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Buddhism and the Beats:

Jack Kerouac's Lineage through Literature in *The Dharma Bums*

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Religious Studies Thesis

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In their quest to create an identity outside of what they saw as a materialistic and superficial society, the Beat Generation worked to develop a new understanding of American culture. This countercultural movement of the 1940s and 50s adopted new philosophies, ideologies and significantly, religious beliefs. The Beat Movement permeated many aspects of society, influencing American culture through its many works of art and literature. As a primary piece of Beat Literature, Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* served as a catalyst for the Beat movement, inspiring youth to explore new religious paths and cultural identities. The text works to capture a moment in history when Buddhist tradition was developing its place in the American religious landscape, a change which was accelerated by the publication of Kerouac's work. *The Dharma Bums* demonstrated a movement which challenged the traditional social and religious identity of America and inspired readers to incorporate these changes into their own lives. As Kerouac worked to develop his own understanding of Buddhism, his writing exemplifies the popularization of Buddhism during within the Beat movement.

Some scholarship argues that Kerouac presents a fragmented or idealized notion of Buddhism, misappropriating the religious tradition¹. However, he is in fact becoming a key part of the long tradition of Buddhist writing and cultural diffusion. Through his multi-layered development of characters and his incorporation of traditional Buddhist writers Han Shan and Hakuin as essential influences on the text, Kerouac demonstrates the

¹ Erik Mortenson, "Keeping the Vision Alive: The Buddhist Stillpoint in the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg," in *The Emergence of American Buddhist Literature*, ed. John Whalen-Brige and Gary Storhoff (Albany: SUNY, 2009).

Timothy D Ray. "Syncretic Visions of the Buddha: Melding and Convergence in the Work of Kerouac and Ginsberg," *College Literature* 37, no. 2 (2010).

Yuemin He, "Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain, Domesticating Han Shan," *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009).

complexity of Buddhism as an ever changing tradition that evolves and adapts as it moves between cultures, times and places. As the Beats adopted Buddhism as a way to remedy their struggles with American society, they continued the transmission of Buddhism, looking to Buddhist literature to make sense of their own lives. By joining voices with Buddhist writers of the past and crafting an image of American Buddhism, Kerouac exemplifies the evolution of the living tradition of Buddhism.

To preserve their message and sanctity, the words of the Buddha are passed down from teacher to student in a lineage that remains a core value of Buddhist tradition. As Buddhism crosses the boundaries of culture and history, this lineage has been regarded as the true path of the Buddha's message, granting authority and authenticity to the message by confirming its direct relationship to the Buddha himself. Lineage continues to be passed down from teacher to student assuring that the message being transposed remains true to that of the Buddha. As an American with no formal Buddhist training or connection to an established Buddhist community, Kerouac falls outside the direct lineage from teacher to student. For this reason, his legitimacy as a Buddhist teacher has been called into question by Buddhist communities and scholars. Michael Masatsugu, a scholar of Buddhism in the United States discusses this question of authenticity, "At odds with each other, proponents of each vision [of Buddhism] critiqued their counterparts in public presentations, study groups, and publications, asserting that their own version was more authentic."² Though Kerouac is part of no formal Buddhist lineage, he looked to the nuanced history of Buddhists of the past to inform his own understanding and presentation of Buddhism. He drew from

² Michael K. Masatsugu, "Beyond this World of Transiency and Impermanence," *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (2008): 425.

historically relevant and diverse sources to develop his understanding of Buddhism and sought to incorporate these traditions into his writing. Kerouac considered himself to be a self-taught Buddhist, and worked to advance his Buddhist thinking through his writing, "spontaneous bop prosody," which he believed best expressed his Buddhist thinking.³ In his unique way, Kerouac portrays the integration of Buddhism into the American religious landscape while remembering historical insights and teachings of Buddhists through incorporating Han Shan and Hakuin in his writing.

The Dharma Bums follows the travels and experiences of Ray Smith, a young American intellectual in the late 1950s seeking to follow the teachings of the Buddha. Ray considers himself a *Bodhisattva*⁴ and travels around the United States in search of enlightenment. Ray is part of the vibrant community of Beat artists, poets, and writers, and acts as a witness to their artistic endeavors and spiritual Awakenings. Ray quickly befriends Japhy Ryder, another American Buddhist convert who becomes his teacher and guide on the Buddhist spiritual path. The two explore their faith together and spend time traveling through the mountains of Northern California and Washington. They partake in daring mountain climbing adventures, wild poetry readings and parties that help solidify their friendship and explore their spirituality. Though the friends look to each other for spiritual guidance, Japhy generally fulfills the role of teacher, as not only has he been practicing Buddhism for longer than Ray, but also has a great deal of experience in academic studies of Buddhism. As the novel progresses, Ray goes on to

³ Carol Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 24.

⁴ According to Obeyesekere's definition listed in Yasodhara, the wife of the Bodhisattva (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012: 90), a Bodhisattva "Is an aspirant to becoming a Buddha. One who cultivates Virtues or Perfections (paramita) during innumerable existences in samsara and finally attains Enlightenment as a Buddha."

spend a great deal of time exploring his own spirituality through serving as a teacher to others. While hitching rides from truck drivers and hopping on and off trains, he travels across the country attempting to act as a spiritual guide to others, talking with those he encounters about his Buddhist practice and beliefs. In this journey, he discovers his own path to Awakening and explores his relationship to contemporary Buddhist teachers as well as those of the past. Throughout the text, Ray develops an understanding of his role as a self-designated *Bodhisattva* and American Buddhist.

As a fictionalized representation of his own community and life experiences, *The Dharma Bums* was one of several semi-autobiographical novels by prolific Beat author Jack Kerouac. Kerouac's writing reflects a style that was revolutionary for the time period. He abandoned literary traditions from which he emerged, and instead developed a sort of spontaneous prose, one that worked to express his own complicated and varied emotional and spiritual states. Of Kerouac's stylistic choices, Beat scholar Carole Tonkinson writes, "Abandoning conventional techniques of editing and revision, Kerouac committed himself to a new method, the practice of spontaneous prose... His aim was to create an honest record of the writer's mode of perception."⁵ Kerouac's writing seems like a string of thoughts, like spontaneous reflections of the way Kerouac saw the world and his peers. Because of this writing pattern, Kerouac doesn't neatly explain exactly what his characters think and believe. The characters are constructed in bits and pieces, representing the complexity of their spiritual and personal paths. This construction serves to make the characters' narratives deeply personal and identifiable. This identifiable nature allows the characters to serve as ideal but relatable models of those who walk a spiritual path.

⁵ Tonkinson, "Big Sky Mind", 24.

Because of his stylistic choices, Kerouac's work stands as not only a guide for those seeking counsel, but as a representation of the winding road to Awakening. His personal accounts of the ways in which Buddhism was manifested in the Beat Generation creates an impassioned and raw vision of the early phases of development in the popularization of Buddhism in North America. However, this raw form also poses some difficulties in the interpreting of the text, as described by Benedict Giomo, professor of American Studies, "Kerouac's expression of Buddhism in his work remains among the most innovative evocations and energetic expositions of traditional Eastern belief in modern American literature. Moreover, the challenges and struggles of coming face-to-face with Buddhist concepts, tenets, images and practices give a whole new dimension to Kerouac's spiritual quest."⁶ Kerouac uses the text as a forum through which he can examine his own spirituality, and that of his friends and community members. Though the text is carefully constructed and detailed, Kerouac seems to use his writing as a way to work through his own spiritual struggles and strengths.

As a semi-autobiographical text, *The Dharma Bums* incorporates many elements of Jack Kerouac's young adult life. Kerouac's friends appear throughout the text with their names altered to appease his editors (and to avoid potential lawsuits)⁷. Though the characters are based on his friends and acquaintances, and the events closely recount his own experiences, Kerouac described his text as a novel, a work of fiction rather than an autobiography.⁸ This fictionalizing of reality works in an involuted way throughout the novel, as the characters work to represent both historical truth and a spiritual ideal.

⁶ Benedict Giomo, "Enlightened Attachment: Kerouac's Impermanent Buddhist Trek," *Religion and Literature* 33, no. 2/3 (2003): 174.

