

Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder: Chasing Zen Clouds

by
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During the first century CE, an Indian monk walked hundreds of miles to spread the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism to China's largely Confucian society. Over the following decades and centuries, the two religions wove an intricate new religious philosophy – Zen Buddhism. Zen spread all over Asia, and became especially popular in Japan. Millions of people today follow the path of Zen Buddhism, striving towards enlightenment primarily through meditation. Unlike the followers of most religions, each of the millions of Zen practitioners possesses a slightly different understanding of what Zen Buddhism really is, as well as a different method for incorporating it into his or her own life. Nearly two millennia since its founding, Zen continues to reach new places and minds around the world, and within the past 100 years has jumped the Pacific Ocean to North America. Two of the first Americans who found refuge in Zen Buddhism were Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac.

Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder: both interested in Zen Buddhism, both identified with the Beat Generation, both strayed from traditional American mainstream society, both friends. These writers appear similar on the surface, although just like the cryptic koans of Zen, things are not always what they seem. In order to understand the work of Snyder and Kerouac, the spiritual

factors that influenced each author must be recognized. It is obvious that they both had an interest in Zen Buddhism – Snyder spent several years studying at a monastery in Japan, and Kerouac wrote several books that contained an irrefutable Zen flavor. In order to compare the Zen influence in Snyder’s and Kerouac’s literature, Zen Buddhism must first be understood. The next step is to examine the authors’ different practices and ideals of Zen. A literary analysis revolving around Kerouac’s novel The Dharma Bums, and Snyder’s poems “Avocado,” and “This Present Moment,” demonstrates that Snyder’s poetry contains deeper roots and a more cohesive understanding of Zen than does the prose of Jack Kerouac.

Zen Buddhism often confuses people, which is no wonder, since “The purpose of all Zen teaching [is] to make you wonder and to answer that wondering with the deepest expression of your own nature” (Suzuki, 13). Before that wondering can be answered, many paradoxes must be worked through. For example, Zen masters often teach their students with koans: “A paradoxical anecdote or story; used to bring Zen students to realization and to help clarify their enlightenment” (Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc). Enlightenment, defined as the “complete elimination of all negative aspects of the mind and perfection of all positive qualities” (Ibid.), is the ultimate “goal” of Zen. However, the absence of goals and aspirations, which stem from desire, constitutes the greatest paradox of Zen. Shunryu Suzuki counsels in his book Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, “You should get rid of excessive things. If your practice is good, without being aware of it you will become proud of your practice. That pride is extra.... You should get rid of that something which is extra” (Suzuki 59). Essentially, the simpler a person lives, the closer he or she reaches towards enlightenment.

Gary Snyder grew up in poverty on a farm north of Seattle, though he often escaped “into the Cascade Mountains, the high country, and got into real wilderness... I found very little

in the civilized human realm that interested me” (The Gary Snyder Reader, 92). From a very young age, Snyder appreciated the natural beauty of the world, and enjoyed the solitude he found while exploring the Northwest landscape. He identified with the natural spiritual beliefs of the Native Americans who lived near him, however as a white man he found that he could only appreciate their customs as an onlooker. Snyder commented about Native American spiritual practice: “Its intent is not cosmopolitan. Its content, perhaps, is universal, but you must be a Hopi to follow the Hopi way” (The Gary Snyder Reader, 93). Snyder could not follow Native American spirituality, so he ventured into the spiritualities of Far Eastern culture, and Zen Buddhism was in the center of it.

Snyder worked “with the translation team at the First Zen Institute of America in Japan” (Fields 215), making him one of the first American scholars to practice and understand the philosophies of Zen. However, this did not make him gloat; Snyder remained a simple, honest man, true to his beliefs, and consistent in his practice. He meditated daily, and understood why he should do so: “I saw it as a completely natural act. To the contrary, it’s odd that we don’t do it more, that we don’t, simply like a cat, *be* there for a while, experiencing ourselves as whatever we are, without any extra thing added to that” (The Gary Snyder Reader, 95). Snyder correctly understood “simply being” as the most important practice of Zen: quieting the mind and body through meditation, living without excess material belongings, and maintaining peaceful relationships wherever possible. In fact, Snyder was the only member of the Beat Generation who meditated on a regular basis at all. Rick Fields noted, “Except for Snyder, who sat regularly on his rolled-up sleeping bag for an hour or so every morning... the Buddhism was mostly literary” (Fields, 214). Snyder went beyond meditating frequently; he studied Zen in Japan for nearly ten years. Snyder represented what Alan Watts described as “Square Zen,” which he

described as “the Zen of established tradition in Japan with its clearly defined hierarchy, rigid discipline, and its specific tests of satori [sudden enlightenment].... It is a quest for the right spiritual experience” (Watts, 4). Snyder studied Zen seriously, and eventually he decided that it was the most important study in his life, and that he wanted to study it under a Japanese Zen master.

