JACK KEROUAC AND THE "BEAT" SECT OF AMERICAN ZEN BUDDHISM

BARRY S. JENKINS

Jack Kerouac and the "Beat" Sect of American Zen Buddhism

by

Barry S. Jenkins

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Abstract

Beat Zen is considered by many scholars to be a corruption of Zen Buddhism. If Beat Zen is examined as a model of the Americanization of Zen, comparable to the Sinicizing of Buddhism during the Han Dynasty described by Zürcher, Ch'en, and Wright, Beat Zen can be a useful tool to determine how Zen Buddhism is changing as it is being received into American society. Just as Han Dynasty Buddhism developed according to the Chinese "national character" so the Beat Generation altered the practice of Zen Buddhism and developed the authority to make these changes in the same manner.

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Introduction: Zen Buddhism and the Beat Generation

1.0 State of the Question

Very few scholars examine the history of American Zen Buddhism, and those who do usually discuss it as the history of transmission of Japanese Zen Buddhism by orthodox Japanese *rōshis* to European-Americans. While many scholars recognize that American Zen Buddhism is developing its own character as it becomes Americanized, few scholars examine Beat Zen, a particular expression of Zen Buddhism developed by American writers, largely without guidance from recognized teachers. In fact, Beat Zen is often criticized as a corruption of Zen Buddhism, and the Beats themselves as having a poor understanding of Zen.

The first, and perhaps most influential, examination of this movement within American religion is Alan Watts' *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen.*[1] Watts, who coined the terms "Beat Zen" and "Square Zen," criticizes both what he sees as the rigid formalism of "Square Zen" (that is, the formal Zen practised in monasteries of Japan and the Zen centres of America), and the "anything goes" attitude of "Beat Zen" as it is depicted by Jack Kerouac in his novel, *The Dharma Bums*. Watts writes:

> When Kerouac gives his philosophical final statement, "I don't know. I don't care. And it doesn't make any difference"--the cat is out of the bag, for there is a

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[1] Alan W. Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959).

> hostility in these words which clangs with self-defense. But just because Zen truly surpasses convention and its values, it has no need to say "To hell with it," nor to underline with violence the fact that anything goes.[2]

In his conclusion, Watts argues that the early Chinese Ch'an Buddhist patriarchs are examples of the ideal Zen Buddhism, which is neither beat nor square. Comparing what he sees as their view of Zen with "beat" and "square" Zen, Watts writes:

> ...their Zen was *wu-shih*, which means approximately "nothing special" or "no fuss." But Zen is "fuss" when it is mixed up with Bohemian affectations, 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.[3]

Watts' division of American Zen Buddhism into "beat" and "square" has been used by later scholars, many of whom accept his characterization of Beat Zen as a corruption of "real" Zen. In 1969, the American sociologist Theodore Roszak, writing of student protests in the 1960's, discusses not only Beat Zen but the fascination the counterculture of the 1960's had for Asian religions in general. Questioning "whether anything that deserves to be called authentic has actually taken root in our culture," he remarks:

> It is indisputable, however, that the San Francisco beats, and much of our younger generation since their time, *thought* they had found something in Zen they needed, and promptly proceeded to use what they understood of this exotic tradition as a justification for fulfilling the need.[4]

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[2] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

[4] Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 134.

Following Watts' view that Beat Zen is a "pretext for licence...a simple rationalization,"[5] Roszak argues that, for the Beats (and for the younger generation who followed them), Zen's distrust of words is viewed as a justification for inarticulateness, and its amorality (at least in Kerouac's depiction of it) as a justification for permissive sex.[6]

Emma McCloy Layman, in *Buddhism in America*, one of the first histories of American Buddhism, quickly dismisses the Beat Generation's view of Zen Buddhism using arguments quite similar to Watts'. Calling it first a "fad of the late fifties,"[7] Layman describes Beat Zen in this manner:

> For the most part, it sought escape from the ills of society and a shying away from the dictates of social conscience. It was used by the "Beat" generation to justify its libertine ways.[8]

Layman goes on to describe *The Dharma Bums* in a similar manner, writing, "Beat novelist Jack Kerouac depicts the Zen adherent of the Beat generation as one who was happily free to run around naked in a drunken orgy."[9] In spite of her quick dismissal of Beat Zen, Layman notes, "some artists and writers identified as belonging to the Beat generation have been serious students of Zen and responsible citizens, as well as talented, creative

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[5] Watts, quoted in Roszak, *ibid.*, p. 136.

[6] Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture*, pp. 134-136.

[7] Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1976), p. 69.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[9] *Ibid.*

persons."[10]

Charles S. Prebish, in *American Buddhism*, deals with Beat Zen somewhat more sympathetically. In his view, Beat Zen is a merging of American and Japanese cultures, combining the Beat ethic with Zen doctrines and traditions. For example, the Beats identified their own ideal of spontaneity with Zen's irrationality. Prebish writes:

> Perhaps the most significant example of this, on the literary level, is Kerouac's "spontaneous prose," written on long rolls of paper, quickly and with no revisions. Just as Buddhists choose not to cling to a past that is already dead, Kerouac refused to polish his work.... Even in the musical styles favored by the Beats, they sought to convey the nonintellectual, intuitive style of Zen, exemplified by their fascination with jazz improvization.[11]

However, Prebish writes, the Beats' understanding of Zen was too simple, leading to misinterpretations from overgeneralizations:

> ...the Beats rather naively assumed that because some Zen monks wandered over the countryside as apparent "lunatics," in a style consistent with their satori experience, *all* Zen monks followed this practice. In so doing, the Beats not only ignored the very basis of Zen monastic life and its incumbent discipline, but they used this assumption to form the basis of a normative model (and justification) for their own itinerant lifestyle.[12]

Prebish concludes his discussion of Beat Zen with the suggestion that the other Beats would have been more effective in their adaptation of Zen to their ethic if, as the Beat poet

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Charles S. Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1979), p. 24.

[12] *Ibid.*

Gary Snyder did, they had sought out more formal Zen training.[13]

However, in spite of this sympathy for Beat Zen, Prebish divides American Buddhism into two strains: the first places emphasis on "sound, basic doctrines, shared by all Buddhists, and on solid religious practice," while the second attracts followers with "the promise of something new, frequently centered on the personal charisma of a flamboyant leader."[14] Prebish notes that the second strain of Buddhism "includes those groups that seem to emerge shortly after radical social movements (such as the Beat Generation or the Drug Culture)."[15] Thus, Prebish argues, while Beat Zen might have been effective in changing Buddhism had circumstances been different, Beat Zen led to a corruption of Zen that was "flashy, opaquely exotic, and 'hip'."[16]

Helen Tworkov's *Zen in America: Profiles of Five Teachers* includes a similar criticism of Beat Zen. For Tworkov, the Beat Generation misunderstood popular commentaries on Zen Buddhism and the translations of Zen Buddhist texts available in the 1950's. In particular, they misunderstood what D. T. Suzuki meant by "emptiness." Tworkov writes:

> Suzuki translated the Chinese characters for "skylike" into English as "emptiness." Skylike emptiness implies a boundless state of unity through time and space in

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[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*

> which the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are abandoned. Skylike is so empty, it can receive absolutely everything; it is--to use another translation--"all-encompassing mind."...From the 1930s to the 1950s, Zen traveled a fairly narrow channel in the United States from a recognizable intelligentsia to the avant-garde underground. With the emergence of the Beat generation in the fifties, the emptiness of Zen became a critical reference for a new social iconography. Formal practice was correctly identified with traditional monasticism. But in Beat Zen, form was "square." Only the romance of emptiness was hip. For the Beats all institutions, including those of religion, were rejected for categorically assaulting one's spirituality.[17]

Thus Tworkov attacks Beat Zen as a nihilistic group who misunderstood Suzuki's translations and writings on Zen Buddhism, and who opportunistically used Zen Buddhism to give authority to their own "anything goes" lifestyle, without engaging in the formal training required of Zen Buddhists.

Negative interpretations of Beat Zen such as these do not do justice to Beat Zen or the Beat Generation within their historical and cultural contexts. The Beat Generation and their interpretation of Zen Buddhism arose as a reaction to the political and religious climate in the 1950's. Bruce Cook, in his book, *The Beat Generation*, notes that the Beat ethic arose out of the conservative, and almost paranoid, cultural context of the Cold War and McCarthyism. He writes:

> ...the Beats had perceived and managed to touch something essential that was only then beginning to take shape in the America of the 1950s. It was a very important and widespread something, compounded of a deep hunger for individual recognition, a desire to speak frankly and honestly about things that mattered, and, finally, a need for passionate personal involvement in major undertakings. Perhaps these are not unusual qualities at all....But they were of special importance in the

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[17] Helen Tworkov, *Zen in America: Profiles of Five Teachers* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), p.7.

> 1950s--the era of Joe McCarthy, the HUAC hearings, and a series of spy trials that together spread a brooding pall of suspicion over all of American society. It was a time during which most of the adult population was trapped in an intricate edifice of social conformity built of fear, suppressed hostility, and the simple desire to get along.[18]

Stephen Prothero, in "On the Holy Road," examines the Beats as a religious movement, as a protest against the dominant Judeo-Christian culture, which the Beats no longer found relevant after the atrocities of World War II.[19] Prothero notes that the Beats rejected the

> ...two most popular spiritual options of the early postwar period--the new evangelicalism of Billy Graham and the mind cure of Rabbi Joshua Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946), Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen's *Peace of Soul* (1949), and the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952).... Thus Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg joined the neo-orthodox theologians H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr in rejecting any easy return to normalcy and in damning the evangelical and mind-cure revivals as vacuous at best.[20]

The Beats can also be seen as following in the footsteps of writers such as Henry David Thoreau by taking refuge in Asian religions to fill a void in Western religions. Comparing Thoreau's spiritual quest with that of the Beats, and Gary Snyder's in particular, Cook writes:

> Anyone who supposes Gary Snyder's Oriental proclivity separated him from the American literary mainstream in general, or from Henry David Thoreau in

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[18] Bruce Cook, *The Beat Generation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), pp. 9-10.

[19] Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest" *Harvard Theological Review* 84, No. 2 (1991), p. 209.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

> particular, simply has no appreciation of the widespread early influence of eastern philosophy and religion on our literature.... Thoreau himself was a great reader of and quoter from the *Bhagavad-Gita*.... This dialectic between East and West is maintained through all Thoreau's work, and it is certainly true that he would not have written the books he did were it not for his reading of Confucius and the Hindu holy books.... In just such a way, too, there has been a continual conversation between East and West in the work of Gary Snyder. Both voices in this dialogue are rightly his own. And although the accents of the Orient have been learned, they are no less properly his.[21]

Prothero notes that the Beat Generation writers also turned to the *fellaheen*[22] or outcasts of society, for their spiritual needs. Thus, in rejecting dominant Western spiritual opinions, they made themselves outcasts, hermits and pilgrims, searching for a different religious structure to fill their needs. Prothero compares their search to that of pilgrims, writing:

> ...the beats were liminal figures who expressed their cultural marginality by living spontaneously, dressing like bums, sharing their property, celebrating nakedness and sexuality, seeking mystical awareness through drugs and meditation, acting like "Zen lunatics" or holy fools, and perhaps above all stressing the chaotic sacrality of human interrelatedness of *communitas* over the pragmatic functionality of social structure. The beats, in short, lived both on the road and on the edge. For them, as for pilgrims, transition was a semipermanent condition.[23]

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[21] Cook, *The Beat Generation*, pp. 30-31.

[22] Ann Charters, in Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1940-1956* (Toronto: Viking, 1995), p. 347n, makes the following note on Kerouac's use of the term *fellaheen*:
> Kerouac used "Fellaheen" to describe the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Carolyn Cassady adds, "I could never tell exactly if he used the term to mean the 'essence' of a culture, unspoiled by exterior influences, or as Spengler used it (where Jack got the term), who says it means the 'residue' of a culture after it has collapsed."

[23] Prothero, "On the Holy Road," p. 211.

Thus Prothero expresses positively what Watts, Roszak and Layman express negatively: the Beats used Zen Buddhism to justify their own beliefs, but these beliefs were the result of a search for religious fulfilment that could not be found in mainstream post-war American society.

None of these authors, however, has examined Beat Zen as a particular step in the Americanizing of Zen Buddhism. Indeed very few scholars have approached the topic of American Buddhism at all, let alone the more general topic of the Westernizing of Buddhism.[24] With the exception of the uneven articles in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, very little work has been published in the field of American Buddhism; scholars prefer to study the development of Zen/Ch'an Buddhism in China and Japan rather than its ongoing evolution in the United States.

Kerouac's own writings, however, reveal more than just a profound Buddhist influence; they are a serious adaptation of Buddhist doctrines to his own Beat ethic. Even the "anything goes" attitude that Watts and other scholars criticized is based upon legitimate Buddhist, and particularly Zen, ideas. For example, Kerouac writes in *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*:

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[24] Exceptions, other than those mentioned above, include Manfred Bergler, "Ein Abriß der Rezeptionsgeschichte des Zen-Buddhismus in Deutschland" *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 36, no. 1 (1984): 39-52; Ernst Benz, *Zen in westlicher Sicht: Zen-Buddhismus—Zen-Snobismus* (Welheim/Oberbayern: Otto Wilhelm Barth-Verlag, 1962); Benz, "Buddhism in the Western World" in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, Heinrich Dumoulin and John C. Maraldo, eds. (New York: Macmillan, 1976): 305-322; and Kenneth Kraft, ed., *Zen: Tradition and Transition* (New York: Grove Press, 1988).

> Do you think the emptiness of the sky will ever crumble away? Every little child knows that everybody will go to heaven. Knowing that nothing ever happened is not really knowing that nothing ever happened, it's the golden eternity. In other words, nothing can compare with telling your brother and your sister that what happened, what is happening, and what will happen, never really happened, is not really happening and never will happen, it is only the golden eternity. Nothing was ever born, nothing will ever die. Indeed, it didnt even happen that you heard about the golden eternity through the accidental reading of this scripture. The thing is easily false. There are no warnings whatever issuing from the golden eternity: do what you want.[25]

Kerouac draws the conclusion "do what you want" from the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines of *śūnyatā*, *anātman*, impermanence, and non-differentiation, all of which are orthodox Buddhist doctrines especially emphasized in Zen Buddhism. Thus to dismiss all of Beat Zen merely on the basis of Kerouac's conclusion that Zen means "do what you want," without examining the philosophy and the practice behind this conclusion is not justified; a serious examination of the practice, origins, and legacies of Beat Zen as a movement within American Zen Buddhism is.

1.1 Scope and Methodology

This thesis is an historical description of Zen Buddhism as it was practised and written about by the members of the Beat Generation during their height, roughly between 1953 and 1962. This thesis is an analysis of their Beat Zen, largely from primary sources: the novels, poems, essays, and letters written by the figures involved in the Beat

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[25] Jack Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (New York: Totem Press/Corinth Books, 1960), section 42 [unpaginated]. Kerouac's (and the other Beats') occasional unorthodox spellings and punctuation will be retained throughout my thesis.

Generation; the translations of Buddhist *sūtras* and works on Zen Buddhism available at the time; and the works of their contemporary critics. Additionally, since the historical study of American Buddhism is a very new field, this thesis is an examination of the theories used by scholars of the development of Chinese and Japanese Ch'an/Zen Buddhism[26] to show that these theories are applicable to the study of an American Zen Buddhist movement.

I will be using the terms "Beat" and "Beat Generation" to refer to that movement of novelists and poets centred in New York around Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and also the "San Francisco Poetry Renaissance." Primarily, "Beat" refers to Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen, the main figures of the Beat Zen movement, and more specifically to Kerouac, the most prolific of the group. Thus, "Beat Zen" refers to the Zen Buddhism practised and written about by these four members of the Beat Generation, and, particularly, by Jack Kerouac. However, since Beat Zen was primarily a lay movement with no particular allegiance to any school of Zen Buddhism,[27]

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[26] For example, Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* 2 Vols.(Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972); and Arthur F. Wright, "Interaction of Buddhism and Chinese Culture" in Wright, *Studies in Chinese Buddhism*, Robert M. Somers (ed.), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[27] It should be noted that later Gary Snyder studied at a Japanese Rinzai monastery, Zenshin Philip Whalen-rōshi became a Sōtō Zen abbot in San Francisco, and Allen Ginsberg became a student of the Tibetan Tantric Buddhist lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

the term "Beat Zen" is used generally to represent the type of meditational Buddhism practised by these writers. It does not strictly refer to just those doctrines and practices associated with orthodox Chinese Ch'an or Japanese Zen Buddhism.[28] It must be remembered that the term "Beat Zen" was coined by a critic of the Beat Zen movement, and may not be properly representative of the movement. Similarly, "Square Zen" shall refer to Zen Buddhism as it has been established in the United States by Asian (mostly Japanese) and American Zen Buddhist *rāshis* and missionaries. That is, "Square Zen" shall refer to traditional Zen Buddhism as it has been received in the United States, while "Beat Zen" shall refer to the Zen Buddhism created and developed by the American Beat movement on its own.

In spite of the fact that many of the sources available are from "inside" the Beat Zen movement, I am taking an objective approach to this topic. That is, I am not considering whether certain aspects of Beat Zen are correct or incorrect interpretations of "real" Zen Buddhism, nor questioning, for example, whether or not Jack Kerouac experienced a "real" *satori*[29] in San Francisco in 1949 as is recorded in *On the Road*.[30] Instead, I am examining

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[28] While Beat Zen contains certain syncretic elements from Tantric and Pure Land Buddhism, Beat Zen is predominately an Americanization of Japanese Zen Buddhism, principally of the Rinzai school.

[29] Theodore Roszak quotes a similar criticism of Alan Watts, see his *Making of a Counter Culture*, p. 132.

[30] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 163-164. See also, Kerouac, to Neal Cassady (Richmond Hill, NY: Jan. 8, 1951), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, pp. 278-281.

what the Beats say about their own experiences of Zen in order to discuss the form of their practice rather than judging the ineffable quality of their experiences. That is, I am starting with the assumption that Beat Zen is a variation of Zen Buddhism, but I am not judging how right or wrong Beat Zen's interpretation of Chinese and Japanese Ch'an/Zen Buddhism is.

1.2 Thesis and Argument

In the relatively new field of the study of American Zen Buddhism, the subject of Beat Zen is either glossed over, or denigrated, or both. However, if Beat Zen is taken seriously as a religious movement, it may be possible to see it as both an example of, and a stage in, the Americanizing of Zen Buddhism. In adapting Zen Buddhism's tradition of iconoclasm with the Beats' own ideals of non-conformity and spontaneity, the members of the Beat Generation were able to draw from their interpretations of Zen Buddhism the authority to alter or eliminate Zen tradition, making Zen easier for them to accept.

In my examination of Beat Zen, I am asking, and attempting to answer, questions such as, how (and how much) did the Beats change Zen Buddhism; under what authority did they do so; do these changes reflect the adaptation of Zen Buddhism to the general American culture and the specifically, the Beat subculture; and how well do the theories of Asian Buddhism provided by scholars such as Kenneth K. S. Ch'en and E. Zürcher apply to the Americanizing of Zen Buddhism?

The thesis consists of two parts. The first describes Beat Zen as it was practised and written about by the Beats, paying particular attention to the changes they made. The practice of Buddhism within a lay movement is often defined as adherence to the Three Refuges (Buddha, *dharma*, and *saṅgha*) and the Five Precepts (no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication).[31] In many cultures, there is some relaxation in how strictly these precepts and refuges are adhered to, and the Beat Generation is no exception. However, the ability of the Beats to alter these fundamental practices of Buddhism suggests that they believed they had the moral authority to do so.

The second part of this thesis examines the origin of this authority in Beat Zen. I show that Beat Zen created its own spiritual authority, drawing on Beat ethics, the examples provided by the early Ch'an Buddhist patriarchs, and the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, and thus empowered itself to alter or eliminate traditional forms of Ch'an/Zen Buddhism.

The conclusion, following the theories on Asian Buddhism, discusses how Beat Zen can be used as a paradigm of the alterations that occur in Buddhism as it becomes embedded in a new culture.

1.3 Contribution to Scholarship

The study of American Zen Buddhism is a relatively new field within Religious Studies. Zen Buddhism has only existed in North America for just over 100 years, having

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[31] Prebish, *American Buddhism*, p. 43.

had its official introduction in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair World Parliament of Religions.[32] On the novelty of this discipline, Rick Fields notes:

> Scholars like to point out that it has usually taken at least three hundred years for Buddhism to become fully at home in a new land. But time seems to have accelerated in out technological age, and news travels fast.[33]

Thus, while no new, significant, characteristically American school of Zen Buddhism has yet appeared, Beat Zen represents an early attempt to create one, merging American and Sino-Japanese thought into a single system of religious belief. The study of Beat Zen not only gives insight into how Zen Buddhism is likely to develop eventually in North America, it also gives insight into how a religion such as Buddhism adapts itself as it travels from one culture into another, a process similar to the merging of Indian and Chinese philosophy that created Ch'an/Zen Buddhism.

In spite of this opportunity, few scholars of Religious Studies have taken this approach to study Beat Zen. Prothero, for instance, notes that with the exceptions of Robert S. Ellwood, Jr.'s *Alternative Altars*[34] and Fields' *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, the Beat Generation tends to be ignored in studies of American religious movements.[35]

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[32] Unofficially, it existed among Japanese and Chinese immigrants previous to this date. See Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1981), pp. 70-82.

[33] *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xiv.

[34] Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[35] Prothero, "On the Holy Road," p. 207.

Beat Zen deserves more scholarly interest than it has previously received.

1.4 The Development of Buddhism in China and Japan

Before proceeding to examine the development of Beat Zen in the United States of America, it is necessary first to review the major theories on the transmission of Buddhism from India to East and Southeast Asia.[36] It is generally agreed that there are two distinct types of transmissions: the development of Buddhism in China involved an exchange between two well-defined cultures; the transmission of Buddhism to Southeast Asia, however, was the result of importing Indian culture, and similarly, the reception of Buddhism in Japan was linked with the arrival of Chinese culture and technology.

Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, in his book, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, summarizes Hu Shih's thesis on the development of Chinese Buddhism. Hu takes the view that in the meeting of Chinese and Indian Buddhist cultures, Chinese culture was adapted to encompass the foreign Indian Buddhist world-view. Hu begins by describing Chinese religion before and after the introduction of Buddhism. Ch'en writes:

> Dr. Hu contended that the plain, simple religion developed by the ancient Chinese consisted primarily of worship of ancestors, of natural forces, and of T'ien or heaven; of belief in the efficacy of divination; and of some vague notions of

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[36] The purpose of this review is merely to provide a framework for the comparison of American and Asian Buddhism. The actual details of the development of early Chinese Buddhism, such as the historicity of Bodhidharma or the Sixth Patriarch, are, therefore, beyond the scope of my thesis. Thus, while more recent works may provide more accurate historical details, the classic works by scholars such as Ch'en and Zürcher are sufficient for the purposes of this thesis.

> rewards and retributions. After Buddhism was introduced into China, the simple, practical Chinese were confronted with a hierarchy of heavens peopled by deities, some of whom have forms, desires, and passions just like ordinary human beings, others with forms but no desires for sensual pleasures, and still others with forms but only consciousness. Parallel to these heavens were a series of hells, hot and cold, in which the torments became progressively more tortuous and terrifying. In place of the vague notions of rewards and retributions, the Chinese learned that there was an all-pervasive force called karma, which operated inexorably to reward good deeds with meritorious rebirths, and evil deed with rebirth in one of the evil modes of existence. The Chinese were also told that the phenomenal world is illusory, like a mirage or shadow, that life is suffering and transitory, that sensual pleasures are undesirable and therefore ought to be suppressed or eradicated, that the ideal pattern of life was withdrawal from society and family to a life of celibacy and mendicancy. The Chinese also learned that because of rebirth, their ancestors could very well be reborn as animals, and hence it would be wise to follow a vegetarian diet.[37]

Thus for Hu, the development of Buddhism in China was a process of Indianization, altering the Chinese national character to fit the new philosophy. Hence, as Buddhism intermingled with Chinese thought, the Chinese responded by using Buddhist thought as a foundation to re-interpret their own society. Hu illustrates this with the commentaries by Neo-Confucian critics of Buddhism. Ch'en writes:

> Though professing to be anti-Buddhists, these rational philosophers, Dr. Hu contended, were in fact subtly influenced by exposure to the Buddhist tradition, and were reinterpreting their ancient systems in the light of that tradition. He concluded that what the rational philosophers did was to secularize Buddhist ideas and, by so doing, spread them beyond the Buddhist monasteries to the whole Chinese population.[38]

Ch'en, however, sees the development of Buddhism in China as a process of

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[37] Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, p. 3.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Sinicizing Buddhism, as well as Indianizing Chinese culture. That is, in addition to adapting Chinese culture to the Indian Buddhist world-view, the Chinese adapted Indian Buddhism to reflect Chinese culture. Ch'en regards this process as a result of the Chinese "national character" or "local genius." He writes:

> By this local genius or national character is meant the sum total of the cultural traits which the vast majority of the Chinese adhered to, traits that had been developed by them during their long history. It was through the manifestation of this local genius that they were able to choose ideas from the Indian religion and modify them to fit the Chinese situation.[39]

Hence, the Chinese local genius acted as the context in which Indian Buddhism was to be understood. This national character made sense of Buddhism according to Chinese terms and, hence, Sinicized Buddhism as Buddhism was Indianizing China.

E. Zürcher takes a similar view on the early stages of development of Chinese Buddhism. For Zürcher, the early stages of this process are marked by the attempt to bring a new social organization into Chinese society, namely the monastic community (*saṅgha*). Zürcher writes:

> Buddhism is not and has never pretended to be a "theory", an explanation of the universe; it is a way to salvation, a way of life. Its introduction into China means not only the propagation of certain religious notions, but also the introduction of a new form of social organisation: the monastic community, the *saṅgha*. To the Chinese Buddhism has always remained a doctrine of monks. The forces and counter-forces which were evoked by the existence of the Buddhist Church in China, the attitudes of the *intelligentsia* and of the government, the social background and status of the clergy and the gradual integration of the monastic community into medieval Chinese society are social phenomena of fundamental importance which have played a decisive role in the formation of early Chinese

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[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

Buddhism.[40]

However, Zürcher points out that Buddhism arrived in China as a heterogeneous force, not as a single entity. Also, the need to translate all these disparate doctrines into Chinese metaphor and speculations resulted in a uniquely Chinese religion.[41] Zürcher writes further:

> Small wonder, because adaptation implies selection. From the very beginning, the body of the foreign doctrine was reduced to those elements which by their real or supposed congruence with pre-existing Chinese notions and practices were liable to adaptation and incorporation. The result of this intense and continuous process of selection and hybridization is widely divergent from the contents of the imported foreign scriptures which were so faithfully copied, memorized and recited by Chinese devotees. These scriptures merely formed the raw material on which Chinese Buddhists founded their free speculations, and the many hundreds of early Chinese versions of Buddhist scriptures--capital sources for the history of *Indian* Buddhism--teach us disappointingly little about the ways in which their message was reinterpreted.[42]

The result of this process of selection, translation, and speculation was a highly intellectual doctrine that could only be popular among "the cultured upper class and those monks who had obtained a literary education which enabled them to take part in the cultural life of this class."[43]

Arthur F. Wright, in "The Interaction of Buddhism and Chinese Culture," notes

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[40] E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, p. 1.

[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[43] *Ibid.*

that social factors during the decline of the Han played an important role in the acceptance of Buddhism in Chinese culture, a culture noted for its xenophobia. Wright writes:

> What is important for our present purpose is the fact that the upper level of the Han sociopolitical order was riven by conflict, that the moral and political sanctions of an earlier day were undermined and discredited, that a mood of uncertainty and questioning developed within the elite.... Peasant bitterness and resentment found expression in the mounting power of Taoist religious fraternities, which offered both religious consolation in a troubled age and a focus of organized opposition to intolerable oppression.... The breakdown of their once stable life was complete, and they were readily drawn to those cults and organizations that promised some amelioration of their lot, some hope for the future. The breakup of the Han peasant society, then, is one of the factors that prepared the way in this period for the spread of an alien religion... On the ideological and philosophic level, the Han Confucian synthesis was utterly discredited by the collapse of the order which it served and sanctioned.[44]

Thus the breakdown of Han society, coupled with the arrival of Buddhism to China allowed for the acceptance of this foreign religion into Chinese life at all levels of society.

Wright also notes that the attempt to translate Buddhist concepts into a metaphor that would be understandable by the Chinese was, by necessity, difficult. Wright writes:

> Everyone who has contemplated the process by which Indian ideas and institutions were made intelligible and, to a degree, acceptable to the Chinese has been struck by the breadth of the cultural gulf which had to be overcome.[45]

As an example, Wright notes that Sanskrit, the language of the Indian Buddhist scriptures, is "Highly inflected, alphabetic, polysyllabic, with a highly elaborated formal grammar," and its literary style is "Discursiveness, hyperbolic metaphor, unlimited imaginative

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[44] Arthur F. Wright, "The Interaction of Buddhism and Chinese Culture," pp. 4-5.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

flights, predilection for the abstract"; in contrast, Wright characterizes the Chinese language as "Uninflected, ideographic, and (in its written form) largely monosyllabic; no systematized grammar," and its literary style, "Terseness, metaphors from familiar nature, limited imaginative range, concreteness."[46] Although Wright's view is disparaging towards Chinese language and literature, it does reveal the gap between the two language that the early Chinese translators of Buddhist texts had to bridge. To do so, they used familiar Taoist terminology to express alien Sanskrit concepts.[47] By the collapse of the Han Dynasty, southern Chinese Buddhist translators were adept at such translation techniques. Wright writes, "Many of these monks, such as Chih Tao-lin, were deeply versed in the concepts and vocabulary of neo-Taoism and could present Buddhist ideas in the familiar *ch'in-t'an* mode."[48] That this method was inadequate is shown by later translators, such as Tao-an and Kumārajīva. Wright notes:

> In the life and thought of Tao-an (312-385) one sees a growing awareness of the immense problems of translation and the adaptation which Buddhism presented to the Chinese. With him the easy "equivalence" of Buddhist and Taoist terms was shown to be delusive. Through his efforts and through those of Kumārajīva (in Ch'ang-an, 401-09) and his Chinese collaborators, Indian ideas were made intelligible to Chinese minds, and Buddhism entered decisively the mainstream of Chinese philosophy which it was to dominate for five centuries to come.[49]

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[46] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

Eventually, such works of translation and refitting Indian philosophy to Chinese metaphor led to the creation of uniquely Chinese *sūtras*, such as the *Heart Sūtra*,[50] and the *Hui-neng Sūtra*.

The transmission of Buddhism to Japan, however, took a different form, more closely related to its transmission to Ceylon, Thailand, and Burma than to China. In these cases, Ch'en writes:

> When Buddhism was introduced into Ceylon, Burma, and Thailand, it found ready acceptance among the people in those countries. There Buddhism was the civilizing influence. With little or no attainments in the arts, literature, and thought, the Ceylonese, Burmese, and Thai welcomed Buddhism in the hope that their own cultural levels would be elevated by the superior civilization brought in with the religion.[51]

That is, these countries came under the overwhelming influence of the dominant Indian society, and, in the process, incorporated Buddhism into their cultures. Similarly, Japan, through Korea, came under the influence of a dominant Chinese society, and through Chinese influence, also accepted Buddhism (with Confucianism and some Taoism). This is particularly evident in term of the development of Japanese art. Robert S. Ellwood and Richard Pilgrim, in their book, *Japanese Religion: A Cultural Perspective*, write:

> The traditional date for the introduction of Buddhism to Japan corresponds to 538 or 552 C.E. We are told by the *Nihonshoki* that in that year a Korean king sent the Japanese emperor a Buddhist scripture and image with a letter extolling their merits. The permeation of the Buddha's *dharma* ("teaching," "truth"), and equally

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[50] Jan Nattier, "The *Heart Sūtra*: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15, No. 2 (1992), pp. 153-223.

[51] Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, p. 5.

> of Confucian thought (which may have arrived even earlier) was certainly a more gradual process than such an exact date would suggest, but the date does indicate approximately the time Buddhism began to be politically significant. The chief early source of mainland (Chinese) culture was Korea; therefore, with Buddhism came not only the envoys of Korean rulers but also immigrant Korean craftsmen. Thus, in addition to Buddhism's philosophy and faith, a technology and art much in advance of Japan's had come to Japanese shores in the sixth century.[52]

The legend related in this passages shows how closely linked the arrival of Chinese culture, in particular Chinese art and technology, and Chinese religion were in Japan. Thus, just as Ch'en describes Indian culture influencing Southeast Asian society, causing Southeast Asian peoples to accept Buddhism, so Ellwood and Pilgrim describe Japan's acceptance of Buddhism through the acceptance of Chinese culture.

Each of these theories, however, reveals a cultural bias either for or against Chinese culture. Hu's theory reveals his nationalist political views, as Ch'en notes, "Because Buddhism was the vehicle of this Indianization, Dr. Hu had on more than one occasion condemned Buddhism as one of the greatest evils to have befallen China."[53] Zürcher notes, "The ideas to be found there [in Chinese Buddhist texts] will strike the student of Indian Buddhism as highly rudimentary and strange, and often as even hardly Buddhist."[54] Similarly, it is difficult to accept Ch'en's depiction of Buddhism as a "civilizing influence" on Southeast Asian culture, accepted "in the hope that their own

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[52] Robert S. Ellwood and Richard Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 23.

[53] Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, p. 5.

[54] Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, pp. 1-2.

cultural levels would be elevated by the superior civilization...."[55] Ch'en's description of this process does not take into account the differences in religious practices among these countries. A more generalized theory may be proposed: in the interaction of cultures, there are two possible outcomes: either one culture will eventually dominate, though not completely so, as may be seen in the interaction of Indian and Southeast Asian cultures, or Chinese and Japanese cultures; or, the two cultures may blend, creating a unique culture different from the original two, as may be seen by the interaction of Chinese and Indian cultures.

Thus it can be concluded that, for China, the dominant economic and political force in East Asia, the process of the development of Buddhism in the early stages represents a form of cultural exchange within China, with Indian elements influencing Chinese culture, and the Chinese national character determining how the Indian elements are to be interpreted. Additionally, the problem of translating Indian thought into Chinese, a quite different language and metaphor, further altered Indian Buddhism, since the Chinese translators attempted to use more familiar terminology to communicate these foreign ideas. In Japan, however, Chinese Buddhism arrived with Chinese art and culture, bringing both the ideas and the context by which these ideas could be understood.

1.5 The Cultural Background: Beat and Square America

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[55] Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, p. 5.

The theories presented above may also be used to describe the interaction of Asian Buddhist and American cultures. Like Han Dynasty China and medieval Japan, the United States during the first half of the twentieth century was being influenced by Buddhism. Before this influence can be examined, it is necessary, as Hu does with China, to examine the American national character and the cultural context in which the Beat Generation manifested itself and later became influenced by Zen Buddhism. In this way, it will be possible to see how much the Beat Generation adapted itself to Zen Buddhism and how much it altered Zen Buddhism to fit its own character.

The American national character can be examined, as Ellwood in "Conservative and Radical Themes in American Zen: Three Writers" discusses, in terms of the dialectic between conservatism and radicalism. Ellwood defines conservatism as follows:

> I am thinking of conservatism essentially in the Burkean sense....[Two] key points stand out in the thoughts of Edmund Burke, unquestionably the dominant figure in Anglo-American conservativism. One may be called anthropological, or if you wish theological; the other is political. The first says that people are not naturally good, but have a propensity for evil--that is, destructive, irresponsible behaviour--which if unrestrained expresses itself in anarchy or tyranny. The second point is that this restraint must take the form of social and political structures of unbroken continuity which link one generation with another, giving the restraints the authority of tradition; innovation and reform may sometimes be undertaken, but should not change the structures themselves but work within them.[56]

That is, according to conservatism, traditional institutions and forms are required to prevent human beings from performing the evil actions that left to themselves they would

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[56] Robert S. Ellwood, "Conservative and Radical Themes in American Zen: Three Writers" in Ellwood, ed, *Zen in American Arts and Letters* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1987), p. 150.

certainly commit. American society, then, on the basis of conservatism, would try to work within traditional structures to achieve its goals, rather than alter these structures and sink into chaos.

Against this force of conservatism, Ellwood also sees a force of radicalism. Ellwood defines radicalism as follows:

> For radicalism perhaps we should turn first to Burke's *bête noire*, the French revolution, and its underlying philosophy. That revolution was radical because it sought to change the root or fundamental structures of society into something entirely new. Again there are two basic themes justifying the endeavor, and not accidentally, they are anthropological and political, and quite the opposite of Burke's. The first, typified by Rousseau, was an affirmation of natural human goodness, with the corollary that evil is the result of corrupt, artificial social structures, not of inherent human nature.... The second theme was belief in reason--in the power of reason, in itself pure and good because of its seat in the originally good human nature, to create a wholly just society based on such abstract (and therefore amenable to reason) principles as liberty, equality, and fraternity, once the inhibiting structures of a corrupt social order are cleared away.[57]

Thus, the radical view proposes that the individual American citizen would rationally choose the good over evil, and that evil is caused by a corruption of institutions within society that must be reformed according to human reason. The ongoing dialectic between these two philosophies can be seen in all aspects of American society, for example, the ongoing debate between the conservative assertion of "traditional family values" and the radical upholding of "individual civil rights."

During the 1940's, the dialectic between conservative and radical themes in American society began a schism which would lead to the creation of the Beat subculture.

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[57] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

Kerouac, having served in World War II in the Merchant Marine, and Ginsberg, noted that they no longer fit into the general American society. Kerouac describes this feeling in his novel, *The Town and the City*. Peter Martin (Kerouac) on leave in New York, discusses this feeling of alienation with his friend Leon Levinsky (Ginsberg). Kerouac writes:

> "Everybody in the world has come to feel like a geek...can't you see it? Can't you sense what's going on around you? All the neurosis and the restrictive morality and the scatological repressions and the suppressed aggressiveness has finally gained the upper hand on humanity--everyone is becoming a geek! Everyone feels like a Zombie, and somewhere at the end of the night, the great magician, the great Dracula-figure of modern disintegration and madness, the wise genius behind it all, the Devil if you will, is running the whole thing with is string of oaths and his hexes."
> ..."I have a feeling like that," stammered Peter, almost blushing, "that is...of being guilty, but I don't know, it's the war and everything, I think, the guys I knew who got killed, things like that. And well, hell!--things aren't like they used to be before the war." For a moment he was almost afraid that there was some truth in Levinsky's insane idea, certainly he had never felt so useless and foolish and sorrowful before in his life.[58]

By the 1950's, the Beat Generation and mainstream American society had diverged even further. Mainstream American society reflected Eisenhower's conservatism (and to some extent, McCarthy's paranoia), the Beat Generation was more radical, creating new values for themselves. Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, in *Jack's Book*, compare Beat

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[58]Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950; reprint, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, nd), pp. 369-370. The feeling of guilt is also found in the phrase "Beat Generation." In John Clellon Holmes' novel, *Go* (Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1952; reprint, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1988, p. 36), Gene Pasternak (Kerouac) says:

> You know, everyone I know is kind of furtive, kind of beat. They all go along the street like they were guilty of something, but didn't believe in guilt. I can spot them immediately! And it's happening all over the country, to everyone; a sort of revolution of the soul, I guess *you'd* call it.

culture as portrayed in *On the Road* with that of mainstream American society. They write:

> Midcentury America was a country of families. Father, Mother, and the children, watching television programs about fathers, mothers, and children. The men and women of *On the Road* coupled and begat with little care for the expectations of church and society, and they seemed intent on banding together into something both larger and less than a family. Father went to a job every morning, a place with desks or a time-clock, where the business of business was conducted for forty hours a week. Dean Moriarty took a job only as a last resort, and Sal Paradise wanted nothing more from his work than food for the night or a bus ticket to take him some place else.[59]

Thus, the Beat Generation, in separating from mainstream conservative American society created a new society for itself, with different ethics and philosophy, even a different economy. This new society was modelled on another American subculture, which Kerouac, following Oswald Spengler, called the *fellaheen*, the working and underclasses of American society. Guided by their reading of Spengler's *The Decline of the West*,[60] the Beats turned to the underclass for their spiritual authority.[61] Prothero summarizes Spengler's view on the religious life of the *fellaheen* as follows:

> A spiritual people, their "second-religiousness" is marked by "a deep piety that fills the waking-consciousness...the naive belief...that there is some sort of mystic

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[59] Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), pp. 231-232.

[60] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Charles Atkinson, trans., 2 vols., (New York: Knopf, 1939).

[61] Prothero, "On the Holy Road," p. 211.

constitution of actuality"....[62]

The Beat Generation, following Spengler's philosophy, turned to the underclasses as sources of religious authority. Thus, the mendicant monks (*bhikṣus*, or "bhikkus" in Kerouac's terminology) of Buddhism provided the Beats with an acceptable paradigm by which the Beats could begin to understand Buddhism.

The Beats were not unique, however, in turning away from traditional American religious movements and towards Asian religions to fill their spiritual needs. For example, in 1958, Arthur Koestler travelled to India and Japan on a similar quest, though Koestler's quest would end in failure. He writes:

> Like countless others before, I wondered whether the East had any answer to offer our perplexities and deadlocked problems. I chose the two countries (India and Japan) because they are at opposite ends of the spectrum: one the most traditional-bound, the other the most "modern" of the great countries of Asia. I did no hope for any ready-made answer, but was anxious to look at the predicament of the West from a different perspective, a different spiritual latitude.[63]

Indeed, so many were travelling to Japan for similar reasons, that Ruth Fuller Sasaki, of the First Zen Institute of America in Japan, wrote a guidebook to help people adjust to the life they would find in Japanese monasteries.[64]

This interest in Asian religions as a viable alternative to American Christianity

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[62] *Ibid.*, p. 212n.

[63] Arthur Koestler, quoted in Larry A. Fader, "Arthur Koestler's Critique of D. T. Suzuki's Interpretation of Zen" *Eastern Buddhist* n.s. 13, No.2 (Summer 1980), pp. 46-47.

[64] Ernst Benz, *Zen in westlicher Sicht*, p. 74.

reveals that Christianity's role within American society has declined. That is, the United States has become a more secular and more pluralistic society in which Christianity, like any other religion, must compete for followers. Peter L. Berger describes this situation as follows:

> The key characteristic of all pluralistic situations, whatever the details of their historical background, is that the religious ex-monopolies can no longer take for granted the allegiances of their client populations. Allegiance is voluntary and thus, by definition, less than certain. As a result, the religious tradition, which perviously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be *marketed*. It must be "sold" to a clientele that is no longer constrained to "buy." The pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities. And at any rate a good deal of religious activity in this situation comes to be dominated by the logic of market economics. It is not difficult to see that this situation will have far-reaching consequences for the social structure of the various religious groups. What happens here, quite simply, is that the religious groups are transformed from monopolies to competitive marketing agencies. Previously, the religious groups were organized as befits an institution exercising exclusive control over a population of retainers. Now, the religious groups must organize themselves in such a way as to woo a population of consumers, in competition with other groups having the same purpose.[65]

Thus, Zen Buddhism has been free to compete with Christianity and other religions to gain followers in all levels of American society, without a breakdown in society having occurred as in Han China. The subsequent translation of Chinese, Japanese, and Sanskrit terminology into American English, and the adaptation of various aspects of Zen Buddhist practice to make it more palatable for American society, although parallel to those efforts in China described by Wright, can instead be related to the effects of American pluralism,

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[65] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; reprint, Toronto: Anchor/Doubleday, 1990), p.138.

that is, the need to market Zen Buddhism to its American consumers.[66]

1.6 Conclusion

Beat Zen, then, may be viewed as an example of the encounter of Asian and American religious traditions, in a manner comparable to the meeting of Chinese and Indian religions that resulted in Chinese Buddhism. That is, following Ch'en and Zürcher's theories, as a strong Chinese and Japanese culture interacts with a strong American culture, the effect on American religious is a mixture of Asian and American elements. Zen Buddhism may become established in North America, but, in the process, it will reflect the American national character of conservatism and radicalism, and will develop into a uniquely American form, which may, providing this paradigm holds into the future, create a form of Zen Buddhism which is as different from Japanese Zen Buddhism as Chinese Buddhism is from Indian Buddhism.