⁷ Matt Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 152.

⁸ Theado, *Understanding Kerouac*, 152.

Because of the text's grounding in reality, it stands to represent a kind of historical truth. However, as Kerouac never claims that it is a representation of truth, the novel serves as creative rendition of the events that led to the rise in popularity of Buddhist practice in the United States. Kerouac works to capture the spirit of a moment in time that has proved historically significant to religious landscape of the United States.

Through understanding the development of the characters, their roles in the text are manifested. Kerouac places himself as the character Ray, the story's protagonist, while Ray's closest friend Japhy is modeled after Gary Snyder, an eminent Beat thinker and poet. It is important to note that while Ray is the protagonist of the story, Japhy works as the text's hero. Japhy is often granted long monologues in which he acts as a teacher to not only the other characters, but also to the reader. Through his lessons to the other characters, Japhy challenges the reader to push their own spiritual limits, a reflection of the religious movements that pushed the boundaries of American spirituality. Ray looks to him as a spiritual teacher who guides him through his Buddhist journey, as noted by Stephen Prothero, scholar of American Religion. "Snyder was immortalized as Japhy Ryder... Although Kerouac was clearly intrigued by Snyder and by Zen, he devoted a good portion of *Dharma Bums* to arguments between Ray Smith (himself) and Ryder (Snyder) and to criticisms of Zen."⁹ Both men participate in and learn from these debates, and they challenge each other in their religious development. Japhy holds more knowledge about the traditions and history of Buddhism, teaching Ray about mandalas, drinking tea, and Buddhist poetry. Ray clearly considers Japhy to be his spiritual guide, admiring his friend and revering him as a teacher, "I had a million

⁹ Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *The Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 2 (1991): 218.

thoughts. Japhy had his. I was amazed at the way he meditated with his eyes open... The world ain't so bad when you got Japhies, I thought, and I felt glad."¹⁰ Ultimately Ray emulates Japhy's path in order to find Awakening, even imitating his teacher's spiritual endeavors in the mountains of Washington. Their relationship falls in line with Buddhist tradition in which Buddhist tradition is passed along directly from teacher to student. The fact that these characters and their experiences are grounded in reality works to intensify the message in *The Dharma Bums*, as the novel is a representation of the lived experiences of those attempting to walk the Buddhist path in the United States.

Kerouac's characters provide examples of the growing population of Beatnik Americans who discovered and converted to Buddhism as young adults. However, Buddhist tradition in the United States was established in the United States far before the Beat movement. Before World War II, there remained very limited involvement of non-Asian Americans in Buddhist communities. At the beginning of the War, Japanese Americans were demonized, in great part because of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Buddhism and Buddhists were placed under particular scrutiny, as the tradition "reinforced stereotypes of those of Japanese ancestry as part of an 'enemy race.'"¹¹ Amidst great fear and political anxiety, Americans demonized traditions outside of their own. However as WWII drew to a close and the relations between Americans and Japanese began to shift, the popular perception of Buddhism began to change as well. American interest in Buddhism surged, sparked by of the increased interaction between Americans and Japanese culture. Many soldiers who traveled to Japan during and post WWII appreciated Buddhism as a part of Japanese culture. While they grew curious

¹⁰ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 71.

¹¹ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World," 423.

about the tradition and gained limited knowledge about it, they did not necessarily have personal interest in practicing Buddhism themselves.¹² As time went on and Americans of both non-Japanese and Japanese descent worked to repair their social relations and counter the demonization of Japanese Americans, Buddhism began to be affirmed as part of the American religious landscape.¹³ Additionally, American interactions with Japan began to increase and improve, as noted by sociologist and Zen scholar Henry Finney. "As Japan recovered from World War II, her expansionism resumed in economic form as part of the emerging global marketplace. Her growing exports included numerous other Japanese cultural elements in addition to Zen, but Zen was part of the export stream."¹⁴ While this increased exposure to Buddhism gave Americans a better understanding and greater acceptance of the religious tradition, there was still a relatively low number of American converts who were not of Japanese ancestry until the Beat Movement.

Post WWII, Buddhism in the United States continued to exist in two categories. In one sphere, the tradition was practiced among Asian Americans, remaining firmly within these communities. These communities consisted of established monasteries and temples, which not only carried on the religious traditions of these communities, but also preserved their ancestral culture. In a separate sphere, Buddhism was understood through an academic perspective by scholars who did not often practice Buddhism themselves, preferring to observe the history and culture of the tradition from a

¹² Van Meter Ames, "On the Hold Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *Philosophy of East and West*, 10, no. 1/2 (1960): 23.

¹³ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World," 433.

¹⁴ Henry C. Finney, "American Zen's 'Japan Connection:' A Critical Case Study of Zen Buddhism's Diffusion to the West," *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 4 (1992): 393.

distance.¹⁵ But in this growing movement, conversion of white Americans¹⁶ to Buddhism became more common than ever before.¹⁷ In his writing Kerouac at once both captured and perpetuated the energy of this movement. His writing, with Buddhism at its core sparked the popularization of Buddhism in America.

Kerouac is renowned as a primary thinker of the Beat movement. As a counterculture movement that sought social change and a breach from traditional standards, the Beats used art as a tool to develop a new cultural identity. The movement began with the first meeting of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs in 1944, who began a cultural revolution. Their early encounters are attributed as those that sparked the Beat movement, "These three characters- a working-class Catholic... A middle-class Russian-American Jew... And a well-to-do Anglo-American Protestant... Stood at the center of the early Beat drama, which soon included a large and diverse supporting cast of novelists, poets, and hangers-on."¹⁸ Their movement stretched across the nation, drawing upon those from diverse religious, political and socioeconomic backgrounds. Appealing particularly to young people disillusioned by the growth of the suburbs and increased consumerism, the Beats challenged what it meant to be an American. The movement questioned every aspect of American life, and worked to break free of norms and expectations. They shared a desire for social change, defined by Tonkinson as an American "new consciousness."¹⁹ This consciousness encouraged liberation: socially, sexually and spiritually. While a

¹⁵ Richard Hughes Seager. *Buddhism in America*. (New York: Columbia University Books, 1999): xvi.

¹⁶ While the Beat Generation emphasized inclusion of those from multiple racial backgrounds, white Americans were among the largest group to begin converting to Buddhism, and the group which Kerouac focuses on in his text. It is important to note that these white convert communities were not necessarily a part of the already established Asian American Buddhist communities, as discussed later in this paper.

¹⁷ Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 232.

¹⁸ Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind*, 11.

¹⁹ Tonkinson, *Big Sky Mind*, 11.

variety of religious traditions played into the development of the Beat movement, Buddhism was the primary focus and became incorporated into many aspects of the counterculture.

Through the art and literature of the Beat generation Buddhism was not only studied, but came to be practiced by Americans from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. With this broadening practice an American Buddhist tradition begins to grow, as described in an interview with Helen Tworikov of Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*. “[Buddhism in immigrant communities is] used as a way of conserving their history... For the Euro-American, the impulse to convert was very, very different. We didn't want to conserve, especially for my generation coming to Buddhism in the 60s. We didn't want to conserve anything from our culture.”²⁰ While American converts sought to carry on Buddhist tradition and practice, they did not necessarily find fellowship in these already established Asian American Buddhist communities. For them, converting to and practicing Buddhism was seen as a way of moving outside of the social standards and cultural norms, so they even resisted the cultural traditions of the already established Buddhist communities. Kerouac captures this tension in *The Dharma Bums*, in which his characters struggle to find their religious identity. They grapple with their understanding of Buddhism as it relates to both Asian and American culture, and some even seem to seek a Buddhism which is entirely outside of a cultural tradition.²¹ Ray discusses Japhy's understanding of Buddhism's cultural implications.

²⁰ Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 235.

