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Jack Kerouac: Dharma Voyeur

by

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This thesis is respectfully dedicated to Eva Neumaier-Dargyay, who was both good cop and bad cop, but never let me quit even when I wanted to. Thanks for everything.

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Keep on dancing, all you dingedodies!

Abstract:

The view of Buddhism expressed within the works of Jack Kerouac played an important role in the formation of the American understanding of this religion. This thesis focuses on Kerouac's struggle with Buddhism, as outlined in his collected series of notes, some of the dharma. Kerouac's attitudes towards Buddhism and himself are examined to reveal both the successes and failures of this well-documented three-year encounter between one of America's most innovative writers, and the religion which captured his imagination.

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Introduction

The 1997 publication of some of the dharma was both a source of delight and consternation for students and critics of Jack Kerouac. Hailed as the "Dharma Daddy of America", praised as the "New Buddha of American Prose" in Allen Ginsberg's dedication to "Howl" Kerouac had been lauded as the torchbearer of American Beatnik Buddhism, transmitting the wisdom of the East to a Western audience sunk in Cold War paranoia. Yet this "Buddhist Notebook" revealed not a man embracing his new religion, but a deeply troubled soul for whom Buddhism was another possible cure-all for his life of suffering.

Some of the dharma originated as a set of notebooks in which Kerouac jotted down notes, poetry, observations, and journal entries. The complexity of these notebooks actually resulted in a two-year delay in publication as the editors attempted to mimic the typeset and format of these notebooks. The fact that it took 40 years for this work to be released has allowed it to attain almost mythical proportions for some critics. In his 1976 study of Kerouac, John Tytell made the following claim:

Kerouac sustained himself spiritually during his years of denial by prolonged study of Buddhism - as his thousand page manuscript, *The Book of the Dharma* may suggest if it is published.

(73)

Up to the present, the study of Kerouac's Buddhism has always come from a literary standpoint, not from one of Religion. As a result, no insightful analysis of his Buddhism as a spiritual matter

has been possible . The publication of some of the dharma affords an opportunity to see how Kerouac's Buddhism played out within his life and then in his works, and either validate or refute the critics' claims.

When Buddhism has been mentioned in studies of Kerouac's work, it has always been in a superficial way, speaking of the religion as if it were one neat, easily definable package. As scholars of Buddhism (and indeed Kerouac himself) are aware, Buddhism's 2500-year history had been punctuated with splits between groups (and within groups), radical new ideas, and new interpretations of the Dharma. To say Kerouac was a scholar or follower of Buddhism is unsatisfactory: his attempts to reconcile seemingly incompatible ideas found within differing schools showed that he himself was hoping to find one religion, but in fact found many.

A brief overview of Kerouac's Buddhism as reported in some of the major biographies and books about Kerouac will show the attitude of the critics: the assumption that whatever he was doing with Buddhism was a reflection of his understanding of the religion. In fact, this assumption has perpetuated a myth of Kerouac's satisfaction with Buddhism that is not reflected within some of the dharma.

Anne Charters referred to Kerouac's "deep satisfaction in his Buddhist studies" (214) in her 1973 biography of the writer, yet on the next page observed that he "was too unhappy, and too undisciplined, to follow the Buddhist precept that drunkenness is as reprehensible as it is a product of bad karma" (215). If Kerouac was in fact getting a sense of satisfaction from his studies, why then was

he so unhappy?

Gerald Nicosia's massive biography of Kerouac, Memory Babe (1983), made a two-page attempt at condensing Buddhism, but the result is unsatisfying and not particularly useful for judging Kerouac's Buddhism. For example, the first two of the Four Noble Truths are listed, but the other two, which Kerouac had little use for, were not given, so the reader has no opportunity to realize the importance of Kerouac's "selective" Buddhism. All four Truths were to be believed in for Buddhism to be "activated" by the practitioner; Kerouac believed in the illness, but not in the possibility of a cure for the suffering which drives people on from lifetime to lifetime.

Nicosia did, however, make several important points about Kerouac's Buddhism, such as his aversion to Zen, and the "combination of selfishness and compassion" (458) which caused him to waver between the solitary arhatship of Hinayana versus the world-saving bodhisattva of the Mahayana tradition. This tension played itself out in some of the dharma as dialogues between Kerouac and himself over the merits of the two schools, with the decision usually given to Mahayana.

What Nicosia and other critics did not mention was that there were concepts within different schools of Mahayana which Kerouac could have benefited from, but ignored. The Madhyamika notion of emptiness, for example, could have aided him in his battle with alcoholism by showing Kerouac that all things are without substance and permanence. Similarly, the Yogacara theories on the storehouse-consciousness could have encouraged him to nurture his internal pure seeds of Awakening, instead of seeking nirvana outside himself.

The 1995 publication of Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation seemed to be a solution to the lack of scholarship in the field of Beat Buddhism, but unfortunately the work not only failed in this endeavor, but also continued to muddy the already distorted relationship between Kerouac and Buddhism. Using selective quotations from various works, and referring to Kerouac's "serious, self-taught program of Buddhist study" (24), and his "ambitious program of sitting meditation and sutra reading" (24), Big Sky Mind leaves the reader with the impression that Kerouac was both a successful and contented Buddhist, a conclusion which is largely unsupported by some of the dharma.

Echoing this impression, Steve Turner solemnly noted in 1996's Jack Kerouac: Angel-headed Hipster that "[f]or the best part of a decade Jack took his Buddhism very seriously" (147), yet there is no analysis of how his Buddhist practice affected his work. A reader unfamiliar with Buddhism comes away from this work with the impression that Kerouac's drug-taking, alcoholism, and other foibles were somehow part of his Buddhist practice, if he was indeed the serious Buddhist Turner claims him to have been.

Likewise, Barry Miles' 1998 Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats avoided any serious discussion of Kerouac's Buddhism, though all of the Four Noble Truths, as well as the steps of the Eightfold Path, are listed. Unfortunately, there is no context given for these items to be meaningful for the reader, and no explanation as to how these fundamentals of Buddhism are to be put into action. Echoing the relationship Buddhism plays in his book, Miles noted that Kerouac's "Buddhism was academic rather than a dynamic part of his life"

(196). What is revealed in some of the dharma is the evidence that Kerouac actively used Buddhism to justify his failures in life, including his Buddhism.

Seen in the light of the weight of this scholarship, the publication of some of the dharma was to be the final proving-ground for Kerouac's Buddhism. At last the world would have proof of Kerouac's Buddhism. Unfortunately, dharma must have come as a shock to scholars, as it not only illustrates the complexity of Buddhism in general, but shows how complicated Kerouac's interpretation of it (mediated through his alcoholism and other preoccupations) became when it encountered his extant difficulties with getting published, his relationship with his mother, and his Catholicism. Without having a solid grounding in Buddhism, it is impossible to untangle what is Buddhism and what is Kerouac's interpretation of Buddhism. This thesis will help to illustrate the theory and practice of Kerouackian Buddhism, as outlined by Kerouac himself in some of the dharma¹.

Even the publication of the first post-dharma work (Ellis Amburn's Subterranean Kerouac) has failed to truly examine Kerouac's Buddhism from other than a literary standpoint. Though the point that Kerouac's alcoholism and drug use interfered with his Buddhism is once again made, the inherent flaws within his Buddhism are not taken into full account; the impression is once more made that if Kerouac had been sober, his Buddhism would have been a source of solace. In fact, if Kerouac were sober, he might have been able to get past his superficial affair with Buddhism, and gain a deeper, unclouded understanding of what Buddhism (in all its

variations) could offer to a 20th century American writer.

Amburn notes that "the impact of Buddhism on Kerouac's writing was more significant than anyone could have assessed before the publication of some of the dharma in 1997" (196). It might be more proper to state that it was Kerouac's selective interpretation of Buddhism that had such an effect

Amburn goes so far as to call Kerouac's influence on America as "one of the strongest since that of Cotton Mather" (217). Referring to Kerouac's contribution to the areas of morality and Buddhism as "an antidote to Mather's emphasis on guilt and sin" (217), Kerouac is credited as being instrumental in freeing a generation of Americans "from shame and repression" (218).

Unfortunately, by referring to such things as Buddhist "salvation" which resulted from "altruistic motives" (200), Amburn not only denies the plurality of the Buddhist schools, but links Buddhism with Western notions of the afterlife. "Salvation" is loaded with notions of Heaven and self and God that Western audiences have tried to apply to Buddhism with only minimal success. The notion of "altruistic motives" seems to be a gross simplification of the Mahayana idea of the bodhisattva. Also, Kerouac may have freed American youth from their hang-ups, but his own neuroses were clearly exhibited in some of the dharma: what he did for others he could never do for himself.

