹⁵ I would agree and add that Smith (and Kerouac) is on the metaphorical road; learning, depriving himself from his desires¹¹⁶, meeting other *Bhikkus* and trying to find out for himself the ‘truth of all things.’¹¹⁷ All these things parallel the Buddha’s journey which Kerouac writes about in a well-informed, unique, ‘Beat’ kind of way in *Wake Up*. Siddhartha Gautama (566 – 486 BCE)¹¹⁸ abandoned his life of wealth and privilege and

Grafton Books.

¹⁰⁹This phrase is, as Gethin notes, a common phrase in Buddhist sources, Gethin, 1998, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p.10.

¹¹⁰This included going naked in all weathers, physical discomfort, and even living as a cow or a dog. Gethin, 1998, p.10.

¹¹¹Gethin, 1998, p.11.

¹¹²Frank, 1997, p.18.

¹¹³Charters, 1973, *Kerouac: A Biography*, p.64.

¹¹⁴Shaw, Jon A., 2000, ‘Thomas Wolfe: Study of a Wanderer’, *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 148.

¹¹⁵Weinreich, Regina, 1990, *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac: a study of the fiction*, New York: Paragon House, p.121.

¹¹⁶Early on in the novel Smith reveals how he has been celibate for an entire year, he says ‘pretty girls make graves’ as he believed lust was the cause of birth which was the cause of suffering. Kerouac, 1958, p.26.

¹¹⁷Kerouac, 1958, 112.

¹¹⁸These dates are commonly used though the precise dates are uncertain. Gethin, 1998, p.14.

adopted a life of a wandering ascetic after he became troubled by the suffering of the old, the sick and the dying. He spent time learning from various teachers, practicing extreme austerity but finally reached the point of ‘awakening’ when meditating, and this involves the deepest understanding the nature of suffering, its cause, cessation and the way leading to its cessation,¹¹⁹ otherwise known as the Four Truths.¹²⁰ Kerouac shows great interest in the journey of Siddhartha Gautama Kerouac by rewriting his story. As mentioned in chapter one, Kerouac himself was troubled by suffering after the death of his brother, it seems he could relate to Buddha’s journey. *The Dharma Bums*’s obsession with wandering, hitchhiking and time in solitude to find the truth, published two years after he wrote *Wake Up*,¹²¹ depicts a man on a similar journey to the Buddha himself.

As I have shown, Kerouac demonstrates an in-depth understanding of Buddhist notions such as *sunyata* and *anatman* in *The Dharma Bums*. His reading of the *Diamond Sutra* and other texts in Goddard’s *A Buddhist Bible*, have informed his Buddhism to a point where he is capable of discussing these philosophical concepts. Though emphasis is placed on Snyder being the ‘scholar’ and Kerouac being a ‘self-taught practitioner’,¹²² Kerouac attempts to understand the ‘thing’ itself, focussing on the key notions, which as Rahula states, is what Buddhism requires.¹²³ I have discussed Kerouac’s reluctance to Zen Buddhism but suggested that, due to its lack of dogmatic authority and flexibility, Zen may be better suited to him, as it is to Ryder and Goldberg. Whether Zen or not, Kerouac’s exploration of Buddhism in *The Dharma Bums* reveals his interest in turning focus inwards to reflect on his own existence, becoming an individual on his own personal journey, like the Buddha; thus removing focus from the conformism, paranoia and suffering of the post-war America discussed in chapter one.

¹¹⁹Gethin, 1998, p.15.

¹²⁰Gethin, 1998, p.22.

¹²¹*Wake up* was written in 1955, 3 years before *The Dharma Bums* was published. ‘Introduction’ by Robert Thurman, in Kerouac, Jack, 2008, *Wake Up*, London: Penguin.

¹²² *What Happened to Kerouac?*, 2012, disc 1, 02:11:00.

¹²³Rahula, Walpola, 1959, *What the Buddha Taught*, New York: Grove Press, p.6.