²¹ In his article “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest,” scholar Stephen Prothero describes the Beat Generation as “Fellaheen.” He cites this term to “*The Decline of the West*,” by Oswald Spengler, who writes, “Cultures and peoples arise and decline in grand cycles in which ‘primitives’ yield to ‘culture-peoples’ as cultures expand and then to ‘fellaheen’ as cultures degrade.” The fellaheen exist on the borders of cultures, and as Prothero says, “Identify with all human beings rather than with their nation only.” These fellaheen seek to find spirituality outside of cultural boundaries, and see themselves as

Here in the heart of the tremendously sophisticated little city called San Francisco Chinatown they were doing the same thing but their church was the church of the Buddha.²² Strangely Japhy wasn't interested in the Buddhism of San Francisco Chinatown because it was traditional Buddhism, not the Zen intellectual artistic Buddhism he loved- but I was trying to make him see that everything was the same.²³

The characters in *The Dharma Bums* reflect a significant issue that arose with the increased presence of Buddhism in America. As Americans from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds converted to Buddhism, practitioners debated the role of Buddhism and its relationship to culture. While Buddhism remained a critical part of Asian American cultural heritage, many non-Asian converts sought to practice Buddhism without these cultural ties.²⁴ Debates surrounding this became central to the rise of Buddhism in the United States.

In large part because of these cultural debates, Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* has faced scrutiny for its portrayal of Buddhist tradition and the Buddhism practiced by his characters. The primary criticism of Kerouac's text is the assertion that his text offers

citizens of a greater world, not particular to their national identity. Prothero cites Spengler, "Fellaheen in every age follow the lead of 'world citizens, world-pacifists, and world-reconcilers... Who withdraw themselves out of actuality into cells and study-chambers and spiritual communities, and proclaim the nullity of the world's doings... Timeless, a-historic, literary men, men not of destiny, but of reasons and causes, men who are inwardly detached from the pulse of blood and being, wide-awake thinking consciousness" (Prothero 212). This identification resonates with Kerouac's construction of his characters, who do not seek to identify with any particular nation or culture, but instead seek to understand themselves and their spirituality outside of these cultural differentiations.

²² *In this passage, Kerouac describes Buddhist worship as "church" using Christian terminology to describe Buddhist practice. Scholarship critiques Kerouac's use of Christian language and metaphor to discuss Buddhism. This reiterates the cultural tension surrounding American Buddhism. In the text, Kerouac often intertwines Christian and Buddhist philosophy, best captured in a dialogue between Ray and Japhy. Ray discusses his philosophy on the afterlife, to which Japhy responds, "'You really like Christ, don't you?' 'Of course I do. And after all, a lot of people say he is Maitreya, the Buddha prophesied to appear after Sakyamuni, you know, Maitreya means 'Love' in Sanskrit and that's all Christ talked about was love.' 'Oh don't start preaching Christianity to me...' 'It'll all come out in the wash'" (Kerouac 203). Kerouac exemplifies this struggle between American Buddhists who completely resist Christianity, and others who embrace elements or all of it. While some Beats like Kerouac who came from a Christian tradition incorporated Christian tendencies into their understanding of Buddhism, others resisted any use of Christianity in their Buddhist practice. Some convert Buddhists even declined to attend Buddhist prayer services on Sundays, as they saw this as a "Christianization" of Buddhism (Masatsugu 446).*

²³ Jack Kerouac. *The Dharma Bums*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1958): 115.

²⁴ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World," 425.

a fragmented and narrow view of Buddhism which reduces the authenticity of the tradition. They argue that Kerouac crafts a portrayal of Buddhism based on naive assumptions, failing to incorporate elements of Buddhist history which they see as essential to the tradition. These critics include Erik Mortenson, Timothy Ray and Yuemin He, who argue that Kerouac and other Beats turned to a reduced and disjointed Buddhism as an answer to their personal struggles. "...Kerouac approached Buddhism with a Western mindset... Kerouac was continually trying to meld competing ideas in his mind and through his writing, rather than offering an authentic version of 'The Eastern.'"²⁵ Some of these critics, including He and Ray go on to argue that the Beat use of Buddhism is a form of "exoticized escapism,"²⁶ in which the authors so desperately desire an alternative to the Christian, normative culture that they force Buddhism into this role. In their critique of Kerouac, these scholars neglect to acknowledge the multiple forms and diverse history of Buddhism, instead developing a single, pure form to which they expect the Beats to conform.²⁷ Furthermore, In their analysis, these scholars employ an understanding of Buddhism as a tradition with a firmly closed canon. However, there is also another idea of authenticity in Buddhism. While the words of the Buddha and traditional Buddhist sutras are regarded as the canon of Buddhism, the tradition remains open to new teachings through ongoing lineages. Because the teachings of the Buddha are passed down through a lineage, Buddhism as a lived practice remains elastic. Kerouac's writing attempts to join this

²⁵ Ray, *Syncretic Visions*, 192.

²⁶ Ray, *Syncretic Visions*, 194.

²⁷ This assertion that Buddhism is a pure product of "the Eastern" is a dangerous reduction of both the tradition, and Eastern culture. These scholars present an extremely reductive and Orientalist version of Eastern culture, neglecting to acknowledge the diversity and multiplicity which plays an essential role in the history of Buddhism's development. These scholars presume a stagnant and true Buddhism, which exists outside of cultural influence. This perspective crafts a stereotype of Buddhism which reduces the diversity in its culture, tradition and history.

ongoing lineage, carrying the teachings of Buddhism from East Asia to the West Coast of the United States. He regards himself as a route in which Buddhist practice continues to move and evolve through its lived lineage.

Buddhism in fact has a rich history of moving across cultures and national boundaries. The tradition is ever-evolving, as noted by Henry C. Finney, sociologist and Zen scholar. "Starting from its birthplace in India in the sixth century B.C.E., the original diffusion of Buddhism to China in the first millennium was easily as great a cultural leap as the more recent one from Japan to America."²⁸ Buddhist traditions have evolved throughout the thousands of years of their transmission, particularly as they diffuse across culture and nations. While Kerouac unavoidably overlooks some traditional aspects of Buddhism, he incorporates teachings from the writings of Buddhists past, carrying on their legacies and spirits through his own writing. Kerouac joins a rich history of Buddhists who introduce the tradition into their own nation and culture.

Kerouac carefully incorporates elements of Buddhism across time and culture in *The Dharma Bums*. In his writing, he emulates Buddhist scholars and teachers from the past, especially writers Han Shan and Hakuin. These writers have strong influence over both Kerouac's stylistic choices and his portrayal of his characters and their Buddhist practices. Han Shan was a ninth century poet and scholar credited for the collection of poems *Cold Mountain*. After growing tired with society Han Shan retired to Mount *T'ien-T'ai* where he lived as a hermit and wrote.²⁹ He writes about abandoning society and disregarding social norms in order to find Awakening. There is little historical evidence about who Han Shan was. There are no other works that discuss Han Shan as a

²⁸ Finney, "Japan Connection," 380.

²⁹ Han Shan, *Cold Mountain*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962): 2-14.

historical figure, and some scholarship even questions if he existed at all, or if he is instead a fictionalized version of several historical figures. The only evidence that sheds light on this figure are in the poems themselves.³⁰ Han Shan himself is already a blend of history and fiction, and his appearance in *The Dharma Bums* further blurs this distinction, as he appears throughout the text as both a historical figure and a fictionalized character. The first mention of Han Shan is in the prefatory pages of *The Dharma Bums*, in Kerouac's dedication. Kerouac's devotion to Han Shan is clear as not only does Han Shan serve as his spiritual role model, but appears throughout the novel as a hero for Japhy and Ray. Japhy spends time throughout the text working to translate Han Shan's text *Cold Mountain*,³¹ and the characters look to him as a role model for the "Dharma Bum" or "Zen Lunatic" they strive to be.

These Buddhist monks not only serve as influences for Kerouac's writing, but they are also woven throughout the text as characters. Han Shan's character makes his first appearance as a "Dharma Bum" through embodying a man Ray encounters in the train. When Ray is train hopping from Los Angeles to San Francisco, he meets a bum who he calls the "Saint Teresa Bum," who modestly teaches Ray about his lifestyle and religion. Like Han Shan, the bum is a wanderer and traveler. For the sake of his spirituality, he abandons his personal possessions and home in search of a spiritual path. He serves as a role model for Ray, who seeks to emulate his spiritual strength and deep religious devotion. "I'd huddle and meditate on the warmth, the actual warmth of God, to obviate the cold; then I'd jump up and flap my arms and legs and sing. But the

³⁰ Burton Watson, *Cold Mountain*, 9.