Snyder’s interest in Zen led him to “[enroll] in the Oriental Languages department at the University of California at Berkeley. “Having discovered that the T’ang Dynasty tradition of Zen he had read about in Suzuki was ‘still alive and well in Japan,’ he had decided to work on the two languages –Japanese and T’ang Chinese Vernacular—that would enable him to experience it first hand” (Fields, 213). Kerouac was interested in Buddhism as well, after he “accidentally” checked out The Life of Buddha by Ashvagosa from the library (211). Snyder helped bring Zen Buddhism to America, and worked “for a time [as] the secretary and assistant” with “a cross-cultural team of dedicated scholar-practitioners” who set out to translate the “major Rinzai Zen texts from both Chinese and Japanese masters” (209). While Snyder had a hand at literally bringing Zen Buddhism to America, Kerouac became an icon of an unconventional wandering lifestyle, once his novel On The Road finally reached the public in 1957. Both authors helped pave the road of American Zen, but in very different ways: Snyder deliberately helped bring Zen to a light that Americans could understand it in, while Kerouac put his own life – and therefore his own ideals and curiosities – in the limelight.

Although Kerouac greatly appreciated Zen, his understanding of it was mostly theoretical. He represented the polar opposite side of Zen from Snyder– Kerouac is the textbook example of what Watts calls “Beat Zen.” Watts observes that Beat Zen “ranges from a use of Zen for justifying sheer caprice in art, literature, and life to a very forceful social criticism and ‘digging

of the universe'.... [But] it is always a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident to have the flavor of Zen" (Watts, 3). Kerouac applied philosophies of Zen to his life just enough so that he could rationalize and "justify him[self] in doing what he please[d]" (5). Though Kerouac sincerely admired Buddhism, he applied it in his own life as a means to justify himself rather than to further his spiritual understanding of the world around him. He employed Zen to affirm his lifestyle and ideas, for example his practice of writing spontaneous prose, in which he documents his stream-of-consciousness memories and ideas. In the "*Surangama Sutra*... the Buddha counsels: 'If you are now desirous of more perfectly understanding Supreme Enlightenment and the enlightening nature of pure Mind-Essence, you must learn to answer questions spontaneously with no recourse to discriminating thinking'" (Tonkinson, 24). Kerouac's interpretation of this sutra seems logical enough – spontaneity is good, so spontaneous prose must be good too. However, the meaning of spontaneity and living in the moment can be interpreted in various ways: it can mean taking a figurative step away from yourself in order to view things with a more objective glance, or it can mean losing your self control and doing whatever you want.

Kerouac always loved to read and write; "[I] wrote little novels in my room, first novel written at age 11, also kept extensive diaries and 'newspapers'" (Charters, xxiv). He played football, which eventually earned him a scholarship to Columbia University. He grew up in a Catholic, French-American family, which may explain why he never fully accepted the principals of Zen Buddhism, and towards the end of his life, he "wrote to Snyder that his Buddhism was dead. In his later years he turned toward the Catholic faith in which he was raised" (Tonkinson, 27). There was, however, a time when "Kerouac read widely in Buddhist literature with a sense of self-recognition" (Charters, 581), especially after he learned about the

first Noble Truth: all life is suffering.

While Kerouac's interest in Zen Buddhism may have included a desire for self-justification, he sincerely enjoyed learning about it – as shallow as that interest was. Reading some literature by Thoreau “led him to pursue a serious, self-taught program of Buddhism study, and his affinity for the teachings was immediate” (Tonkinson, 24). While he enjoyed the teachings, he did not meditate much, partially because “his knees were ruined by playing football....They wouldn't bend without great pain” (Fields, 214). With meditation – the most important part of Zen Buddhism – out of the picture, Kerouac could do little besides read about Zen. Philip Whalen even recounted that “He never learned to sit in that proper sort of meditation position. Even had he been able to, his head wouldn't have stopped long enough for him to endure it” (Ibid.). Since he could not practice sitting meditation, he decided to try a period of solitude – a summer spent as a fire lookout on top of Desolation Peak in the Cascade Mountains –which describes the end of The Dharma Bums. However, “After his stint on Desolation Peak... it became clear that such heavy doses of solitude did not agree with him” (Tonkinson, 26). After Kerouac gave Buddhism thorough contemplation and a couple of years to sink in, he abandoned his brief, intense Zen obsession, and “wrote to Snyder that his Buddhism was dead” (27). Once he had given up on Buddhism, he found comfort and entertainment in Catholicism and alcohol, respectively.