Chapter Three: The American Situation/Kerouac's Individualisation of Religion

Jack Kerouac spent many years experimenting with Buddhism. In these years however, he never fully abandoned his Catholic faith, instead, he took a postmodernist, pick and mix approach to religion. According to John Hick's theory of pluralism, this is possible; I will explain this further in this chapter. I will initially discuss the transcendentalist movement of the nineteenth century to consider the progression of eastern/ Buddhist belief in American society and how the Beat Generation followed on from this, popularizing Buddhism within society. Including some critiques of both western Buddhism and Kerouac's understanding of Buddhism, I will finally examine the individualisation process of religion that Kerouac adopted.

Within nineteenth century America, the Transcendentalist movement offered an alternative to the spirituality than that provided by the Christian Church.¹²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leading figure of this movement, emphasised the importance of nature in understanding God and oneself, nature being a theme prevalent throughout both his and other Transcendentalists' work,¹²⁵ which rejected the Protestant belief that the Bible was the only source of divine revelation.¹²⁶ Indeed, many contemporary Protestants who looked only to the Biblical texts to define their religion viewed eastern religions such as Buddhism in the context of the western imperial dominance, and its assumption that Europeans had a right to judge the culture of subject peoples.¹²⁷

¹²⁴Porterfield, 2002, p.16.

¹²⁵One example is in Emerson's essay *Nature*, which describes the beauty of nature and the need for man to realise it. He says 'the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both.' 'Nature' in Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nature and selected essays*, London: Penguin, pp.35-81, p.39.

¹²⁶ Porterfield, 2002, p.16.

¹²⁷Normand, Lawrence 'Introduction' in Normand, Lawrence & Winch, Alison, 2013, *Encountering Buddhism*

Scholars, succumbing to this assumption, considered many Asian traditions to be degenerate versions of a 'one pure original one,' such as the founder of the British Pali text society,¹²⁸ Thomas William Rhys Davids who, for example, deemed Tibetan Buddhism to be 'corrupt Buddhism'.¹²⁹ The Transcendental distancing from the reliance on scripture allowed for a more open and embracing approach to eastern religions, and more specifically, Buddhism.

The Transcendentalist movement showed great interest in combining eastern and western thought to suit their own individual religious needs, and twentieth century writers such as Dwight Goddard, who wrote the Buddhist 'bible', which as I shall be discussing further in chapter three, promoted interreligious dialogue and pluralist religious practice. Kerouac was both familiar with the transcendentalists, having been inspired by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854),¹³⁰ and had studied from Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* (1932).¹³¹ Kerouac and Goddard share the want to combine Christianity and Buddhism, Goddard believes that 'Buddhism might serve to inform Christianity.'¹³² There are further likenesses in Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* to Goddard's views; Goddard, like D.T. Suzuki was interested in Zen, but he had also spent time in a Christian-Buddhist monastery in Nanking (China). He proceeded to form an American monastic order which included the 'Homeless Brothers', celibate renunciants who practiced *Dhyana* which is the Buddhist practice of meditation, bringing the practitioner 'deeper knowledge and experience of the nature of the world.'¹³³ The way of life Smith chooses in *The Dharma Bums* is profoundly similar to this lifestyle; he too approaches Buddhism from a Christian stance and is also interested in the idea of homelessness and being a wanderer as mentioned in chapter two.

While the Transcendentalists opened the door for the acceptance of Buddhism in

in *Twentieth-Century British and American Literature*, London: Bloomsbury, p.1.

¹²⁸Snodgrass, Judith, 2007, *Defining Modern Buddhism: Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids and the Pāli Text Society*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 27, No. 1, p.186.

¹²⁹Normand & Winch, 2013, p.2.

¹³⁰Charters, 1973, p.21.

¹³¹Nicosia, 1983, p.457.

¹³²Aitken, Robert, 1996, 'The Christian-Buddhist Life and Works of Dwight Goddard', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 16, pp.3-10, p.6.

¹³³Gethin, 1998, p.10.