³¹ Gary Snyder was the first to popularize *Cold Mountain* in the United States through his translation into English (He, "Selective Way to Cold Mountain," 45.) His work is regarded with a great deal of tension among Buddhist scholars as many, including Yuemin He and Ling Chung consider it to be an inaccurate and somewhat fragmented representation of the text.

little bum had more patience than I had and just lay there most of the time chewing his cud in forlorn bitterlipped thought. My teeth were chattering, my lips blue."³² Kerouac consistently refers to Han Shan as a "little bum" throughout the text, suggesting that this bum is a representation of Han Shan. Additionally, Kerouac describes the bum and Han Shan in the same way, as contemplatively quiet and wise. By introducing Han Shan's character early in the text and labeling this character as a "Dharma Bum," Kerouac crafts an ideal the characters aspire to become. He describes a "Dharma Bum" as a religious wanderer and says of himself, "I believed that I was an oldtime *bhikku* in modern clothes wandering the world... In order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, of Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener)."³³ The little bum solidifies his confidence in the merit of his lifestyle and embodies the "Dharma Bum" which Ray emulates. Throughout the text Ray and Japhy envision Han Shan as the ultimate "Dharma Bum," who they continuously look to as the perfect example of a spiritual lifestyle.

Han Shan appears later in the novel and provides a source of hope and comfort to Ray. His character is a blend of the historical Han Shan, the idealized Han Shan, and Japhy, Kerouac's own recollection of Han Shan. As Ray is alone in the mountains, he seeks liberation,

I called Han Shan in the mountains; there was no answer. I called Han Shan in the morning fog: silence it said... And suddenly it seemed I saw that unimaginable little Chinese bum standing there, in the fog, with that expressionless humor on his seamed face. It wasn't the real-life Japhy of rucksacks and Buddhism studies and mad parties at Corte Madera, it was the realer-than-life Japhy of my dreams.³⁴

³² Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 6.

³³ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 5.

³⁴ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 243.

Of course, neither Japhy nor Han Shan are physically present. Ray is entirely isolated in the mountains, but draws upon both men, their teachings and their spirits to help him find Awakening. As Ray merges together reality and fiction, past and present, Kerouac allows the reader to see the way that Buddhism moves across borders and time periods. Kerouac joins Han Shan's lineage by perpetuating his message through *The Dharma Bums*, creating a literary lineage.

Throughout the text, the characters also refer to Buddhists of the past as "Zen Lunatics," an ideal they continue to emulate on their own spiritual journeys. Japhy not only uses this expression frequently throughout the text, but also gives himself this label. Ray describes one of his first interactions with Japhy, "He showed me how to eat with chopsticks and told anecdotes about the Zen Lunatics of the Orient... I had a lot more to learn too. Especially about how to handle girls- Japhy's incomparable Zen Lunatic way, which I got to see firsthand the following week."³⁵ Kerouac's portrayal of the "Zen Lunatic" points to another Buddhist writer and teacher, Hakuin who Kerouac recalls in the spiritual journeys of his characters. Hakuin is a prominent figure in Japanese Zen. He lived in Japan from 1696-1768 CE and is noted for the unique literature he crafted. Despite working in a tradition where priests generally made little mention of their personal lives or journeys, Hakuin wrote the first spiritual autobiography of a Zen Master. Like Han Shan, Hakuin was devoted to teaching others how to walk on a spiritual path to find enlightenment and personal peace.³⁶ Throughout his autobiography *Wild Ivy*, Hakuin describes himself as uninterested in social norms or the social repercussions of his behavior. In one instance he writes,

³⁵ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 6.

³⁶ Hakuin, *Wild Ivy: The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin*, trans. Norman Waddell (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc, 1999): vii-xliv.

When I returned to my senses, I began clapping my hands together with delight and emitting great whoops of laughter. My rescuers started backing away from me with doubtful grins on their faces. Then they broke and ran, yelling 'Crazy monk! Crazy monk!' (It was a repeat performance of the events that had taken place some years before in Iiyama.) I had just experienced one of those eighteen satoris I mentioned before.³⁷

This idea of the "crazy monk," who abandons social conformity and restrictions is one which Kerouac recalls frequently through his characters who care little about the way they are perceived by society (and who often behave in socially transgressive ways). Kerouac's characters echo Hakuin's wild manners. When Ray is isolated in the mountains he finds awaking and celebrates wildly. "My hair was long, my eyes pure blue in the mirror, my skin tanned and happy... I paced in the windy yard with cup of coffee forked in my thumb singing 'Blubbery dubbery the chipmunk's in the grass.'"³⁸ Without regard for social norms or cultural expectations, Ray allows himself to freely celebrate his spiritual growth, emulating the autobiographical accounts of Hakuin's own spirituality. Just as Kerouac joins Hakuin's lineage through his writing, Hakuin places himself in Han Shan's lineage through his understanding and loyalty to Han Shan's writings. In his autobiography, Hakuin periodically refers to Han Shan, discussing his study of Han Shan's texts, and his work in teaching them to others in his village. In one instance, he even discusses lecturing on the poems of *Cold Mountain*.³⁹ As Hakuin discusses the work of Han Shan, Kerouac draws from the writings of both teachers, affirming his own place in their lineage of Buddhist literature.

Kerouac's notion of the "Zen Lunatic" grew from the Beat understanding of Buddhist conversion as socially transgressive, and as an antidote to their struggles with

³⁷ Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, 52.

³⁸ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 242.

³⁹ Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, 85.

American society.⁴⁰ Kerouac was a leader in this new movement, and through his writing offered an example of a way to break from normative American society through religious conversion. In *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac develops an understanding of what it meant to be an American and uses Buddhism as a way of resisting negative elements of this society. Kerouac's most glaring critique of American culture is of its materialistic and conformist tendencies, which the characters despise and see as pervasive in American society. In his travels throughout the country, Ray labels certain behaviors and practices as "American," disowning them by separating them from the Buddhism which he so values. Ray sees the suburban lifestyle as ignorant and wasteful, often preaching about its flaws. Walking through suburban streets and noting a television in each window he comments, "You'll see what I mean, when it begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way and the Zen Lunatics have long joined dust, laughter on their dust lips."⁴¹ He contrasts his lifestyle with that of the typical American, claiming that his way of living is a strong alternative to the mindlessness of society. He criticizes a culture which declines to challenge social norms, and prides his own tendency to question society and tradition. Through placing himself and the "Zen Lunatics" as separate from the typical American lifestyle, Ray offers an alternative way of living, one which advocates a separation from materialism, and discusses a new understanding of community. While he seeks to deviate from American normative culture, he desires to create change in this culture, not escape from

⁴⁰ *Resistance to the Cold War also contributed to the Beat frustration with American society. The Beats often saw the Cold War as perpetuating a violent and nationalistic mentality which conflicted with their personal and spiritual beliefs. They envisioned Buddhism as an "alternative to American religious traditions and Cold War society and culture" (Masatsugu 437). This critique of the Cold War further enhanced the Beat's distaste for American ideologies and culture.*

⁴¹ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 104.

it altogether. He seeks Buddhism as a way to facilitate a change in American culture, and seeks to catalyze these changes.

In Kerouac's development of an American identity he challenges the American religious paradigm. In religious debates Ray and Japhy encourage a spiritual liberation, challenging other characters to break free of religious norms and explore a new spiritual path. Ray faces a great challenge when his family questions his spiritual motivations. Though he loves his family and respects their religious beliefs he questions them, encouraging them to open their minds to new spiritual possibilities. While discussing his Buddhist beliefs with his family, Ray meets resistance. "You and your Buddha, why don't you stick to the religion you were born with?' my mother and sister said."⁴² Ray is struck by his family's lack of open-mindedness and grows frustrated with their refusal to even attempt to understand his spiritual beliefs. Ray's family serves as an illustration for what he and Japhy see as the dominant religious culture in the United States. One in which people are afraid to challenge tradition and refrain from questioning the familiar. The men work throughout the text to offer a counter to this conformity, seeing their liberated spiritual journeys as examples of how to break free from the normative American religious tradition.

