Jack Kerouac and Beat Spirituality: The Vehicle(s) to Enlightenment

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This article analyses Jack Kerouac's religious and literary "apostasy" from the forms of organized religion and the established norms of prose writing, in an attempt to prove that his turn to Mahayana Buddhism and "spontaneous prose" were the immediate expression of both his struggle to transcend the mundane and (re)create reality through art. He was ready to embrace everything but unwilling to give up anything, and thus he embarked on the Buddhist vehicle(s) to enlightenment, which allowed him to pursue his art and aspire to spiritual awakening. Kerouac's life and work played a crucial role in the program of personal, social and literary transformation of America developed and implemented by the Beat Generation.

Keywords: Kerouac, Buddhism, Christianity, religion, spontaneous prose, Beat Generation.

In the Introduction to "the only book about Kerouac worth reading", according to *The San Francisco Chronicle* (qtd. in Clark, the front cover), Carolyn Cassady argues that Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac was attracted by Buddhism's apparent ability to provide him with answers that Roman Catholicism had not been able to verbalize clearly enough: "Chaos was the rule until Buddhism came along and supplied the answers he sought – or so he believed. The tenets of Buddhism became a balm to his emotional and spiritual aspirations and fit his own psyche, but they related very little to the demands of daily life nor did they provide practical help. He ignored the rule against alcohol, for it too, provided escape from reality" (xvi). Ironically, it was love, not alcohol which provided him with the reason for giving up Buddhism later on, a reason he revealed to Alfred Aronowitz for *Escapade* in 1960: "Also, wisdom is heartless. I quit Buddhism because Buddhism — or Mahayana Buddhism preaches against entanglement with women. To me, the most important thing in life is love" (Need 88).

In other words, his constant search for peace of mind, for freedom, for refuge from the material world led (temporarily) to Buddhism, which, beyond anything else, showed him the benefits of compassion and a possible future away from the constraints of the material world. Up to a point, Buddhism seemed to provide all the solutions he needed in his battle against the horrors of the mundane, but these were not practical enough so as to help him conquer every-day life. Moreover, Jack was by no means a practical man himself, in the usual meaning of the term. As Carolyn Cassady observes,

Neither Neal nor Jack were entirely at ease in the material world, even though they reveled in its sensory delights. They were, so to speak, *in* the world but not *of* it. Neither man was practical. Money was a nuisance. Neal was passionate about cars, but only because they were a means to move through space and defy the earthly law of gravity… I do think Jack perceived intuitively this Universal Force and tried to consciously tap it through meditation. This awareness

also must have been behind his sporadic attempts at disciplining his physical desires by periods of celibacy or abstinence from alcohol, but he was never able to gain a clear enough understanding to prove it practical and sustained. (xvii)

However, Jack was "practical" enough to understand that, profane as it sounds, Buddhism and alcohol (one could also add Benzedrine and marijuana to the list) might have proven helpful in his attempt to escape the material world, as temporarily as that may have been. In the long run, total Buddhist renunciation and abstinence were not for him. He was neither a Christ-like figure, nor a Buddha, but he was "intuitive", "visionary" enough to acquire an unbiased perception of the mundane reality, while keeping an eye on its spiritual dimension: "At the forefront of his thinking were always questions about the existence of God, the Creator's purpose for all forms of life, the concept of mind, the nature of sin, the existence of evil, a hostile/indifferent/benign cosmos, self and other, the definition and function of time, care and compassion, and salvation" (Grace 2).

According to some of his biographers and commentators, Kerouac was somewhat familiar with Buddhism in the 1940s, but he studied it thoroughly between 1953 and 1957 (Grace 3). Even though his interest in Buddhism might look very strange considering his Roman-Catholic background, he managed to combine them into a religious cocktail that would allow him to continue his quest for art, for poetry. He did this in full acknowledgement of the fact that he was *in* this world, connected to it and thus unable to transcend it completely. Nevertheless, he accepted the role of the messenger, one who had access to both worlds but who also had to means to avoid being captured by either Roman-Catholicism (through his interest in Eastern spirituality and meditation) or by (Mahayana) Buddhism (through his submission to the senses). He was a messenger who understood, soon enough, that his destiny was built on incongruous realities, on binary oppositions, as he was not an enlightened Buddha, not even a mid-twentieth century Shakespeare, not a modern-day Messiah and not a truly nihilist Nietzsche. He aspired to being a little bit of all of them though, as he wrote in his *Some of the Dharma*: "I am Buddha come back in the form of Shakespeare for the sake of poor Jesus Christ and Nietzsche" (qtd. in Kerouac et al. 47).