America, it was not until the Beat Generation that the religion became popularised within society. In her anthology of the Beat generation *Big Sky Mind* (1995) Carole Tonkinson, former managing editor of *Tricycle*, characterises the Beat Generation as a new consciousness full of spiritual innovation.¹³⁴ As Stephen Prothero argues in his introduction to *Big Sky Mind*, the Beat movement were a part of a ‘religious demonstration’ as well as a counterculture against conformity, and have had a significant effect on ‘popularizing and transforming Buddhism in America.’¹³⁵ As Tonkinson describes, the ‘Big Mind’ of Buddhism where the boundaries between self and other are eliminated, seems to become an antidote to the paranoia and the conformity mentioned previously.¹³⁶ Additionally, Perry Schmidt-Leukul argues that the individualism that the Beat Generation sought to regain does have a place in Buddhism, for Buddhism requires an individual search for enlightenment.¹³⁷ Turning focus inward to the self and realisation of no-self (*Anatman*)¹³⁸ provides escape from a society heading towards Fromm’s notion of collective insanity¹³⁹ (see chapter one), by promoting self-reflection to aid those in a time of restrictive idealisms and increasing consumerism imposed on society by the government.

As well as being exotic, Buddhism appealed to the west, mainly, as Christmas Humphreys states, because it provided a relief from dogma.¹⁴⁰ That said, Ling would claim this is a misunderstanding, arguing that, though not set down like Christianity or Judaism, Buddhism still has the ‘Holy Truths’; doctrinal tenets that have come from the authority of the Buddha.¹⁴¹ Ling observes that the modern men who have lost their faith in organised religion and become ‘spiritual refugees’, find themselves attracted to eastern thought because they are unable to believe in a personal supreme god any longer. Wanting some form of ‘transcendental reference for human life,’ they turn to

¹³⁴Tonkinson, 1995, p.11.

¹³⁵Prothero, Stephen, ‘Introduction’ in Tonkinson, 1995, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, p. 9-10.

¹³⁶Tonkinson, 1995, pp. vii-viii.

¹³⁷Schmidt-Leukul, Perry, 2009, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity*, London: SCM, p.55.

¹³⁸Hadley, Barbara, 2011, ‘The growth of Buddhism in America’, *Spiritual Studies from a Global Perspective: The Ongoing East-West Dialogue*, p.7.

¹³⁹Fromm, Erich, 2013 [1955], *The Sane Society*, New York: Open Road.

¹⁴⁰Humphreys, Christmas, 1977, *Zen Comes West*, London : Curzon Press, p.178.

¹⁴¹Ling, Trevor, 1979, *Buddha, Marx and God*, London: Macmillan Press, p.17.

Buddhism which appears to provide them with exactly what they are looking for.¹⁴² However, Ling points out that what westerners perceive to be Buddhism is in fact far removed from the faith practiced in its homeland, Asia¹⁴³; he argues that the ‘religionless’ faith and the portrayal of it as simply a ‘humanistic philosophy rather than a religious system’ is wrong.¹⁴⁴ Ling believes that those in the west fail to recognise the authoritative spiritual revelation and strict religious life that has been bound up with Buddhism from the start.¹⁴⁵

Kerouac evidently wanted to read about Buddhism, and to write about it. However, Kerouac’s Buddhist literature was not as popular with publishers as his novels *On The Road* and *The Dharma Bums* were, the work containing the strongest Buddhist content was not published until recently; *Wake Up*, a retelling of the Buddha’s journey, was only published in 2008 and *Some of the Dharma* in 1997. Philip Whalen, another Beat interested in Asian thought, was also criticised for speaking about Buddhism, to which Kerouac told him ‘I like your poetry and Gary’s [Snyder’s] *because* it discusses enlightenment.’¹⁴⁶ That said, as sincere as Kerouac’s enthusiasm for Buddhism was, his experimentation with it only lasted from around 1954 to 1957, when he claimed his Buddhism was ‘dead’.¹⁴⁷ It did not result in the ultimate conversion as it did for Gary Snyder, who studied formal Buddhist practice in Japan.¹⁴⁸ Both Snyder and William Burroughs showed hostility towards Christianity; Burroughs, as Stephan Prothero recounts, condescendingly described Kerouac as a “‘Catholic-Buddhist” {emphasis his}’¹⁴⁹ suggesting you cannot, or at least it is not as commendable, to have affiliation for both simultaneously. This hostility is depicted in *The Dharma Bums* after Smith’s constant referencing of Christ, Ryder (Snyder) replies by saying ‘oh, don’t start preaching Christianity to me, I can just see you on your deathbed kissing the cross’ and bitterly adds that Smith will end up like Dwight Goddard, writer of *A Buddhist Bible*

¹⁴² Ling, 1979, p.18.