In the development of his spiritual and cultural identity Japhy works in a similar way to Ray, seeking to separate himself and his values from those he sees as dominant in American culture. Again, he places the American way of life as oppositional to his beliefs. He goes so far as to claim that he himself does not identify as a true American,

You know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human

⁴² Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 144.

values but and when I discovered Buddhism and all I suddenly felt that I had lived previous lifetime innumerable ages ago and now because of faults and sins... I was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom. ⁴³

By suggesting a lack of freedom, Japhy uproots a founding principle and core value of American culture in favor of the Buddhism he practices. Setting himself apart from social norms, Japhy criticizes the repression and rigidity that dictates the action of the masses. This critique reflects a Beat sensibility that Post WW II America had abandoned its principles, referenced by Timothy Ray, "Kerouac's feelings about post-World War II America, an America that had emerged victorious from the war with a healthy economy and a bright future, but which in its post-war conformist, oppressive, communism-obsessed mindset seemed to lack self-awareness about its founding principles."⁴⁴ Interestingly, despite their frequent critique of American society, the Beats did not express anti-American sentiments. They actually expressed deep regard for American principles, but believed these principles have been abandoned, leading them to work to catalyze a resurgence of these values- freedom, liberty and education. The characters in *The Dharma Bums* seek complete liberation for themselves and others. In one instance Ray is traveling to Washington, and experiences the liberation he has worked to achieve, "Suddenly I felt so free I began to walk on the wrong side of the road and sticking out my thumb from the side, hiking like a Chinese Saint to Nowhere for no reason, going to my mountain to rejoice."⁴⁵ Ray strives to attain complete freedom, and sees Buddhism as a means to do so. He works to remedy the lack of freedom he feels in American society through his Buddhist practice. Again Kerouac's characters

⁴³ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 31.

⁴⁴ Ray, "Syncretic Visions," 191.

⁴⁵ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 218.

challenge the mainstream hold on American identity by preferring Buddhism, which they see as a vessel which compliments core and founding American values.

This social criticism parallels the critique crafted by Han Shan in *Cold Mountain*. Han Shan's poetry offers a great deal of resistance to the religious, political and cultural norms of his own society, and like Kerouac's characters sets himself apart from society. In one instance, he does so by detailing his relationship to many people in his society, "When people see the man of Cold Mountain they all say, 'There's a crackpot!' Hardly a face to make one look twice... A word to those of you passing by- Try coming to Cold Mountain sometime!"⁴⁶ Demonstrating his disregard for mainstream culture, Han Shan suggests that he is happy living outside of these social restrictions. He challenges the conformity which dictates his culture, and sees Buddhism as a way to break free from this rigidity. Han Shan defines his society as one controlled by social regulation and restriction, and is repelled by the strict social hierarchy which controls social interactions. He abandons social norms and does not care that he seems like a "crackpot" to others, just like the "Zen Lunatics," Japhy and Ray who place themselves outside the realm of social restriction.

Kerouac's social commentary follows the tradition of social critique made by Hakuin in *Wild Ivy*. Hakuin seeks to escape the confines and monotony of secular and social life, believing it to be worthless. He forgoes his culture, criticizing its hypocrisy and pressure. Hakuin particularly takes issue with those who practice religion without faith, simply going through the motions as a way to conform to social expectations. "They engage in no act of religious practice; they don't develop a shred of wisdom. They just waste their lives dozing idly away like comatose badgers, useless to their

⁴⁶ Han Shan, *Cold Mountain*, 91.

contemporaries while they live, completely forgotten after they die."⁴⁷ Despite his distaste for social structure, Hakuin demonstrates his deep love and committed relationships to the people in his life. He is connected to these spiritual communities which help him grow spiritually and allow him to serve as a teacher to others. Despite being devoted to spiritual communities, Hakuin disregards secular social concerns, focusing on only spiritual matters. Of an admired teacher, he writes, "There wasn't a mundane thought in his head. He was completely ignorant of secular matters."⁴⁸ Hakuin seeks to emulate this detachment from social constructions and restrictions, and uses his role in his community only for the spiritual growth of himself and others.

Over time Hakuin begins to develop a "Zen Sickness," a physical ailment which is the product of a spiritual brokenness. His illness results in near death, and he turns to a Zen master to discover the way to overcome this spiritual and physical turmoil. He learns that the only cure for this sickness is to isolate himself from society altogether and must abandon his spiritual community. In isolation, Hakuin not only finds a cure to his physical exhaustion, but finds great wisdom and Awakening. He learns that a personal spiritual quest in complete isolation is often the route to find Awakening. Hakuin's isolation from society is essential to his spiritual life, and offers insight into the role of community in Buddhist tradition. Though he encourages his followers to look to Zen masters and teachers for advice in their spiritual journeys, he also recognizes the absolute necessity of independence on the spiritual path. He writes, "Find the quietest, most secluded spot you can. Settle down there [and do zazen] with the intention of withering away together with the mountain plants and trees. You musn't spend the rest

⁴⁷ Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, 66.

⁴⁸ Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, 88.

of your life running all over the country looking for someone to help you."⁴⁹ Hakuin's understanding of community crafts a unique perspective on the *sangha*, or religious community, a core value of Buddhism. The message of the Buddha can only thrive when supported by a spiritual community. However, Han Shan, Hakuin, and Kerouac all write about the advantages of removing oneself from society in order to find Awakening. All three authors discuss the benefits of isolation and point to this removal from society as a critical step on the path to enlightenment. In their discussion of this isolation, the authors create a shift in the meaning of community.

Han Shan's poetry revolves around the peace and Awakening he finds while isolated from the structure and restrictions of society. Alone in the wilderness, he finds his ultimate path to enlightenment. He writes of the joy and freedom he feels while removed from the judgmental eyes of society and encourages his followers to do the same. In many ways, however, Han Shan's teaching creates a paradox. Though he clearly encourages isolation from society, by recording his personal experiences in the wilderness he himself serves as a teacher. He writes of the joy he finds on Cold Mountain, far removed from society,

As for me, I delight in the everyday Way,
Among mist-wrapped vines and rocky caves.
Here in the wilderness I am completely free,
With my friends, the white clouds, idling forever.⁵⁰

So while he preaches the importance of removing oneself from society, he himself remains a part of society through his writing. In fact, Han Shan acknowledges the importance of books very early in the collection of poetry. In his second poem of the

⁴⁹ Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, 50.

⁵⁰ Han Shan, *Cold Mountain*, 67.

collection, he writes that nearly all he has in his home is a "Bed piled high with books."⁵¹ In this way, Han Shan passes his lineage on through his literature.

Kerouac's characters in *The Dharma Bums* are part of an intimate community of friends, who work to help each other reach Awakening and artistic achievement. However, the characters perpetually reiterate their belief in the importance of isolation and the removal of the attachment to this society. Herein lies a significant similarity between Han Shan and Kerouac's characters, their passionate belief that Awakening can best be obtained in the wilderness. In accordance with their desire to abandon society and find freedom from cultural restrictions, Ray, Japhy and Han Shan retreat to the wilderness, isolated from all other people in search of spiritual Awakening. Because of his deep distaste for the society in which he lives, Han Shan removes himself, leaving for the isolation of the mountains, where he believes true peace can be found. "Thirty years ago I was born into the world. A thousand, ten thousand miles I've roamed...I brewed potions in a vain search for life everlasting, I read books, I sang songs of history, and today I've come home to Cold Mountain to pillow my head on the stream and wash my ears."⁵² Despite attempting to find peace while living in society, Han Shan acknowledges that he cannot find Awakening while surrounded by the cultural and social distractions. Alone, he retreats to T'ian Tian Mountains and lives a simple, peaceful life of contemplation. Living in isolation, he escapes from the society that brings him no satisfaction. The poems continue on, detailing the purity and Awakening that Han Shan gratefully obtains while alone in the wilderness.