Beat Zen may be considered as a model of this process. In accepting Zen Buddhism and adapting themselves to this Asian tradition, the Beats also adapted the traditional

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[66] Indeed, the pluralist co-existence in the United States of several schools of Buddhism from various cultures such as Chinese Ch'an, Vietnamese and Japanese Zen, Theravada, and Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism (see further, Kraft, "Recent Developments in North American Zen," p. 179, may be compared to Zürcher's depiction of early Chinese Buddhism as follows (Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, p. 2):

> The early Chinese monks, forced to be eclectics by the circumstances under which the doctrine was presented to them, had to base their opinions on a bewildering variety of Mahāyāna and Hināyāna sûtras, monastic rules, spells and charms, legends and scholastic treatises of different epochs and schools.

practice of Zen Buddhism under their own authority to make it more "beat." An examination of the practice and sources of Beat Zen reveals how Beat Zen can be used as an example of the acculturation of Zen Buddhism into American culture.

Chapter 2

The Practice of Beat Zen

2.0 Views of Beat Zen Practice

Beat Zen, since it was described by Alan W. Watts in 1958, has been associated with trendiness and a lack of discipline and, hence, has been viewed (to use Ellwood's terminology) as a radical movement in opposition to the more conservative "square" Zen. For example, the discipline of Square Zen's meditative practice is seen as having been replaced by Beat Zen's effortless awakening. Watts characterizes Beat Zen as follows:

> Thus for Beat Zen there must be no effort, no discipline, no artificial striving to attain *satori* or to be anything but what one is.[1]

An example of this effortless attainment of enlightenment is found in Kerouac's *Scripture of the Golden Eternity*. In the following section, Kerouac relates a sudden, spontaneous experience of enlightenment (in Sanskrit, *saṃbodhi*) without any sort of practice:

> I was smelling flowers in the yard, and when I stood up I took a deep breath and the blood all rushed to my brain and I woke up dead on my back in the grass. I had apparently fainted, or died, for about sixty seconds. My neighbor saw me but he thought I had just suddenly thrown myself on the grass to enjoy the sun. During that timeless moment of unconsciousness I saw the golden eternity. I saw heaven. In it nothing had ever happened, the events of a million years ago were just as phantom and ungraspable as the events of now or of a million years from now, or the events of the next ten minutes. It was perfect, the golden solitude, the golden emptiness. Something-Or-Other, something surely humble. There was a rapturous ring of silence abiding perfectly. There was no question of being alive or not being

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[1] Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, p. 22.

> alive, of likes and dislikes, of near or far, no question of giving or gratitude, no question of mercy or judgment, or of suffering or its opposite or anything. It was the womb itself, aloneness, alaya vijnana the universal store, the Great Free Treasure, the Great Victory, infinite completion, the joyful mysterious essence of Arrangement. It seemed like one smiling smile, one adorable adoration, one gracious and adorable charity, everlasting safety, refreshing afternoon, roses, infinite brilliant immaterial golden ash, the Golden Age. The "golden" came from the sun in my eyelids, and the "eternity" from my sudden instant realization as I woke up that I had just been where it all came from and where it was all returning, the everlasting So, and so never coming or going; therefore I call it the golden eternity but you can call it anything you want. As I regained consciousness I felt so sorry I had a body and a mind suddenly realizing I didnt even have a body and a mind and nothing had ever happened and everything is alright forever and forever and forever, O thank you thank you thank you.[2]

Examples such as this one have led Buddhist scholars such as Prebish to the conclusion that Beat Zen is completely radical and without discipline, and Kerouac's Beat Zen is especially devoid of serious Zen Buddhist practice. In this example, Kerouac does no formal meditation, yet he receives a spontaneous insight; similarly, in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac drinks to excess, has sex, and generally lives an undisciplined life.

Many scholars, however, qualify their descriptions of the practice of Beat Zen by comparing Gary Snyder's practice to Jack Kerouac's, suggesting that Snyder understood Zen Buddhism better than Kerouac and hence his practice was more disciplined and closer to "real" Zen Buddhism. Watts, for example, describes Snyder's practice in terms of the Chinese or Japanese Ch'an/Zen monastic lifestyle. He writes:

> Part of his shack is set aside as a formal "meditation hall," and the whole place is

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[2] Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, section 64.

in the best Zen tradition of clean and uncluttered simplicity."[3]

Watts then qualifies the description of Snyder's practice and lifestyle in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* as follows:

> In *The Dharma Bums*, however, we are seeing Snyder through Kerouac's eyes, and some distortions arise because Kerouac's own Buddhism is a true beat Zen which confuses "anything goes" at the existential level with "anything goes" on the artistic and social levels.[4]

A similar statement is found in Carl T. Jackson's article, "The Counter Culture Looks East," in which he compares Kerouac's practice of meditation with Snyder's. He writes:

> Where his friend Kerouac tried to meditate on several occasions and, unable to assume the lotus position, soon gave up the effort, Snyder took up "sitting" almost effortlessly....In a recent interview he disclosed that he has continued to meditate for more than twenty years. His approach has always been practical: denying ever undergoing "any great enlightenment experiences," he has insisted that meditation is as normal as walking or breathing. At the same time that he has sought to eliminate its mystery and exoticism, he has emphasized that meditation is crucial. "The point of it is to sit cross-legged and do meditation. That's all I can say, ZAZEN, that's what Buddhism's about...." For Snyder Buddhism *is* meditation.[5]

Even Allen Ginsberg, who looked upon Kerouac as a type of Zen master,[6] writes:

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[3] Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, p. 17.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Carl Jackson, "The Counterculture Looks East: Beat Writers and Asian Religion" *American Studies* 29, no. 1 (1988), p. 66.

[6] See, for example, Ginsberg's dedication to *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), p. 3, in which he refers to Kerouac as "the new Buddha of American prose," and Kerouac's own instruction to Ginsberg, "And of course, for your beginning studies of Buddhism, you must listen to me carefully and implicitly as tho I was Einstein teaching you relativity or Eliot teaching the Formulas of Objective Correlation on a blackboard in Princeton." (Kerouac, letter to Allen Ginsberg (Richmond

> Kerouac, however, lacked specific instruction in the actual method of meditation practice in Zen.... Gary Snyder never did teach him Zen Buddhist style in 1955, '56 and '57, because of some odd miscommunication. Though Gary Snyder had practised, there was never any communication about the technics of the sitting-practice of meditation.[7]

All of these criticisms can be reduced to a question of the seriousness of the practice of Beat Zen (and Kerouac's Beat Zen in particular). Kerouac's writings, as well as those of the other Beats, present a different picture of Beat Zen as a serious practice involving Zen Buddhist meditation, adherence to Buddhist precepts, and other traditional Buddhist practices.

2.1 The Definition of Buddhist Practice

In order to discuss Beat Zen as an interpretation of Zen Buddhism, it is necessary to define what Zen Buddhist practice is, to see how closely Jack Kerouac and other Beats followed it and how they may have adapted it to their own subculture. The problem, however, arises that Zen Buddhism itself is difficult to define as a religion,[8] and, as Beat Zen is essentially a lay movement, there is no particular monastic lineage to link Beat Zen to an established religious sect.

Hill, N.Y.: early May, 1954) in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 415.)

[7] Allen Ginsberg, "Kerouac's Ethic" in Pierre Anctil, et al., *Un Homme Grand: Jack Kerouac at the Crossroad of Many Cultures/Jack Kérouac à la confluence des cultures* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), p. 55.

[8] See William Heberechtsmeier, "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion: One More Time" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32, no. 1 (1993), pp. 1-18.

This problem is similar to the one which Holmes Welch noted about Buddhist practice in China. Merely asking the question, "Are you a Buddhist?" may not give an accurate response.[9] Such a question asked of Jack Kerouac during the period of 1954-1962 would give a varieties of answers. For instance, in *The Dharma Bums*, written in 1957 about the events of 1955-1956, Kerouac's narrator and alter-ego Ray Smith describes himself as follows: "I'm not a Zen Buddhist, I'm a serious Buddhist, I'm an oldfashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism."[10] In *Desolation Angels*, written in 1956 and 1961 about the events of 1956-1957, Kerouac's narrator Jack Duluoz says, "O I'm not a Buddhist anymore--I'm not anything anymore!"[11] In the introduction to *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac describes himself as a "strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic."[12] However, in *Big Sur*, written in 1961 about the events of 1960, Duluoz describes himself as a "Bhikku,"[13] engages in *kōan*-inspired spontaneous question-and-answer sessions,[14]

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[9] Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 357.

[10] Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Viking Press, 1958), p. 13.

[11] Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (Frogmore: Panther, 1966), p. 199.

[12] Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler* (McGraw-Hill, 1960; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. viii.

[13] Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1962; reprint, Toronto: Penguin, 1992), p. 37.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 97-102.

does "Yogic" breathing exercises,[15] and performs Buddhist-Catholic meritorious practices.[16] Clearly a more accurate picture of Kerouac's and the Beat Generation's involvement with Buddhism can be found by measuring its practice to some standard for Buddhist practice. This method will also reveal the extent to which the Beats conformed to or deviated from this standard.

Scholars such as Emma Layman[17] and Prebish[18] have dealt with the problem of defining someone as a Buddhist by referring to Welch's descriptions of lay Buddhist practice in China.[19] Because of the syncretic nature of Chinese religious practices, Welch suggests that to get an accurate accounting of practising lay Buddhists in China (to 1950), one should ask, "'Have you taken refuge in the Three Jewels (*kuei-i san pao*)? and 'Have you taken the Five Vows (*shou wu-chieh*)?'"[20] Asking such questions of the Beat Generation reveals that the Beats (in particular Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac) seriously attempted to follow Buddhist practice while adapting it to their own beliefs.

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[17] Layman, *Buddhism in America*, p. 252-253.

[18] Prebish, *American Buddhism*, p.43.

[19] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, pp. 357-393.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 358.

2.2 Beat Zen and the Three Refuges

Welch notes that the formal acceptance of a layperson to discipleship was marked by the administration of the Three Refuges (the Buddha, the *dharma*, and the *saṅgha*). Often, a certificate was issued stating that the person had taken these Refuges.[21] Welch writes that ordination certificates usually have a text describing what is expected of someone who takes these Refuges. He writes:

> Usually the text of the certificate admonished the disciple to do nothing evil, but good to all, and in particular, to forsake other religions. For example, one certificate lists the following prohibitions: "If you take refuge in the Buddha, you may no longer take refuge in other religions, whether they deal with Heaven or demons, for they do not provide escape from the cycle of birth and death. If you take refuge in the dharma, you may no longer accept the scriptures of other religions, for their principles do not reflect the true reality. If you take refuge in the sangha, you may not become the disciple of a master who belongs to another, heterodox religion, because that would be the blind leading the blind."[22]

The members of Beat Generation did not formally begin their study of Buddhism by taking these refuges under ordained monks. There is evidence, however, that Kerouac and Snyder took these refuges informally (Synder even shaving his head in 1952, "To be like a bhikku"),[23] and Snyder and Whalen certainly took these refuges formally when they sought out formal training in Japan.[24] In Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, Gary Snyder's

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 359.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 359-360.

[23] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 167.

[24] Allen Ginsberg did not formally take the Three Refuges until May 1972 under the Tibetan lama, Chögyam Trungpa.

character, Japhy Ryder, recites the Three Refuges in Pāli, "Buddham saranam gocchami...Dhammam saranam gocchami...Sangham saranam gocchami,"[25] as a breakfast call. When questioned by Smith about its meaning, Ryder explains:

> That's the chant they give out for the three meals in Buddhist monasteries in Japan. It means, Buddham Saranam Gocchami, I take refuge in the Buddha, Sangham, I take refuge in the church, Dhammam, I take refuge in the Dharma, the truth.[26]

Similarly, Allen Ginsberg, in his essay "Kerouac's Ethic," remembers Kerouac's singing (in the style of Frank Sinatra) the Three Refuges in Sanskrit in 1952. He writes, "And that first introduced me to the delicacy and softness of his Buddhism...."[27]

Here the question may be asked, "How did the Beats understand these refuges, and how does their understanding of them compare to that given by Welch?" The Beats appear to have been divided on this question. *The Dharma Bums* reveals that the exclusivity of the refuges was a source of argument between Kerouac and Snyder. In a discussion between Smith and Ryder regarding an outdoor preacher, Kerouac writes:

> "...but boy have you ever heard a greater preacher?"
> "Yeah," says Japhy. "But I don't like all that Jesus stuff she's talking about."
> "What's wrong with Jesus? Didn't Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn't Heaven Buddha's nirvana?"
> "According to your own interpretation, Smith."
> "Japhy, there were things I wanted to tell Rosie and I felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make? We're all in Heaven now, ain't we?"

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[25] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 171.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

[27] Ginsberg, "Kerouac's Ethic," p. 48.

"Who said so?"
"Is this nirvana we're in now or ain't it?"
"It's both nirvana and samsara we're in now."
"Words, words, what's in a word? Nirvana by any other name."[28]

While Snyder has a more exclusive view of the Refuges, Kerouac finds points of intersection between Christianity and Buddhism. This identification of Buddha and Jesus, and of Buddhist philosophy and Christian theology, is particularly evident in Kerouac's *Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, in which Kerouac writes:

> But "what's in a name?" asked Shakespeare. The golden eternity by another name would be as sweet. A Tathagata, a God, a Buddha by another name, an Allah, a Sri Krishna, a Coyote, a Brahma, a Mazda, a Messiah, an Amida, an Aremedeia, a Maitreya, a Palalakonuh, 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 would be as sweet.[29]

That Kerouac did not distinguish between these religious traditions indicates he did not find any conflict between taking the Three Refuges and following other religious practices as well. In fact, in an interview with Ben Hecht, Kerouac said, "I don't only worship Buddha.... I worship Christ, I worship Allah, I worship Yahveh, who is the Father, I worship them all."[30]

2.3 The Beat Observance of the Five Precepts

In Chinese Buddhism there is varying opinion as to the precise meaning of the Five

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[28] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 114.

[29] Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, section 14.

[30] Ben Hecht, "Interview with Jack Kerouac" on *The Beat Generation* (Rhino/WordBeat, R2 70281), vol. 3.

Precepts and their observance. Welch notes that the lay devotee had an option in the ordination ceremony to choose as many of the precepts as could be followed. Welch writes:

> A businessman, for example, might be reluctant to take the vows against lying and stealing, since this would interfere with the conduct of his business. A person who felt unable to forego the pleasures of the "flower house" would omit the vow against sexual license. Almost everyone, however, included the first vow: not to take the life of any sentient being.[31]

Further, Welch notes that among Chinese practitioners, there are varying interpretations regarding to what extent these precepts should be observed. He writes:

> The first of the Five Vows, they said, meant simply to avoid killing animals oneself or eating an animal that had been killed on one's account.... Other informants, on the whole better qualified, took a different view. They maintained that the first of the Five Vows carried with it the clear obligation to become a vegetarian.... There was a similar difference of opinion about sexual abstinence. All informants agreed that the third of the Five Vows (against illicit sexual activity, *hsieh-yin*) prohibited visits to a brothel or even intercourse with one's wife in an improper place at an improper time or with the use of instruments ("improper" meaning, for example, in the living room during the afternoon, which, I was told, has been in vogue among those of modern outlook). But some informants said that a devotee who had taken the Five Vows was required to put away his concubines. Others said that he was merely prohibited from taking additional concubines. Still others maintained that these restrictions did not begin until he had taken the Bodhisattva Vows.... Breaking the vows (*fan-chieh*) was distinguished from suspending or "opening" them (*k'ai-chieh*). In the treatment of some illnesses, for example, the doctor would prescribe eggs or wine. In that case the upasaka could consume prohibited foods with a clear conscience. Nor did his conscience trouble him if he violated the vows he had *not* taken. It was up to each individual how far he wanted to go in abstinence and how much merit he wanted to accumulate. [32]

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[31] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 362.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 365-266.

Similarly, Philip Kapleau, an American Zen Buddhist teacher who studied in Japan, in his book, *Zen: Dawn in the West*, notes, "In Japan today most Buddhist priests, and a few Zen masters, are married men with families; celibacy is only required during training."[33] Thus, it can be seen that lay, and even monastic, observance of the Five Precepts was open to a wide degree of interpretation from strict observation to observation only at certain times to the complete prohibition of certain acts that are deemed contrary to Buddhist practice. Kerouac's Buddhist writings illustrate that he attempted to follow at least four of the five precepts, and that his observation of these precepts was largely more conservative than that of Snyder.

As Welch notes, there has been debate as to whether or not the first precept, no killing, should be interpreted as advocating vegetarianism. Neither Snyder nor Kerouac seems to have interpreted it as necessitating strict vegetarianism. Kerouac, in fact, appears to have given no thought whatsoever to the notion: one of his first meals after descending Desolation Peak, having spent the summer meditating, includes "Shrimp in a brown sauce, curried chicken, and sweet and sour spare ribs, in a Chinese menu diner, I eat it with another beer, it's a terrific meal I can hardly finish--but I finish it clean, pay and cut out."[34] Snyder viewed vegetarianism as unnecessary, considering it an archaic practice. In *The Dharma Bums*, Ryder, describing Han Shan, says:

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[33] Philip Kapleau, *Zen: Dawn in the West* (Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979), p. 79.

[34] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, p. 138.

> ...he was...a vegetarian too by the way though I haven't got on that kick from figuring maybe in this modern world to be a vegetarian is to split hairs since all sentient beings eat what they can.[35]

Snyder's view is more clearly illustrated in Janwillem van der Wetering's *Empty Mirror*, in which Snyder (called Gerald by Wetering) explains his views on the tradition of vegetarianism practised by Japanese Zen Buddhist. Wetering writes:

> "Nonsense. If you eat vegetables you also kill living beings. Every move you make is deadly for some insect or other. Your body kills microbes. And what is death? An illusion, a change, a birth, a process of passing from one stage to another."
> "But why don't monks eat meat then?"
> "They do eat meat," Gerald said, "but not here, not in the monastery. They are often invited by people in the neighbourhood and then they eat everything which is offered to them, meat, fish, shrimps, you name it, they eat it....[The] training which we are following is packed with tradition. A thousand years ago some Zen monk started eating piping hot rice gruel and that's why they still do it now. And a thousand years ago an Orthodox Buddhist decided that one shouldn't eat meat and that's why Zen monks still refuse to eat meat, provided they have the feeling that someone is supervising them."[36]

Here Snyder presents the radical opinion that the first precept need not be followed exactly since it is merely a matter of tradition. Eating meat and even killing are forms which are illusionary and need not be observed except as part of the monastic rule.

Kerouac, however, was more conservative with regard to the first precept, except as it applies to vegetarianism. He accepted that it meant no sentient beings were to be killed under any circumstances. In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac's narrator, Jack Duluoz,

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[35] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 22.

[36] Janwillem van der Wetering, *The Empty Mirror: Experiences in a Japanese Zen Monastery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). pp. 60-61.

confesses to his reader his murder of three mice on Desolation Peak. Kerouac writes:

> And I realize we are all of us murderers, in previous lifetimes we murdered and we had to come back to work out our punishment, by punishment-under-death which is life, that in this lifetime we must *stop murdering* or be forced to come back because of our inherent God natures and divine magic power to manifest anything we want.... But now I had joined the ranks of the murderers and so I had no more reason to be pious and superior, for for awhile there (prior to the mice) I had somewhat considered myself divine and impeccable--Now I'm just a dirty murdering human being like everybody else and now I cant take refuge in heaven anymore and here I am, with angel's wings dripping with blood of my victims, small or otherwise, trying to tell what to do and I dont know any more than you do--[37]

Hence Kerouac took the first precept as a moral stance while Snyder interpreted it philosophically. Kerouac attempted to live by the first precept (without becoming a vegetarian) writing in *Big Sur*, "for my days of killing mice are over,"[38] while Snyder discusses the first precept in terms of the Buddhist concept of the illusion of existence.

Kerouac also practiced the second precept, no lying. He states this precept in "The Brooklyn Bridge Blues," in which he is upset that his mother denied that he sent her money. He writes:

> *...Denied it!*
> Fibbed! Didnt even wink!
> My own mother! Wow!
> The work of Sangsara!
> This false world--and the
> Lord says it in the Diamond
> Sutra, Keep the Precepts,
> Don't be insinsere, it's one

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[37] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, p. 89.

[38] Kerouac, *Big Sur*, p. 37.

> of the Paramitas (it's
> one of the Four Precepts)![39]

Kerouac's view of this precept is directly related to his "Spontaneous Prose" method of writing. this method, developed with *The Subterraneans* (1953), written before Kerouac's interest in Buddhism (though, as Kerouac wrote to Malcolm Cowley, it has affinities with Buddhist views on spontaneity),[40] is a combination of Reichian theories on the orgasm ("write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich's 'beclouding of consciousness.' *Come* from within, out--to relaxed and said.")[41] and Roman Catholic confession. Noting the autobiographical material of the "Duluoz Legend" (Kerouac's novels seen chronologically), Anne Charters writes, "Mostly he inserted only minor changes, like giving Ginsberg a

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[39] Jack Kerouac, "The Brooklyn Bridge Blues: In Ten Choruses," on John Sampas (producer), *Kerouac: Kicks Joy Darkness* RCD 10329 RykoDisc, 1997.

[40] Kerouac, to Malcolm Cowley (Berkeley: Sept. 11, 1955), in *Selected Letters*, p. 516:

> I foresee a new literature on account of this--but it's hard, it's paradoxical, i.e., it's taken me all my life to learn to write what I actually think--*by not thinking*. Quote from Surapama Sutra: "If you are now desirous of more perfectly understanding Supreme Enlightenment and the enlightening nature of pure Mind Essence, you must learn to answer questions spontaneously with no recourse to discriminating thinking. For the Tathagatas in the ten quarters of the universe have been delivered from the ever returning cycle of deaths and rebirths by this same simple way, namely, by reliance upon their intuitive minds."