¹⁴³In Asia, he argues, Buddhism is a religion. Ling, 1979, p.28.

¹⁴⁴ Ling, 1979, p.21.

¹⁴⁵ Ling, 1979, p.21.

¹⁴⁶Tonkinson, 1995, p.26.

¹⁴⁷Tonkinson, 1995, p.27.

¹⁴⁸Tonkinson, 1995, p.172.

¹⁴⁹Charters, 1973, p.17.

(1932), who ‘spent his life as a Buddhist and suddenly returned to Christianity in his last days.’¹⁵⁰ However, as Snyder’s fictional representative prophesied, Kerouac does return to Catholicism towards the end of his life, reverting back to the dogmatic way of his childhood religion, though he never completely abandoned it when exploring Buddhist.

The Philosopher John Hick (1995) suggests that there is a central concern for all major world religions, and that they are all:

directed towards a transformation of human existence from self-centredness to a re-centring in what in our inadequate human terms we speak of as God, or Ultimate Reality, or the Transcendent, or the Real.¹⁵¹

This thought is reiterated by Kerouac throughout *The Dharma Bums*, which is evident within these examples:

Didn’t Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn’t Heaven Buddha’s nirvana? (p.97)

Who would you mean by God? [Japhy]
Just Tathagata, if you will [Smith] (p.168)

Here Kerouac is suggesting that heaven and nirvana are the same thing, just as God and Tathagata, another title for the Buddha, are; they are just different variations from different traditions. One can apply Hick’s pluralist argument to Kerouac’s interest in multiple faiths and argue that, if both religions direct towards the same things then whichever path someone decides to take is irrelevant, as all paths lead to the same ‘Ultimate Reality’. As Perry Schmidt-Leukel argues in ‘The Lasting Legacy of John Harwood Hick (1922 – 2012)’, Hick’s theory provides a way that expands and deepens one’s own understanding of the Ultimate.¹⁵² Therefore to be a ‘*Catholic-Buddhist*’ is a plausible religious affiliation. In a globalised world with the boundaries between different countries and cultures decreasing by means of faster travel and technology, it is understandable that exclusivism has been questioned by the likes of Hick and

¹⁵⁰ Kerouac, 1958, p.169.

¹⁵¹Hick, John, 1995, ‘The Rainbow of faiths: critical dialogues on religious pluralism, London: SCM press, P.18.

¹⁵²Schmidt-Leukel, Perry, 2013, ‘The Lasting Legacy of John Harwood Hick (1922 – 2012)’, *Current Dialogue*, pp. 78-82, p. 80.

Schmidt-Leukel. Kerouac's pluralist attitude in *The Dharma Bums* is a reaction to the bringing of eastern thought into the west; Kerouac sees similarities between the two and comes to believe that it is possible for both to be true.

In the chapter 'Detraditionalization' in their anthology *Religion in Modern Times* (2000), Woodhead and Heelas discuss the process of detraditionalization, the internalisation of authority in regards to religious belief, and the effect this has on religion.¹⁵³ Faith, they observe, has become an 'internal' process that develops from the individual's own knowledge and experience. Though I would add that there are still many who follow an 'external' authoritative figure, such as the Pope, the move away from the institutional has shaped modern religion significantly. Whereas the 'self' was once devalued, in need of guidance to salvation, it is now considered sacred, which is especially true in the case of Kerouac and the other Beats who saw focus on the self as the route to truth. Taking influence from transcendentalism, and distancing itself from dogmatic religious restrictions, *The Dharma Bums* emphasises the potency of individualism, and one of many examples that express this potency is: 'I would spend all that winter and spring meditating under the trees and finding out by myself the truth of all things.'¹⁵⁴ Finding out by *himself*, without the need for an authoritative figure. Whereas his Catholic upbringing would have taught Kerouac the importance of theological dogmatism and the authority of the priest, through Smith, he centres his search for truth internally. This theory of detraditionalisation also reflects the individualisation of religion that Kerouac exemplifies. Without the need for external authoritative figures, the church, or strict dogmas, one can pick and choose aspects of religion that best suits them and hold a pluralist religiousness rather than a strict affiliation to one tradition.