⁵¹ *Han Shan, Cold Mountain, 20.*

⁵² *Han Shan, Cold Mountain, 56.*

Japhy and Ray follow after their role model, seeking Awakening in isolated nature. Just as Han Shan ventures up Cold Mountain, they climb Matterhorn Mountain and contemplate their own spirituality. Japhy acts as a teacher to Ray, conveying similar messages as Han Shan does in his poetry, "Ray when you're up here you're not sittin in a Berkeley tea room. This is the beginning and the end of the world right here. Look at all those patient Buddhas lookin at us saying nothing."⁵³ Away from society, the characters seek the truth, finding a sense of peace amidst their natural surroundings. The mountains become alive, serving as their teachers and acting as spiritual guides in their Awakenings. Japhy tells Ray of his experiences alone in the mountains, where he lived as a "Zen Lunatic," isolated from society and entirely focused on spiritual development. It is in this isolation that Japhy finds Awakening and begins to understand his role as a Bodhisattva. Ray follows in Japhy's footsteps, and also finds Awakening while isolated in the mountains. The similarities between the beliefs and practices Han Shan, Ray, and Japhy present a cohesive understanding of Buddhism. As Kerouac's characters look to these Buddhists of the past, they transmit Buddhism into their own lives, becoming part of the lineage of Buddhist practitioners.

In the character's development of an American counterculture, their desire for social resistance is strong. In their fervent attempt to create change and find cultural alternatives, many characters seem to have a romantic notion of Buddhism. Scholars often critique Kerouac for his romantic presentation of Buddhism, as his characters in some ways do not seem to grasp Buddhism as a contemporary practice, preferring to look to historical Buddhists. The characters, particularly Japhy imagine themselves as a part of an intellectual Buddhism, which is in some way free of its cultural ties. Though

⁵³ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 68.

monasteries and Buddhist centers exist in the same city as the "Zen Lunatics," Japhy often prefers to develop his understanding of Buddhism through independent scholarship, privileging historical Buddhism over contemporary. Ray describes this sense, "Strangely Japhy wasn't interested in the Buddhism of San Francisco Chinatown because it was traditional Buddhism, not the Zen intellectual artistic Buddhism he loved."⁵⁴ Despite Japhy's claim to resist the American Buddhist communities, he comes to learn a great deal from them, and is excited to note the incorporation of Buddhist historical tradition in its contemporary practice. After a meeting at a Zen center, he excitedly tells Ray, "You know what happened Smith? I went to the Buddhist lecture and they were all drinking white raw saki 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 great!"⁵⁵ Despite his original romantic insistence upon resisting contemporary practice, Japhy comes to understand Buddhism as a lived tradition. This vision of a Buddhism which exists entirely outside of a cultural and lived context is one which occurs throughout the book, and is often debated by the characters.

The Beats created a new sense of Buddhist community through the way this white, convert community interacted with Asian American immigrant Buddhist communities. While white converts were not often a part of established Asian American temples, it is necessary to consider the many ways in which the two groups interacted, often engaging in heated debates regarding the "authenticity" of Buddhist practice and tradition.

⁵⁴ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 115.

⁵⁵ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 192.

"Ethnic and convert Buddhists often held contrary views, shaped by distinct priorities, as to what Buddhism in America should look like. Japanese Americans tended to espouse an etho-national vision, grounded in community and tradition, as a part of strategy for incorporating Buddhism and Japanese American Buddhists into the imagined community of the U.S. national culture."⁵⁶

This vision was problematic for the Beats, who not only did not have a connection to this Japanese culture, but who also imagined Buddhism as a form of cultural resistance. Controversy arose because of these distinctly different perceptions of the connection between Buddhism and culture. In fact, many Beats even began to argue that their implementation of Buddhism was more "authentic," as it was separated from cultural influences.

These questions of authenticity are central to discussion of the Beat incorporation of Buddhism, and essential to the discussion of the cultural diffusion of Buddhism throughout its entire history. Though there are many ways to understand this discussion, the framework presented by Michael Masatsugu, professor of Asian American History provides a lens which works to understand these complex debates by dissecting the interactions between Asian American immigrant Buddhist groups, and white American converts. "During the 1950s and 1960s the boundaries dividing Japanese American and white convert Buddhists were more fluid than had been assumed and that ideas about the form and content of Buddhism in America were open to discussion and debate."⁵⁷ He argues that 1950s and 60s Buddhism exemplifies a modified or "transformed" *sangha*, one which incorporated ethnic and cultural diversity. This framework "de-centers" Asia as the only source of Buddhist transmission and discusses Buddhism as an evolving and constantly shifting religious tradition.

⁵⁶ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World," 425.

⁵⁷ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World," 427.

Additionally, Masatsugu argues that the portrayal of Asian American Buddhist communities is often tainted by a racist attitude, which "Supports the portrayal of Asian Americans as a 'model minority'- passive, silent, insular, and largely disengaged from Cold War politics."⁵⁸ This portrayal reduces the complexity of the immigrant Buddhist communities and their ongoing efforts and struggles to establish communities which both preserved their culture, but also could prosper in a new nation and culture. It is impossible to characterize these immigrant communities in one particular portrayal, a notion that Kerouac acknowledges throughout *The Dharma Bums*.

In many ways throughout *The Dharma Bums*, Ray and Japhy seek to understand the interaction between culture and religion, and in doing so often attempt to unwind Buddhism from its cultural context. The characters play with the possibility of a Buddhism which removes doctrine from culture, a seemingly impossible task. During conversation with Japhy, he analyzes their cultural perspectives on Buddhist tradition, "[Japhy] 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."⁵⁹ Stripping Buddhism down to what he sees as its basic core, Ray imagines a spirituality that does not adhere to traditional cultural affiliations. This tension between culture and religion becomes a prominent and recurring issue in the text, as noted by professor of American Religious Studies, Benedict Giomo. "Kerouac's expression of Buddhism in his work remains among the most innovative evocations and energetic expositions of traditional Eastern belief in

⁵⁸ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World," 427.

⁵⁹ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 12.

modern American literature. Moreover, the challenges and struggles of coming face-to-face with Buddhist concepts, tenets, images and practices give a whole new dimension to Kerouac's spiritual quest."⁶⁰ While the characters seek this disentanglement of culture and religion, they never succeed in removing Buddhism entirely from its cultural context. In this way, Kerouac seems to acknowledge the impossibility of disentanglement. Instead, it appears that he is working through the relationship between culture and religion, and exploring the different ways in which they intersect.

In their discussions of the disentanglement of culture and religion, the characters once again parallel Han Shan, who turns to Buddhism as a way to resolve his frustrations with the tension between spirituality, society, and culture. "You complain that Buddha is hard to find. Turn your mind within! There he is! Why look for him abroad?"⁶¹ Han Shan implores his reader to learn about the Buddha through looking internally. He examines the cultural effects on Buddhism, showing a preference for a personal and internal spiritual journey. As Ray dismisses the "national flavors" of Buddhism, Han Shan suggests that Buddhists find Awakening through turning inward, using only the Buddha's teachings as a guide. In their struggles with the cultural implications of Buddhism, the "Zen Lunatic's" in *The Dharma Bums* recall the teachings of the ancient Buddhist scholar.

Among the many ways in which Kerouac's writing replicates the teachings of these ancient scholars is his discussion of gender in *The Dharma Bums*, in which he gives a reductive portrayal of female figures and imitates Han Shan's flamboyant masculinity. In interpreting the use of Buddhism in the text, gender plays a significant

⁶⁰ Benedict Giomo, "Enlightened Attachment: Kerouac's Impermanent Buddhist Trek," *Religion and Literature* 33, no. 2/3 (2003): 174.

⁶¹ Han Shan, *Cold Mountain*, 88.

role, and Kerouac's use of gender proves to be one of the most controversial and complex areas of the text. The story centers around the lives of male characters who value masculinity, and their macho attitudes shape both their daily lives and their practice of Buddhism. Their attitudes align with Han Shan's overtly masculine practice of Buddhism, and his limiting perception of women. In their journeys in the wilderness, the characters push themselves and each other to achieve difficult physical feats, expressing their masculinity and strength. When Ray and Japhy are climbing the Matterhorn, Ray feels the exhaustion of the altitude, believing he can't climb further. Despite his fatigue, he presses onward, "With horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, 'When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing,'"⁶² feeling compelled to continue onward and prove his masculinity through achieving physical feats. His behavior is encouraged by the other male characters, who validate his masculinity and recognize his physical achievements.