Though Kerouac eventually gave up on Zen Buddhism, he produced several pieces of prose during this phase of his life, including The Dharma Bums. This novel was largely “constructed around Gary Snyder. The novel portrayed Snyder and Kerouac's friendship, and the poetry-and-Buddhist milieu of the time” (Fields, 222-223). Kerouac used the name Japhy Ryder as a pseudonym for Snyder, and called himself Ray Smith (Charters, 620). The Dharma Bums

demonstrates evidence that, in terms of both style and content, Kerouac lacked a true understanding of Zen Buddhism, and when he failed to acquire the great happiness he thought it would bring, he abandoned his fleeting interest in Zen.

The Dharma Bums exemplifies Kerouac's spontaneous prose technique. While many people have criticized this technique, Truman Capote even remarking that his prose "isn't writing at all; it's typing" (Author Profile: Truman Capote), others have praised him for stretching the stylistic limits of prose. However, when looking at this style with the ideals of Zen in mind, it quickly becomes evident that it is not a Zen-like style of writing. For example, when Ray Smith hitchhikes from the West Coast to the East, Kerouac describes part of the trip, all in one sentence:

From that desert in Arizona he roared on up to New Mexico, took the cut through Las Cruces up to Alamogordo where the atom bomb was first blasted and where I had a strange vision as we drove along seeing in the clouds above the Alamogordo mountains the words as if imprinted in the sky: "This Is the Impossibility of the Existence of Anything" (which was a strange place for that strange true vision) and then he batted on through the beautiful Atascadero Indian country in the uphills of New Mexico beautiful green valleys and pines and New England-like rolling meadows and then down to Oklahoma (outside Bowie Arizona we'd had a short nap at dawn, he in the truck, me in my bag in the cold red clay with just stars blazing silence overhead and a distant coyote), in no time at all he was going up through Arkansas and eating it up in one afternoon and the Missouri and St. Louis and finally on Monday night bashing across Illinois and Indiana and into old snowy Ohio with all the cute Christmas lights making my heart joy in the windows of old farms. (Kerouac, 131)

The stream-of-consciousness perfectly portrays why Kerouac's prose strays from Zen: in Zen, meditation plays the most important role, with Zen masters often meditating for 10 hours in a single day. While meditating, thoughts may arise; however, they are only to be acknowledged and let go of. Ultimately, the mind quiets, and thoughts cease. Kerouac's prose, on the other hand, races with different thoughts and ideas. His sentences often run on for entire paragraphs, moving quickly from idea to idea. Kerouac can breeze

through all of America in a single (drawn out) breath, which to many is admirable, but is quite the opposite of the Zen ideals of simplicity. Zen takes the time to observe things, especially the true nature of the self, while Kerouac zips from one idea and into another before the first one can be thoroughly perceived. While in this quote Kerouac discusses nature, “the uphills of New Mexico beautiful green valleys and pines and New England-like rolling meadows” (Ibid.), he observes it hurriedly, describing only the surface features in a few words then rushing to his next thought.

The content of The Dharma Bums also hints that Kerouac’s impression of Zen is far from the true ideals of the practice. For example, Kerouac often rationalizes activities that stunt his advancement towards enlightenment:

I’m going to go to... the gay streets of Mexico night, music coming out of doors, girls, wine, weed, wild hats, viva! What does it matter? Like the ants that have nothing to do but dig all day, I have nothing to do but do what I want and be kind and remain nevertheless uninfluenced by imaginary judgments and pray for the light (147).

Kerouac appears to believe he can do whatever he wants and remain a spiritual practitioner, but by partying with drugs, alcohol, and nameless girls, he is actually taking steps backwards on the path to enlightenment. In fact, he defies two of the five precepts of Zen Buddhism: “Do not have damaging sexual interaction,” and “Do not take intoxicants” (Batchelor, 13). Gary Snyder, or rather, Japhy Ryder, sees his materialistic indulgences and warns him in The Dharma Bums. When Ray (Kerouac) claims, “There’s wisdom in wine, goddamnit!’... Japhy was sad and disappointed. ‘How do you expect to become a good bhikku or even a Bodhisattva Mahasattva always getting drunk like that?... How can you understand your own mind essence with your head all muddled and your teeth all stained and your belly all sick?’” (Kerouac, 190). Kerouac simply tries to rationalize his desires by saying they follow the path of Zen and that there is

“wisdom in wine” (Ibid.), while in reality the same desires prevent him from progressing on his spiritual path.

Kerouac also uses Zen to justify the ideas he already concretely believed in. The narrator of The Dharma Bums confesses, “I don’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*” (12). With this in mind, it is as though Kerouac employed Zen as a cloak to hide his deeply rooted depression and angst towards himself and those around him. His pessimism allowed him to relate to the first Noble Truth, however it also prevented him from trying to alleviate suffering, which the other Noble Truths explain. Instead of trying to understand Zen, Kerouac used Zen to try to justify himself.