Nietzsche had taught Jack Kerouac and all the other Beats that philosophy and, one could add, literary art need the double that would make them both conceivable: "As Nietzsche knew, philosophy requires a double. The Beats, too. If Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs achieved literary renown for their raw expression of lived experience, it was by means of a kind of literary stunt-double, a vicarious codependence that would make their art possible at all" (Scribner 9). Kerouac's literary doppelganger was Neal Cassady, but he also had a spiritual double, a bodhisattva, one that was still walking on his path to enlightenment. In Mahayana Buddhism, a bodhisattva is someone who has access to nirvana, but accepts existential suffering, multiple reincarnations out of compassion for the other beings living on earth. Even though the etymology seems rather simple, the word being a combination of two terms in Indo-Aryan: *bodhi*, or perfect knowledge (derived from *budh*, to know perfectly) and *sattva*, or being, essence, the use of the term is quite problematic in Mahayana Buddhism.

In one of the notes to his book on *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, Paul Williams argues that the meaning of the term *bodhi* is easier to track back to its origins than the term *sattva*, which is usually defined as "sentient being", "essence", and even "courage". Thus, bodhisattva means an "enlightenment-being", a "being who has enlightenment as essence", an "enlightenment-hero". However, the term might also be explained through the etymology of the word *bodhisatta*: "The Sanskrit of *bodhisatta* could equally be *bodhisakta* = 'directed towards enlightenment", or it could be *bodhiśakta* = 'capable of enlightenment'. Clearly these etymologies make better sense" (Williams 286–87).

If, etymologically, it is not easy to relate the term to someone who is on the path to enlightenment, Shantideva, the Buddhist philosopher-monk, author of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, gave an explanation that may well be applied to Jack Kerouac, the modern-day Bodhisattva who was far from the Buddhist ideal himself, but was nevertheless full of compassion for his fellow human beings:

> …a bodhisattva is permitted to commit 'even what is proscribed,' if it is motivated by compassion (5:84). This is the doctrine of skillful means (*upaya kausalya*): a skillful teacher will use appropriate means for each situation, which justifies transgressing moral codes regulating acts of body and speech when properly motivated by a compassionate mind. Shantideva addresses skillful means in the context of his presentation of moral discipline, as if to emphasize that rules of conduct are designed to make the practitioner mindful and aware, and not conceived as unchanging laws universally determining action. (qtd. in Edelglass 390)

Within this context, Jack Kerouac's statement – found in a letter he sent to Robert Lax on 26 October 1954, when he was engaged in a systematic study of Buddhism – regarding his spiritual journey under the guiding light of the Mahayana ("The Great Vehicle") Buddhism seems quite enlightening itself: "I am no saint, I'm sensual, I can't resist wine & attachment to imaginary lures before my eyes – but I intend to

ascend by stages & self-control to the vow to help all sentient beings find enlightenment and Holy escape from the sin and stain of life-body itself" (Kerouac et al. 47). Elsewhere, he makes it quite clear that his compassionate mind is focused on achieving "pure understanding" first, "and then pure life", just like a Bodhisattva striving to learn first, by making mistakes and then teach the others and/or become enlightened (48).

Kerouac's personal spiritual journey was also put to practice in his writing. To a certain extent, there is no apparent difference between his journey in life and his journey in the art of writing. He was equally "spontaneous" in both; he believed in bridging the liminal space between art and life, between Roman-Catholicism and Buddhism, between himself and the world. Negotiating boundaries was one of his main concerns, in the attempt to create life, not artistic artefacts or representations of life. As Ann Douglas observes in her 2006 introduction to Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, he "was indeed compiling in his novels what he called 'a contemporary history record' of his times, but he may have been the first American writer to self-consciously discover , as the critic William Crawford Woods puts it, that 'history becomes fiction in the… act of being written down'" (viii).

William Crawford Woods's approach in his article "'A New Field': A Note on the *Dharma Bums*", published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1983 – a tri-quarterly journal publishing criticism "on fiction writers whose work resists convention and easy categorization", as the description on its official website reads (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*) –, is obviously as unbiased as one might expect from a person who, according to his own testimony, is neither a Roman-Catholic Christian, nor a Buddhist, and who does not even believe in Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous prose". Nevertheless, he also writes about Kerouac from a truly personal reason, attesting to the fact that the relationship to Jack and his fellow Beats can only be a personal one (7).