There were a few contemporaries of Kerouac who voiced concern about the sincerity of his commitment to Buddhism, notably fellow Beats Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder, both of whom would become Zen priests. Whalen observed that from what he could see,

Kerouac's "interest in Buddhism was pretty much literary" (Gifford and Lee 81). Snyder felt in many ways that Kerouac was "using Buddhism as an escape" (Nicosia 494), and both Whalen and Snyder noted that Kerouac's drinking held him back from making meaningful Buddhist progress. Such reservations, coming in retrospect, were largely lost on the literary critics, whose work formed the vast majority of studies on Kerouac and his work.

Of course, responsibility for the lack of scholarship on Kerouac's Buddhism cannot solely rest with the literary critics. It is up to scholars of religion to take some of the dharma and define what constituted Kerouac's version of Buddhism, and how this affected his outlook and his literary output.

It is this failure that this thesis will address: to look at Kerouac's Buddhism in light of Buddhism, not merely how his Buddhism affected his writing. Due to alcohol, drugs, family and social pressure, his innate Catholicism, and his own crippling self-doubt, Kerouac was never able to experience Buddhism as a way of life, and thus reap its benefits. Instead, he dabbled superficially in Buddhist texts and morality, admiring and appropriating the language of Buddhist writings, but he never made more than token, temporary efforts to live by the Buddha's teachings: he was truly a Dharma voyeur.

Chapter One: Entering the Stream (1954)

Kerouac's foray into Buddhism has usually been assigned the starting date of January, 1954 by the critics. More precisely, it began in the previous month as a weary Kerouac, burned out after a Benzedrine-fueled typing binge in December 1953, went looking for solace. This binge resulted in the manuscript of The Subterraneans, which would not be published until 1958, and Kerouac himself described the subsequent events in an interview in 1960:

"How did I become Buddhist? Well, after that love affair described in The Subterraneans, I didn't know what to do. I went home and I just sat in my room hurting. I was suffering, you know, from the grief of losing a love, even though I really wanted to lose it. Well, I went to the library to read Thoreau. I said "I'm going to cut out from civilization and go back and live in the woods like Thoreau", and I started to read Thoreau and he talked about Hindu philosophy. So I put Thoreau down and I took out, accidentally, The Life of the Buddha by Ashvaghosa."

(Miles 194)

A happy accident, for in the tale of Siddhartha Gautama's life Kerouac found a metaphor for his own, and a possible solution to his suffering. Kerouac's own Roman Catholicism had brought him no solace, and now it seemed that an Eastern perspective is what Kerouac needed. Buddhism became his new love, though like all his other passionate affairs, it was destined to be short, bittersweet, and the impetus for one of his major works (dharmā, though it would also heavily influence the rest of his literary output, notably The Dharma

Bums).

What struck Kerouac in particular was the first of the Four Noble Truths, the foundation of Buddhism: all life is suffering. For Kerouac, 31 years old, the author of one unsuccessful novel and many unpublished manuscripts, man without means of regular support and having no home of his own, having just completed yet another disastrous love affair (though luckily he had neither got married nor fathered a child this time, as he had earlier with Joan Haverty), Kerouac was indeed the embodiment (or so he thought) of this truth. There was suffering aplenty in his native Roman Catholicism, but Buddhism's promise of nothing being permanent was more attractive than the eternal fire and brimstone of his first religion.

What Kerouac never seemed to agree with, even in his early, earnestly Buddhist days, was the requirement to believe in all four Truths, not just picking and choosing the ones he agreed with. As he would later record in The Dharma Bums,

I warned him [Gary Snyder/Japhy Ryder] at once that 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 achieved*, which I didn't quite believe was possible then. (12)

The Surangama Sutra, a text which would become a favorite of Kerouac, warned against such selective acts, stating "you should not accept one teaching, or one principle, that is easy and agreeable, and reject the rest of the Dharma" (Goddard 267). Suffering was what

spoke to Kerouac at this time, and so the other Truths would have to wait.

Despite such feelings, some of the dharma (hereafter abbreviated as dharma) opened with a listing of all Four Noble Truths:

1. All Life is Sorrowful
2. The Cause of Suffering is Ignorant Craving
3. The Suppression of Suffering can be Achieved
4. The Way is the Noble Eightfold Path

(dharma 3)

It must be noted that the translation of the third Truth is somewhat faulty: Buddhism aims at the extinction of suffering, not the mere suppression of it. By choosing this wording, Kerouac seemed to be unsure whether Buddhism could actually work.

Kerouac then engaged in an activity which will predominate in some of the dharma: he listed the Eightfold Path, but also gave his interpretations of what each step meant to him:

1. Right Views--Ideas Buddhistic
2. Right Aspirations--Resolution to Follow
3. Right Speech--Gentle Speech
4. Right Conduct--Kind Circumspect Behavior
5. Right Means of Livelihood--Harmless Foodgathering
6. Right Endeavor--Perseverance in Supernormal States
7. Right Mindfulness--Realization of Supernormal States
8. Right Contemplation--Holy Ecstasy in Supernormal States

(dharma 3)

The Eightfold Path is a guide for proper Buddhist behavior, but Kerouac modified it for his own purposes: by adding the vague

provisos such as "Ideas Buddhist", he left an opportunity for endless interpretation of what constituted "right". As his dharma entries show, Kerouac saw himself as failing to live up even to his elastic and all-encompassing version of the Eightfold Path. His theory was sound, but his practice was without a solid foundation.

There are no dated entries in some of the dharma until page 31 (March 12, 1954), so it is unclear when this work actually commenced. His note taking is generally agreed to have begun in December of 1953, but a reference much later in some of the dharma may indicate the work began two months later: "...I conceived the idea of teaching the Dharma in more ways than one, after this present book *Buddha Tells Us* (Begun Feb.18)" (dharma 268). Kerouac devoured all the books on Buddhism he could find, making extensive forays into the San Jose Public Library for material to confirm his own Buddhist position as well as to refute the Cayceism of Neal and Carolyn Cassady, with whom Kerouac was staying². The primary text that Kerouac encountered was A Buddhist Bible, an anthology of Buddhist texts put together by Dwight Goddard in 1932 (with a revised edition put out in 1934)³. Kerouac obtained his own copy of this work, as well as a copy of The Sacred Books and Literature of the East, volume 10: India and Buddhism (dharma 8).

Neither a Bible, in the Western sense of the word, nor entirely Buddhist (it includes a translation of the "Tao-teh-king"), A Buddhist Bible included samples of texts from Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and modern sources (no Japanese texts are included). Goddard himself was clear on the gaps in his anthology, which also made clear a bias in his reporting:

The present editor has been guided in his selection of scriptures for this Buddhist Bible by a sincere purpose to make the selection as comprehensive as possible within its limits and to represent as truly as possible the original teachings of the Blessed One both as understood by the Southern and more primitive school and by the Northern and more philosophical interpreters.

(xxxii)

Miles, like others, cites Kerouac's attachment to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path as proof of his commitment to Buddhism, but herein lay the problem. Kerouac WAS attached to them, in a wishful, romantic sort of way, and that attachment bred desire: he was doomed from the start.

Kerouac's downfall lay in the requirements of Buddhism. It was not simply a matter of showing up at church one day a week, or simply being baptized into the faith: Buddhism required day-to-day mindfulness of its followers. One of the elements involved in following the Eightfold Path was the keeping of the Precepts (five for laypeople and another five for monks and nuns). Yet, when Kerouac listed them, they were only four:

THE FOUR PRECEPTS

1. No lust and avarice UNCHASTITY (Adultery without Consent) (Rapacity)
2. No cruelty and egoism KILLING (Brutalizing)
3. No insincerity and proud deceit LYING
4. No covetousness and stealing STEALING

(dharma 8)

Missing was the fifth Precept, which forbids the taking of intoxicants.

At first referring to alcohol (fermented palm wine), it has been extended to include all mind-altering substances (including alcohol, psychedelic drugs, and in extreme cases of piety, caffeine). The Precepts were set out many times in Goddard's anthology, so Kerouac certainly knew there were five. In the modern text "Homeless Brothers" (from a compilation prepared in modern times by Professor Yamabe of Kyoto), from which Kerouac would draw his excuses for abandoning his daughter, the Precepts were clear:

Lay members should follow the five precepts for good behavior:--not to harm any sentient life, not to steal, to live a pure and restrained life, not to lie or deceive, and not to use intoxicants.