It must be acknowledged that Kerouac's understanding of Buddhism was not without critique amongst his contemporaries, and in particular, Alan Watts, a British populariser of Buddhism who taught Asian Studies in America, openly disputed

¹⁵³Woodhead and Heelas, 2000, p.342-343.

¹⁵⁴ Kerouac, 1958, p.112.

Kerouac's views on Buddhist practice. Watts himself spent time as an Episcopalian clergyman before returning to the Zen Buddhism that had interested him as a teenager, though he too maintained interest in Christianity.¹⁵⁵ Although his views eventually altered, Watts originally viewed Zen as an elitist way of life that is 'for the few',¹⁵⁶ despite Suzuki's description of Zen as having no hierarchy, even the masters are powerless in a way,¹⁵⁷ but it seems Watts's guarded attitude towards Zen remained whilst criticising Kerouac. He attacked 'Beat Zen' and claimed that they did not fully understand what it is to be Zen, instead he reduces Ginsberg and Kerouac's use of Zen as a 'very forceful social criticism' and, as he sarcastically adds, a simple 'digging of the universe.'¹⁵⁸ Watts notes how the original Chinese Zen masters, heavily influenced by Taoism, did not 'brag' about what they believed nor did they feel the need to justify it; instead their Zen was 'wu-shih', meaning 'no fuss.' Watts contrasts this to the Beats and argues that Zen is 'fuss' when it is 'mixed up with Bohemian affections, and 'fuss' when it is imagined that the only proper way to find it is to run off to a monastery in Japan or to do special exercises in the lotus posture for five hours a day.'¹⁵⁹ However, his disregard for Kerouac's writing may be influenced by Kerouac's mocking of Watts; Watts appears in *The Dharma Bums* as Arthur Whane,¹⁶⁰ who claims that Buddhism is 'getting to know as many people as possible', and at Ryder's leaving party, stands formally dressed while everyone else is naked and drunk.¹⁶¹ I would dispute Watt's depreciating of Beat spirituality and argue that, though they were in a culture that will inevitably force them into justifying or labelling themselves and their philosophy, as is the nature of the west, they (primarily Kerouac and Ginsberg), were reluctant to commit themselves exclusively to a tradition, instead they intentionally integrated different parts of different traditions to suit them. Therefore to overlook their philosophy based on the fact they had not submitted to Zen fully, or traditionally, is to focus too much on categorizing their beliefs rather than understanding them.

¹⁵⁵Furlong, Monica, 1986, *Genuine Fake: a biography of Alan Watts*, London: Unwin p.2.

¹⁵⁶Furlong, 1986, p.54.

¹⁵⁷Suzuki explains that the truth is self-attained, there is no process of transferring 'secrets' from master to disciple, it is therefore open to all who attempt such self-realization or *Satori*. Suzuki, 1959, p. 435.

¹⁵⁸ Alan Watts, 1996 [1958], 'Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen', *Chicago Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3/4, Fifty Years: A Retrospective Issue, pp. 48-55, p.52

¹⁵⁹Watts, 1958, p.55.

¹⁶⁰Furlong, 1986, p.142.

¹⁶¹ Kerouac, 1958, p.163.

I would argue that according to Suzuki's depiction of Zen as being able to adapt to other philosophies,¹⁶² Hick's pluralist theory, and Woodhead and Heelas's detraditionalization theory, Kerouac's incorporation of both Catholicism and Buddhism is a valid approach to religion. This allows him to pick and choose philosophies such as the concept of *sunyata* and the belief in Christ to influence him in his understanding of salvation and the ultimate truth. I would further this and add that, at a time of such distress in society, it is an understandable process to remove oneself from convention and instead hold beliefs around one's own internal reflection. Through Buddhism *The Dharma Bums* restores individuality and promotes non-conformity. Kerouac's writing of novels like this went on to inspire a generation of 'hipsters' in the sixties, who likewise went on to rebel against the intolerance of the establishment,¹⁶³ and they too found meaning and peace in eastern thought.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to understand Jack Kerouac's interpretation of Buddhism. To explore this required a consideration of the contextual background of America in the forties and the fifties, why Buddhism appealed to him and others, and how he individualised it to suit his Catholic faith.