Admitting to the fact that even though his previous article on Jack Kerouac he had published in *The New* Republic had been rather short on insight into Kerouac's literary art and the power of his Buddhism, he managed however "to work up a reasonable argument that ended by awarding Kerouac a 'modest honorable place' in the American literature of his time (the praise now seems to slight) , and – most valid of all – [he] was ready to see that [Kerouac's] great value lay in the personal impact of his confessional voice: Kerouac was… a specific anodyne to the sargassos of adolescence" (Woods 7). In other words, Jack Kerouac's books interfere with the readers' personal lives in a way that elicits transformation, and, more specifically, *The Dharma Bums* "has a place in that process… and… it generally carries on the program of personal and social transformation posited by the Beats in the years of their ascendancy" (Woods 9).

In *The Dharma Bums*, the main characters, Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder (the former is Kerouac's and the latter is Gary Snyder's double) are practicing Buddhists travelling in the mid-twentieth century America. Trapped in the world seen as void, a direct reference to the Buddhist concept of *Śūnyatā* (or emptiness), the two characters are engaged in a spiritual quest, in the search for an "angelic" America, to use Allen Ginsberg's idea in his poem "America". In Kerouac's case, the focus is always on the soul and the narrator tells the story as a monologue, as a confession, in an attempt to "[abolish] the distance between author and reader." His art, his "spontaneous prose", unfolding like a long letter or diary entry, enabled him to write the "true story of postwar America in all its speed tomfoolery, and sorrowfulness … as interior monologue and confession" (Douglas viii).

Symbolically, Ray Smith's final destination is San Francisco, where, according to the Californian poet Kenneth Rexroth "Everybody… is a Buddhist…" (qtd. in Dittman 53). Kerouac's interest in Buddhism and his aspiration to achieve Nirvana should be seen within a broader context, not as a manifestation of his superficial interest in Eastern spirituality. According to Ann Douglas, Kerouac's interest in Eastern philosophy and religion was triggered by his rereading *Walden*, the book written by transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, in which he promotes meditation, spiritual awakening and simplicity. *Walden* was originally published as *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* in 1854, that is, exactly a century before Kerouac started to study Buddhism on his own and thus transforming (Thoreau's) art into life. Thoreau is also the author of the first sutra to be published in the English language in the United States of America in 1844 (xviii). One should also note, that these values usually referred to as fundamental values of Buddhism are also inherently connected to Christianity as well, which made Kerouac's transition, if this is the right word, considerably easy.

Besides the fact that it was very fashionable at the time everywhere, and particularly in San Francisco, Kerouac's and his characters' El Dorado, Buddhism was also a natural step in Jack Kerouac's spiritual journey, seen as a passive detachment from his Roman-Catholic background. Buddhism's force of attraction resided then as it resides today in its rejection of dogma and in the fact that the "convert" is not required to become an apostate before embracing his new belief. Buddhist monks may return the vows to the Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni (ordained male or female members of the *sangha*, the Buddhist monastic community), leave the *sangha* and thus rejoin the Buddhist laypeople. In Mahayana Buddhism, monasticism implies taking the

vows of personal liberation and the *sangha* contains both monks and laypeople on their path to spiritual awakening. Bhikkhu literally means "beggar" which explains, at least partially, Kerouac's choice for the title of *The Dharma Bums*.

Another explanation for Kerouac's smooth acceptance of Buddhism is also the fact that he must have understood spiritual liberation as rejection of any dogmatic or spiritual authority. By comparison, Roman-Catholicism requires obedience to the head of the earthly church, the Pope, while Buddhism has no absolute head of the community, since Buddha left no successors. Nevertheless, Kerouac overlapped his newly acquired faith with his inherited religious background, highlighting the obvious junction areas assuming what was convenient to him at the time. Confusions were imminent: "Echoing mainstream reviewers, Alan Watts … who popularized Buddhism in several bestsellers, said Kerouac had 'Zen flesh but no Zen bones;' he had confused Zen's ' "anything goes" at the existential level with "anything goes" on the artistic and social levels'" (Douglas xviii).

Allan Watts was indeed a source of information on Buddhism for the Beat Generation, but he was just a former-Anglican reciting from Suzuki's writings and echoing the results of his analysis of Western Christianity. "Watts assumed Suzuki's basic critiques of Western thought and extended them to an explicitly radical, left-libertarian critique of post-war American culture… Watts saw Zen as offering individual liberation from the tyrannical and authoritarian nature of Western theology". In addition to spiritual and religious liberation, Zen Buddhism also offered Western society a chance to free itself from the "authoritarian system of social relations reflected in the modern, anti-democratic workplace", namely political, social freedom, and "true democracy" (Brown 95). Ironically, today, the influence of Suzuki's and Watts's works on Buddhism has been superseded by the influence Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* exerts on the American public, at least in terms of their first contact with Eastern spirituality: "The first exposure many people have to Buddhism continues to be Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* read in high school or college" (Need 83).