[41] Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," in Jack Kerouac, *Good Blonde and Others* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993), p. 71.

beard in *Desolation Angels*, or made omissions."[42] Kerouac writes in *Desolation Angels*:

> Strangely enough, these scribblings were the first of their kind in the world, I was originating (without knowing it, you say?) a new way of writing about life, no fiction, no craft, no revising afterthoughts, the heartbreaking discipline of the veritable fire ordeal where you cant go back but have made the vow of "speak now or forever hold your tongue" and all of it innocent go-ahead confession, the discipline of making the mind the slave of the tongue with no chance to lie or re-elaborate (in keep not only with the dictums of Dictung Warheit Goethe but those of the Catholic Church in my childhood).[43]

For this reason, Kerouac includes a sex scene in *Desolation Angels* with the apology, "And now, for the sake of a 100% literature, I'll describe our loving."[44]

In spite of such claims, Kerouac's writings contain a certain lie of omission. While heterosexual sex is included in his writing "for the sake of a 100% literature," his homosexual experiences are notably absent. For instance, Kerouac hints at an incident in *Desolation Angels* involving some male Mexican medical students living in the flat above Duluoz and friends,[45] yet omits the scene.[46] Indeed Kerouac does not even mention his

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[42] Anne Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973), p. 360.

[43] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, p. 238.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 272.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 245.

[46] Similarly, Kerouac omits his sexual encounter with Gore Vidal from *The Subterraneans* (1958; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1981), written in 1953. (See Anne Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, p. 395.)

friends' homosexuality until the second half of *Desolation Angels* (written in 1961),[47] although other previously published Beat Generation books, notably *Go* and *Junkie*,[48] revealed some of the Beats' sexual orientations.

Another of the ideals of the Beat movement, as may be apparent from the discussion above, is sexual freedom. This, it would seem, contradicts the Third Precept of Buddhism, no sexual misconduct. Kerouac, however, did attempt to practise abstinence when he began studying Buddhism in earnest. This concerned his friend, William S. Burroughs, who wrote to Kerouac:

> I can't help but feeling that you are going too far with your absolute chastity. Besides, masturbation is *not* chastity, it is just a way of sidestepping the issue without even approaching the solution.[49]

This attempt to practise chastity accounts for Kerouac's reluctance to join in the *yabyum* ritual described in *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac writes:

> But on top of all that, the feelings about Princess, I'd also gone through an entire year of celibacy based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death and I had really no lie come to a point where I regarded lust as offensive and even cruel.... All the peaceful celibacy of my Buddhism was going down the drain. "Smith, I distrust any social system that puts down sex," said Japhy quite scholarly now that he was done and sitting naked

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[47] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, pp. 239-240.

[48] William S. Burroughs, *Junkie* (New York: Ace Books, 1953).

[49] William S. Burroughs, to Jack Kerouac (Tangier: Aug. 18, 1954), in Burroughs, *The Letters of William S. Burroughs*, Oliver Harris, ed. (Toronto: Viking, 1993), pp. 225-226.

crosslegged....[50]

Kerouac obviously comes to agree with Snyder's view on sex and Buddhism as he participates in the *yabyum* ritual;[51] however, he later insisted that this was not an orgy but a religious act (though sloppily performed).[52] Kerouac's misogyny is also revealed in the *yabyum* scene, since he equates women with desire and grasping for rebirth, quoting his motto, "Pretty girls make graves,"[53] when expressing his reluctance to participate. He also writes that Princess, who acts as the *yoginī* in the ritual, can only achieve real spiritual fulfilment through sex. He writes:

> She was just a little off her nut but when I heard her say "Bodhisattva" I realized she wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy and being a girl the only way she could express it was this way, which had its traditional roots in the yabyum ceremony of Tibetan Buddhism, so everything was fine.[54]

Snyder's view on the celibacy of monks is elaborated in Wetering's *Empty Mirror*. Snyder (Gerald) tells Wetering:

> Here in the monastery we have no girls, so it can't be done. I suppose some of the

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[50] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, pp. 29-30.

[51] Kerouac also planned to include *yabyum* in his American Buddhist monasteries, writing, "Altho really frankly I think an American zendo with no rules and all the cats talking all day when they feel like it and orgies at night with shaktis would be best thing...." (Kerouac, to Gary Snyder [Mill Valley, CA: May, 1956], in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 584.)

[52] Ben Hecht, "Interview with Jack Kerouac."

[53] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 29.

[54] *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

> monks may have homosexual relations--it's much more accepted here than in the West anyway. But with the training and the continuous discipline, there isn't much time or opportunity for sex. You'll have to go out and look for it.... When I run into it I won't shy away.... But I haven't got much time to look for it either.... There's no money for the whores. No, I have to wait till it comes my way; it has happened, and it will come again. I am always prepared for it.[55]

Hence, for Snyder, the precept against sexual intercourse is a matter of form, rather than principle. Sex is avoided in monasteries only because monks have no time for sex, not because there is anything wrong with sex or anything incompatible between sexuality and Zen, in Snyder's experience. Once again, Kerouac is shown to have taken a more conservative approach to the precepts, attempting to follow the third precept by practising complete abstinence, while Snyder takes a more radical approach by following the precept only in form while practising in a Japanese monastery. Kerouac only comes to accept sexuality as being compatible with religious practice when confronted by Snyder's and Burroughs' views on the subject.

Another example of how Kerouac deliberately altered his behaviour to conform with Zen Buddhist practice can be seen in his practice of the fourth precept, no stealing. Prior to Kerouac's conversion to Buddhism, he and the other Beats are often shown picking pockets and stealing overcoats, either to supplement their meagre incomes or just in fun. In *The Subterraneans*, for example, Kerouac (Leo Percepied) and his friends steal a pushcart and leave in front of Allen Ginsberg's (Adam Moorad's) apartment.[56] After

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[55] Wetering, *The Empty Mirror*, pp. 61-62.

[56] Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, pp. 106-108.

Kerouac began to be interested in Buddhism, however, such narratives end. He is startled and upset, in *Desolation Angels*, to discover that someone has stolen his rucksack. He writes:

> I let my head fall on the seat in that harsh glare nowhere worse in the world than in America with a stupid guilty hangover. A whole new novel (*Angels of Desolation*), a whole book of poetry, and the finishing chapters of another novel (about Tristessa), together with all the paintings not to mention the only gear I had in the world (sleepingbag, poncho, sweater of holy favor, perfect simple equipments the result of years' thinking), gone, all gone. I started to cry.[57]

This passage reveals not only Kerouac's suffering caused by the theft, but also his dedication to a life of poverty. Not only has Kerouac given up petty theft, he has also given up ideas of property, preferring to live with very few possession like a wandering Indian *bhikṣu*. Instead of stealing, Kerouac and his friends are shown performing odd jobs to gain just enough money to live on while meditating. As an example, Kerouac explains to his mother about Philip Whalen's (Ben Fagen's) lifestyle, "He has a part time job inspecting eggs in the university laboratory up the hill. He earns just enough for his beans and wine. He's a *Buddhist*!"[58]

Kerouac was unable (or unwilling) to follow the fifth precept, no intoxication, although he may have attempted to do so at first. He wrote, as part of a schedule to achieve *nirvāṇa* by 2000, "1954...No more drunkenness or alcohol, no more

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[57] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, p. 287.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

'sipping'...."[59] However, in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac takes a more Taoist[60] approach to alcohol; indeed, he seems to have convinced Snyder about the uses of alcohol in religious experiences. In the book, Ryder is shown as reluctant to participate in some of Smith's drinking binges. When Smith wants to drink wine instead of going to a lecture at a Buddhist Centre, saying "There's wisdom in wine goddam it!"[61] Ryder argues:

> You're just drinking too much all the time, I don't see how you're going to gain enlightenment and manage to stay out in the mountains, you'll always be coming down the hill spending your bean money on wine and finally you'll end up lying in the street in the rain, dead drunk, and then they'll take you away and you'll have to be reborn a teetotalin bartender to atone for your karma.[62]

However, Smith's example and the lecture Ryder attends finally convince Ryder of Smith's view. When he returns to Smith, he says:

> I went to the Buddhist lecture and they were all drinking white raw sake out of teacups and everybody got drunk. All those crazy Japanese saints! You were right! It doesn't make any difference! We all got drunk and discussed prajna! It was

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[59] Kerouac, in *Selected Letters*, p. 448n.

[60] The *Tao-te-ching* is included in Goddard's *Buddhist Bible*. Goddard considers it a Buddhist text, writing :

> Moreover the teachings are so similar to Buddhist teachings, that it is more than probable that they are Buddhist ideas which had percolated into China during the two hundred years before 240 B.C., and the Lao-tzu (The Old Philosopher) to whom the book is credited really refers not to a Chinese author but to the Buddha himself. (Dwight Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible* (1932; reprint, *A Buddhist Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 670.)

[61] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 190.

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

great.[63]

This lesson seems to have stayed with Snyder who continued drinking even in his apartment in Japan, which Wetering visited while on leave from Shokoku-ji monastery. As the two of them drink sake and discuss the eightfold path, Snyder breaks a dish and says, "All I can do is be aware of the fact I am getting drunk, or am drunk already, and try to get through the rest of the evening without accidents."[64] Snyder here attempts to combine his drinking and his practice by being mindful of his situation, even while he is drinking.

Thus, Kerouac and Snyder made some attempt to practise Buddhism by following the five precepts, with varying degrees of accuracy. Of the precepts they attempted to keep, they performed them according to their own interpretations, usually with Snyder attempting to understand the spirit of the practice and Kerouac the literal sense, until, through experience and discussion, a new interpretation of the precepts arises. This does not necessarily imply that they followed the precepts half-heartedly, or only followed the ones that were convenient. Rather, their experience and understanding dictated how to follow them.

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[63] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

[64] Wetering, *The Empty Mirror*, p. 93.

2.4 *Bodhisattva* Vows and General Beat Zen Practice

Welch notes that some Chinese lay Buddhists take the further step of observing the *Bodhisattva* vows. These vows, which may be taken by monks or laypersons who are "committed to follow the bodhisattva path in helping and saving all other creatures,"[65] are as follows:

> 1. All sentient beings, however infinite, I vow to save. 2. All the passions, however inexhaustible, I vow to cut asunder. 3. All the holy teachings, however innumerable, I vow to learn. 4. All the Buddha-ways, however unsurpassable, I vow to fulfil.[66]

Kerouac, who refers to himself, indirectly, as a *bodhisattva*,[67] attempted to follow these vows as well. He writes, in "Poem":

> I demand that the human race
> ceases multiplying its kind
> and bow out
> I advise it
>
> And as punishment & reward
> for making this plea I know
> I'll be reborn
> the last human
> Everybody else dead and I'm
> an old woman roaming the earth

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[65] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 358.

[66] D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (Rider, 1949: reprint, London: Arrow, 1959), p. 100.

[67] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 10:
"Where did you meet Ray Smith?" they asked him [Japhy Ryder] when we walked into the Place, the favorite bar of the hepcats around that Beach.
"Oh, I always meet my Bodhisattva's in the street!" he yelled, and ordered beers.

groaning in caves
sleeping on mats

And sometimes I'll cackle, sometimes
pray, sometimes cry, eat & cook
at my little stove
in the corner
"Always knew it anyway,"
I'll say
And one morning won't get up from my mat.[68]

His attempts to keep the *Bodhisattva* Vow can also be seen by his devotions to Buddha and *bodhisattvas*, *sūtra* study, meritorious practices, and preaching, activities which are also performed by Chinese lay Buddhists who take the *Bodhisattva* Vows.

Kerouac often prayed as he meditated, though, as noted above, not exclusively to Buddha. Prothero, in "On the Holy Road," quotes Kerouac, "I pray to my little brother, who died, and to my father, and to Buddha, and to Jesus Christ, and to the Virgin Mary."[69] Additionally, in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*, he also prays to Avalokiteśvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion, for the sake of all sentient beings. In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac, meditating on Desolation Peak, prays:

> I pray and ask Awakener Avalokitesvara to lay his diamond hand on my brow and give me the immortal understanding-- He is the Hearer and Answerer of Prayer, I know that this business is self hallucination and crazy business but after all it is only the awakeners (the Buddhas) who have said they do exist--In about twenty seconds comes this understanding to my mind and heart: "When a baby is born he falls asleep and dreams of life, when he dies and is buried in his grave he wakes

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[68]Kerouac, "Poem" in Jack Kerouac, *Scattered Poems*, Ann Charters, ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1985), p. 22.

[69] Kerouac, quoted in Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road," p. 216.

up again to the Eternal Ecstasy."[70]

Here Kerouac both worships Avalokiteśvara and asks for his help to discover how to end all suffering for all beings, combining both the Buddhist and Catholic ideas of prayer. While this prayer is not as ritualized as one observed by Welch, in which Śākyamuni, Amitābha, and Avalokiteśvara are all praised,[71] Kerouac still offers it for the salvation of all sentient beings.

Welch also notes that lay Buddhists study and recite *sūtras* as part of their daily religious devotion:

> The devotee would offer incense to the buddha image and sit before it, often in lotus position, reciting from memory or reading a text from the lectern in front of him. The sutras recited might be the *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, or the *Sutra of the August Royal Kuan-yin (Kao-wang Kuan-shih-yin ching)*.[72]

Kerouac, similarly, read, studied and used the *sūtras* he could find in English and French[73] in his devotions. In a letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac advises Ginsberg to read the *Diamond Sūtra* daily, as he did. He writes:

> Read, as I'm doing, the Diamond Sutra every day, Sunday read the Dana Charity chapter; Monday, Sila kindness; Tuesday, Kshanti patience; Wednesday, Virya

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[70] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, p. 51.

[71] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 184.

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 382.

[73] Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, p. 199.

Zeal; Thursday, Dyana tranquility; Friday, Prajna wisdom, Saturday, conclusion.[74] Prothero notes further, "Kerouac began to study Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, especially the Diamond Sutra, the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, and the Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, as they appeared in Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*."[75]

More than just meditating and reading the *sūtras* himself, Kerouac actively tried to preach the *dharma* as he had learned it. While in Chinese Buddhism, the laity tend to finance the publication of, or to distribute, Buddhist texts,[76] Kerouac preferred to expound on the texts and rephrase them for modern Western readers. As he read Buddhist texts, he would make notes and paraphrase, composing a text entitled *Some of the Dharma* originally as a study guide for Ginsberg.[77] In his novels, Kerouac is depicted spreading the *dharma* to everyone who gives him a ride. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac writes:

> In fact, driving through Arizona I'd explained a little Buddhism to them, specifically karma, reincarnation, and they all seemed pleased to hear the news.
> "You mean other chance to come back and try again?" asked the poor little Mexican, who was all bandaged from the fight in Juárez the night before.
> "That's what they say."
> "Well goddamnit next time I be born I hope I ain't who I am now."[78]

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[74] Kerouac, to Allen Ginsberg (Rocky Mount, N.C.: July 14, 1955), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 498.

[75] Prothero, "On the Holy Road," 217.

[76] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, pp. 375-376.

[77] Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, *p. 204.*

[78] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 159.

Kerouac even introduced a lecture to college students on "Is There a Beat Generation" with a brief discussion of the illusory nature of the world.[79] Indeed most of his writing during his Buddhist period can be considered as Kerouac's attempt to spread Buddhism to his readers, through the examples of his friends and their discussions and commentaries.

Kerouac also followed the meritorious practice of helping the animal life around him. In Chinese Buddhism, this practice is common and usually consists of releasing captured animals. Welch describes the practice of mass releases by Chinese Buddhists to mark holidays or to stem natural disasters: "What more appropriate homage could there be to the compassionate Kuan-yin on her three annual festivals than to save living creatures from the dinner table?"[80] Kerouac, following a similar motive, would leave food for wild animals and remove mouse traps and rat poison from their reach.[81] Part of his breakdown at Big Sur may have been caused by a meritorious act gone awry: feeding corn flakes to fish.[82]

Thus Kerouac not only followed the Five Precepts to the best of his understanding, he also attempted to preach Buddhism to his friends, acquaintances and readers. He tried

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[79] Jack Kerouac, "Is There a Beat Generation" on "Readings by Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation" in *The Jack Kerouac Collection* (Rhino/Word Beat R2 70939-C, 1991), vol. 3.

[80] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 378.

[81] Kerouac, *Big Sur*, p. 42.

[82] *Ibid.*, p. 167.

to help all sentient beings achieve enlightenment through prayer, his own meditation, and through compassion towards wild animals. Hence, his following the *Bodhisattva* Vows and his performance of meritorious acts reveal that he was serious about his Buddhism and did not practise merely to justify his own ethic.

2.5 Beat Zen Meditation: *Zazen* and *Kōans*

Since the Beats practised Zen Buddhist meditation largely without formal training and without such guidebooks to Zen meditation as *Three Pillars of Zen*[83] and *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*,[84] it is difficult to link Beat Zen to Zen Buddhism or any other specific school of Buddhism, except through the meditation practices the Beats emphasized. If they chanted Amitābha's name or made extensive use of mandalas, they could be classified as Pure Land or Vajrayana Buddhists without difficulty. For Kerouac and his friends, Beat Zen meditation consisted of sitting meditation (*zazen*) and some informal use of the *kōan* method, both of which are used extensively in Zen Buddhism. Hence, by the emphasis it places on Zen-style meditation, Beat Zen can be considered part of the American Zen Buddhist movement.

The practice of Zen (Ch'an) Buddhist meditation by the laity is rare in China. Welch writes:

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[83] Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (1964; revised, Toronto: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1989).

[84] Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).

> While laymen had a perfect right to join in collective Ch'an meditation, they seldom did so. Sometimes they were allowed to sit in the meditation hall of a large public monastery. The Venerable Hsü-yün encouraged this practice during the 1930's. He permitted several groups of lay supporters to come to the Nan-hua Ssu and follow part of the same schedule as the monks. Although they lived and ate in the guest quarters, they attended morning and evening devotions and after supper they sat in the meditation hall for the evening fourth period. Their places were in the east, "lower than any of the monks." The meditation patrol did not strike them over the shoulder if they dozed.... At other times Hsü-yün invited laymen to sit in the meditation hall of the Yü-of Ssu in Shanghai and the Hua-t'ing Ssu near Kunming. In the latter case he allowed John Blofeld, an English devotee, to shave his head and to lead the same life as the monks enrolled in the hall for a period of seven months....[85]

In Japan, however, the laity do occasionally meditate with the monks in the monastery during *sesshins*. Snyder observes in his article, "Spring *Sesshin* at Shokoku-ji," "Laymen who will observe the customs of Sodo [Zen monastic training] life and are able to sit still are allowed to join in the *sesshin*."[86] Snyder also writes that during the evening sittings during the *sesshin*, "Others arrive too--teachers, several college professors, and half a dozen university students...."[87] Hence the practice of meditation among the Beat Zen devotees is actually stricter than Chinese Ch'an Buddhist practice and is closer to Japanese Zen Buddhist practice.

Kerouac and his friends seem to have most strictly followed the practice of *zazen*. This style of meditation is described by Dōgen in *Shōbōgenzō zazengi*:

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[85] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 385.

[86] Gary Snyder, "Spring *Sesshin* at Shokoku-ji" *Chicago Review* 12, no. 2 (1958), p. 41.

[87] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

> You should sit upright in correct bodily posture, inclining neither to the left nor to the right, inclining neither forward nor backward.... Ready your body and mind in this way, and exhale deeply. Sitting in meditation silently and immobile, think of not thinking. What is thinking of not thinking? Non-thinking. This in itself is the art of zazen.[88]

To this may be added the description Ginsberg gives of meditation, "This, basically, is to follow the breath and take a friendly attitude toward one's thoughts, but bring the mind back to attention to the breath."[89] It should be noted, however, that until the twentieth century it was the practice of most Zen masters not to give any instructions to the novice meditators, except for the correction of posture.[90]

That Kerouac knew the method of *zazen* can be seen in his writings. Kerouac gave detailed instructions on *zazen* to Ginsberg. He writes:

> Drink a small cup of tea. Lock the door first, then place pillow on bed, pillow against wall, fold feet, lean, erect posture, let all breath out of lungs and take in a new lungful, close eyes gently and begin not only breathing gently like little child but listening to intrinsic sound of silence which as you know is the sea-sound shh under noises which are accidental.... The first signpost is, that after 5, 10 minutes you feel a sudden bliss at gentle exhalation and your muscles have long relaxed and your stomach stopped and breathing is slow. This bliss of out-breathing means you

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[88] Dōgen, in Norman Waddell and Abe Masao (trans.), "Dōgen's *Fukanzazengi* and *Shōbōgenzō zazengi*," *Eastern Buddhist* n. s. 6 (Oct. 1973), p. 128.

[89] Ginsberg, "Kerouac's Ethic," p. 55.

[90] Introductory talks, such as can be found in Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, were an innovation by Dai'un Harada. Helen Tworkov notes:

> In an attempt to revitaiize Zen in an age of degeneration, Harada Roshi devised introductory talks to inspire the modern mind. Students in the West take this format for granted, but it was heterodox in Japan, and Harada was sharply criticized by his conservative peers. There the traditional training of a novice monk was deliberately devoid of verbal instruction. (Tworkov, *Zen in America*, pp. 12-13)

> are entering samadhi. But dont grasp at it. The bliss is physical and mental. Now you're no longer interested in sounds, sights, eyes closed, ears receptive but non-discriminatory. Itches may rise to make you scratch; dont scratch them; they are imaginary, like the world; they are "the work of Mara the tempter" in yourself, trying to delude you and make you break up your samadhi. As the breathing is blissful, now listen to diamond sound of "eternity," now gaze at the Milky Way in your eyelids (which is neither bright nor dark, entertains neither arbitrary conceptions of sight). Body forgotten, restful, peaceful.... As bliss comes realize by INTUITION...the various understandings your have concerning the day's activities and the long night of life in general, their unreality, eerieness, dreamness, like Harlem Vision again. Then if you wish, use a lil tantrism to stop thought; to stop thought you may say "This thinking is Stopped" at each outbreath or "It's all Imaginary" or "Mind Essence loves Everything" or "It's only a Dream" or "Adoration to the Tathagata of No-Contact" (meaning no contact with thoughts). By cutting off contacts with thoughts, their clinging ceases; they come and go, certes, like dreams in sleep, but you no longer honor their forms, because you're honoring Essence. By a half hour of this a further bliss seeps in. But then there are leg-pains. Try often to stand the leg-pain as long as possible to dig that when it seems unbearable; at that instant, you can take it just one minute more, and suddenly during a few seconds of that minute, you forget cold about the pain, proving their imaginariness in Mind. But hung with body you have to come out. Try continuing with legs out, or better, rest, rub them, and start again....[91]

In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac's knowledge of meditation practice is further shown when Kerouac (Duluoz) and Peter Orlovsky (Simon Darlovsky) visit a Buddhist Centre where one of their friends goes to meditate. Kerouac writes:

> "There's Paul's meditation mat--on rainy nights after he's stoked the furnace and et he sits there in the dark thinking."
> "What does he think about?"
> "Nothing."[92]

These passages reveal that Kerouac was, at least, familiar with the *zazen* method

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[91] Kerouac, to Allen Ginsberg (Richmond Hill, N.Y.: Jan. 18, 1955), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, pp. 642-643.