Chapter one explores both Kerouac's life and the life of those living in America. Examining the historical background of America and thus bringing to attention events such as the execution of the Rosenbergs and the fear of conspiracy that came with the Cold War,¹⁶⁴ we can work towards understanding the 'collective insanity' suggested by Fromm.¹⁶⁵ Kerouac's literature reflected the true reality of society by depicting the restlessness and instability that they felt, instead of the distorted vision of the 'American Dream' that conveyed unattainable ideologies. The first chapter of this dissertation explores why, as a result of such events, the Beat Generation would want to

¹⁶²Suzuki, 1959, p.63.

¹⁶³Huddleston, Diane M., 2012, 'The Beat Generation: They Were Hipsters Not Beatniks', *Department of History seminar paper*, Western Oregon University, p.15.

¹⁶⁴Knox, Sara L., 1993, 'The Genealogy of Treason: 'Ethel Rosenberg and the Masculinist Discourse of Cold War'', *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, pp. 32-49, p.34.

¹⁶⁵Fromm, Erich, 2013 [1955], *The Sane Society*, New York: Open Road, p.13.

remove themselves from society and start to look towards the east for spirituality. Their move towards Buddhism was part of a journey to find individuality in a capitalist society that, as Frank Thomas states, was intolerant of difference.¹⁶⁶

In the second chapter I have discussed Kerouac's Buddhism in *The Dharma Bums* and looked at Smith's relationship with Ryder to assess how Snyder influenced Kerouac in his Buddhism, but also to highlight Smith's different interpretation of it. For example, Smith's celibacy contrasts Ryder's practice of *yabyum*, a Tantric practice representing the sexual union of deities;¹⁶⁷ Smith believes that such lust is the cause of suffering.¹⁶⁸ I have argued that Kerouac demonstrates a good understanding of complex Mahayana Buddhist terms like *sunyata* and *anatman* and of the four noble truths, and examined his depiction of them in relation to the texts he read such as the *Diamond Sutra*. I have also explored how, although Zen may be more appealing to the west due to its lack of dogmatic authority¹⁶⁹ Smith, in *The Dharma Bums*, shows a reluctance to conform to one tradition. He openly speaks of Christ, and believes Heaven to be the Buddha's Nirvana.¹⁷⁰ As with Allen Ginsberg's dislike of 'fixed identities'¹⁷¹ Kerouac does not label his alter-ego Smith's religiousness as anything. I have argued that to have this approach allows for spiritual freedom, leaving Smith to experiment with the Buddha's solitude, Ryder's *yabyum* practice, prayers to 'God'.¹⁷²

The third chapter of this dissertation has further examined the interreligiousness of *The Dharma Bums* as an attempt to reveal the true nature of Kerouac's spirituality. I have looked at John Hick's 'pluralist' philosophy,¹⁷³ relating it to Kerouac's work, and argued that it is possible and plausible to have multiple faiths at one time. This allowed him to pick and choose aspects of both religions, and enabled him to practice the

¹⁶⁶Frank, Thomas, 1997, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.10.

¹⁶⁷'Yab-yum', *Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias*, available at: <http://universalium.academic.ru/293608/yab-yum>, last accessed:06/03/14.

¹⁶⁸Kerouac, 1958, p.27.

¹⁶⁹Suzuki, 1959, p.5.

¹⁷⁰Kerouac, 1958, p.97.

¹⁷¹Svonkin, Craig, 2010, 'Manishevitz and Sake, the Kaddish and Sutras: Allen Ginsberg's spiritual self othering', *College Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 166-193, p.167.

¹⁷²Smith says 'God, I love you' and 'God. Take care of us all, one way or the other.' Kerouac, 1958, p.204.

¹⁷³ Hick, John, 1995, 'The Rainbow of faiths: critical dialogues on religious pluralism, London: SCM press.