Throughout the text Ray continuously feels his masculinity challenged, and fights to prove himself. Though in the beginning of the text he has taken a vow of celibacy, Japhy presses him to break the vow, mocking him for resisting the temptations of sex. Japhy convinces Ray to participate in "yabyum"⁶³ with Princess, though it challenges his personal values, "All the peaceful celibacy of my Buddhism was going down the drain."⁶⁴ His resistance is challenged, and Japhy encourages him to seek sexual pleasures despite his spiritual and personal convictions which tell him otherwise. "Smith, I distrust any kind of Buddhism or *any* kinda philosophy or social system that

⁶² Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 84.

⁶³ Yabyum is a type of tantric practice. Though Buddhism dictates that Tantra should only be practiced by advanced monastics, the characters seem to use yabyum as a way to appease their sexual desires, and avoid vows of celibacy.

⁶⁴ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 30.

puts down sex,' said Japhy quite scholarly."⁶⁵ This focus on sexual pleasures seems contrary to the simplistic and sacrificial lives that the characters seek to live otherwise. They cling to a masculine understanding of themselves and their place in the world, pushing each other and themselves to almost forcibly practice what they see as masculine qualities. As the characters look to Han Shan to exemplify Buddhist practice, they emulate his interpretation of masculinity. Throughout *Cold Mountain* Han Shan exerts his masculinity as a prominent theme and focus, similarly pushing himself to achieve physical feats, venturing into the depths of the wilderness, "Cold Mountain is full of weird sights; People who try to climb it always get scared... A touch of rain, the whole mountain shimmers- but only in good weather can you make the climb."⁶⁶ Han Shan demonstrates a competitive and masculine nature imitated by the male characters in *The Dharma Bums*. This valuing of forceful masculinity seeps its way into the entire text, affecting both their practice of Buddhism, and their relationship with women.

In their presentation of Buddhism, both Kerouac and Han Shan demonstrate a notably masculine orientation, incorporating these masculine ideals into their writing. In their valuing of masculinity, they demonstrate a deep disregard for women, particularly through dismissing the possibility of complex female spirituality. Throughout Buddhist history, there has been a vibrant debate regarding the spiritual capabilities of women. Despite the prominent presence of female Buddhist saints and leaders, there is a long standing tradition of Buddhists who deny the spiritual capabilities of women.⁶⁷ Though

⁶⁵ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 30.

⁶⁶ Han Shan, *Cold Mountain*, 63.

⁶⁷ The debate regarding women in Buddhism has been prominent from the very beginnings of Buddhist tradition. Controversial issues include the role of women in the monastic order, as noted by Buddhist scholar Donald Lopez, "Within a century or two after the Buddha's death, there were predictions of the eventual disappearance of the Dharma from the world. Various reasons were given for its demise, ranging from a general deterioration in human virtue to the fact that the Buddha had agreed to admit

Han Shan does not directly address this debate, his opinion about limited female spiritual capability is manifested throughout his poetry. He only includes women in the text who appear at a great distance, and through this removed visual, appears to value them primarily for their physical appearance, providing no discussion of their spiritual or intellectual capabilities. For example, he writes of women who he encounters, "A crowd of girls playing in the dusk...Golden butterflies are sewn to the hems of their skirts; Their chignons are pinned with mandarin ducks of jade. Their maids wear cloaks of sheer crimson silk... Will they give a glance to one who's lost the way, with hair turned white and a restless heart?"⁶⁸ Each mention of women in the text is similar, discussing only physical attributes, with no regard given to the spiritual or intellectual depths of the characters.

Kerouac parallels Han Shan in the incorporation of women into his text, similarly disregarding female capacity for Awakening. In one instance, Ray and Japhy are preparing for a hiking expedition in which they intend to isolate themselves in the wilderness to develop spiritually. Princess, a young woman the men frequently interact with asks if she can join them on their trip. She asks, "'Can I come with ya?' as she was a bit of a mountain climber herself. 'Shore,' said Japhy, in his funny voice he used for joking... 'Shore come on with us and we'll all screw ya at ten thousand feet.'"⁶⁹ Though she has skills as a mountain climber the men completely disregard, even mock her

women into the order" (Donald Lopez, Buddhism in Practice, 26). Deeper issues go so far as to question a woman's capability of achieving Awakening. This idea is refuted by the Buddha, as noted by scholar Jonathan Walters, "The Buddha, who is still present, asks Gotami [his mother] to put on a show of her miraculous powers as a lesson to those who doubt that women can achieve the highest states of spiritual perfections" (Walters, 115). Despite the Buddha's confirmation that women can in fact obtain Awakening, there continues to be fierce debates regarding the true spiritual capabilities of Buddhist women (Allen Sponberg, "Attitudes toward women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism").

⁶⁸ Han Shan, *Cold Mountain*, 49.

⁶⁹ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 27.

desire to join them. This dismissal of Princess' desire for Awakening recalls Han Shan's chauvinist perspective which denies women spiritual equality to males. In their refusal to allow Princess to join them, they deny her capacity for spiritual practice and ignore her own desire or potential for spiritual growth.

The women in the *The Dharma Bums* are condensed into very particular stereotypes, with limited acknowledgment of their spiritual or intellectual capacities. Like Han Shan's portrayal, they are almost always viewed from a distance, and always through the eyes of the male characters. The women in the text work as female archetypes with one dimensional personalities and few distinctive qualities. The three prominent female characters who appear throughout *The Dharma Bums* are Princess, Rosie, and Christine, all of whom appear sporadically throughout the text. Princess fulfills the role of the hyper-sexualized woman and although she imagines herself as spiritually developed, the male characters value her exclusively for her sexuality. Princess is established immediately as a character who the men desire, she is very young compared to the male characters and openly declares her love for Japhy, making her obviously vulnerable to the desires and demands of the men. Despite her desire to learn about Buddhism from Ray and Japhy, they see her only through this hyper-sexual lens. In one instance, she discusses her spirituality with Ray and Japhy, who disregard her words. "I'm the mother of earth. I'm a Bodhisattva.' 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."⁷⁰ Recalling the controversy of female Bodhisattvas, Ray joins this debate and makes his position clear. Though Ray and Japhy continuously call themselves Bodhisattvas, they mock Princess for calling herself one, based simply on her gender. Princess' role in the text is reduced entirely to her sexuality, with no respect or acknowledgement given to her capabilities or prospects as a Buddhist.

Another female character Rosie, the wife of Japhy's friend Cody, is reduced to her gender as well, placed in the role of the hysterical woman who falls victim to her seemingly uncontrolled emotional impulses. She continually deals with complex emotional and spiritual issues, and ultimately commits suicide to escape from her personal demons. Prior to her suicide, Ray tries to reason with her, discussing his spiritual beliefs. Rosie rejects his words, exasperating Ray who reinforces her role as an irrational woman. Despite the deep pain Rosie feels, Ray expresses an insulting and reductive belief that he could have saved her through sex. He muses, "If she'd lived, and could have come here with me, maybe I could have told her something, made her feel different. Maybe I'd just make love to her and say nothing."⁷¹ In this statement he disregards Rosie's mental and emotional capabilities, suggesting that he could offer clarity to her deep turmoil simply by "telling her something." Additionally, he reduces Rosie to her role as a woman by placing her sexuality above all of her other qualities, disregarding her complexity and emotional depth. In the presentation of women, Kerouac recalls Han Shan's limiting and flat representation of women.

Further, the character Christina is presented in a one dimensional and restrictive way. As a married woman and a mother, she is not a sexualized character. Rather, she

⁷⁰ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 30-31.

⁷¹ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 123.

is valued for her skills as a loyal mother and wife, presented as a passive match for her husband who is labeled as an "Old time patriarch."⁷² The characters repeatedly acknowledge Christina's skills as a cook and homemaker. Because of her desexualized status as a married woman, the male characters express respect and affection for her, though their respect never extends to acknowledge her spirituality. The men's treatment of women appears misogynistic and reductive, as the female characters are spiritually and emotionally limited. Though this treatment appears counter to the principles of Buddhism, which teaches respect towards all sentient beings, Kerouac's writing echoes the historical controversies of Buddhism which question the spirituality of women.