[92] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, pp. 189-190.

of meditation as defined by Dōgen, even if he had no formal training in this practice. That he attempted to practise this method is evident in his writings between 1954 and 1962. Kerouac is often depicted sitting in crosslegged meditation. In *The Dharma Bums*, for example, while he winters with his mother and sister in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, Kerouac meditates nightly in the woods in a *zazen* position, even using a makeshift meditation cushion. He writes:

> Then I went in, led moonwhite Bob direct to my pine, where my old bed of straw was still at the foot of the tree. I arranged my cape and legs and sat to meditate.... I immediately fell into a blank thoughtless trance wherein it was again revealed to me "This thinking has stopped" and I sighed because I didn't have to think any more and felt my whole body sink into a blessedness surely to be believed, completely relaxed and at peace with all the ephemeral world of dream and dreamer and the dreaming itself.[93]

While perhaps undisciplined (occasionally he would fall asleep),[94] Kerouac is shown meditating in *zazen* style, sitting and meditating without thinking. That he performed this often can be inferred by Ryder's comment in *The Dharma Bums*, "Why do you sit on your ass all day?"[95]

In comparison, Snyder's practice before his first trip to Japan to study Zen formally was more structured than Kerouac's. Kerouac described Snyder's practice as follows:

> His meditations were regular things, by the clock, he'd meditated first thing waking in the morning then he had his mid-afternoon meditation, only about three

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[93] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 134.

[94] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[95] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

> minutes long, then before going to bed and that was that. But I just ambled and dreamed around.[96]

In spite of this difference in attitude towards practice, Kerouac still saw himself and Snyder as "two strange dissimilar monks on the same path."[97]

The *kōan* method of meditation is also used in some Zen schools. Traditionally, the *kōans* (in Chinese, *kung-ans*) or "public cases" are stories of exchanges between student and teacher, containing a critical phase (*hua-t'ou*). Welch describes the *kung-an* method practised in China as follows:

> To keep working on the same question was "like a rat gnawing at a coffin--if he keeps gnawing at the same spot, there will come a day when he gnaws his way through."... [The *hua-t'ou*] had to be gripped day and night, walking, sitting, going to the latrines.[98]

Neither Kerouac nor Snyder seem to have made formal use of *kōans* in meditation at this time. That is, they are seldom shown to be struggling with a particular *kōan* during their meditations. Rather, *kōans* are used to illustrate the spirit of Zen Buddhism or as a separate practice of composing *kōans* and solving them spontaneously. At the beginning of *The Dharma Bums*, Snyder attempts to teach Kerouac about Zen Buddhism by telling Kerouac a few *kōans* in rapid succession. Kerouac, just beginning his Buddhist studies without giving much attention to Zen, complains:

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[96] *Ibid.*, p. 175-176.

[97] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

[98] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 69.

> "It's *mean*.... All those Zen Masters throwing young kids in the mud because they can't answer their silly word questions."
> "That's because they want them to realize mud is better than words, boy." But I can't recreate the exact (will try) brilliance of all Japhy's answers and come-backs and come-ons with which he had me on pins and needles all the time and did eventually stick something in my crystal head that made me change my plans in life.[99]

Kerouac tries practising Snyder's interpretation of the *kōan* method later that evening with the chef in a Chinese restaurant, who responds to the question "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?" with "'I don't care,' said the old cook, with lidded eyes, and I told Japhy and he said, 'Perfect answer, absolutely perfect. Now you know what I mean by Zen.'"[100]

Kerouac composed his own *kōan* to study. In a letter to Gary Snyder, Kerouac writes:

> The other night I tried a samapatti self-hypnotist trance and determined to find out the cause and the cure of the world's woe. It came out in the form of visions, one of a seed becoming a baby as I stared into my dark eyelids, the other was a bent stick. The thing therefore goes like this:
>
> THE CAUSE OF THE WORLD'S WOE IS BIRTH
> THE CURE OF THE WORLD'S WOE IS A BENT STICK
>
> This will be my Koan. (Did anybody ever invent his own koan?) It's a pip, aint it? So I went out in the yard and gathered 3 or 4 bent sticks, like boomerangs, right angle organic tree sticks not furniture pieces....[101]

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[99] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 13.

[100] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[101] Jack Kerouac, letter to Gary Snyder (Mill Valley, CA: May, 1956), in Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 583.

Here Kerouac is seen to be meditating with a *kōan*, albeit one of his own devising. However, there is no indication as to whether or not he practised this *kōan* is any formal manner, grappling with it, "like a rat gnawing on a coffin," as Welch describes.

For the Beats, the essence of Zen, as shown by their use of *kōans*, is completely spontaneous action or speech. This view leads to the spontaneous question-and-answer sessions among Kerouac and his friends, or spontaneous physical games, as is illustrated in *Big Sur*. Kerouac, having visited Albert Saijo (George Baso) in hospital, plays "a Zen game" with him as they elaborately wave goodbye to each other. Kerouac writes:

> Finally I start to make a joke of it by ducking around a corner and peeking out and waving again--He ducks behind a bush and waves back...--Suddenly we're two crazy hopeless sages goofing on a lawn.... What's keeping me is that I know George will get better and live and teach the joyful truth and George knows I know this, that's why he's playing the game with me, the magic game of glad freedom which is what Zen or for that matter the Japanese soul ultimately means....[102]

Hence Kerouac's Beat Zen actually uses the traditional Zen meditation techniques of *zazen* posture and *kōans* in its practice. Moreover, this practice was informal though, as Ginsberg comments, "I once asked Gary how he thought Jack would do in a Zen monastery in terms of responding to *kōans*, and he said that Kerouac could just cut through and get them."[103] Through his use of the *kōan* and *zazen* methods, Kerouac, according to

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[102] Kerouac, *Big Sur*, pp. 81-82.

[103] Allen Ginsberg, quoted in Gifford and Lee, *Jack's Book*, p. 215.

Ginsberg, "had some kind of satori,"[104] which is the ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism. The actual nature of a *satori* experience is too subjective and subtle to be discussed here. However, Kerouac claims to have had such experiences, both as the result of meditation[105] and spontaneously.[106]

2.6 Conclusion

Thus, Kerouac and the other Beats, in particular Gary Snyder, attempted a serious practice of Buddhism with an emphasis on the *zazen* method of meditation and a modified *kōan* method. If their practice of Buddhism is compared with that of Chinese and Japanese Buddhists, as Layman and Prebish suggest, Kerouac and the Beats can be seen to have taken the Three Refuges, to have followed the Five Precepts (as they interpreted them), and to have taken the *Bodhisattva* Vows to save all sentient beings. Additionally, they emphasized Zen Buddhist meditation in a style consistent with that described by Dōgen,

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[104] Ginsberg, "Kerouac's Ethic," p. 55.

[105] In a letter to Philip Whalen, Kerouac writes:
This pitiful Jack shaking his head over the fools of the future, is, as they are, just that...but Buddha, for the Buddha, nothing is there anywhere.--The ecstasy of that night in the woods at 1 A M when the Lord told me "Everythings Alright forever & forever & forever," and my hair stood up on end with remembrance of the Blessed Origin of all things, wow, that was it, that will be it. (Kerouac, to Philip Whalen [Rocky Mount, N.C.: Feb. 7, 1956], in, Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 550.)

[106] See, for example, Jack Kerouac, "Satori in Paris," (*Evergreen Review*, 1966; reprint, *Satori in Paris and Pic*, New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. 7.

the founder of the Sōtō Zen school in Japan, with some use of *kōans* as a teaching method, instead of the more traditional use as a separate form of meditation.

The alterations Kerouac and Snyder made to Zen Buddhism in their practice of Beat Zen are largely the result of attitude and discussion. Kerouac usually took a more conservative approach to practice, strictly following the precepts (where possible, with the exception of the Fifth Precept) literally, while Snyder took a more radical approach, following the precepts more in spirit than in practice, according to Zen Buddhist philosophy as he understood it. As can be seen from the example of the third precept, Kerouac actually became more radical when he encountered Snyder's practice (which included Tantric sex rituals). Watts and the other critics fail to consider the conservative and radical strains within Beat Zen practice when they dismiss its practice as "anything goes."

Thus, it can be seen that Beat Zen closely resembles Japanese Zen Buddhism in practice, except for some alterations which the Beats made to adapt Zen Buddhism to their own understanding of how it should be practised in their Beat subculture. That they altered Zen Buddhism on their own authority, however, need not be counted against them, once the sources they used to discover Zen are examined.

Chapter 3

The Problem of Authority

3.0 The Question of Authority

While it is possible to consider Beat Zen to be a variation of Zen Buddhism, the following question must be addressed: "On what authority did the Beats alter Zen to fit their own lifestyles and philosophies?" That is, while Zen Buddhists traditionally follow the teachings and adaptations of their Zen masters, who, in turn, rely on the teachings of their particular sects of Zen Buddhism, where did Kerouac and the Beats get their authority to create Beat Zen on their own and follow it? Since Kerouac did not seek out a Zen master, who could have guided his study of Zen, aided in meditative practice, and illustrated teachings with examples from the legends of the Zen patriarchs, he was left to find his own authority to create Beat Zen. Watts, in *Beat Zen Square Zen and Zen*, presents his view on how the Beat Generation derived this authority. He describes the stereotypical Beat as:

> the cool, fake-intellectual hipster searching for kicks, name-dropping bits of Zen and jazz jargon to justify a disaffiliation from society which is in fact just ordinary, callous exploitation of other people.... They are...the shadow of a substance, the low-level caricature which always attends spiritual and cultural movements, carrying them to extremes which their authors never intended.[1]

In light of Ch'en's argument on the development of the notion of filial piety within Chinese Buddhism, Watts' argument does not hold. That is, the process by which Kerouac

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[1] Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*, p. 18.

adapted Zen Buddhism to his Beat ethic is similar to the process that Buddhism underwent in China when Chinese Buddhists interpreted Buddhism as being filial. Ch'en writes:

> In a society where filial piety was emphasized, the Buddhists recognized clearly that their religion must develop and stress its own ideas concerning piety if it were to flourish in China. Only through such a positive approach could the religion hope to compete with the Confucians on favorable terms. Having recognized the problem that they faced in China, how did the Buddhists proceed to adjust to this ethical milieu, so as to present a better image off their religion as far as filial piety was concerned? Briefly, they sought to make Buddhism acceptable to the Chinese by three methods: first, by pointing out the numerous sutras in the Buddhist canon which stress filial piety; second, by forging a body of apocryphal literature which emphasizes piety as its central theme; and third, by contending that the Buddhist concept of filial piety was superior to that of the Confucians in that it aimed at universal salvation....[2]

Similarly, Kerouac, in adapting and "Beatifying" Zen Buddhism studied the Buddhist texts available to him in the 1950's, particularly the works of D. T. Suzuki, paraphrased and elaborated on these texts, and followed the examples of Buddhist figures who typified Kerouac's idea of the *fellaheen* hero.

3.1 Kerouac's Authority

Kerouac's general attitude towards discipline and accepting the authority of others can be seen in his military experiences during World War II. He joined the Navy but was unable to follow the discipline imposed on him. Ann Charters writes:

> The Navy psychiatrist asked Kerouac who he really thought he was. Jack replied, "I'm only old Samuel Johnson." He meant he was "a man of letters" and "a man of letters is a man of independence." It all came down to the simple matter of Navy

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[2] Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, p. 18.

> discipline, he told his doctor, not that Jack wouldn't take it, but that he *couldn't*. He kept insisting he was "too much of a nut, and a man of letters." The authorities agreed with part of what he said at least. A few weeks later Kerouac was honourably discharged with an "indifferent character."[3]

Hence, Kerouac, although enthusiastic enough to volunteer for the Navy, lacked the temperament to follow the strict discipline of military life. His views on religion reflect this attitude, as he writes in *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*:

> When you've understood this scripture, throw it away. If you cant understand this scripture, throw it away. I insist on your freedom.[4]

Further, Kerouac writes in "Aftermath: The Origins of the Beat Generation" that he and his friends turned away from traditional sources of authority and found a new source in the underclass or *fellaheen* of hipsters, hustlers, drug addicts, and jazz musicians: those who were "beat up" or "beat down" by contemporary society. Kerouac writes:

> *beat*, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction.... It never meant juvenile delinquents; it meant characters of a special spirituality who didn't gang up but were solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization. The subterranean heroes who'd finally turned from the "freedom" machine of the West and were taking drugs, digging bop, having flashes of insight, experiencing the "derangement of the senses," talking strange, being poor and glad, prophesying a new style for American culture, a new style (we thought) completely free from European influences (unlike the Lost Generation), a new incantation.[5]

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[3] Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Press, 1973), p. 39.

[4] Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, sect. 45.

[5] Jack Kerouac, "Aftermath: The Philosophy of the Beat Generation" *Esquire*, March 1970, reprinted in Jack Kerouac, *Good Blonde & Others*, Donald Allen, ed. (San Francisco: Grey Fox, 1993), p. 47.

Kerouac also writes that being beat also has religious aspects. He writes of visiting a working-class church:

> Yet it was as a Catholic, it was not at the insistence of any of these "niks" and certainly not with their approval either, that I went one afternoon to the church of my childhood (one of them), Ste. Jeanne d'Arc in Lowell, Mass., and suddenly with tears in my eyes and had a vision of what I must have really meant with "Beat" anyhow when I heard the holy silence in the church (I was the only one in there, it was five p.m., dogs were barking outside, children yelling, the fall leaves, the candles were flickering alone just for me), the vision of the word Beat as being to mean beatific.... There's the priest preaching on Sunday morning, all of a sudden through a side door of the church comes a group of Beat Generation characters in strapped raincoats like the I. R. A. coming in silent to "dig" the religion...I knew it then.[6]

This turning to the *fellaheen* as a source of spiritual authority is reflected in Kerouac's preference for the wandering *bhikṣus* and hermits such as Han-shan, the "Dharma Bums" and "Zen Lunatics" whom Kerouac uses to illustrate his writings.

However, Kerouac did not fight against what was perceived by mainstream society as authority, as some of his friends did. While some members of the Beat Generation did reject mainstream society in favour of left-wing or anarchist politics,[7] Kerouac was indifferent to politics. When asked by Hecht for an opinion on Dwight Eisenhower, Kerouac responds, "He's the kind of man that, you know, you'd like to shake hands with.

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[6] Jack Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation" in *Good Blonde and Others* Donald Allen, ed, (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993), p. 63.

[7] See Gary Snyder, "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution" in Snyder, *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New York: New Directions, 1969), pp. 90-93.

He's a nice man. You know he's a nice man. I don't know anything about politics."[8] That is, Kerouac only considered Eisenhower as a fellow human being and not according to his political views or actions. The political world of Eisenhower does not seem to have touched Kerouac, who confesses, in the same interview, never to have voted.[9] Thus, for Kerouac, authority was a matter of autonomy over heteronomy; that is, he did not recognize heteronomous authority, but preferred to decide autonomously what was authoritative for himself, from his own reading, the examples of his friends, and from his own experience.

3.2.1 The Authority of Beat Zen: Scriptural

The Beat Generation originated as an intellectual movement. The three central members of the Beat Generation in New York, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs, met while Ginsberg and Kerouac were attending Columbia University, and were influenced by such writers as Reich, Spengler, and Alfred Korzybski. In Korzybski's anti-nominal general semantics, he rejects Aristotelian logic as follows:

> Either/or thinking created a gap between reality and the words used....To demonstrate the gap between the word and the reality, he banged on a table and said, "Whatever this is, it is not a table." Emotions such as love, hate, and anger, he explained, occurred on a nonverbal level, so that what we called them had

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[8] Hecht, "Interview with Jack Kerouac."

[9] *Ibid.*

nothing to do with what they were.[10]

Just as Spengler's view of the *fellaheen* led the Beats to discover a new spiritual authority based on the underclasses, Korzybski's semantics may also be seen as a precursor to Kerouac's Beat Zen. Kerouac notes, paraphrasing the Heart *Sūtra*:[11]

> And even emptiness is a word, so, a prayer...the word emptiness is emptiness, the word emptiness is not different from emptiness, neither is emptiness different from the word emptiness, indeed, emptiness is the word emptiness![12]

Thus the intellectual pursuits of the Beat Generation can be considered the context upon which Beat Zen was formed. With this intellectual context in mind, it is not possible to take Kerouac's statement, "O I'm not a Buddhist anymore--I'm not anything anymore!"[13] at face value. While he may be denying that he is a Buddhist, he could also be holding to Korzybski's anti-nominalism, or affirming that since he has achieved the goal of Buddhism

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[10] Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), p. 72.

[11] Max Müller, *The Ancient Palm-Leaves*, in *Anecdota Oxoniensia: Texts, Documents, and Extracts Chiefly from Manuscripts in the Bodleian and Other Oxford Libraries, Aryan Series Vol. 1, Parts 1-3* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881-1884; reprint New York: AMS Press, 1976), Vol. 1, 3, p. 48:

> Iha Sāriputra rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṃ rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ yad rūpaṃ sā śūnyatā yā śūnyatā tad rūpam. ("O Śâriputra,...form here is emptiness, and emptiness indeed is form. Emptiness is not different from form, form is not different from emptiness. What is form that is emptiness, what is emptiness that is form.")

[12] Kerouac, to Philip Whalen (Rocky Mount, N.C.: Feb. 7, 1956), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 548.

[13] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, p. 199.

to free himself from suffering he no longer needs Buddhism,[14] or even referring to the doctrine of the emptiness of words as recorded in this passage from the *Laṅkavatāra Sūtra*:

> Word-discrimination goes on by the coordination of brain, chest, nose, throat, palate, lips, tongue, teeth and lips. Words are neither different nor not-different from discrimination. Words rise from discrimination as their cause; if words were different from discrimination they could not have discrimination for their cause; then again, if words are not different, they could not carry and express meaning. Words, therefore, are produced by causation and are mutually conditioning and shifting and, just like things, are subject to birth and destruction.[15]

When Kerouac's friends, Neal and Carolyn Cassady, began to study Edgar Cayce's writings on reincarnation, Kerouac responded by reading Buddhist texts and *sūtras* extensively, as a means to argue against Cayce.[16] Kerouac recommended these works to Allen Ginsberg, who was also becoming interested in Buddhism. Kerouac's study of *sūtras* can be seen in his recommendation of the following works in a letter to Ginsberg:

> Here, first, is the correct bibliography:

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[14] Kerouac, to Allen Ginsberg, (Rocky Mount, NC: May 20, 1955) in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 483:

> Suddenly the past two days I ben watching ants in the garden, their dry villages, their familiar dry travails in the grit, and it seems to me I have reached the point beyond Enlightenment now and can abandon Buddhism now because Buddhism is an arbitrary conception. I mean, in reality, there is no difference between Ignorance and Enlightenment, they are both different forms of the same thing which is that unknowable unpredictable shining suchness as I say...a girl's ass is the same as nothing, life is the same as death, practising discipline is the same as riot, what's the use of torturing your form?

[15] D. T. Suzuki, "The Lankavatara Scripture" in Goddard (ed.), *A Buddhist Bible*, p. 285.

[16] Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My Life with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), pp.234-235.

TEXTS FROM THE BUDDHIST CANNON KNOWN AS DHAMMAPADA. (Samuel Beal, London and Boston, 1878).

LIFE OF BUDDHA, or BUDDHA CHARITA by Asvaghosha the Patriarch, translated by Samuel Beal (Sacred Books of the East, vol. 19)

THE GOSPEL OF BUDDHA by Paul Carus (Open court, Chicago 1894).

BUDDHISM IN TRANSLATIONS by Henry Clarke Warren (Harvard Oriental Series Vol. 3, Harvard U.P 1896) Also in HARVARD CLASSICS.

THE BUDDHIST BIBLE, Dwight Goddard (Goddard, Thetford, Vt.) This is by far the best book because it contains the Surangama Sutra and the Lankavatara Scripture, not to mention the 11-page Diamond Sutra which is the last word, and Asvaghosha's Awakening of the Faith, and the Tao. The Buddhist Bible uses sources–from the Pali, the Sanskrit, the Thibetan, Chinese, Burmese and modern.

BUDDHIST LEGENDS E. W. Burlingame (Harvard Oriental Series Vol. 28, 30). These are commentaries on the 423 Aphorisms, very rich.

THE DIALOGS OF THE BUDDHA, DIGHA-NIKAYA (long dialogues) (Rhys Davids, Oxford 3 vols.).

VISUDDHI MAGGA by Buddhaghosha, trans. by P. M. Tin (The Path of Purity, Pali Text Society, Translation Series 11, 17, 21).