‘watered down’ version of the *Bhikkhoo* (monkhood) way of life that his fame and lifestyle did not permit.¹⁷⁴ Schmidt-Leukel argued that Hick’s theory provides a way to deepen one’s understanding of the ultimate; Kerouac used comparisons of Jesus and the Buddha, and Heaven and Nirvana, to understand the ‘truth of all things’.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, Kerouac’s ‘detraditionalization’ of religion serves to promote the ‘self’ as a potent means to salvation.¹⁷⁶ Americans like the Beats and the hipsters that were to follow¹⁷⁷ in the sixties, having lost trust and faith in the government as a result of fear evoked by anti-communism,¹⁷⁸ found freedom in the detraditionalization of religion. Many, as a result of the Beat Movement, turned to Buddhism too, and, particularly in Zen, found the ‘release from confusion of the relative world.’¹⁷⁹ Additionally, Buddhism gave Kerouac a system of thought where cessation of *Dukkha* (suffering) is regarded as the goal of all practice,¹⁸⁰ the acknowledgment of suffering being key to Kerouac’s attraction to Buddhism.

In writing this dissertation, I have found that Jack Kerouac’s faith in Catholicism must be acknowledged to understand his interpretation of Buddhism. His interest in it came alongside his interest in Catholicism; he therefore interprets it differently to Buddhist Gary Snyder. Upon exploring the context in which he was writing, we can understand the personalised spirituality of his alter-ego Ray Smith and apply it Woodhead and Heelas’s detraditionalization theory. Having faith in the ‘self’ to reach salvation and moving away from conformity provides the freedom and individualisation that Kerouac and the other Beats sought after. Buddhism’s advocating of a mendicant, homeless path provided an alternative to the culture driven by a cycle of ‘work, produce and consume’¹⁸¹ This is portrayed in *The Dharma Bums*; Kerouac found peace of meditation and an ascetic lifestyle which acts as an antidote to the instability,

¹⁷⁴Tonkinson, Carole (ed.), 1995, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat generation*, New York: Riverhead Books, p.25.

¹⁷⁵Kerouac, 1958, p.112.

¹⁷⁶ Woodhead and Heelas, 2000, *Religion in Modern Times: an interpretive anthology*, p.342-343.

¹⁷⁷ Huddleston, Diane M., 2012, ‘The Beat Generation: They Were Hipsters Not Beatniks’, *Department of History seminar paper*, Western Oregon University, p.15.

¹⁷⁸Anon., 1969, ‘Buddhism and the Beat Generation’, *Tricycle*, <http://www.tricycle.com/special-section/buddhism-beat-generation>.

¹⁷⁹Humphreys, Christmas, 1977, *Zen Comes West*, London: Curzon Press, p.95.

¹⁸⁰Gethin, p.59.

¹⁸¹Tonkinson, 1995, p.viii.

consumerism and conformism that surrounded him in America. The choice that is advocated by John Hick's pluralism allows Kerouac the freedom to experiment with these aspects of Buddhism, providing him with the freedom that was lacking in his country.

Glossary of Buddhist Terms

Arhat – an awakened Buddhist saint

Anatman – 'Not self', the understanding that one has no permanent existence

Atman – 'Self'

Bhikku – A Buddhist monk

Dharma – The teaching of the Buddha

Dhyana – A meditation attainment

Dukkha – Suffering

Mahayana – 'The great vehicle', a school of Buddhism known

Nirvana – The release from *Samsara*

Prajnaparamita – ‘Perfection of wisdom’, Mahayana literature

Parivrājaka – Wanderers

Samadhi – Concentration, a state of deep meditation

Samsara – The cycle of rebirth

Sanga – Buddhist monastic order of monks and nuns

Sunyata – Emptiness; used to describe the nature of things

Tantra – A class of esoteric ritual and mediational Buddhist texts, used in Vajrayana/
Mantrayana Buddhism

Tathagata – ‘The thus gone/ come’, another title for the Buddha

Glossary of Characters

The Dharma Bums (1958)

Ray Smith – Jack Kerouac

Japhy Ryder – Gary Snyder

Alvah Godberg – Allen Ginsberg

Arthur Whane – Alan Watts

On the Road (1957)

Sal Paradise – Jack Kerouac

Dean Moriarty - Neal Cassady

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