(628)

They are listed again in the "Summary of Buddha's Dharma", which was a sort of crib sheet of Buddhism included by Goddard, who thought it "wise to add a brief summary of them [the Buddha's teachings]" (677). Kerouac certainly would have gone through this, as his listings of the Noble Truths and Eightfold Path were undoubtedly taken from it. However, Kerouac seems to have hit the major points without reading the fine print. Under point four of the Eightfold Path (Right Behavior), the student is told not merely what not to do but also what behavior should be followed instead:

Besides behaving according to the general rules of propriety, one should be especially careful to keep the Five Precepts:--Not to kill but to practice kindness and harmlessness towards all animate life. Not to steal or covet what does not belong to one, but to practice charity and going without things oneself. Not to commit adultery but to practice purity of mind and sexual self-control. Not to lie but to practice honesty and sincerity in thought,

word and deed. Not to partake of alcoholic drink or drugs, or anything that weakens one's mind-control, but to practice abstinence and self-control. (647)

In a way, the fifth Precept could be viewed as a linchpin for the entire set: intoxication could lead to the breaking of other Precepts, due to the clouding of the mind and will (Robinson and Johnson 78). Kerouac excused his drinking during this period by following the teaching of the Diamond Sutra, telling Carolyn Cassady that as "all things, including asceticism, are but a dream and an arbitrary conception not to be grasped, it seems I've been loosening my grip on Virtue and being just a common good old pot" (Letters 426-427)⁴.

Kerouac, generous by nature, was eager to share his new discovery with friends, and the first object of his Buddhist generosity was Allen Ginsberg. Some of the dharma was originally begun as a set of study notes for Ginsberg, who had become interested in Buddhism during a recent bout of unemployment. Unfortunately, Ginsberg never saw the notes, as Kerouac kept promising then refusing to send them. Not only was he worried that the notebook would get lost in the mail ("If you really want to see it, I will send it importantly stamped, it's the only copy, we must take special care with it, right?" (Letters 416)), but also that it was no good. Only five months into his Buddhist journey, Kerouac reflected on his writings, musing that "Some of it is now, I see, useless, because mistaken, or written on tea, or other faults" (416).

Despite this, Kerouac had great hope for his notes providing

Ginsberg with a springboard for his own Buddhist studies. So confident was he in his role as teacher that he loudly proclaimed "of course for your beginning studies of Buddhism, you must listen to me carefully and implicitly as tho I was Einstein teaching you relativity" (Letters 416).

However, if Ginsberg was a willing pupil of the Kerouackian Buddhist Way, William Burroughs was a confirmed naysayer. Having studied and dismissed Buddhism years previously, Burroughs was not shy about giving his honest opinion about Kerouac's new obsession. Even as early as 1950, he had been warning Kerouac about the perils of Buddhism:

You know the logical conclusion to the I've-got-it-all-inside proposition is the conclusion reached by certain Tibetan Buddhists who wall themselves in a little cell with a slot where food is pushed in at them, and stay there till they die. This is not my idea of a good deal.

(Harris 71)

Despite this, Burroughs encouraged Kerouac to study Buddhist texts, but cautioned him to remain uninvolved. Reacting to Kerouac's desire to give up sex as part of his new Buddhist life, Burroughs' response was firm, unyielding, and would irritate Kerouac for years:

So my conclusion was that Buddhism is only for the West to *study as history*, that is it is a subject for *understanding* , and Yoga can profitably be practiced to that end. But it is not, for the West, *An Answer* , not *A Solution*.

(Harris 226)

In pointing out these problems he had with Buddhism, Burroughs hit

upon a point that would be echoed by later critics, and could be applied to Kerouac as well. Citing that Buddhism often manifested itself (particularly in California) as "psychic junk"⁵, Burroughs condemned the Western seekers as "psychic retreaters from the dubious human journey" (Harris 226). As Goddard himself had noted that American and European Buddhists would have to adapt Buddhism to their culture (656), the problems of East meeting West were already in the minds of many. Though he talked occasionally about his vision of American Buddhism, Kerouac seemed determined to adapt himself to the "real" Buddhism as outlined in his readings.

One large impediment kept him from making any real forward progress: his mother, the formidable Memère. Very early in his Buddhist studies Kerouac stated his mission: "my mother's happiness is the only thing that matters to me" (dharma 46). His mother was at once a source of liberation and enslavement for her son. Kerouac recognized her role as lay supporter to his as Buddhist monk, as well as her role in enabling him to write: "What I really only want, what Ma's given me, is freedom to do nothing" (dharma 138). By providing her son with food, shelter, and money, Gabrielle Kerouac freed him from the physical needs of his existence, leaving him free to pursue a meditative life (in the manner of Buddhist monks), yet it was never meant to be. Kerouac hated himself for failing his mother, a theme which undoubtedly had its roots in the death of his brother, Gerard: he believed that he should have died, not his saintly elder brother.

At the end of November 1954, Kerouac put his priorities in order: mother first, then Buddhism:

I cant renounce the world completely till I have done
serving my mother, who brought me into the world.

...
For how, and by what laws of compassion, can I abandon
her, she loved me and served me in a lifetime.

(dharma 171)

This love of family was also something which the historical Buddha wrestled with before he left on his renunciant life. What Kerouac could not admit was that (according to Buddhism), it would be a compassionate act to leave his family and follow the Dharma. In the case of his wife and daughter, Buddhism was used as an excuse to abandon them; in the case of his mother, Buddhism would have to wait. The text "The Historic Buddha" in Goddard contains a verse which summed up the Buddhist stance in this regard:

T'was not through hatred of his children sweet,
T'was not through hatred of his lovely wife,
Thraller of hearts--not that he loved them less--
But Buddhahood more, that he renounced them all.

(Goddard 6)

Kerouac's mother existed in a place outside Buddhism, though he realized that she was the main reason he was able to practice Buddhism at all. Kerouac summed up his relationship with his mother and his religion in a small poem recorded in some of the dharma:

My India
Is right in this house---
Here I do my begging
And my teaching---

I dont have to go anywhere
 ---Fortune I give to my mother
 And go on begging from her,
 Till I move my India
 To India

(78)

Even Kerouac's moments of insight were interrupted by Memère, yet he never complained: it was so accepted that mother came first that it never occurred to the son that his religious aspirations were being cut off at the knees. After making the decision to begin regular meditation sessions in December 1954, his first sitting had to be postponed: "before supper I had no time, that is, my mother was due in" (dharma 186). Kerouac made allowances for such interruptions, allowing for "unavoidable circumstances connected with my lay position" (186). His mother's disapproval eventually forced Kerouac to meditate in the woods.

Even before his mother became a major obstacle to his Buddhism, Kerouac was running into difficulties. By the end of July, after only a few months of effort, Kerouac found the scholastic joy of his Buddhism wearing thin. Perhaps the personal responsibility it entailed was too much of a strain, but by this point Kerouac was in despair:

Ecclesiastes says "much knowledge is a curse" and so does Chiangtse + Dhammapada. The more I learn in Buddhist "scholarship" the more I am becoming confused now, weary, and far from actual samadhi bliss.

(dharma 83-84)

Due to this weariness, Kerouac formally ended some of the dharma,

and began book of samadhi as a postscript to it (it would become a 300 page postscript). Perhaps by simply changing the name of his manuscript he hoped to start afresh: instead, he might have profited more from the words of the Buddha in the Lankavatara Scripture, which warned strongly against the attachment to language which Kerouac the writer could not shake:

Disciples should be on their guard against the seductions of words and sentences and their illusive meanings, for by them the ignorant and the dull-witted become entangled and helpless as an elephant floundering about in the deep mud.

(Goddard 287)

By the fall of 1954, Kerouac's sober, Buddhist half again asserted itself in the first of many fruitless attempt to give up alcohol. This time, however, he made a contract with himself, perhaps in an effort to take his resolve seriously. He attempted to downplay the seriousness of what he wants to do by telling himself "THE FOLLOWING DECISION is not such a bleak final dismal decision as it seems...not drinking is not sad, it's the gayest thing of all..." (dharma 127). In the following note, Kerouac not only defined what he means by "no intoxicants" but also gave himself an ultimatum: "...if I break any of these elementary rules of Buddhism...I will give up Buddhism forever" (127)⁶.

Having done this Kerouac appeared to settle down; his entries were lucid and insightful, and he expressed great anticipation of the rewards his sacrifices would give him. This time of introspection yielded other fruit: on October 5th he admitted that his Buddhist resolve was only firm when he was alone, "but instantly as I go forth

from my hermitage I become restless, contaminated with seeking, I look at girls, think of wine, food, senses" (dharma 130)

After one of the longest stretches of (presumably) sober writing in some of the dharma, Kerouac's resolve came to naught after only a few weeks:

This afternoon Oct 12 '54 I was tempted to drink again, for the first time in 8 days---but by suffering loneliness, waiting, and eating food, I got over the yen, which would have replunged me in insensitive ignorance of the past 14 years

...

Ah misere---Who knows? Who even exists? Drink up--- but not more than once a week. (Hop!)(Had a can of beer at 10 P M and that's all.)