Snyder, on the other hand, uses his practice of Zen to try to thoroughly understand his true self, in accordance with the principles of Zen. When Snyder tackles the big questions, he looks for new answers, not evidence for his current ideas. Snyder’s understanding of the principals of Zen appears in his poetry. For example, Snyder’s poem “Avocado” from his Pulitzer Prize winning book, Turtle Island :

The Dharma is like an Avocado!
 Some parts so ripe you can’t believe it,
 But it’s good.
 And other places hard and green
 Without much flavor,
 Pleasing those who like their eggs well-cooked.

And the skin is thin,
 The great big round seed
 In the middle,
 Is your own Original Nature—
 Pure and smooth,
 Almost nobody ever splits it open
 Or ever tries to see
 If it will grow.

Hard and slippery,
 It looks like
 You should plant it – but then
 It shoots out thru the
 fingers—

gets away. (61)

In this poem, an avocado metaphorically represents Dharma, that is, “The principle or law that orders the universe” or “The essential function or nature of a thing” (American Heritage Dictionary, 513). The metaphor simply and concretely describes something abstract and intangible. Zen encourages metaphorical thinking to facilitate understanding of some of its more ambiguous concepts, such as Dharma. This poem contains a reflection of the Dharma present in the world, and in Snyder’s environment in the United States where Zen was just beginning to emerge: it was very true that “Almost nobody ever splits it open / Or ever tries to see/ If it will grow” (Snyder, Turtle Island, 61), as few people in America were on the Zen spiritual path to enlightenment. This poem also contains a paradox, which is an important element of Zen. In Zen, koans are used to trigger instant enlightenment. A koan is defined as “A riddle in the form of a paradox used as an aid to meditation and a means of gaining intuitive knowledge” (American Heritage Dictionary, 998), the most famous perhaps being, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” In Snyder’s poem “Avocado”, a paradox at the end, “It looks like / You should plant it – but then / It shoots out thru the / fingers – / gets away” (Ibid.), suggests that the act of trying to cultivate Dharma creates desires and attachment, and thus it cannot be cultivated. “Avocado” is just one example of the poetic evidence of Snyder’s thorough and true understanding of Zen.

Snyder’s ideas fell in with many of those that Zen masters taught, not only philosophically, but also in terms of how a poem should be constructed. Snyder believed in “the

idea of a poetry of minimal surface texture, with its complexities hidden at the bottom of the pool, under the band, a dark old lurking, no fancy flavor, is ancient” (Snyder, Rip Rap and Cold Mountain Poems, 66). While “Avocado” is a simple poem, it still maintains both abstract and concrete imagery, metaphors, paradoxes, and three stanzas that contain it all. However, the poem “This Present Moment” from page 608 in The Gary Snyder Reader, Portrays the simplicity that Zen preaches:

This present moment:
That lives on,
To become

Long ago

Snyder justifies his idea of poetry with “minimal surface texture” being “ancient” by saying, “Du Fu [a Chinese poet] said, ‘The ideas of a poet should be noble and simple,’ Zen says, ‘Unformed people delight in gaudy, and in novelty. Cooked people delight in the ordinary’” (Snyder, Rip Rap and Cold Mountain Poems, 67), which almost exactly describes the contrast between Kerouac and Snyder, respectively. The simplicity of Snyder’s poem “This Present Moment” mimics not only the simplicity of nature, but also the silence that Zen is built from, by using few words, double spacing the lines, and taking time to get to the end point. Snyder truly grasps the foundation philosophies of Zen, and his poetry provides a looking glass into his understanding and acceptance.

Snyder and Kerouac formed a friendship largely over two of their common interests – writing and Zen. Snyder held a much deeper comprehension of Zen than Kerouac, and a lifestyle that was more consistent with his spiritual beliefs. Snyder’s poetry clearly reflects his simple way of living, which can be partially attributed to his devout study of Zen. Kerouac fluttered in and out of Zen and Catholicism, eventually sticking to the Catholic religious teachings of his

childhood. Kerouac's writing style never coincided with the principals of Zen, although he often wrote about his curiosities and understandings of it. While they each had different motives and desires, they found they each could learn a lot from the other, and a strong friendship grew between them. Rick Fields commented, "Snyder thought Kerouac was an important writer and was impressed that he had studied so much Buddhism on his own. Still there were important differences in the way the two men saw things. They were, as Jack wrote, 'two strange dissimilar monks on the same path'" (Fields, 215). Neither Kerouac nor Snyder devoted themselves to Zen like monks, but Kerouac described an otherwise accurate picture: while their opinions and practices of Zen and their styles of writing were vastly different from each other, they were both interested in traveling along a spiritual path and jotting down their thoughts along the way.

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