THE SACRED BOOK AND EARLY LITERATURE OF THE EAST. Volume 18 India and Buddhism. (Parke, Austin and Lipscomb New York-London).[17]

Hence, Kerouac began his study of Buddhism, in Beat tradition, as an intellectual pursuit, using a wide variety of texts, consisting largely of scriptural sources. Further, Kerouac's study of Buddhist scriptures was an on-going practice, constantly giving Kerouac insight into different aspects of Buddhist philosophy. At the beginning of *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac explains his simplistic view of Buddhism, writing:

> [Ryder] knew all the details of Tibetan, Chinese, Mahayana, Hinayana, Japanese and even Burmese Buddhism but I warned him at once I didn't give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavors of Buddhism, but was just interested in the first of Sakyamuni's four noble truths, *All life is suffering*. And to an extent interested in the third, *The suppression of suffering can be*

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[17] Kerouac, to Allen Ginsberg, Richmond Hill, N.Y.: early May, 1954, in *Selected Letters*, pp. 414-415.

> *achieved*, which I didn't quite believe was possible then. (I hadn't yet digested the Lankavatara Scripture which eventually shows you that there's nothing in the world but the mind itself, and therefore all's possible including the suppression of suffering.)[18]

On this attempt to study as much material on Buddhism as possible, one of Kerouac's friends, John Clellon Holmes, said of him, "He tried like mad with Buddhism. Nobody understood Buddhism as deeply as Jack that I have ever known."[19]

Kerouac's writing reveals a great deal of references to Buddhist *sūtras*, in particular the *Diamond Sūtra*, which he read daily. In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac sums up his religious ethic in a paraphrase of the *Diamond Sūtra*, writing:

> "I'll carry your pack Pat," I offer, figuring I'm strong enough to do it and I wont give it a second thought because it says in the Diamondcutter of the Wise Vow (my bible, the *Vajra-cheddika-prajna-paramita* which was supposed to've been spoken orally--how else?--by Sakyamuni himself) "practice generosity but think of generosity as being but a word and nothing but a word," to that effect--[20]

From his reading of the *Diamond Sūtra*, Kerouac may have felt compelled, as an act of kindness, to preach the *dharma* he learned from his study of Buddhism. The *Diamond Sutra* reads:

> What do you think, Subhuti? If a disciple bestowed in charity an abundance of the seven treasures sufficient to fill the three thousand great universes, would there accrue to that person a considerable blessing and merit?...If there is another disciple who, after studying and observing even a single stanza of this Scripture, explains its meaning to others, his blessing and merit will be much greater. And

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[18] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 12.

[19] Holmes, in Gifford and Lee, *Jack's Book*, p. 220.

[20] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, p. 104.

> why? Because from these explanations buddhas have attained Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi and their teachings are based upon this sacred Scripture. But, Subhuti, as soon as I have spoken of these Buddhas and their Dharmas, I must recall the words, for there are no Buddhas and no Dharmas.[21]

Thus, in the spirit of generosity and kindness, Kerouac, like the Chinese Buddhist translators of the Han, began to rewrite *sūtras* into modern English. In a letter to Snyder, Kerouac writes:

> I'm busy translating the Diamond Sutra from the English-of-the-Translators, to an English to be understood by ordinary people (who are not to be divided from the Buddha). For instance, I think "imaginary judgment" will be a good translation of "arbitrary conception," which is such a tough phrase, even I couldn't understand it with all my philological considerings... Dharma, would be, "truth law." Nirvana, "Blown-out-ness"... Tathata, "That-Which-Everything-Is" and Tathagata "Attainer-to-That-Which-Everything-Is".... Bodhisattva-Manasattvas [*sic*], "Beings of Great Wisdom"--Dipankara Buddha: "Awakened One Dipankara"....[22]

An example of Kerouac's re-translation of Buddhist texts can be found in his *Mexico City Blues*, in which he paraphrases the Burning House passage from the *Lotus Sūtra*:[23]

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[21] Dwight Goddard, "The Diamond Sutra" in Goddard (ed.) *A Buddhist Bible*, pp. 89-90.

[22] Kerouac to Snyder (Rocky Mount, N.C.: March 8, 1956), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 567.

[23] Compare with H. Kern (trans.), *The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka or The Lotus of the True Law* (Sacred Books of the East, Max Müller, ed., Vol. 21) (London: Clarendon Press, 1909), pp.86, 88-89:

> Then the man thinks: I am now in anxiety on account of my children. What is the use of my having sons if I lose them? No, they shall not perish by this fire.
> Instantly a device occurred to his mind: These young (and ignorant) children are fond of toys, and have none just now to play with. Oh, they are so foolish!
> He then says to them: Listen, my sons, I have carts of different sorts, yoked with deer, goats, and excellent bullocks, lofty, great, and completely furnished.
> They are outside the house; run out, do with them what you like; for your sake

Like running a stick through water
The use and effect
Of tellin people that
their house
is burning,
And that the Buddha, an old
And wise father
Will save them by holy
subterfuge,

Crying: "Out, out, little ones,
The fire will burn you!
I promise to give you fine
carts
Three in number, different,
Charming, the goat cart,
The deer cart, and
The cart of the bullock

Gayly bedecked--With oranges,
Flowers, holy maidens & trees,"
So the children rush out, saved,
And he gives them
The incomparable single Greatcart
Of the White Bullock, all snow.[24]

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have I caused them to be made. Run out all together, and rejoice to have them.
....
Then I employ an able device, and tell them of the three vehicles, so showing them the means of evading the numerous evils of the triple world which are known to me.
And those of my sons who adhere to me, who are mighty in the six transcendent faculties (Abhigñâs) and the triple science, the Pratyeka-buddhas, as well as the Bodhisattvas unable to slide back;
And those (others) who equally are my sons, to them I just now am showing, by means of this excellent allegory, the single Buddha-vehicle. Receive it; ye shall all become Ginas.

[24] Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1959, reprint, 1990), p.126. Similarly, Whalen paraphrases the *Heart Sūtra*'s *mantra* "*gate gate pāragate*

Hence, Kerouac not only translated and paraphrased Buddhist texts into contemporary American idioms, he also knew about the role of *upāya* ("skilful means," "device," or Kerouac's "holy subterfuge") in spreading Buddhism. Thus, Kerouac's paraphrases of Buddhist scriptures could be used to enlighten his readers with Buddhist philosophy expressed in modern English. Kerouac attempted this with a book called ***Buddha Tells Us*** which he tried to have published in 1955. He writes Ginsberg:

> "Buddha Tells Us" has been received coldly by Cowley, Giroux, Sterling--a great book. It will convert many when it is published and read. If I can get it thru the Money changers, the people who sincerely read it will dig. I mean, I've read it over three times and it definitely has magical powers of enlightenment, it is truly a Lake of Light.[25]

This view is confirmed by Snyder, who encouraged Kerouac to write *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, a meditation on Buddhist philosophy, saying, "All right, Kerouac, it's about time for you to write a sutra."[26]

Thus, the first part of Kerouac's Beat Zen was the result of an intensive study of the original *sūtras*, followed by reinterpretation and re-translation of the works into contemporary idiom and finally the creation of a new "*sūtra*" and his "Buddha Tells Us" text which he attempted to publish for the enlightenment of his readers. Hence, Beat Zen,

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pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā" in "Sourdough Mountain Lookout," in Ann Charters, [ed.], *The Portable Beat Reader* [New York: Viking, 1992], p. 313) as, "Gone/Gone/REALLY gone/into the cool/O MAMA!"

[25] Kerouac to Ginsberg (Rocky Mount, N.C.: July 14, 1955), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 498.

[26] Snyder, quoted in Jackson, "The Counterculture Looks East," p.57.

like Chinese Buddhism, adapted its own terminology to fit Buddhist concepts and, in the process, created new texts, in the way that Chinese Buddhists created the *Heart sūtra*,[27] and Kerouac created "Buddha Tells Us."

3.2.2 The Authority of Beat Zen: D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts

Beat Zen also has its origins in the Beat Generation's position as an art movement. Just as the Beats were inspired by Rimbaud and Dostoyevski, some of the Beats were inspired by Zen Buddhist art and poetry. Ginsberg began his study of Zen Buddhism with commentaries by D. T. Suzuki, such as his *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, after seeing an exhibit of Chinese and Japanese art.[28] Ginsberg writes, in a letter to Kerouac:

> I rushed over (3 blocks) to the Public Library Vast branch 42 St and went to the fine arts room and took out a dozen volumes of Chink painting, which I never hardly laid eyes on before in m'life. True, I had attended the Met Museum of Art show of Jap paintings, which opened my eyes to the sublimity and sophistication (meaning learning and experience, not snideness) of the East. But as far as Chinaland went, I had only the faintest idear that there was so much of a kulcheral heritage, so easy to get at thru book upon book of reproduction--coolie made volumes sewn together on fine linen paper by laundrymen in Shang-hai or Kyoto (Jap.) decades ago before the first world War even. That is to say, tho China is a bleak great blank in our intimate knowledge, there is actually at hand a veritable feast, a free treasurey, a plethora, a cornucopia of pix--pictures, like children love to see--in good libraries and museums. So this gets me on a project and I am now

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[27] Nattier, "The *Heart Sūtra*: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?" pp. 153-221.

[28] Ginsberg's interest in Chinese and Japanese culture did not alter his use of World War II-style racist slang. Such language is also evident in his poem, "America" (Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* [San Francisco: City Lights, 1959], p. 43), in which he writes, "That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black niggers. Hah. Her make us all work sixteen hours a day. Help."

> spending all my fee time in columbia Fine Arts library and NY Public leafing through immense albums of asiatic imagery. I'm also reading a little about their mystique and religions which I never did from a realistic standpoint before. Most of the Buddhist writing you see is not interesting, vague, etc because it has no context to us--but if you begin to get a clear idea of the various religions, the various dynasties and epochs of art and messianism and spiritual waves of hippness, so to speak, you begin to see the vastitude and intelligence of the yellow men, and you understand a lot of new mind and eyeball kicks. I am working eastward from Japan and have begun to familiarize myself with Zen Buddhism thru a book (Philosophical Library Pub.) by one D. T. Suzuki (outstanding 89 yr. old authority now at columbia who I will I suppose go see for interesting talk) "Introduction to Zen Bhuddism."[29]

Similarly, Whalen relates how he and Snyder became interested in Zen Buddhism while reading R. H. Blyth's translations of haiku. Andrew Schelling, in "Flying Softly Through the Night: A Profile of Philip Whalen" writes:

> ...according to Whalen, his interest in Zen began with Gary Snyder's discovery of R. H. Blyth's four volume set of haiku translations that came out in the fifties. Blyth keeps referring to Suzuki Daisetz in his notes. "That's how Gary got to looking up the *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. So we read all those, Suzuki's three volumes, but it pretty much started with the haiku translations."[30]

Thus, the members of the Beat Generation began their study of Zen Buddhism as an aid to understanding the art and poetry that fascinated them. In doing so, they turned to popular works on Zen Buddhism, works which would have been readily available to them in libraries and bookstores.

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[29] Ginsberg, to Kerouac, in Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady, *As Ever: The Collected Correspondence of Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady*, Barry Gifford, ed. (Berkeley: Creative Arts, 1977), p. 140.

[30] Andrew Schelling, "Flying Softly Through the Night: A Profile of Philip Whalen" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Summer 1994), p. 81.

It should be noted, however, that the two most popular commentators on Zen Buddhism during the 1950's, Watts and Suzuki, were not representatives of traditional Japanese Zen Buddhism. Suzuki was the pupil of Soyen Shaku, a reformer, attempting to revitalize Japanese Zen Buddhism and to spread this new interpretation of Zen Buddhism to the West. Tworkov writes, "...Soyen felt that Zen in Japan had grown impoverished, sapped of true spiritual inquiry. On Soyen's horizon, the future of Zen rested with the barbarians in the West."[31] Hence, the missionary movement which inspired Suzuki's writings did not attempt merely to copy Japanese Zen Buddhism into West, but to present an altered, richer (in Soyen's view) Zen Buddhism to the West, and the process, back to Japan.[32]

One of Suzuki's early works on Zen Buddhism is *Manual of Zen Buddhism* in

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[31] Tworkov, *Zen in America*, p. 3.

[32] Soyen and Suzuki's attempt to revitalize Zen Buddhism can be viewed as part of the wider trend in nineteenth century Japan to modernize Japan by adopting aspects of western culture. Kenzaburō Ōe, in his lecture, "Speaking on Japanese Culture Before a Scandinavian Audiene: Lecture Series, 1992," Kunioki Yanagishita (trans.), in Ōe, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures* (New York: Kodansha International: 1995), p. 17-18, compares this phemonemon with Genji's insistance that his son learn Chinese culture, wit "Yamato spirit," or a shared sensibility:

> After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, "foreign culture" came to mean not Chinese but European learning, with all the implications that had for the modernization of Japan; but fundamentally there was no real change in the attitude toward learning from those outside. Once again, however, the notion of "Yamato spirit" was brought into play, as Meiji politicians used it to unify the people's cultural consciousness in the interests of creating a modern state. This was done, in large part, by stressing the absolute nature of Japanese culture, with the emperor as its central feature.

which he provides translations of selections from Mahāyāna Buddhist texts which are considered important in Zen Buddhism. In this manner, Suzuki not only introduced a complex Asian philosophy into the West, he also provided a context in which it could be understood. Larry A. Fader, in his tribute to Suzuki, "D. T. Suzuki's Contribution to the West, writes:

> With the publication of *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, Suzuki believed that he had brought to the West a set of materials necessary for a well-rounded understanding of Zen. *The Manual* was intended to complement his early *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* in which the essential teachings of Zen are discussed philosophically and *The Training of a Zen Monk* in which monastic rituals and practices are described.[33]

Suzuki also influenced translators of other Mahāyāna texts such as Paul Carus and Dwight Goddard.[34] Thus, somewhat indirectly, Suzuki's interpretation of Zen Buddhism was influencing Kerouac even when Kerouac concentrated on Mahāyāna texts, such as the *Laṅkavātara Sūtra*, and rejected Zen Buddhism as "mean."[35]

In presenting Zen Buddhism to the West, Suzuki used psychological and mythological terms, rather than stressing the historical development of the religion. Indeed, Suzuki claims that Zen cannot be understood in an historical context, writing:

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[33] Larry A. Fader, "D. T. Suzuki's Contribution to the West," in Masao Abe (ed.), *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York: Weatherhill, 1986), p. 100.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 99.

[35] Kerouac, in Al Aronowitz, "The Yen for Zen," *Escapade* vol. 6 (Oct. 1960), reprinted in Jack Kerouac, *Safe in Heaven Dead: Interviews with Jack Kerouac*, Michael White (ed.), (New York: Hanuman Books, 1990), p. 92.

> Zen must be understood from the inside, not from the outside. One must first attain what I call *prajñā*-intuition and then proceed to the study of all its objectified expressions. To try to get into Zen by collecting the so-called historical materials and to come to a conclusion which will definitely characterize Zen as Zen, Zen in itself, or Zen as each of us lives it in his innermost being, is not the right approach. Hu Shih, as a historian, knows Zen in its historical setting, but not Zen in itself. It is likely that he does not recognize that Zen has its own life independent of history. After he has exhausted Zen in its historical setting, he is not at all aware of the fact that Zen is still fully alive, demanding Hu Shih's attention and, if possible, his "unhistorical" treatment.[36]

As a result of this view, Suzuki explains Zen Buddhism in terms of the personal experience of the Zen Buddhist acolyte rather than as a tradition developed within Chinese Buddhism. Indeed, he refers only to the obviously mythological aspects of historical figures within Zen Buddhism, using them more as parables than historical evidence. For example, in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Suzuki seldom makes reference to the historical Buddha as the founder of Buddhism. Rather, Buddha is the subject of *kōans* and parables. As an example, Suzuki writes:

> When Sakyamuni was born, it is said that he lifted one hand toward the heavens and pointed to the earth with the other, exclaiming, "Above the heavens and below the heavens, I alone am the Honoured One!" Ummon (Yun-men), founder of the Ummon School of Zen, comments on this by saying, "If I had been with him at the moment of his uttering this, I would surely have struck him dead with one blow and thrown the corpse into the maw of a hungry dog." What unbelievers would ever think of making such raving remarks over a spiritual leader? Yet one of the Zen masters following Ummon says: "Indeed, this is the way Ummon desires to serve the world, sacrificing everything he has, body and mind! How grateful he

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[36] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "Zen: A Reply to Hu Shih," *Philosophy East and West* 3, p. 26. James D. Sellmann, in "A Belated Response to Hu Shih and D. T. Suzuki" (*Philosophy East and West* 45, no. 1 (Jan. 1995):97-104), argues that Suzuki uses the term "history" to mean "living history" while Hu uses it to mean "histiography."

must have felt for the love of Buddha!"[37]

Downplaying the historical aspects of Zen Buddhism, Suzuki stresses personal experience and irrationality. Thus, Suzuki writes:

> Personal experience, therefore, is everything in Zen. No ideas are intelligible to those who have no backing of experience.... To get the clearest and most efficient understanding of a thing, therefore, it must be experienced personally. Especially when the thing is concerned with life itself, personal experience is an absolute necessity. Without this experience nothing relative to its profound working will ever be accurately and therefore efficiently grasped. The foundation of all concepts is simple, unsophisticated experience. Zen places the utmost emphasis upon this foundation-experience, and it is around this that Zen constructs all the verbal and conceptual scaffold which is found in its literature known as "Sayings" (*goroku*, J.: *yu-lu*, Ch.). Though the scaffold affords a most useful means to reach inmost reality, it is still an elaboration and artificiality. We lose its whole significance when it is taken for a final reality. The nature of the human understanding compels us not to put too much confidence in the superstructure. Mystification is far from being the object of Zen itself, but to those who have not touched the central fact of life Zen inevitably appears as mystifying. Penetrate through the conceptual superstructure and what is imagined to be a mystification will at once disappear, and at the same time there will be an enlightenment known as *satori*. Zen, therefore, most strongly and persistently insists on an inner spiritual experience. It does not attach any intrinsic importance to the sacred sutras or to their exegeses by the wise and learned. Personal experience is strongly set against authority and objective revelation, and as the most practical method of attaining spiritual enlightenment the followers of Zen propose the practice of Dhyana, known as *zazen* in Japanese.[38]

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[37] D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Rider and Company, 1940; reprint, London: Arrow Books, 1959), p.40. Such neglect of the importance of history can be seen in the traditional view of the Buddha in the writings of the early Ch'an and Zen Buddhist masters. Ch'en (*The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, p. 11) writes:

> the Ch'an masters shouted to their followers that if they should encounter the Buddha and bodhisattvas, they should kill them, for the Buddha was said to be just a barbarian devil and the bodhisattvas just so many dung-heap coolies.

[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

This is an example of Suzuki's presentation of the experience of *satori* (enlightenment) in psychological, rather than religious, terms. Heinrich Dumoulin, noting William James' influence on Suzuki, writes:

> In an early essay he had expanded William James' well-known characteristics of mystical states of mind (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity) to eight characteristics of satori: irrationality, intuitive insight, authoritativeness, affirmation, sense of the beyond, impersonal tone, feeling of exaltation, and momentariness. This essay remains within the then-current framework of the psychology of mysticism. More important to Suzuki were James's frequent references to the transmarginal or subliminal forces of the subconscious and the significance for the religious life that he ascribed to them.[39]

The description of the *satori* experience in psychological terms is shown further by Carl Jung's comparison of Suzuki's description of *satori* with the unconscious. Dumoulin writes:

> The encounter between Zen and Western psychology was facilitated by Suzuki's readiness to see satori as insight into the unconscious. Jung, echoing James' remarks on the limits of the field of human consciousness, elaborated in his own terms: "The world of consciousness is inevitably a world full of restrictions, of walls blocking the way. It is of necessity always one-sided, resulting from the essence of consciousness. No consciousness can harbor more than a very small number of simultaneous conceptions." In contrast, Jung continues, the unconscious or subconsciousness is of immeasurable breadth: "The unconscious is an unglimpseable completeness of all subliminal psychic factors, a 'total exhibition' of potential nature. It constitutes the entire disposition from which consciousness takes fragments from time to time." Zen allows "unconscious contents to break through to the conscious." When Zen enlightenment is achieved, the entirety of the human psyche, with its conscious and unconscious contents, comes to light.[40]

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[39] Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen in the 20th Century*, Joseph O'Leary, trans. (New York: Weatherhill, 1992), p. 92.

[40] *Ibid*, p. 93.

Thus, in Suzuki's psychological interpretation of Zen Buddhism, the most important aspect of Zen is the personal experience of the irrational, which he calls the "foundation-experience." Traditional Buddhism, with its teachers and masters of particular schools and lineages, is secondary to this experience. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that Soyen refused to declare any *dharma* successors, ending his lineage.[41] In view of this, Prebish's criticism of the Beats, "Had they only understood more fully the Zen tradition they associated with, and incorporated an authentic Zen *lineage* into their tradition, genuine success might have been achieved,"[42] is invalid. For Soyen's students, an authentic Zen lineage was irrelevant for an understanding of Zen Buddhism.

The other popular (though now controversial) lecturer on Zen Buddhism in the 1950's, Alan Watts,[43] shares Suzuki's view on Zen. David Guy, in his article, "Alan Watts

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[41] Tworkov, *Zen in America*, p. 5.

[42] Prebish, *American Buddhism*, p. 24.

[43] While some of Watts' interpretations of Zen Buddhism are undoubtedly controversial (see, for example, David Guy, "Alan Watts Reconsidered" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 4, No. 1 (Fall 1994), p. 10:

> At the meditation center where I used to practice, my teacher told a story about a time when he had lived in Korea and studied with a Zen monk.... My teacher ended with a punch line. "I think I'd been reading too much Alan Watts." The class roared with laughter. That remark seemed to express a common view of Alan Watts, that he hadn't been quite authentic, hadn't known Zen from the inside. He had learned his Buddhism from books, his view of liberation was facile, and he didn't acknowledge the real work that was part of it. He had been a sixties character, an alcoholic and a womanizer, one of the early experimenters with psychedelics. He had gotten people started on the path, but they soon moved beyond him.