GOT DRUNK THE NEXT DAY OCT 13

(dharma 138)

On October 16, after treating Robert Lax (editor of the Catholic "Jubilee" magazine) to a comparison of Karuna and Agape, Kerouac turned maudlin, confessing that "I'm no saint, I'm sensual, I cant resist wine" (Letters 447). Though able to make accommodations for the restrictions of the other Precepts, the rule of no intoxicants had a built in auto-destruct for Kerouac: he simply could not stop drinking once he had started. One drink led to another and continued on into oblivion. Kerouac had returned to alcohol, though in some of the dharma he continued to write about the evils of liquor, and the reasons (Buddhist and otherwise) that he should stop drinking. For the first time, he quoted from the words of the Buddha on the subject:

"Shun drink; make no man drink;
Sanction no drinking. Mark

how to drink madness leads,
 Through drink fools sin, and egg
 Lax brethren on to sin.
 So flee this maddening vice,
 this folly, bliss of fools."

(dharma 156)

Unfortunately, bad news from home crushed Kerouac's hopes for sobriety: his cat Pinky had been run over and killed. His cats were dearer to him than any of his two-legged friends, and Pinky's sudden demise hit him hard. Struggling to maintain a Buddhist facade, Kerouac examined his grief, wondering what it was, exactly, about the cat that he loved. After all, Pinky, as constructed in the world of samsara was only "his imaginary body & his imaginary catsoul" (dharma 145). Having decided that Pinky had gone to nirvana, Kerouac tried to move forward in his studies.

Steeling himself for another attempt at the Buddhist life, on November 9 Kerouac renewed his commitment to his Resolve of early October, yet felt compelled to justify his failure thus far: "...was only abandoned because of temporary intellectual abandonment of Buddhism which is no longer possible" (dharma 158). The presumption was, then, that this new attempt would be entirely successful just on general principle. It is interesting to note that it is the intellectual side which promises salvation: Kerouac was obviously not in the mindframe of the Sudden Enlightenment School, here: only through study and meditation could one begin the long road prescribed by the Gradual Enlightenment thinkers, rather than waiting for a spontaneous burst of enlightenment.

After one week, Kerouac again detailed his Four Precepts, going

into great detail about the punishments for breaking them. Drinking was still on his mind, though, and just before Thanksgiving he stated that "No Drinking is absolutely essential as the first step to Buddhism" (dharma 166). However, in the next paragraph he reconsidered this radical stance, without noticing the contradiction he set up:

No drinking (I'd say at this time) at any time, except at home, only at home, and then only because of holidays & feasts or if for any other reason, like frantic sad madness, do it in your room and think.....think away from it eventually-----Wine is good but no-wine is good too.

(dharma 166)

If home was to be the place where precepts would be broken, then Kerouac had only one alternative: a hermitage. He often spoke of quitting civilization and getting back to nature, like Thoreau or the Buddhist monks he read about, but for once he was honest enough with himself to see the impracticality of the plan:

Get to Thy Hermitage!

Dear Lord above I'm frightened tonight---what do I know about deserts? water?---where shall I go to escape this civilization which at any moment may thrust me in jail or war or madhouse? A shack in the woods outside Rocky Mount, be near family?---what of the gnats, heat, tics, mosquitos, disapproval? Be like Rhinoceros, tough-hided.

(dharma 167)

As he habitually did, Kerouac borrowed the Rhinoceros reference from a sutra, without paying much heed to what the sutra said. In his copy of Sacred Books of the East was the "Khaggavisana

[Rhinoceros] Sutra", and in it Kerouac's desire to be near his family in his hermitage found its antithesis:

Having abandoned the different kinds of desire, founded on child, wife, father, mother, wealth, corn, relations, let one walk alone like a rhinoceros.

(34)

As Christmas 1954 approached, Kerouac's resolve wavered further and he admitted to his notebook that what he was looking for was beyond all conceptions of Religion: "I want to penetrate into the mystery myself without relying on Buddha or Jesus Christ" (dharma 178). Kerouac never found himself a master, and as a result his Buddhism was strictly from books. As the master-student relationship is vitally important to entering the stream of the Mahayana Buddhism which Kerouac espoused as his own, Kerouac's "go-it-alone" approach was another stumbling block for him. He ignored the section of Goddard which told him of the consequences of such an undertaking:

The Buddha's Dharma is too deep and inclusive to be translated into writing and even less to be completely understood and fully realized by the study of the Scriptures alone.

("Summary of Buddha's Dharma",
in Goddard 649)

His only brush with organized Buddhism occurred when he and poet Al Sublette, in a state of extreme intoxication, "helped" with the construction of a Buddhist temple in San Francisco, during which time they lectured their fellow labourers on elementary Buddhism:

(across the way in fact they're building a Buddhist temple and out front's a sign saying All Welcome to help build the Universal Buddhist Church)(so that one night my boy Al Sublette and I got drunk and pushed wheelbarrows of sand around and yelled the Four Great Truths about Suffering at the beautiful Chinese girls in overalls)

(to John Clellon
Holmes in Letters 523)

When sober, though, Kerouac was less likely to be so forward. This uncertainty caused him to recant on his earlier boast to Allen Ginsberg, admitting that he really was not qualified to be anyone's teacher, because (quoting Ananda's words from the Surangama Sutra) "I'm only a Junior Arhat not yet free from the intoxicants" (Letters 452). Any humbleness and egolessness conveyed by this confession was negated by the second reason Kerouac gave for relinquishing his teacher's role: "The teaching may & will be appreciated by intelligent but insincere poseurs who will use it for their own terrestrices and evil and heretical ends" (452). Though admitting that he was possibly one of these people, Kerouac nonetheless feared that his teaching might be corrupted or appropriated. He was the only one entitled to do these things, apparently.

In some of the dharma, the Junior Arhat was more thoughtful. Doing a "Buddhist Year in Review", Kerouac found himself lacking on every count, accusing himself of being "full of alcoholic sorrow" and "self-disappointed & endlessly sad because I'm not doing what I knew should be done a whole year ago" (dharma 185). Having gone through a depressing litany of complaints and self-recriminations, a

more humble Kerouac took what seemed to be his version of a Bodhisattva vow, which included the prophetic statement "Being famous, he will be hounded to death; being a nonentity, no one will want to use him" (185). Of course, if past events were any indication of the future, this Bodhisattva would be unable to save himself, let alone all sentient creatures. Listed among the chains from which the Bodhisattva must loose himself was Kerouac's personal Mara, alcohol.

The designation of Bodhisattva was both inspiring and terrifying for Kerouac. In simple terms, a Bodhisattva was a person, who, having reached the threshold of enlightenment, refused to enter Nirvana, electing instead to remain until all other sentient beings had achieved enlightenment as well. This appealed to Kerouac on the grounds that it showed how generous and self-sacrificing he was, but at the same time he knew that he was nowhere near enlightenment: not only was he not ready to row the Yana ferry, but he would not even be allowed aboard.

The Bodhisattva was a major development within the Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle") tradition of Buddhism, which arose out of the school of Nikaya Buddhism, which the Mahayanists contemptuously named Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle"⁷. In this tradition, the emphasis was on the enlightenment of one's own self; a common metaphor for the two traditions compared the one-man raft of the Nikayists versus the huge lifeboat of the Mahayanists. Kerouac viewed Nikaya (which he termed Theravada, actually a school of Nikaya) as the first step towards a later development called Mahayana. Actually, the development of various schools of Buddhism is very complicated, often stemming from reinterpretation

of Buddhist texts or doctrine. Kerouac, perhaps unaware of this, viewed Theravada as a "root", and Mahayana as its "flower", and referred to the earlier school as a sort of kindergarten.

While tending to lean towards the Mahayana school (most of the material in *Goddard* is Mahayana), Kerouac also took solace in the self-bestowed title of Tathagata, one who floated through the world without attachments. Miles wryly noted that considering himself to be such a being provided the perfect self-portrait for Kerouac:

It would be hard to find a more apt description for a man who left two wives, a daughter, numerous lovers and friends, and several careers as though they were just way stations on the road to his final dissolution.

(458)

This fence-sitting led to some uneasy self-debate in some of the dharma, with both Mahayana and Hinayana being alternately defended and offered up as the pinnacle of teaching. During some moments, his native Roman Catholicism was drawn into the debate.

As Kerouac's Catholic roots kept showing, it could be that the Bodhisattva ideal struck a resonance with his boyhood religion, as a way of becoming a martyr to his new faith. He saw himself as poor Kerouac, giving up enlightenment in order to give Buddhism to America, which of course was too ungrateful and depraved to heed his message. In a way it was more Jesus Christ than Buddha Gautama, yet at least initially Kerouac genuinely believed that what he was doing in some of the dharma was just what Cold War America desperately needed to hear.

Though 1954 was not the immediate success that Kerouac

hoped it would have been (at least from the standpoint of his Buddhism), he had made significant gains in his acquisition of Buddhist terminology and theory. It remained to be seen whether the new year would bring him the stability and peace that his beginning Buddhism held out.