Kerouac's emulation of the writing of past Buddhist writers affirms his place in Buddhist lineage. Further, in his stylistic choices Kerouac emanates the teachings of the Buddha, adhering to the values embraced by Buddhists throughout history. One of these choices can be seen through his development of characters, as he relays the importance of the Buddhist principle of the elimination of one's ego. Buddhist practitioners are called to remove the ego which distinguishes them from others, a goal which Ray works hard to attain in the text, and finally achieves in the wilderness of North Carolina, "It was pure egolessness, just simply wild ethereal activities devoid of any wrong predicates...devoid of effort, devoid of mistake... We're here forever in one form or another which is empty. What the dead have accomplished, this rich silent hush of the Pure Awakened Land."⁷³ Ray obtains some sense of enlightenment and fully comprehends what it is to be removed from one's ego, a primary goal of Buddhism. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac expresses this egolessness in two ways. On the surface,

⁷² Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 162.

⁷³ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 147.

grand claims like Ray's verbalize the importance of removing one's ego. Ray's long speech and others like it, teach the reader about the desperate need to escape one's ego to find freedom. More subtly, Kerouac expresses egolessness through removing the distinction between each character. As the characters' identities, thoughts, and words flow together they lose the ego that separates from one another. Through this loss of distinction an understanding of egolessness can be developed. Kerouac crafts a presentation of Buddhism that can be seen not only through his character's eyes, but through the style of the writing.

Furthermore, Kerouac's intricately crafted characters, who act as fictionalized embodiments of historical figures, himself, and his friends gives the text deeper complexity, again incorporating Buddhist philosophies. The blending of past and present, reality and fiction creates a sense of egolessness in his characters. For example, when Ray is reading a piece of his poetry to his friends, "The boys was glad, and rested up for more, and Jack cooked mush, in honor of the door."⁷⁴ There is no character in *The Dharma Bums* named "Jack," so it would appear that he is a fictitious character created by Ray. In this incorporation of Jack Kerouac's own name into the text, he once again blurs realities by creating a unique understanding of his own identity and ego. In another instance, Kerouac writes, "I had a dollar left and Gary was waiting for me at the shack."⁷⁵ Again, Kerouac intricately crafts characters who are at once a product of fiction and reality. It can appear that this is a simple editing mistake, that Kerouac forgot to change Snyder's name to "Japhy" in this one place. But more likely Kerouac is reminding the reader to remain unattached to reality, and the common sense

⁷⁴ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 58.

⁷⁵ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 161.

of self. His use of characters provides insight into Buddhist tradition as personal identities are challenged, exemplifying the Buddhist ideal of unattachment to one's ego. Kerouac also expresses Buddhist thought through his complex use of characters from both the past and present, working to capture another element of Buddhism, the stillpoint⁷⁶ in which the past and present converge into one. Through intersecting figures from different points in history, Kerouac gives a new meaning to his characters, as they themselves become an embodiment of Buddhist practice.

Reiterating the Buddhist philosophy through his text, Kerouac exemplifies egolessness through his dialogue. He writes in a style that often makes it difficult to distinguish between the characters, and the conversations often go on for pages with little to no markers to distinguish who is speaking. Conversation flows with rapid excitement, moving between characters who often elaborate on each other's thoughts, for instance:

"Well, I got news for you... I'm going to bed"
 "Well sometimes I see a flash of illumination... But believe me I get more of a satori out of Princess than out of words"
 "It's a satori of your foolish flesh, you lecher."
 "I know my redeemer liveth."
 "Oh let's cut this out and just live!"⁷⁷

As four characters converse with each other Kerouac neglects to indicate who is speaking so the characters' identities blend together, their thoughts and ideas becoming a collective. By crafting conversations in this way, Kerouac merges the personalities and beliefs of many influential Buddhist thinkers, from Han Shan to Japhy. There is little distinction between his characters. This lack of differentiation between the characters has a powerful affect on the meaning of the text. As the characters begin to lose their

⁷⁶ Mortenson, "Stillpoint" 123.

⁷⁷ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 34.

individuality, Kerouac recreates an understanding of identity. Buddhism encourages practitioners to remove their independent identity, to see themselves as interconnected with all around them. Despite the fact that the characters are often expressing opposing or very different ideas, their collective thoughts allow the reader to lose attachment to the characters' identities.

Erik Mortenson, scholar of Beat Literature argues that Kerouac's merging of fiction and reality works to create a stillpoint, a way of giving meaning to Kerouac's personal experiences and understandings. Kerouac pulls from diverse times and places across Buddhist tradition and applies these features to his own understandings of Buddhism. This stillpoint allows him to craft a Buddhist experience which is in many ways outside of history, culture and geography. "[Kerouac] turns to the Buddhist conception of a 'stillpoint' lying beyond rigid ego consciousness for an answer... [his] deployment of the Buddhist stillpoint allows [him] to turn seemingly isolated visionary experience into a means of connecting past, present, and future into a meaningful whole."⁷⁸ Kerouac uses *The Dharma Bums* as a way to exemplify one moment, one stillpoint in history, as American Beats begin to understand and practice Buddhism. Though it is impossible to recreate the entire movement, Kerouac's blending of past, present, fiction and reality works to develop a point from which to examine the movement of Buddhist tradition. In his construction of the text, Kerouac creates a connection between the Buddhists throughout time. This convergence works to make Buddhism accessible to the reader, who can begin to understand the diverse tradition through the stories of his characters.

⁷⁸ Mortenson, "Stillpoint," 123.

In his approach to understanding the developing movement of Buddhism in America, Kerouac worked always to be reverent and benevolent. With respect for Buddhist history and spirituality, he served as a link in the transmission of the tradition across cultural, racial and national boundaries. With a deep respect for the Buddhism which he practiced, he re-appropriated the term "Beat" from "beaten down" connotations to a "beatific" one. Torkinson describes this new understanding, "Having already coined the phrase 'Beat Generation,' he now came to understand the word 'beat' as meaning not simply down- and-out but also 'beatific, trying to be in a state of beatitude, like St. Francis, trying to love all life, being utterly sincere and kind and cultivating 'joy of heart.'"⁷⁹ Spreading a message of transcendental hope and liberation, Kerouac carefully wove ancient Buddhist tradition into his own writing, offering a portal through which Americans seeking freedom from cultural norms could begin their own spiritual journeys. In his discussion of this spiritual journey of the Beats, Prothero writes, "The Beats shared, in short, not an identifiable geographical goal but an undefined commitment to a spiritual search. They aimed not to arrive but to travel and, in the process, to transform into sacred space every back alley through which they ambled and every tenement in which they lived."⁸⁰ Though Kerouac worked to encourage others break free from social restrictions, his writing served as a catalyst for liberation, not simply as a critique of American culture or religion. With reverence, Kerouac offered a path for those seeking an alternative which would offer them hope amidst a world of restriction.

⁷⁹ Torkinson, *Big Sky Mind*, 25.

⁸⁰ Prothero, "On the Holy Road," 211.

The Dharma Bums serves as an emotional and complex expression of the shifting role of Buddhist tradition in the United States. In working to create a path of social resistance and calling for a fundamental change in the American lifestyle, the text offers a way of life that provides solace from materialism and social repression. Kerouac works in complex ways to capture the rapid growth of a counterculture movement that challenged norms and preached a kind of liberation. He provides an example of characters who use Buddhism to inform their lives, and adopt the tradition as a way of finding liberation from American life. His text weaves together Buddhist tradition of the past and present, which permeates every aspect of the novel from the characters to the scenery. Through *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac provides both a model for and an example of American Buddhism and its growth. Though Kerouac is part of no formal Buddhist lineage, he joins the literary lineage of Buddhists before him, calling upon authors like Han Shan and Hakuin to inspire and inform his Buddhist expression. Kerouac served as a guide in the transmission of Buddhism across cultural and historical boundaries, and in relaying his path of Buddhism he builds an American lineage, a tradition of resistance which offers freedom from suffering.

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