While this may be the case, there is still no doubt of Watts' role as a popularizer of (at

Reconsidered" notes Watts' first book on Zen Buddhism, *The Spirit of Zen* "was largely a summarizing of Suzuki's work...."[44] Hence, Watts' work stressing Zen Buddhism as a personal experience, albeit an experience which echoes the experiences of the Chinese Ch'an masters such as Lin-chi. However, Watts criticizes Zen as it is practised in modern Japan. For example, Watts notes this Square Zen "is still square because it is a quest for the *right* spiritual experience, for a *satori* which will receive the stamp (*inka*) of approval and established authority. There will even be certificates to hang on the wall."[45] Further, Watts did not align himself with any particular school of Zen Buddhism (although he did study with Suzuki and marry Eleanor Everett, Zen scholar Ruth Fuller Sasaki's daughter).[46] Instead, Watts writes:

> ...the impression has been circulating that I am a spokesman for "Square Zen." By this term I was designating the traditional and official Zen schools of Japan, Rinzai and Soto, to which many Westerners do indeed belong. I do not, nor do I represent them in any capacity. This is not because I disrespect them or have some quarrel with them, but because in matters of this kind I am temperamentally not a joiner. I do not even style myself a Zen Buddhist. For the aspect of Zen in which I am personally interested is nothing that can be organized, taught, transmitted, certified, or wrapped up in any kind of system. It can't even be followed, for

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least his own interpretation of) Zen Buddhism, of getting "people started on the path." In discussing Watts, I am not looking at his interpretation of Zen Buddhism as a normative interpretation; rather, I am examining his style of interpretation, paricularly his independent temperament and his reliance on Suzuki, and the manner in which this style of interpretation influenced and has affinitities with Beat Zen.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[45] Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*, p. 19.

[46] Guy, "Alan Watts Reconsidered," pp. 11-12.

everyone has to find it for himself.[47]

Watts' "temperament" is reflected in his *Way of Zen*, of which Ellwood notes:

> The hard monastic discipline side of Zen is glossed over, but we are immediately intrigued by what doubtless intrigues most Westerners when they first turn to the contemplation of Zen: the idea of a whole new "view of life" and one so unique it cannot even be handled by the mental machinery we have used thus far. Watts properly does not overdo the "mysterious East" business, but he does emphasize that Zen and even *zazen* are more an attitude or kind of awareness than a particular practice; this he got from Suzuki, whom he says elsewhere was really more Taoist that Zen. Watts liked the free inwardness he associated with true Taoism and Zen, and disdained the "skinhead military zip" of many Japanese monks.[48]

Thus, Watts prefigures much of Beat Zen's adaptations to Zen Buddhism. As Watts notes in his autobiography:

> It is also said--perhaps with truth--that my easy and free-floating attitude to Zen...led on to the frivolous "beat Zen" of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, of Franz Kline's black and white abstractions, and of John Cage's silent concerts.[49]

Indeed, Kerouac read an article by Watts published in *Bussei*. In a letter to Snyder, he writes, "Am looking forward to meeting Alan Watts, his article in *Bussei* shows a genuine Buddhist sincerity which is saying a lot for a man I also thought was a bit of a fop (from sound of his voice on radio)."[50]

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[47] Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*, unpaginated.

[48] Robert S. Ellwood, *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 157.

[49] Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 262.

[50] Kerouac, to Gary Snyder (Rocky Mount, NC: March 8, 1956), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1940-1956*, p. 569. Kerouac reports meeting Watts in a letter to Holmes, (Mill Valley, CA: May 27, 1956) in *ibid.*, p.580.

Thus, Kerouac's spontaneous enlightenment, as recorded in *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*[51] may be regarded as Zen Buddhist as Zen Buddhism is described by Suzuki and Watts. It is a spontaneous experience and not the result of the "military zip" of formal Zen Buddhist discipline. It is irrational, in the sense that the experience does not arise from any rational process. Its conclusion, "nothing had ever happened and everything is alright forever and forever and forever. O thank you thank you thank you," reflects Suzuki's statements on both the apparent nihilism and the implicit affirmation of Zen Buddhism:

> It is true there are many passages in Zen literature which may be construed as conveying a nihilistic doctrine; for example, the theory of Sunyata (emptiness).[52]
>
> Absolute affirmation is the Buddha; you cannot fly away from it, for it confronts you at every turn....[53]

3.2.3 The Authority of Beat Zen: Exemplary Figures

More than providing a certain interpretation of Zen Buddhism which the Beats then adapted, Suzuki and Watts used mythological figures and parables as examples from which Zen Buddhist principles could be extracted. This method is similar to the early Chinese use of such figures as Vimalakīrti as models to create a lay Buddhism acceptable for the

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[51] Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, section, 64 (see above).

[52] Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, pp. 48-49.

[53] *Ibid.*, p.73.

Chinese.[54] Wright notes:

> The figure of Vimalakīrti was presented as an ideal model of character, overshadowing and outmoding the old ideals of the Confucian *chūn-tzu* and the Taoist sage. Here was no bloodless moral paragon, no naked ascetic but a rich and powerful aristocrat, a brilliant talker, a respected householder and father, a pure and self-disciplined personality, yet a man who denied himself no luxury or pleasure while he changed all whom he met for the better. Buddhism thus presented the southern aristocrats with a new model for a worldly life.... Buddhism now provided a more highly sophisticated and aesthetically satisfying regimen for the meditative life, a richer and more diversified body of doctrine and philosophy, and--in the Bodhisattva ideal--a stronger ethical justification for such a life.[55]

Similarly, Suzuki and Watts used legendary figures from the history of Zen/Ch'an Buddhism to illustrate their books.[56] Watts, for example, uses Hui-neng, who was enlightened upon his first hearing of the *Diamond Sūtra*, to illustrate both spontaneous enlightenment and the Zen Buddhist doctrine of "no-mind." Watts writes:

> Hui-neng's teaching is that instead of trying to purify or empty the mind, one must

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[54] Similarly, Robert Aitken, *rōshi* at the Diamond Sangha, a lay order in Hawaii, uses examples such as D. T. Suzuki as models of lay piety. He writes, in Aitken, *Encouraging Words: Zen Buddhist Teachings for Western Students* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p.8:

> We are lay disciples of the Buddha Shākyamuni. He felt that in order to meet the Tathāgata you must be a monk. But this idea is disproved by the lives of Vimalakīrti, the Layman P'ang, Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki, and the many wise tea-women, nameless but not forgotten in Zen Buddhist history.

[55] Wright, "Interaction of Buddhism and Chinese Culture," pp. 12-13.

[56] In discussing the roles of the legendary patriarchs in Zen Buddhism and Beat Zen, I am not referring specifically to the historical personages to whom these legends have been attached. For such an account, see Heinrich Dumoulin's "Early Chinese Zen Re-examined: A Supplement to *Zen Buddhism: A History*," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. 20 (March 1993): 31-53. Rather, I refer only to the way in which Zen and Beat Zen use these figures.

> simply let go of the mind--because the mind is nothing to be grasped. Letting go of the mind is also equivalent to letting go of the series of thoughts and impressions (*nien*) which come and go "in" the mind, neither repressing them, holding them, nor interfering with them.[57]

This use of exemplary figures to illustrate teaching is also in keeping with the Beats' use of the *fellaheen* as models of religious authority. For example, Kerouac used his friend, Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty), as a role model in *On the Road* in order to create a new type beat hero, a joyous character instead of the apocalyptic vision described by Spengler and exemplified by Burroughs. Kerouac describes Cassady as follows:

> His dirty workclothes clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn't buy a better fit from a custom tailor but only earn it from the Natural Tailor of Natural Joy, as Dean had, in his stresses. And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighbourhood and drowsy doorsteps of afternoon where boys played guitars while their older brothers worked in the mills. All my other current friends were "intellectuals"--Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious talk, Old Bull Lee and his critical anti-everything drawl--or else they were slinking criminals like Elmer Hassel, with that hip sneer; Jane Lee the same, sprawled on the Oriental cover of her couch, sniffing at the *New Yorker*. But Dean's intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his "criminality" was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides). Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love....[58]

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[57] Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1957), p. 93.

[58] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Viking, 1957; reprint Markham: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 13-14.

Thus, just as Hui-neng represents the Zen Buddhist ideals of spontaneous enlightenment and "no-mind," Cassady represents the Beat ideal of the positive, joyful, spontaneous *fellaheen*. Indeed, the Buddhist figures most commonly cited in Beat Zen are those who best illustrate this sort of Beat ideal, poor but positive and joyous figures, "Dharma Bums" or "Zen Lunatics," such as Hui-neng, Han-shan and Shih-te, and Buddha.

Kerouac often referred to himself and his friends as "bhikkus," suggesting that they especially emulated wandering, begging monks. Holmes Welch describes the life of these monks in modern China as follows:

> Even in the Republican period he had to travel much of the time on foot, either because he did not have the money for a ticket or because there was no public transportation along his route. If he was going to a country monastery, the last few miles of his journey were almost sure to be on foot, since such monasteries lay back in the hills. All his possessions were in a bundle (*i-tan*) that he carried on his back. It was wrapped in a special way, and tied to it was a yellow "incense bag" (*hsiang-tai*) embroidered on each corner with the characters of the four elements (symbolizing the four quarters of the land) and in the center with the character "buddha." In his hand he carried a pilgrim's shovel (*fang-pien ch'an*), which he could use to bury the bodies of men or animals that he found along the road, and which also served as a weapon of self-defense. It was not always easy to find lodging. Public monasteries, which offered hospitality to any ordained monk, were few and far between and they would not admit him if he was accompanied by an unordained novice. He might not have the money for an inn, and in any case the rules did not allow him to spend more than two nights under the same roof as laymen.... But wandering monks had a higher purpose than "roughing it." The usual expression for wandering was *ts'an-fang*, which may be translated as "traveling to every quarter of the country." But the word *ts'an* also suggests *ts'an-hsüeh*, "to engage in training and in study," not only of books, but of meditation (*ts'an-ch'an*) and all other religious exercises. Wandering monks wanted to study and to practice religious exercises under the best possible guidance.[59]

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[59] Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, pp. 305-306.

The monks, then, embodied the Beat ideals of poverty, wandering, and a spiritual quest. Kerouac and Snyder emulated these monks, not only in name, but also in their lifestyle. In *The Dharma Bums*, Ryder is described as having very few possessions, among them, "his famous rucksack with cleaned-up pots and pans all fitting into one another in a compact unit and all tied and put away inside a knotted up blue bandanna,"[60] reminiscent of the wandering monks' bundle, and the nested bowls owned by Zen monks.[61]

For Beat Zen, the most influential of such figures is the hermit-poet, Han-shan. Introduced to Kerouac through Snyder's "Cold Mountain Poems,"[62] Han-shan is the model of Beat Zen philosophy and behaviour. Stressing their comparability to the Beats' *fellaheen* heroes, Snyder, in his introduction to the poems, describes Han-shan and his companion, Shih-te, as follows:

> [Han-shan] and his sidekick Shih-te...became great favorites with Zen painters of later days--the scroll, the broom, the wild hair and laughter. They became Immortals and you sometimes run onto them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America.[63]

Han-shan is further described in the preface to the poems, by Lu Ch'iu-yin, who writes (in Snyder's translation):

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[60] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p. 18.

[61] Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. 121.

[62] Gary Snyder, "Cold Mountain Poems" *Evergreen Review* 6 (1950), reprinted in Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp. 33-63.

[63] Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, p. 35.

> He looked like a tramp. His body and face were old and beat. Yet in every word he breathed was a meaning in line with the subtle principles of things, if you thought of it deeply. Everything he said had a feeling of the Tao in it, profound and arcane secrets. His hat was made of birch bark, his clothes were ragged and worn out, and his shoes were wood. Thus men who have made it hide in their tracks: unifying categories and interpreting things. On that long veranda calling and singing, in his words of reply Ha Ha!--the three worlds revolve. Sometimes at the villages and farms he laughed and sang with cowherds. Sometimes intractable, sometimes agreeable, his nature was happy of itself. But how could a person of wisdom recognize him?[64]

Here, Han-shan is described not only as a joyous, lunatic sage, laughing and singing as he works, but also as a poor, "beat" figure much like Kerouac's description of Cassady. Indeed, Snyder's anti-materialistic lifestyle is echoed in Han-shan's poem:

> In a tangle of cliffs I chose a place--
> Bird-paths, but no trails for men.
> What's beyond the yard?
> White clouds clinging to vague rocks.
> Now I've lived here--how many years--
> Again and again, spring and winter pass.
> Go tell families with silverware and cars
> "What's the use of all that noise and money?"[65]

Han-shan's position as Beat Zen role model is further expressed in Snyder's and Kerouac's ideal work: fire lookout on a mountain. Like Han-shan in his mountain hermitage, Kerouac spent his summer on a mountain, "this Chinese Han Shan hill,"[66] meditating, and even writes of a vision of Han-shan. In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac

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[64] *Ibid.*, pp. 35-26.

[65] Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, p. 40.

[66] Jack Kerouac, "Desolation Blues: 7th Chorus" in Kerouac, *Book of Blues* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 123.

writes:

> On foggy days the view from my toilet seat is like a Chinese Zen drawing in ink on silk of gray voids, I half expect to see two giggling old dharma bums, or one in rags, by the goat-horned stump, one with a broom, the other with a pen quill, writing poems about the Giggling Lings in the Fog–...Suddenly I see Hanshan now appearing before my Window pointing to the east, I look that way, it's only Three Fools Creek in the morning haze, I look back, Hanshan has vanished, I look back at what he showed me, it's only Three Fools Creek in the morning haze.[67]

Suzuki and Watts do not just use ancient Chinese and Japanese figures as examples of Zen Buddhist principles; they also use Western figures whose lives and writings seem to epitomize aspects of Zen. Suzuki, for instance, presented Meister Eckhart in Zen Buddhist terms.[68] Similarly, R. H. Blyth ascribed Zen Buddhist interpretations to many English poems. Blyth writes:

> Literature, especially poetry, has this same double, paradoxical nature as religion, and it is the main theme of *Zen in English Literature*, that where there is religion there is poetry, where there is poetry there is religion; not two things in close association, but one thing with two names. "Zen in English Literature" means Zen in English Poetry, that is Poetry as English Zen. The false religious and the false poetical life are essentially one: a wallowing in God, a vague and woolly pantheism, nightingales and roses. If anything in so-called poetry, if anything in Buddhism or Christianity will not stand the test of reality, the test of Zen,
>
> What will not hold Perfection, let it burst![69]

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[67] Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, pp. 42-43.

[68] Peter Fingesten, "Beat and Buddhist" *The Christian Century* Feb. 29, 1959, p. 227. Similarly, Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps, in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, nd.), p. 20, include a story of Buddhist interpretation of Christ, concluding, "Whoever said that is
not far from Buddhahood."

[69] R. H. Blyth. *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1960), pp. ix-x.

Also, Paul Wienpahl, in "Zen and the Work of Wittgenstein"[70] compares Wittgenstein's existentialism to the Zen Buddhist phenomenon of *satori*. Thus, the Beat writers did not have to limit themselves to Chinese or Japanese figures as sources of authority for their Beat Zen. Kerouac could turn to Snyder as a model of Beat Zen life, in the same manner as he turned to Cassady as his source for creating a new Beat hero. Thus, Kerouac records the following quotation from Snyder (Ryder) as if it were a pronouncement from a buddha or prophet:

> I've been reading Whitman, know what he says, *Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*, he means that's the attitude for the Bard, the Zen Lunacy bard of old desert paths, see the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work produce come, I see a vision of a 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, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures....[71]

Gifford and Lee record Snyder's view of Kerouac's modelling his own Zen after Snyder's:

> The dialectic that I observed in Jack, which was kind of charming, really, and you see it at work in his novels, was that he could play the student very well. "But see, I really don't know anything about this. Teach me!" "Wow! You really know how

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[70] Paul Wienpahl, "Zen and the Work of Wittgenstein" *Chicago Review* 12, no.2 (1958), pp. 67-72.

[71] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, pp. 97-98.

> to do that?" and lead you on. That was balanced by sometimes great authoritativeness and great arrogance, and he would suddenly say, "I am the authority." But then he would get out of that again. It was partly maybe like a really skilful novelist's con, to get people to speak. And he uses that as a literary device in his novels, where he presents himself often as the straight guy and he lets the other guys be smart.[72]

Here, Kerouac uses *mondos*, conversations between masters and students often described by Suzuki,[73] to draw teachings from his friend. Alternatively taking on the role of student or teacher, Kerouac learned about Snyder's views on Zen Buddhism and expressed his own interpretations.

Snyder's prophecy also reveals the role that non-Buddhist sources had on Beat Zen. Just as Snyder cites Walt Whitman in his vision of the Dharma Bums and the rucksack revolution, so Kerouac cites Blake, Dickinson, and Thoreau in his vision of his own future as a hermit. In a letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac writes:

> Turns out that all my final favorite writers (Dickinson, Blake, Thoreau) ended up their lives in little hermitages...Emily in her cottage, Blake in his, with wife; and Thoreau his hut...This I think will be my truly final move...tho I don't know where yet. It depends on how much money I can get. If I had all the money in the world, I would still prefer a humble hut.[74]

Here, Kerouac sees himself as following Dickinson, Blake and Thoreau, as well as Han-shan, in retiring from the world. Thus, Prebish's observation, "How strange it is that none

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[72] Snyder, in Gifford and Lee, *Jack's Book*, p. 202.

[73] Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, passim.

[74] Kerouac, to Ginsberg (Rocky Mount, N.C.: July 14, 1955), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 497.

of the Beats ever sought to identify the city domain of the American Zennist's search for satori as the wilderness in which religious wholeness might be found,"[75] may be answered simply: the Beats had no model by which such an identity could be made. Indeed, all their models pointed them in the direction Kerouac, and to some extent Snyder, eventually took: into a hermit-like seclusion.

Kerouac also uses his dead brother, Gérard, as a model of Beat Zen life. Kerouac writes of his first memories of Gérard in a letter to his sister, Caroline Blake, in 1945:

> Now all I remember about Gerard, for instance, is his slapping me on the face, despite all the stories Mom and Pop tell me of his kindness to me. The psychoanalyst figured that I hated Gerard and he hated me--as little brothers are very likely to do, since children that age are primitive and aggressive--and I wished he were dead, *and he died*. So I felt that I had killed him, and ever since, mortified beyond repair, warped in my personality and will, I have been subconsciously punishing myself and failing at everything.... But psychoanalysis can make me remember the kind things Gerard did to me, and the kind feelings I had for him--which would thus balance against the terrible guilt complex and restore normalcy to my personality. Nothing else can make me remember the kindness I felt for Gerard, since I've been trying like hell, and all I can remember is that slap in the face.[76]

Later, however, Gérard Kerouac becomes a Buddha- or Christ-figure in Kerouac's work. In *Visions of Gerard*, Kerouac describes Gérard in Buddhist terms:

> It was only many years later when I met and understood Savas Savakis [Sabastian Sampas] that I recalled the definite and immortal *idealism* which had been imparted

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[75] Charles Prebish, "Reflections on the Transmission of Buddhism to America" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, *Understanding the New Religions* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p. 161.

[76] Kerouac, to Caroline Kerouac Blake (New York: March 14, 1945), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, pp. 87-88.

> to me by my holy brother--And even later with the discovery (or dullmouthed amazed hang-middled mindburnt waking re discovery) of Buddhism, Awakenedhood--Amazed recollections that from the very beginning I, whoever "I" or whatever "I" was, was destined, destined indeed, to meet, learn, understand Gerard and Savas and the Blessed Lord Buddha (and my Sweet Christ too through all his Paulian tangles and bloody crosses of heathen violence)--To awaken to pure faith in the bright one truth: All is Well, practice Kindness, Heaven is nigh.... I see there in the eyes of Gerard the very diamond kindness and patient humility of the Brotherhood Ideal propounded from afar down the eternal corridors of Buddhahood and Compassionate Sanctity, in Nirmana (appearance) Kaya (form)--My own brother, a spot of sainthood in the endless globular Universes and Chillicosm--[77]

Kerouac here is describing his brother in Buddhist terms as a kind of Buddha-figure (even referring to one of the bodies of the Buddha, *nirmāṇakāya*). This passage also reveals the extent to which he used his friends to draw religious teachings from, equating Gérard and Sampas with Buddha and Christ. Kerouac also presents his brother as receiving Christian-Buddhist visions. In a scene in which Gérard, sick, falls asleep during a catechism class and receives a vision of Heaven, Kerouac writes:

> Automatically he reads the words to please her; while pausing, he looks around at the children; Lo! all the beings involved! And the strange sad desks, the wood of them, and the carved marks on them, initials, and the little boy Ouellette (suddenly re-remembered) as usual with the same tranquil unconcern (outwardly) whistling soundlessly into his eraser, and the sun streaming in the high windows showing motes of room-dust--the whole pitiful world is still there [in Heaven]! and nobody knows it! the different appearances of the same emptiness everywhere! the ethereal flower of the world![78]

Thus, Kerouac uses the memories of his brother to voice his own view of the world, based

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[77] Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1963; reprint, Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1976), pp. 13-14, 15.

[78] *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

on *Mādhyamika* Buddhism: that the world is illusory (empty), and, using the identity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, that everyone is already in Heaven, that *nirvāṇa* is already achieved in the everyday world.

Thus, Kerouac used his friends and examples he and the other Beats read about in works by Suzuki, Watts, Blyth and others, to create models through which he could create his Beat Zen. Specifically, these models were those available who most closely fitted his view of the *fellaheen*, the poor but joyous figures, whether that person be the lunatic hermit, Han-shan, or the members of his own working-class immigrant family.

3.2.4 The Authority of Beat Zen: Personal Experience

In addition to reading the *sūtras* and the commentaries of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, and emulating people who fit the Beat interpretation of Zen Buddhism, the Beats also relied on their own experience to guide them in defining Beat Zen. That is, as the Beats read and practised Zen Buddhism, they were able to come to certain conclusions and insights that shaped their view of Zen Buddhism. This is in keeping with Suzuki's assertion, "Personal experience, therefore, is everything in Zen. No ideas are intelligible to those who have no backing of experience,"[79] and the fact that the Beats, in emulating the *fellaheen*, had become their own models.