Chapter Two: Fighting the Current (1955)

Kerouac entered 1955 in a pensive mood ("New Year's Day--- Got up, washed, went back to bed & thought (dharma 194)). Perhaps wishing to start with a clean slate, his initial entries were much like those from January of the previous year: quotes, translations of terms, and a general lack of Kerouac. Though only in passing, Kerouac again recognized the fundamental split in his nature: wanting to write, yet realizing all writing was futile. The compromise here was that writing will now be used to get past writing:

I still feel like writing
Book of Mind in which I would
recall & disintegrate all events in
the life of Jack Dulouz---

...

---But I want a method of
teaching by writing---

(dharma 194)

Drunk once again, Kerouac then returned to writing about his favorite themes of sex, futility, and the utter importance of what he was writing about.

I look forward to the day when all the literature of the world will be Buddhist. . . there is no other basis for a truthful literature, a literature free from ignorance. . .

(dharma 199)

As if in response to this pronouncement, Kerouac received on the night of January 5 what he called "The Glorious Maitreya Samadhi", in keeping with his growing belief that he was either the future Buddha Maitreya, or that he had some special knowledge about the coming of Maitreya. According to his journal entry, for the period of one hour all Kerouac's thinking stopped ("There was no JK tonight" (dharma 200)). The problem was that whenever Kerouac made any progress with his Buddhist studies, he tended to fixate on his accomplishment rather than simply accept it as a signpost that he was on the right track, and continue. "Summary of the Buddha's Dharma" warned against precisely this: "all these transitory psychic experiences should be ignored and forgotten, they are only mile-stones on the path" (Goddard 653). This glimpse of enlightenment was taken by Kerouac to be the genuine thing ("THE TRUE CURE AND THE TRUE MORPHINE AT THE SAME TIME" (dharma 201)), and that all that was wrong in his life was now fixed: Kerouac the writer had become Kerouac the Buddha.

Buddhahood has cured me of life.
 Desire for life, cured. Thinking, cured.
 Anxious literary ambition, cured.
 Madness for riches, cured. Greed, cured.
 Chasing after women, cured. Egoism, cured.
 Alcoholism, cured. Drug habits, cured.

...

(dharma 201)

This was a tall order for one hour of supposed enlightenment. The fact that Kerouac continued to write for another 200 pages is proof that he had not achieved genuine enlightenment; all he had really done is set himself up for another failure. The events of the previous

year illustrated the Kerouackian pattern of claiming to have licked a habit, yet being powerless to resist the first temptation.

Before the first temptation of 1955, and still glowing with imagined Buddhahood, Kerouac felt qualified to do something he had not dared as yet: rewrite a Sutra. Though perhaps not brave enough to attempt the Diamond Sutra, Kerouac selected the Surangama Sutra. This piece had always been a favorite with him, for in it he found the scriptural legitimacy for his spontaneous prose, calling it the "greatest known writing in the world" (dharma 272)

Probably formed with Goddard's translation/arrangement as a model, Kerouac's version was short, simplified, and totally without the formal arrangement of a sutra, in aid of the goal of simplifying it for "the understanding of Western Minds" (dharma 201). It is interesting to note that Kerouac felt that his style of writing would be easily understood by Western minds: his methods of spontaneous prose were innovative for their time, and are only gaining scholarly attention in the 1990's.

Perhaps the impetus for this sutra came out of a long, thoughtful letter Jack had written to Beverly Buford on January 2 (he added the text of this letter to some of the dharma after his January 5 entry). Several pages long, it is an explanation of Buddhism a la Kerouac, and is an example of the beautiful prose style that Kerouac could use when he put his mind to it. Reading this letter without knowledge of the issues Kerouac dealt with in some of the dharma, it would be easy to form an opinion of him as a learned Buddhist scholar, and a happy one at that:

In answer to your request "Write me something to think

about" let me attempt to explain the Teaching of the Buddhas of Old to you, so that you can join me in the gradual happiness and liberation that comes with wholehearted sincere understanding of the mysterious law....

(dharma 205)

Encouraged by his largely imaginary success, Kerouac added the five additional Precepts to his regime, though he still was having no luck with the first five (or even in acknowledging that there were FIVE). The second group of five consist of precepts taken by ordained monks or nuns, though there was nothing to prevent an especially pious layperson from taking them as well. Robinson lists them as consisting of abstaining from: eating after noon (i.e. one meal a day); watching dancing, singing, and shows; adorning himself with garlands, perfumes, and ointments; using a high bed or seat; and receiving gold and silver (70). Kerouac altered these slightly:

1. Little as possible to do with money and valuables
2. Strictly pure & celibate
3. No soft beds
4. No ointments and condiments
5. No entertainments & gambling

(dharma 214)

Notice that the precept regarding eating was replaced with a rehashing of one of the first five precepts; sex (or the results thereof) was on Kerouac's mind at this time, and the reasons for this substitution would shortly become clear.

Unfortunately, any sincerity in regard to making a real effort at his Buddhism was soon washed away by an event which receives no direct mention in some of the dharma, though it had a profound

effect on the parties directly involved, and on Kerouac's Buddhism: the paternity case of Joan Haverty Kerouac. The scene was worthy of a Kerouac novel. Hauled before a judge to answer for the maintenance of his wife and two-year-old daughter, Kerouac refused to acknowledge his responsibilities, and used Buddhism as his justification.

JAN 19 1955---set free by the law to follow my
bhikku track...But all day a firm conviction
that all this phenomena of my life is a delusion and
I really dont have to honor it and eventually wont.

(dharma 231)

And of course, he never did. In the case, Kerouac was defended by Allen Ginsberg's brother Eugene, and it seemed that the writer was willing to go to jail rather than acknowledge his daughter (who had been born in February of 1952). He showed up at court with his Buddhist notes and copy of Goddard, and a report from his doctor stating that Kerouac's phlebitis was so severe that he could not work and in fact should be in bed (Charters 457). Because of the medical evidence, the judge set the case aside, and an elated Kerouac was free to rush home with the news. His first act (his mother was not at home to share in his victory) was not to rest his poor crippled legs: it was to write to Allen Ginsberg with the "joyous news", telling him of his plans for traveling "as soon as I go down to south and clear the country lot my folks bought for house" (dharma 459).

Kerouac's role as absentee father has, unfortunately, been condoned by many critics. Tytell's observation about Kerouac's first marriage was illustrative of this attitude: "The marriage only lasted

six months with unfortunate repercussions as later Joan plagued Kerouac with her paternity suit" (67).

Recently, however, Jan had found some posthumous champions, such as Ginsberg biographer Barry Miles:

How could he play with Carolyn's children without a thought for his own? His fans claimed he had a great heart, that he was generous and sensitive, but he cared more for his cat than for his own daughter and there is all the difference in the world between sentimentality and sensitivity. He allowed Jan to become a junkie at thirteen, selling her body on the streets of the Lower East Side to buy drugs while he, wealthy from the worldwide sale of his books, drank himself insensate in the bars of Lowell and Florida...As a human being he was insensitive, selfish and cowardly, and must be held accountable for his daughter's misery.

(168)

Kerouac's reasons for ignoring his daughter were numerous, and most are best left to psychologists, but his reasoning in some of the dharma was clear: other people's children were fine, but his own child was something chaining him to the "wheel of quivering meat conception" (Mexico City Blues 211), a way women had of deluding men into believing in their own selves, and the hope of immortality which children bring. In late February 1955 Kerouac described the situation thus:

ALL WOMEN WANT TO GIVE REBIRTH, because of a secret fear of being barren; yet the world has no more reality than a barren woman's child.

(dharma 272)

The shift in emphasis to sex/pregnancy/birth being all the

fault of the woman owed perhaps as much to St. Paul as to Buddhism, but it also reflected the voluminous hatred which Kerouac bore towards Jan's mother, Joan (though they would not get divorced until 1959). As Kerouac warned at the beginning of April, "warm golden thighs produce cold black mornings" (dharma 292). Like alcohol, women were another temptation out to snare him, another tool of Mara to keep the bhikku Kerouac from enlightenment:

Men are "taken in" by women, since beginingless time,---
 this is how birth and ignorance continue---Men dont
 realize that women are their own Rib of Lust, Self-Lust,
 and are actually nothing but (like men) skin & bones with
 shit inside---Watch women closely & see if I'm not right-
 --The True Man eschews women, has no children, and
 seeks No-Return to the dreary wheel of life and death...