Kerouac's spiritual syncretism was translated by Ben Giamo into what he called "[the] collapse of the sacred and profane into 'gently lovely tasks'"; this collapse is, according to Giamo, "quintessential Kerouac", and the two, the sacred and the profane, or "religious form and spiritual content (not to mention an image from popular culture) meet in harmony" (85). It is true that Giamo supports his argument with facts taken from Kerouac's life before his Buddhist rush, namely his visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, but when interpreting Kerouac's dive into Buddhism one should also consider his resolute denial of religious form altogether and also the fact that Buddhism is not a "religion" *per se*, but a philosophical system concerned with the spirit and not so much with the form. The debate upon Buddhism being a religion or a philosophy is far from finding a final answer in the West, but it is undebatable that, in the mid-twentieth century America, it was mainly perceived as a way to personal enlightenment.

As a writer, the "Buddhist" Kerouac was very productive and managed to write, between 1953 and 1956 seven books, five of which were indebted to Buddhist spirituality: *Wake Up*; *Mexico City Blues*; *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*; book one of *Desolation Angels*; and *The Dharma Bums*. According to some of his commentators, "it was the most productive period of Kerouac's career, surpassing in sheer volume the five novels he had written between 1951 and 1953, demonstrating that the discovery of Buddhism was both an inspiration for the ongoing spiritual-literary-artistic quest as well as a very useful 'protective device' "(Giamo 88). Obviously, Kerouac did not "convert" to Buddhism in order to become a better and more productive writer, but it is worth mentioning that Buddhism lessened his concerns with time, the void and suffering and allowed him to find the peace he needed in order to write. In brief, "Kerouac's conversion to Buddhism (never categorical) was prompted by nothing less than his quest to dissolve the sin of life itself: death, and the stain of original sin thereby implicated in that Occidental bargain of belief" (Giamo 91).

One year before his death, Jack Kerouac came up with a functional explanation that would prove very valuable for his commentators in their attempt to explain his spiritual journey which deeply influenced his literary art. Thus, in an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1968, he said that:

> What's really influenced my work is the Mahayana Buddhism, the original Buddhism of Gautama Sakyamuni, the Buddha himself, of the India of old. Zen is what's left of his Buddhism, or Bodhi, after passing into China and then into Japan. The part of Zen that's influenced my writing is the Zen contained in the haiku. But my serious Buddhism, that of ancient India, has influenced that part in my writing that you might call religious, or fervent, or pious, almost as much as Catholicism has. Original Buddhism referred to continual conscious compassion, brotherhood, the *dana paramita* (meaning the perfection of charity). (Gourevitch 105)

Asked why he had never written about Jesus, Kerouac calls the interviewer "an insane phony" and declares boldly: "…*all I write about* is Jesus", before he states that there is actually no difference between Jesus and Buddha (Gourevitch 105). This adds to

the confusion, but also reveals the concept of the double as the core of his work. Kerouac's mind and his "spontaneous prose" operate on two levels of reality which, at times, overlap revealing the spirituality and literary art of one of the most famous writers of the twentieth-century literature in America:

> …when Kerouac says 'I have nothing to offer anybody but my own confusion,' it is easy to take him at his word.

Yet serious readers should not be easily fooled. Kerouac's Dionysian revels and Dostoyevskian reflections lend weight on his work rather than detract from it. And there are other reasons to consider Kerouac among the most important spiritual writers of the last half of the twentieth century. Not only did he refashion American Transcendentalism through the modern idioms of jazz, haiku, and memoir, but he also inspired a small army of imitators and disciples who carried his literary project far beyond anything he could have accomplished on his own. (Inchausti 1)

Therefore, far from being a Christ-like figure or a modern-day Buddha, Jack Kerouac preached his "confusion" and developed his literary art to an extent to which they both became "preachable" gospels, appealing to a congregation/*sangha* of "believers" willing to immerse into the desert and follow their Jesus/Buddha/Kerouac deep into the void of the mundane reality. Nevertheless, none of it is real, for it is mortal, as Ray Smith, the narrator, and Kerouac's stunt-double in *The Dharma Bums* argues, "How strange, how worthy, how good for us! What a horror it would have been if the world was real, because if the world was real, it would be immortal" (Kerouac 114).

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