Kerouac's reinterpretation of Zen Buddhism according to his own meditations can

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[79] Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, p. 33.

be seen as an echo of the Buddha's initial enlightenment when Gautama, without benefit of a teacher or doctrine, is said to have discovered the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. In his biography of the Buddha, "Wake Up," Kerouac writes of this moment:

> With the discernment of the grand truths and their realization in life the Rishi became enlightened; he thus attained *Sambodhi* (Perfect Wisdom) and became a Buddha. Rightly has Sambodhi been called, it can be accomplished only by self help without the extraneous aid of a teacher or a god. As the poet says,
>
> "Save his own soul's light overhead
> None leads man, none ever led."[80]

Describing outside teaching as "extraneous," Kerouac uses the Buddha as an ideal case of enlightenment by one's own actions. Kerouac's own interpretations of Zen Buddhism can be seen in this light, as Kerouac's own struggle for enlightenment without "extraneous aid" of a Zen master.

Such a view is also in keeping with the Beats' own experience. Kerouac and Ginsberg both claim to have visions, which they later incorporated into their interpretations of Buddhism. Ginsberg's vision occurred while reading William Blake's poetry in Harlem in 1948. Ginsberg claims he heard Blake's voice reading the poems. Barry Miles, in *Ginsberg: A Biography*, writes:

> He understood that "If her heart does ache,/Then let Lyca wake" meant to wake up to the same realization he had just experienced, "the total consciousness of the complete universe. Which is what Blake was talking about...a breakthrough from ordinary quotidian consciousness into consciousness that was really seeing all

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[80] Jack Kerouac, "Wake Up: Episode Three" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 3, No. 2 (Winter 1993), p. 23.

heaven in a flower."[81]

Ginsberg claims this vision recurred, while he was looking at other people in a bookstore:

> I realized that *he* knew also, just like I knew. And that everybody in the bookstore knew, and that they were all hiding it! They all had the consciousness, it was like a great *un*conscious that was running between all of us, and that everybody *was* completely conscious, but that the fixed expressions people have, the habitual, the manners, the mode of talk, are all masks hiding this consciousness. Because almost at that moment it seemed that it would be too terrible if we communicated to each other on a level of total consciousness and awareness each of the other. The complete death awareness that everybody has continuously with them all the time (was) all of a sudden revealed to me at once in the faces of the people, and they all looked like horrible grotesque masks, grotesque because *hiding* the knowledge from each other. Having a habitual conduct and forms to prescribe, forms to fulfill. Roles to play. But the main insight I had at that time was that everybody knew.[82]

This vision suggests that Ginsberg experienced a different state of consciousness which he considers everyone has the capacity of achieving. The result of this experience was Ginsberg's search to recreate the experience through the use of drugs and meditation. Miles writes:

> After his Blake vision, he had vowed to widen his area of consciousness and had systematically explored his mind, using stronger and stronger drugs: heroin, mescaline, peyote, LSD, psilocybin, ayahuasca.... He felt compelled by his Blake vision to break down his identity and seek a "more direct contact with primate sensation, nature." All through India he asked the holy men and gurus for their advice on how to deal with this problem, and they all, in one way or another, pointed him straight back to his own body: from Swami Shivananada's "The only guru is your own heart," to Dudjom Rinpoche, whose advice was for Allen not to

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[81] Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (Simon and Schuster, 1989; reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 101.

[82] Ginsberg, in Miles, *Ginsberg*, p. 102.

cling to visions, be they horrible or beautiful.[83]

Kerouac claims to have had a vision while in San Francisco in 1949. In a letter to Neal Cassady, he writes of his vision of a past life:

> Suddenly innumerable real memories, a whole night-world of them, all of them distinct and miraculously English, whole images of old London and panged memories of certain streetcorners where I stood, as if I had actually and not only in the imagination lived all this, flooded through my being, and these were the precise messengers of that tingling sensation I mentioned. For they came so by themselves, I was struck dumb, and they were complete. There I stood in ecstasy on Market Street, rushing to reconstruct the events that must have transpired between my former sonhood to this poor woman in London up until this one haunted moment in San Francisco, California, February, 1949. How did I get there?[84]

In *On the Road*, Kerouac describes this incident in specifically Buddhist terms, writing:

> And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death kicking at my heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels, and myself hurrying to a plank where all the angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable radiances shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven. I could hear an indescribable seething roar which wasn't in my ear but everywhere and had nothing to do with sounds. I realized that I had died and been reborn numberless times but just didn't remember especially because the transitions from life to death and back to life are so ghostly easy, a magical action for naught, like falling asleep and waking up again a million times, the utter casualness and deep ignorance of it. I realized it was only because of the stability of the intrinsic Mind that these ripples of birth and death took place, like the action of wind on a sheet of pure, serene, mirror-like water. I felt sweet, swinging bliss, like a big shot of heroin in the mainline vein; like a gulp of wine late in the afternoon and it

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[83] *Ibid.*, p. 326.

[84] Kerouac to Neal Cassady (Richmond Hill, N.Y.: Jan. 8, 1951), in Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, p. 280.

makes you shudder; my feet tingled.[85]

The result of these visions for Kerouac and Ginsberg was a quest for an alternate state of consciousness, which could be interpreted as "higher," or more real. Hence, in interpreting Zen Buddhism, the Beats focused on meditation as a method of achieving this state of consciousness, rather than practising meditation for its own sake. Thus, more concerned with insights than practice, Kerouac writes in *The Dharma Bums* of a meditating in Rocky Mount:

> All kinds of thoughts, too, like "One man practicing kindness in the wilderness is worth all the temples this world pulls" and I reached out and stroked old Bob, who looked at me satisfied. "All living and dying things like these dogs and me coming and going without any duration or self substance, O God, and therefore we can't possibly exist. How strange, how worthy, how good for us! What a horror it would have been if the world was real, because if the world was real, it would be immortal."[86]

3.3 Conclusion

Kerouac and the Beats were well-versed in the sources of Buddhism and specifically Zen Buddhism which were available to them in the 1950's. Having begun with the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, Kerouac formulated a Buddhism based on compassion (from the *Diamond Sūtra*) and Yogacara philosophy (from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*). Also, following the interpretations of Zen Buddhism by Suzuki, Watts, and other popular writers, who

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[85] Kerouac, *On the Road*, pp. 163-164.

[86] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, pp. 134-145.

stressed the experience of Zen rather than its history, Kerouac was able to construct a form of Zen based on the models provided by Zen Buddhist traditions as well as Kerouac's own friends and members of the underclass he came into contact with. Therefore, Watts' characterization of the Beat as a "fake-intellectual hipster" does not hold true. Kerouac's Beat Zen was the result of a great deal of study and more than just the passing acquaintance suggested by Watts' "name-dropping bits of Zen." Indeed, Kerouac's Zen is closely related to Watts' own, sharing Watts' views on heteronomous authority and discipline.

Kerouac's Zen was even more closely related to that of Suzuki. Not only was Kerouac guided by Suzuki's psychologizing of Zen Buddhism and his emphasis on Zen as the personal experience of the irrational, Kerouac followed Suzuki's use of Asian and Western exemplary figures as models of correct Zen Buddhist behaviour and belief. Indeed, Dumoulin has written about Suzuki, "Suzuki was no mere regurgitator; he constantly reinterpreted the message he transmitted, adapting it to Western concerns and deliberately highlighting certain key themes. This he did with increasing boldness as his stature not only as a scholar but as a genuine sage was recognized."[87] Kerouac and the Beat Generation followed not only Suzuki's interpretation of Zen Buddhism but extended it further into an indigenous religious movement, using Suzuki's own method.

Thus, Kerouac was able to create a form of Zen Buddhism that was not only

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[87] Dumoulin, *Zen in the 20th Century*, p. 5.

American but also "beat." That is, Kerouac's Beat Zen was redefined according his Beat philosophy, of emulating the underclass, in the form of the "Zen lunatics" and "Dharma Bums." Thus, he writes of his discovery and interpretation of Zen Buddhism in "Last Words":

> (1) All Life is Sorrowful
> (2) The Cause of Suffering is Ignorant Desire
> (3) The Suppression of Suffering Can Be Achieved
> (4) The Way is the Noble Eightfold Path
> (which you might as well say is just as explicit as Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.)
> Not knowing it could just as well be:
> (1) All Life is Joy
> (2) The Cause of Joy is Enlightened Desire
> (3) The Expansion of Joy Can Be Achieved
> (4) The Way is the Noble Eightfold Path
> since what's the difference, in supreme reality, we are neither subject to suffering nor joy--Why not?--Because who says?[88]

Thus Kerouac was able to create for himself a "Beat" Zen which, like the Beats and the *fellaheen* peoples they emulate, was poor but joyous, individualistic, and spontaneous.

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[88] Jack Kerouac, "Last Words: Three" *Escapade* (October 1959); reprinted in Jack Kerouac, *Good Blonde and Others*, Donald Allen, ed. (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993), p. 166.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: The American Transformation of Buddhism

4.0 The Analogy of Asian Buddhism

The acculturation process that Zen Buddhism is undergoing in the United States has followed patterns similar to the processes Buddhism underwent in China. As is the case of Chinese Buddhism, Zen Buddhism has adapted American culture to its practices while it has been adapted to the "local genius" of American culture, that is, the conservative and radical philosophies which are in a constant dialectic. Kerouac's Beat Zen is representative of this exchange: Kerouac's behaviour was modified by his practice of Zen Buddhism, becoming less frantic, or "hot," and more meditative, as he writes, "It was a hot hipster like myself who finally cooled it in Buddhist meditation, though when I go in a jazz joint I still feel like yelling 'Blow baby blow!' to all the musicians though nowadays I'd get 86'd for this";[1] also, he transformed his Zen Buddhism into a Beat religion, reflecting the spirituality of the *fellaheen*, exemplified by his ideal of the "Dharma Bums." Similarly, in Square Zen, certain practices have been altered to help acculturate Zen Buddhism to its American environment, as Lane Olson, a member of the San Francisco Zen Centre, which expelled its *rōshi* for misconduct, notes:

Within the first year after Baker-roshi left, everything loosened up.... They started

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[1] Jack Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation," p. 61. Kerouac's change from hot to cool Beat can also be seen by comparing the literary styles of *On the Road* with *The Dharma Bums*.

> going into more and more American translations of the chants, and they added more walking periods and discretionary periods, in which you could choose whether to sit or walk or even sleep, during one-day sittings and seven-day sittings, which to me was a lot more feminine, for some reason. It was caring more about the people as opposed to putting on this ritualistic schedule.[2]

At the same time, however, American culture has been adapted into an environment for Zen Buddhism, creating, as in China, a Buddhist *saṅgha* of lay and monastic practitioners, with strict monastic rules. Wetering writes of his experience in an American monastery:

> I felt alone, unable to relate to this bunch of fanatics. The young monks in Japan had moved when they were in pain and I had been able to identify with them. Here I was opposed by storm troopers, all bent to get to whatever-or-wherever-it was exactly according to their rules and to what the master told them.[3]

Additionally, Zürcher's characterization of the early stages of Chinese Buddhism may be considered as a model for American Zen Buddhism. Zürcher notes that early Chinese Buddhist monks were intellectuals and *literati*. The writers of the Beat Generation may be considered analogous to this group. Zürcher describes work of the Chinese *literati* as follows:

> Like practically all works of medieval Chinese literature, the early sources...were written by and for *literati*, and deal only with one *niveau*, one segment of the immensely complex phenomenon which was early Chinese Buddhism. As proved by the very nature of the doctrine which they contain, by their subtle and abstruse speculations on philosophical and moralistic subjects and by the refined and highly artificial, over-stylized language in which these are expressed, their range of circulation must have been restricted to a distinct, highly important but relatively

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[2] Lane Olson, quoted in Sandy Boucher, *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* 2nd Edition Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, p. 253.

[3] Janwillem van der Wetering, *A Glimpse of Nothingness: Experiences in an American Zen Community* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 27.

> small part of the Buddhist population: the cultured upper class and those monks who had obtained a literary education which enabled them to take part in the cultural life of this class.[4]

The Beat Generation was also a group of highly educated *literati*, whose works include "speculation on philosophical and moralistic subjects" and are written in a stylized language, such as Kerouac's "spontaneous poetics." In writing about Zen Buddhism in this manner they have created a form of Buddhism, known as Beat Zen, about which has been said, as Zürcher writes about Chinese Buddhism, "The ideas to be found there will strike the student of Indian [or Chinese or Japanese] Buddhism as highly rudimentary and strange, and often as even hardly Buddhist."[5]

The Beat Generations differ from Zürcher's depiction of early Chinese Buddhist *literati*, however, in that Beat literature was intended for a broader audience. Following the publicity arising from the obscenity trial against Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*,[6] and the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road*, the philosophical and religious speculations of the Beat Generation, through their novels, poetry, interviews, readings, and audio recordings, were widely distributed. Coupled with inexpensive, popular works on Zen Buddhism which were in print at the same time,[7] elements of Zen Buddhist philosophy and

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[4] Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, p. 2.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

[6] Barry Miles, *Ginsberg*, pp. 232-234.

[7] See, for example, Ernst Benz, *Zen in westlicher Sicht*, p. 5:
Es gibt kaum einen Bahnhofkiosk, in dem man nicht eine billige

practice were able to spread quickly into mainstream society. This accelerated introduction of Zen Buddhism into American culture was recognized by Watts, who, despite his role in popularizing Zen Buddhism, would have preferred a slower transition. Watts writes:

> In the Far-East this has gone on for so long that it is part of the landscape, and some of its disadvantages are offset by the fact that it seems perfectly natural. There is nothing exotic or "special" about it. Even organizations can grow naturally. But it seems to me that the transplantation of this style of Zen to the West would be completely artificial. It would simply become another of the numerous cult-organizations with their spiritual claims, vested interests, and "in-groups" of followers, with the additional disadvantage of the snob-appeal of being a "very esoteric" form of Buddhism. Let Zen soak into the West informally, like the drinking of tea. We can digest it better that way.[8]

In this manner, Zen Buddhist ideas were translated and disseminated quickly into American culture. This process is roughly analogous to the process of translating Buddhist ideas into Chinese, and the adaptations the early Chinese monks made to allow for Buddhism to appeal to the Chinese laity, such as assigning Vilmalakīrti as a model of lay piety, as Wright describes.

Further, the argument that Beat Zen represents a corruption of Japanese Zen

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> Taschenbuchausgabe mit einer sachkundigen Einführung in Zen erweben kann. Und gar die großen Buchhandlungen, ganz zu schweigen von Buchhandlungen solcher Städte, die sich einer Universität rühmen, weisen nicht nur in ihren Regalen und Lagern, sondern bereits in ihren Schaufenstern eine ganze Auswahl von deutschen, englishen und französischen Werken über Zen auf. Nich nur die Buchverleger, sondern auch die Hersteller von Postkarten und Litographien haben sich dieser Geistesbewegung angenommen und werfen Reproducktionen von Tuschzeichnungen japanischer und chinesischer Zen-Maler in großer Anzahl auf den Markt.

[8] Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen*, unpaginated.

Buddhism by a small group of bohemians does not hold true. As has been shown, Beat Zen is very similar in practice to Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen Buddhism. Further, Beat Zen's interpretation of Zen Buddhist philosophy is firmly based in Buddhist *sūtras* and is comparable to the interpretations provided by the Beat contemporaries, Watts and Suzuki. Instead, the changes the Beats made to Zen Buddhism may be viewed as an attempt to reinterpret the largely monastic tradition of East Asian Buddhism to the modern American lay society. The Beats' attempt, epitomized by the vision of the "rucksack revolution" in *The Dharma Bums*, is echoed in the struggle American Zen Buddhists are experiencing as they try to incorporate Zen Buddhism into their daily lives. Robert Aitken discusses this issue as a problem of finding a "right livelihood" combining both Buddhism and contemporary American society. He writes:

> Recently I asked Sulak Sivaraksa, the Tai Buddhist activist, "Generally in the United States these days, husband and wife both work. They are tired when they get home and must look after their children and their house. They scarcely have energy for coming to a Buddhist meeting, much less for engagement in the community. What suggestions do you have for this dilemma?" He answered graciously and gently, acknowledging the problem, pointing out that it is not just a matter of budgeting time and energy. It is, he said in effect, a matter of life-style. In other words, the nice house and nice car and the private school are the problems. They need protection and maintenance. They focus our attention upon the unit, rather than upon the whole. Society itself, as we have structured it, needs protection and maintenance too; the cost is felt by everyone and ordinary folks must exhaust themselves just to put food on the table. This is Wrong Effort, somehow. Right Effort, on the other hand, is Right Life-style and indeed this is the Chinese understanding of the term: the Way of the Sage, living on the plainest of food in the plainest of accommodations. Yet following the Way of the Sage individually would itself be isolative. Somehow we must conspire together in networks and build the Buddha's way of interdependence within and beside the acquisitive system that is all about us, using the tools and lines of communication

that are already in place for our own global purposes. Otherwise we are maintaining a steady course of using up ourselves and the world.[9]

4.1 Ch'an Lunatics and Dharma Bums

The comparison of early Chinese Buddhism with the Beat Generation is particularly apt, not only because they have taken similar approaches in responding to a foreign religion, but also because Beat Zen has appropriated the figure of the Dharma Bum or Zen (Ch'an) lunatic from Ch'an Buddhism. This is a consequence both of the similarity between the Beats' *fellaheen* hero and mad Ch'an Buddhist monks such as Han-shan, and of the influence of D. T. Suzuki's work on Zen Buddhism.

As has been discussed, Suzuki, a student of the Zen Buddhist reformer Soyen Shaku, was part of a movement to revitalize Zen Buddhism by introducing it to the West. Rather than discuss how Zen/Ch'an Buddhism is currently practised in China[10] and Japan, Suzuki discussed Zen as a personal experience of the irrational. To illustrate his discussion, he cited numerous legendary figures, such as Bodhidharma, and Hui-neng, and the teachers such as Joshu (Chao-chou) featured in *kōan* collections.

The members of the Beat Generation, who had already built a philosophy of spontaneity and irrationality, in reading Suzuki, and other scholars such as Blyth and

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[9] Aitken, *Encouraging Words*, p. 117.

[10] Welch, *The Chinese Practice of Buddhism*, p. 47, notes, "After an inspection tour of Chinese Buddhism in 1934, Dr. Suzuki wrote: 'Japanese Zen travellers...deplore the fact that there is no more Zen in China.'"

Goddard who were inspired by Suzuki, practised this irrational, spontaneous behaviour. For the Beats, the *kōans* of the *Mumonkan* ("The Gateless Barrior") were not a test of the authenticity of their enlightenment, as in Square Zen, but a game of spontaneous questions, answers and gestures. Thus, while Prebish argues, "...the Beats rather naively assumed that because some Zen monks wandered over the countryside as apparent 'lunatics,' in a style consistent with their satori experience, *all* Zen monks followed this practice. In so doing, the Beats not only ignored the very basis of Zen monastic life and its incumbent discipline, but they used this assumption to form the basis of a normative model (and justification) for their own itinerant lifestyle,"[11] the Beats were actually imitating the Chinese Ch'an monks who did behave in this manner.

Similarly, the Ch'an masters cited by Suzuki and emulated by the Beat Generation were noted iconoclasts. Ch'en notes of these monks:

> Against the prevailing practice of looking to the Buddha and bodhisattvas for support in achieving spiritual progress, the Ch'an masters shouted to their followers that if they should encounter the Buddha and bodhisattvas, they should kill them, for the Buddha was just a barbarian devil and the bodhisattvas just so many dung-heap coolies. Of course, these words are not to be taken literally. They are used to make the point that one should not rely on such external aids but should rely rather on mediation, which was considered the essence of Buddhism, as it was through meditation that the Buddha achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree. Through meditation, one can awaken the original nature which is the Buddha nature or Buddha mind in all of us, and thus achieve enlightenment directly, completely, and instantly. There is no need to depend on reading and studying scriptures, worshipping images, or performing meritorious deeds. Ch'an was therefore the product of the Chinese mind and environment; it was as Dr. Hu Shih

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[11] Prebish, *American Buddhism*, p. 24.

puts it, "a revolt against Buddhist verbalism and scholasticism."[12]

Thus, while critics of Beat Zen may dismiss it as "anarchism," Beat Zen is also a return to this type of Ch'an iconoclasm. Thus, Kerouac writes in his own scripture, "This truth law has no more reality than the world,"[13] or "When you've understood this scripture, throw it away. If you cant understand this scripture, throw it away,"[14] Kerouac is emulating the Ch'an masters who rejected Buddhist scriptures and the Buddha himself as useless for the attainment of enlightenment.

While Suzuki was aware of his influence on the development of Beat Zen, he does not seem to have fully understood it as a recreation of ancient Chinese Ch'an Buddhism. Larry A. Fader, in "D. T. Suzuki's Contribution to the West" writes of Suzuki's position:

> Suzuki believed that the Beat Generation, also called the "San Francisco Renaissance Group" had misunderstood his interpretation of Zen. "Spontaneity," wrote Suzuki, "is not everything, it must be 'rooted'." Indeed, the Japanese scholar was aware that while Zen was entering into the vernacular of Western culture, it was also being watered down and misrepresented. In the same article he states, "Zen is at present evoking unexpected echoes in various field [*sic*] of Western culture: music, painting, literature, semantics, religious philosophy, and psychoanalysis. But...it is in many cases grossly misrepresented or misinterpreted...."[15]

Suzuki does not recognize here that Beat Zen was "rooted" not just in the Beat experience,

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[12] Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, pp. 11-12.

[13] Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, section 7.

[14] *Ibid.*, section 45.

[15] Larry A. Fader, "D. T. Suzuki's Contribution to the West," in Masao Abe (ed.), *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York: Weatherhill, 1986), p. 107.

but also Suzuki's own writings, in the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, and in the recreation of the experience of the ancient Ch'an Buddhist masters. In this way, Beat Zen is not a misinterpretation of Suzuki's Zen Buddhism, but a different interpretation, and one which Suzuki could not recognize.

Thus, Beat Zen is not just the Americanization of an Asian religion, it is also part of a movement to reform that religion. In citing the examples of Ch'an Buddhist masters, Suzuki allowed for the re-introduction of Ch'an Buddhist elements into Zen Buddhism. In becoming Dharma Bums, the members of the Beat Generation revitalized Zen Buddhist doctrines and teaching methods into system of practice. While indebted to Suzuki's scholarship, the Beats surpassed him by putting his work into practice and creating a new, American form of Zen Buddhism.

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