(dharma 170)

Of course, Kerouac had a wife, and though he would not admit it, he had a child as well, yet he seemed to want to blot them out of existence as mistakes from his past that would prevent his enlightenment. Though he had used quotations from Ecclesiastes to justify his drinking, he did not give his family the same consideration. Even his use of Buddhist texts in this situation is very suspect. During his bout of good Buddhist intentions at the beginning of January, Kerouac added a few lines to some of the dharma, which, at the time, had no specific significance:

**FOR THE HOMELESS BROTHERS:-'IF MARRIED HE MUST
 MAKE SOME SATISFACTORY ARRANGEMENT WITH HIS
 WIFE SO THAT HE IS NO LONGER RESPONSIBLE FOR HER
 SUPPORT OR THE SUPPORT OF ANY CHILDREN THERE MAY
 BE."**

(dharma 214)

Despite having the appearance of a direct quotation, this is probably a paraphrase from a selection called "Homeless Brothers" in Goddard, which outlines the requirements for leading the life of either a pious householder or a homeless brother. This section of Goddard opens with a commandment from the Buddha: "A man who wishes to become my disciple must be willing to give up all direct relations with his family" (625), an idea Kerouac would be in favor of, in the case of Jan and Joan (but not his mother, of course). Yet the second half of this pronouncement was ignored by Kerouac, who did not want to give up "the social life of the world and all dependence upon wealth" (625). If Kerouac did give up dependence upon wealth, it was in a mean-spirited attempt to avoid paying Joan any support. As he reported to Allen Ginsberg, nothing would come of January's court case "unless Joan gets mad or I get rich and famous" (Letters 458). When "Jazz of the Beat Generation" was published in New World Writing in April, the author's name was simply Jean-Louis: Kerouac did not want Joan getting any of the \$150 he was paid.

Kerouac at this time seemed to see himself as a Buddha-figure: a prince leaving his palace and family to seek the true reality. In actuality he was a penniless alcoholic never able to leave the domain of his co-dependent mother. Yet his selective and blatantly cursory treatment of "Homeless Brothers" shows him to be so far from the path to enlightenment that he might never get back on track. The rules for the homeless brother are clear: he must be utterly committed to the Dharma, as well as avoiding women, publicity, and

the temptations of the senses. The candidate is warned that all the good intentions in the world are useless without genuine commitment: "Even if his intention is honest, if he can not control his worldly desires, he is not a homeless brother, no more than an infant is" (626).

It is perhaps no surprise that Kerouac completely ignored the section of the text dealing with the responsibilities of the lay householder, which started off with keeping the Precepts (including the fifth). Lay brothers also had to guard their health, for "If they do not keep well and live long, they can not practice the Dharma personally nor explain it to others" (630). They were also exhorted to live happily with their wives and children, something that was impossible to Kerouac to do.

Kerouac undoubtedly had knowledge of the court date some weeks in advance (in a letter to Ginsberg in December he acknowledged that he had been arrested again after being informed on, and that "The culprit was some fool of ignorance" (Letters 452)), and as he was basing his case on his phlebitis, it is suspicious that he chose December 1954 to begin an intensive program of seated meditation which undoubtedly aggravated his legs. His Buddhism was becoming less of a religion and more of a source of excuses for his own woes.

Whatever his intentions were, Kerouac threw himself into his meditation sessions, after making adjustments for his mother's schedule. The first few sessions were remarkable only in the discomfort he felt in his legs, both from his phlebitis and his knees, which he had ruined playing football in college. Fittingly enough for

a Catholic, his first taste of enlightenment came during his night dhyana of December 25 (actually the early hours of the 26th). He described the sensation as "A glorious feeling that Mind Essence was realized and that my body was discarded as so much froth on the sea of suffering and rebirth" (dharma 189). The Lankavatara Scripture, had he consulted it, would have described his experience as "the dhyana practised by the ignorant; practised also by those, who, despising the body, see it as a shadow and a skeleton full of impurity and yet who cling to the notion of an ego, seek to attain emancipation by the mere cessation of thought" (Goddard 263).

What Kerouac lacked was mind control, or the seventh part of the Eightfold Path, which was necessary for step eight, Dhyana. Once again, Kerouac was picking and choosing, instead of committing himself to a process, and therefore it was inevitable that he would fail:

...a man who tries to practise dhyana without first attaining control of his mind is like a man trying to bake bread out of sand; bake it as long as he will, it will only be sand made a little hot...if the source is indecent, the outcome will be indecent.

(Goddard 263)

Interestingly, what this enlightenment gave Kerouac was not so much encouragement that he was on the right path, but more a balm for his wounds of non-publication. Having speculated on writing a Buddhist version of On the Road, Kerouac voiced his fear of such a venture during his night Dhyana of December 23, stating "I should perhaps not write a Buddhist novel for fear it will re-attach me to

self attainment" (dharma 188). Three days later, he announced "it makes no difference whether I write or not" (189) and that he saw "no distinction between imprisonment and suddenly 'selling my book'" (189.). Despite thinking that he was on the road to enlightenment, Kerouac was still not following the basics. In his new state of enlightenment, he wrote, he was keeping the Precepts (dharma 189), yet on the previous page he noted that he was drinking wine (188).

On January 11, 1955, after taking stock of his writings to date (none of which had been published, except for The Town and the City in 1952), Kerouac began to espouse one of the major themes of some of the dharma: having discovered Buddhism, all his previous work was irrelevant, being "pre-enlightenment". So sure of himself was Kerouac that he mused about having his agent return all his manuscripts for the reason that he was "on a new career of Buddhist writing...and tell him [the agent] that 30 years from now I may countenance publishing them as Pre-Enlightenment Writings, if anyone wants them. Free!" (dharma 221). The only works which mattered were his translations of Buddhist writings; original work was an attachment to self and to ego.

"La Loi Tranquil" that Kerouac now promoted was one that had to be undertaken sober, to provide "dry happiness instead of wet unhappiness" (dharma 224), yet Kerouac would still prove unable to give up this habit permanently. During his night dhyana of January 28, Kerouac "saw clearly that [he] wont get drunk again" (dharma 239) and coupled this, two days later, with a vow to quit cold turkey (239).

By the spring of 1955, Kerouac's losing battle with the bottle was reaching a critical state: it would take more than one religion or deity to intercede on pauvre Ti Jean's behalf. In desperation, Kerouac put out a general SOS to "my saints, Gerard, Avalokitesvara, Buddha Sakyamuni, Papa, Jesus, and St. Francis" (dharma 302).

This marked not only a recognition of the reconciliation with his Roman Catholicism but also a resurgence of the Cult of Gerard, which would gain importance as 1955 progressed, and reach its full flower in 1956, when Kerouac would write Visions of Gerard. Through the rest of 1955, references to Gerard become more frequent in some of the dharma, but never in an obviously Buddhist context. Unlike his mother, whom he called a Buddha, Kerouac limited his epithets of Gerard to that of Saint, presumably with the full Roman Catholic meaning.

Despite his supposed decision to seriously pursue his Buddhism, the pull to be a writer was still strong. What Kerouac came up with was a figure called a "Writing Buddha", who was in possession of the 32 powers of writing excellence (dharma 311). Such a Buddha would be able to perform non-attached writings, have his writings heard, and donate all the royalties from his writings to "Buddhist Monasteries of the New World" (311). This is in direct opposition to the views of the man who on the previous page stated "I'm in enlightenment now...and literature is a past thing" (310).

For the first two weeks of April 1955, Kerouac once again seemed to find a quiet spot within himself, trying to limit his drinking in an effort to attempt a no-intoxicants life, but the temptations were overwhelming him. He formulated "THE WINE

PRAYER" aimed at Avalokitesvara, in which he asked for protection not only from the bottle, but from all "the intoxicants of Samsara" (dharma 302). These prayers were not as efficacious as he would like, as towards the end of April he once again took solace in the fact that everything, including alcohol, was empty. Complaining to Carolyn Cassady, Kerouac grouched that "my Buddhism has deprived me of what was left of patience and fortitude in the Sangsara world of troubles" (Letters 476). With both his crutches equally incompetent at helping him cope, Kerouac stated two weeks later: "I am going to give up drinking & Buddhism Enuf talkin about it" (dharma 318).

At the beginning of May, Kerouac's entries began to voice what had only been previously hinted at: suicide. Though he was constantly pondering the eternal question "what's the point", this new mindset produced a vision which was a cry for help disguised as a teaching about egolessness and illusion:

---blew my brains out in the woods, using P's gun, they found me there after 2 days of wonder and called the Law---then they wondered what it was that made me go Eedy bobby bow-bay with the old dog Bob, what individual I was there in the matter of this affectionate muling and puling and wailing with the poor mutt, all gone now in the sheriff's basket."

(dharma 315)

Perhaps in order to drive such thoughts from his head, both Buddhism and drinking were given a reprieve, as on May 24 Kerouac's dharma entry told of his latest meditation experience (meeting Tathagata Mahameru in the Buddha-land), and the

composition of a poem entitled "AFTER READING YEATS (DRINKING)" (dharma 319). The seriousness of his rededication to alcohol was not shown in some of the dharma: at this time he was living in Rocky Mount at the home of his sister and brother-in-law, and far from being a time of moonlight and meditation, it was moonshine instead, as Kerouac became an expert cocktail mixer:

Myself of course in desperation I'm drinking moonshine cocktails or punch made with orange juice, ice, ginger ale, & white lightnin. Very good, every time exhilarating yet never heavy like wine or hangover making. What's to do? It's always seemed to me that ennui was my worst enemy.

-letter to William Burroughs
(Letters 480)

Instead of finding the peace and quiet he longed for, Kerouac instead found boredom: what could have been the perfect opportunity to embark on a serious program of meditation instead became a period of stagnation and wasted time.

Kerouac's arrival at the Cassadys' in mid-1955 was a rather shamefaced homecoming of sorts, as he was no longer the preachy, upright and uptight Buddhist of the previous year. During his stay he recorded in his notebook a large number of "pops", or American Haikus which he and the Cassady children (plus any available grownups) composed. They are of a quality to be expected of three small children, yet Kerouac carefully included them in some of the dharma, perhaps viewing them as examples of intuitive, innocent, totally spontaneous writing. There must have been some Buddhist connection, as Kerouac had defined pops as being "American (non-Japanese) Haikus...delineating 'little Samadhis' if possible, usually of a

Buddhist connotation, aimed towards enlightenment" (dharma 342).

The urge to travel was upon Kerouac again, and though he made claims of wanting to retire to a hut to be a hermit, he instead decided to travel to Mexico. Supposedly making the trip for the promise of cheap penicillin for his phlebitis, Kerouac stayed for three weeks in August. Living in the same building as Burroughs' old drug connection Bill Garver, Kerouac not only kept himself supplied with huge quantities of marijuana and smaller amounts of morphine, he fell in love with the widow of Burroughs' former connection, a prostitute named Esperanza Villanueva. The fruit of this love was the writing of what would be the first half of his novel Tristessa, though it is hardly mentioned in some of the dharma. (Notable for its fusing of Catholic and Buddhist ideas and imagery, this novel would be completed the following year.)

At this time Kerouac also wrote a series of 244 short poems which would be published as Mexico City Blues. Resulting not from meditation and study, but rather from drugs, these poems were composed during marathon sessions in Garver's apartment, where the two men would take drugs, and then Kerouac would listen to Garver's ramblings, jotting them down. Other poems he composed himself, though he was always under the influence of something.

Mexico City Blues has been lauded by the critics as a fundamentally religious work. Nicosia saw its writing as marking Kerouac's "emergence from Buddhist influence" (490), describing it as a "Buddhist book that finally talks itself back to a Christian love of life" (480). Kerouac certainly did not think so, at least not at the time. Some of the dharma was all but ignored during the Mexico

trip, and the three pages he did write do nothing to support Nicosia's claim that Mexico City Blues is a Catholic book, nor does it show what Ginsberg called "Kerouac's intelligent understanding of Buddhism" (490). In a letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac gave a more worldly report of his feat: "Myself I have just knocked off 150 bloody poetic master pieces in MEXICO CITY BLUES, each one of uniform length and wailing" (Letters 507).

Shortly after returning from Mexico, Kerouac finally encountered some "real" American Buddhists: Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, both of whom studied Zen⁸. This meeting, supposedly so important to Kerouac's Buddhism, goes unmentioned in some of the dharma. It was at this time that Catholic references began to multiply in his Buddhist notebook: could this have been a defensive reaction to meeting literary people who seemed to be successful Buddhists? Kerouac attempted to pass himself off as a great Buddhist scholar, but was silenced when he realized that he was in fact the least learned person in the room.

Though for the remainder of 1955 his journal entries steered largely clear of the subject of alcohol, his letters revealed a far more inebriated Kerouac. He had previously maintained a professional and sober correspondence with his agents, even when he suspected that they must have been going out of their ways to keep him from being published. However on November 10 he explained his state of mind in a letter to Sterling Lord: "This letter written drunk but expressive of how good I feel these days" (Letters 530). With the signing of two more waivers, On the Road was inching towards possible publication, and Kerouac the Writer began to overtake Kerouac the Buddhist⁹.

One traumatic event which most of Kerouac's critics have declined to mention was the October suicide of Natalie Jackson, one of Neal Cassady's girlfriends. She had been unstable for some time, eaten up by remorse for helping Cassady forge his wife's name on ten thousand dollars worth of securities, which were promptly lost at the racetrack. Cassady had hoped that she would pull herself together in a few days, so he instituted a 24-hour watch over her. Kerouac looked after her one day while Neal was at work, and after failing to convince her to eat, he then attempted to talk her out of her madness by revealing his dharma to her. His only mention of the event was a brief comment in his Thanksgiving Day entry:

(about this time Natalie Jackson committed suicide---I tried to tell her everything was empty, including her paranoiac idea that the cops were after her & all of us--- she said O YOU DONT KNOW! then the next day she was found dazed on the roof and when a cop tried to catch her she jumped off, Neal's tenement roof)

(dharma 346)

One might ponder the wisdom of trying to convince a mentally disturbed woman that all reality was an illusion, but Kerouac evidently thought that if she would have listened, things would have been different. The lack of compassion in both the event and the comment are startling, considering that Kerouac claimed to be on the Bodhisattva path¹⁰. Perhaps he was simply uncomfortable with his inability to handle the situation, but like most Beat writers, Kerouac's attitude towards women was not expressive of ideals of equality.

As the previous holiday season had done, the approaching Christmas of 1955 caused Kerouac to reassess his Buddhist progress,

and once again he found himself sorely lacking. His "no intoxicants" vow seemed as far away as it did a year ago. He now modified this stance to only forbid "systematic drinking" because "is isnt the True Me (TiJeanNirvana) that gets drunk" (dharma 360). As usual, drinking on special occasions was permissible, which was convenient in light of the approaching New Year's Eve. In response to his lack of forward progress, Kerouac embarked for a second time on what he hoped would be the route to enlightenment: dhyana, or meditation.

Goddard's anthology contains a text entitled "Dhyana for Beginners", and it may be assumed that Kerouac used this text as a basis for his meditation. Like much of the rest of his Buddhism, Kerouac was enthusiastic about the idea of meditating, without troubling himself with the details behind the idea.

"Dhyana for Beginners" clearly states a position on writing (even what Kerouac would call "Enlightenment writing") which is in every way antithetical to Kerouac's need to write:

It means to give up all general study even of a seemingly good kind, such as reading, writing lectures or books, attending lectures, etc. For what reason should these things be given up? It is because if we are interested in these things our minds are not quiet and free for the practice of Dhyana and the attainment of enlightenment.
(445)

Here Kerouac was faced with the ultimate choice: be a writer, or become enlightened. Taking this one quote at face value, the two goals were mutually exclusive, and Kerouac must have been torn, as he saw his writing as a way of not only achieving enlightenment for himself, but also as being a beacon to guide others on the path.

Despite the promise of 1954, Kerouac's second year as a Buddhist reaped him little in the way of rewards. As his publishing anxieties, combined with pressure from his family and friends, began to mount, Kerouac relied heavily on his Buddhism throughout 1955. Once again, though, he concentrated on his failures instead of his successes, no matter how limited or small they were. As another new year dawned, Kerouac's Buddhism was on very shaky ground, and it was unclear whether he would be able to stay on the path, or succumb to the cravings and sufferings of his world.

Chapter Three: That Sinking Feeling (1956)

Coming off a very Catholic Christmas (a portion of which he spent listening to Mass from St. Paul's on the radio), his new commitment to Buddhism via meditation omitted any thought of giving up drinking. In fact, this new 1956 model Buddhism accommodated not only his drinking but his drunkenness as well: "It doesn't matter whether I die/drinking or imitate Buddha, it'll/be the same ethereality" (dharma 376). During his January 1 dhyana he attained an enlightenment: "I am now a Buddha -- but in the sense of the Ten Perfections, I am not a Buddha -- in my mind I am now a Buddha, my mind is perfect and has always been the one suchness" (dharma 372). However, the very next day he abdicated any responsibility for his (non)Buddhahood, stating "I'M NOT PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR FAILURE TO ATTAIN HIGHEST WISDOM" (dharma 373).

As if to test this hypothesis, Kerouac spent the first two weeks of 1956 composing Visions of Gerard, a florid paean to the sainted life of his brother Gerard, who died of a rheumatic heart when Kerouac was four. He completed the manuscript in twelve days, thanks to a combination of Benzedrine and alcohol.

Despite his intoxicants, Kerouac attempted to keep up his meditation schedule, and dutifully noted the results in his notebook. However, in a letter to Lucien Carr Kerouac revealed that his Dhyana was not as fruitful as he would like - in fact, it was getting boring:

...everyday I go in the woods to my favorite grove of

trees where I have a grass mat a foot high and sit and write in the sun and practice Dhyana Meditation...but too much of the same thing gets dull.

(Letters 566)

It was so dull, in fact, that Kerouac resorted to artificial stimulation, as he had typed that letter under the influence: "I'm drunk tryna type this. Virginia Port" (Letters 566).

After all the pain and suffering (which Buddhism was supposed to alleviate) Kerouac admitted to the futility of his efforts in his entry from March 6:

I'm not a Buddha this trip . . . face it . . . because I have too many decisive ideas about life, how to live, health, food and drink, a veritable crone of ideas . . . because of sensuality, drink, involvement in the ideas and antagonisms of men . . .

(dharma 417)

Unfortunately, Kerouac took no solace in the notion prevalent in some schools of Buddhism that it would take many lifetimes to achieve Awakening. Instead of looking at this life as a learning experience which would prepare him for a more favorable rebirth (perhaps in a Buddhist country or family), Kerouac focused on the failures of this lifetime, showing that he still clung to notions of self that his Buddhism could have helped him disengage.

Writing to Gary Snyder on March 8, Kerouac described his current project of translating the Diamond Sutra ("from English-of-the-Translators, to and English to be understood by ordinary people" (Charters 567)). This translation was to be so wonderful as to replace "that vast arbitrary Goddard Bible" in Kerouac's affections

(567). Kerouac's final pronouncement was that soon Buddhism would penetrate to the highest offices in the land, and "The president of the United States will meditate in the Meditation Room" (569).

Quoting Sinatra and defining Nirvana one more time, Kerouac closed his Buddhist Notebook on March 15 with the musing "All this BOOK OF DHARMAS since December 1953, hasnt it been mighty preparations for the Epic Novel THE TATHAGATA?" (420).

Handwritten immediately after this is the comment ".....NO" (underlined twice) and the instruction "(next page):-". Filling the remainder of the page is a large doodle of what could be an angel or a lotus or something else. Some of the dharma had finally reached its conclusion.

Conclusion: Kerouac's Contribution

Bringing some of the dharma to a close did not mean the end of Kerouac's Buddhism. In fact, his most overtly Buddhist works were still in front of him: The Dharma Bums, "The Scripture of the Golden Eternity", and Tristessa. Mixing in varying proportions with his Catholicism, Kerouac's Buddhism stayed with him til the end.

As his works began to be published (starting in 1957 with On the Road, closely followed by The Dharma Bums), Kerouac seemed to distance himself from his Buddhism. Perhaps the final attainment of published authorhood was more alluring than the vague promise of enlightened beinghood. The real reason may have been more pedestrian: uncomfortable in the public eye, Kerouac suddenly found himself having to cope with being a media celebrity, and turned to alcohol for the courage to face the press. As he had always viewed alcohol as being at odds with his new religion, he may have chosen the bottle over the Buddha.

Despite this, to deny the effect that Kerouac had on Buddhism would be a disservice to both literary and religious studies of Kerouac's work, and to the field of North American Buddhism. The Buddhist and Bohemian ideals espoused in On the Road and The Dharma Bums formed a template for the emerging Hippie movement of the 60's which was a time of intense interest in Eastern ideas. Kerouac himself hated hippies (even finding the radical views of McCarthyism to have value), and was aghast at being credited with being the father of the movement.

Perhaps the major contribution Kerouac made to American Buddhism was the "initiation" of fellow Beat Allen Ginsberg to the dharma. Though Ginsberg was not completely ignorant of Eastern Culture (having spent several weeks of unemployment in 1953 soaking up Japanese and Chinese art at the library), Kerouac's infectious enthusiasm for his Buddhism nudged Ginsberg towards more serious study. He eventually found a teacher, took formal vows, and spent his life as a Buddhist practitioner. He acknowledged his debt to Kerouac in interviews, and in a more public manner: the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics was founded at Colorado's Naropa Institute, America's first accredited Buddhist University.

It would be easy to dismiss Kerouac's Buddhism, as the entries in some of the dharma may leave the Buddhistically-inclined reader frustrated and disappointed. The ultimate disappointment lies with the untapped Buddhist potential that existed within Kerouac, a wealth of wisdom and insight which he, for many serious reasons, was unable to access. If Kerouac's appreciation of Mahayana texts and the path of the Bodhisattva had led him to a teacher able to cope with his problems, he may have been able to accept what he saw as his shortcomings, and work towards a harmonious relationship with the dharma. Buddhism is hard work, and most schools focus on the responsibility of the individual, a responsibility that Kerouac, out of fear, was unable to assume. As a result, his Buddhism seemed to give him little lasting comfort, as their studies gave Ginsberg, Snyder, and Whalen.

Perhaps Gary Snyder summed up Kerouac's Buddhism best:

Calling yourself a Buddhist is not like calling yourself a Catholic or a Christian. It's not a label that defines you right away as a member of a sect with a set of theology. Buddhism is a way of mind, a way of seeing the world that can embrace all those things and still go beyond it. And in that sense Jack was. We'll say that he was on the way as all Buddhists are. There are no Buddhists: there are just people on the way.

(A Jack Kerouac ROMnibus)

Though it would be another year before fame found him, and another thirteen before his death, the patterns of self-abuse found in some of the dharma would continue; as his Buddhism waned, his drinking waxed, and the final years of his life would be spent in a state of permanent intoxication, barricaded in his mother's Catholic stronghold¹¹.

And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them;
I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found
pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my
toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and
the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity
and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be
gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11

If one, through reciting much of texts
Is not a doer thereof, a heedless man;
He like a cowherd counting others' cows,
Is not a partaker in a religious quest.

If one, though reciting little of texts,
Lives a life in accord with dhamma,
Having discarded passion, ill will, and unawareness,
Knowing full well, the mind well freed,

He, not grasping here, neither hereafter,
Is a partaker of the religious quest.

The Dhammapada 1: 19-20

End Notes

¹ Kerouac habitually made the Christmas season a time for reflection on his progress through life. In keeping with this, the chapters of this thesis are divided up by year (as some of the dharma ends in March of 1956, the chapter outlining this year is much shorter than the others.

² Neal and Carolyn had discovered the writings of the "Sleeping Psychic" Edgar Cayce, whose abilities had begun with diagnosing illnesses from a trance state, but then branched out into predictions about future events, as well as of past civilizations, such as Atlantis. Though falling out of vogue for a while, Cayce's writings are currently enjoying a newfound popularity in light of the approaching Millenium.

³ The Foreward of the new 1994 edition of Goddard's work features Kerouac in a prominent role. The combination of A Buddhist Bible and Kerouac is given credit for "Americanizing Buddhism".

⁴ Despite North American claims to the contrary, intoxicants (especially alcohol) have played large parts in many forms of Buddhism. If Kerouac had studied the examples of Tibetan holy men Padmasambhava and Milarepa, he would have found the sort of "crazy wisdom" that may have enabled him to make peace with his alcoholism. As evidenced by the cover story of the Fall 1998 edition of "Tricycle: A Buddhist Review" ("Twelve Steps and Dharma Drunks"), the tension between Buddhism and alcohol still continues in North America.

⁵ "Junk" refers here to drugs, not garbage.

⁶ Of course, he failed, and did not give up Buddhism. Throughout this work, Kerouac would make grand promises and then not follow through, setting up a pattern of failures which he was never able to let go of, thus hindering his Buddhist progress.

⁷ Hinayana, meaning "Lesser" or "Inferior" vehicle, was used by

Kerouac, though modern scholars would substitute either Theravada or Nikaya as a title for this form of Buddhism.

⁸ Meeting Snyder and Whalen, Kerouac was astonished to find out he was not the only Buddhist. Despite this, Kerouac never took anyone on as a teacher, or as a study partner, except for his early days of correspondence with Allen Ginsberg.

⁹ Because On the Road was thinly-disguised fact, publishers feared lawsuits from the people depicted in it. Kerouac had to obtain waivers from the principle characters in order for the book to even be considered for publication.

¹⁰ Natalie did, however, receive a mention in The Dharma Bums as Kerouac reported a version of the events which, though lengthy (five and a half pages) shows no remorse for his part nor any mention of Neal's, which consisted of convincing Natalie to pretend to be Carolyn Cassady in order to cash in thousands of dollars in bonds, which Neal lost at the racetrack (see pages 109-113). The character of Rosie is presented as simply an unstable woman who Kerouac and Cassady attempted to help.

¹¹ Though Buddhism receded as a driving force in Kerouac's life, it still stayed with him. In a 1967 interview for The Paris Review, Kerouac spoke eloquently about Buddhist themes, and quoted from texts, showing that he still retained much of what he learned during the Fifties.

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