

Buddhism and sexuality in jack kerouac's "the dharma bums"



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The Beat Generation has always been associated, and rightfully so, with themes connected to sexuality. Beat writers were, and still are, famous for advocating sexual liberation and free love, being open about their homosexuality when that was the case (like Allen Ginsberg did for all his life), and much of their literary production is filled thoroughly with erotic experiences. All of this inevitably clashed, or merged, with the Buddhist faith that most of the Beats came in contact with, for different time spans and definitely with different results. The relationship between Buddhism and sexuality can be observed in Jack Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums*, published in 1958. The novel's protagonists are Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder, based on Kerouac himself and his dear friend and writer Gary Snyder (who had largely introduced him to Buddhism), on a semi-fictional journey of self-discovery in the wild. The two have completely opposite approaches to sexuality: while Ryder has embraced it fully, Smith cannot find a way to conciliate it with his commitment to Buddhist faith. Throughout the book there are several hints of the duality that troubles Smith, and the difficulty he encounters in trying to reconcile his religious side with his sexual impulses. He sees sexuality as an hindrance to faith and a source of unhappiness, and he explains having "gone through an entire year of celibacy based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death and I had really no lie come to a point where I regarded lust as offensive and even cruel. "Pretty girls make graves," was my saying" (Kerouac 31). This can be related to a Buddhist belief contained in the *Sutta Nipata*, in which Buddha declares that desire (*tanha*), and in particular sensual desire (*kama*), brings pain (*dukkha*) and is an obstacle to obtaining an enlightened mind. "So one, always mindful,

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should avoid sexual desires. Letting them go, he will cross over the flood like one who, having bailed out the boat, has reached the far shore." (Kama Sutta, Sutta Nipata, 4. 1)

Buddhist expert Barbara O' Brien, in her article *What Buddhism Teaches About Sexual Morality*, proposes more of a modern interpretation, arguing that "The Second noble truth teaches that the cause of suffering is craving or thirst (tanha). This doesn't mean cravings should be repressed or denied. Instead, in Buddhist practice we acknowledge our passions and learn to see they are empty, so they no longer control us. This is true for hate, greed and other emotions. Sexual desire is no different." (O'Brien 1) This seems more compatible with Japhy Ryder's views. He is much more confident than Smith, he is comfortable with expressing his sexuality, and even explicitly linking it to religion. In chapter five of *The Dharma Bums*, a girl named Princess wants to join the group through some sort of sexual initiation - "she wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy and being a girl the only way she could express it was this way" (Kerouac 31) - and "Japhy wasn't at all nervous and embarrassed and just sat there in perfect form just as he was supposed to do" (Kerouac 30). He explains that "This is what they do in the temples of Tibet. It's a holy ceremony, it's done just like this in front of chanting priests. People pray and recite Om Mani Pahdme Hum, which means Amen the Thunderbolt in the Dark Void. I'm the thunderbolt and Princess is the dark void, you see." (Kerouac 30) This is not just something that Ryder is completely making up to legitimate his actions.

Buddhist expert Peter Harvey, in his *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, states that some sexual practices are "necessary at the highest level for the

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attainment of Buddhahood”, although their use is “ highly regulated. It is only permitted after years of training and [...] has historically been extremely rare.” (Harvey 142) Smith is fascinated with this practice, and has feelings of admiration and envy towards Ryder’s freedom, but his own inhibitions, guilt, and fear of failing his beliefs stop him from joining the sexual encounter. Still, he cannot get rid of this conflict, and he constantly swings between wanting sex and either being repelled by it or denying it to himself. In chapter twenty-five he is going into detail about some mundane party he attended before he decided to embark on the Buddhist journey; he is with a friend, they are sitting in a corner, observing other people’s behavior, and he describes it as follows: “ We were the old monks who weren’t interested in sex any more but Sean and Japhy and Whitey were the young monks and were still full of the fire of evil and still had a lot to learn. Every now and then Bud and I looked at all that flesh and licked our lips in secret.” (Kerouac 178) This quote is the perfect example of his internal strife: he thinks that people giving in to sexual desires are somehow weak and “ evil” and lacking wisdom, but he still can’t help to yearn “ in secret” for what they have. The strife goes on in chapter twenty-six: “ I felt lonely to see everybody paired off and having a good time and all I did was curl up in my sleeping bag in the rosebushes and sigh and say bah. For me it was just red wine in my mouth and a pile of firewood”. (Kerouac 187) So, he regrets his self-imposed isolation and wishes he could just bring himself to do like everyone else, but “ then I’d find something like a dead crow in the deer park and think “ That’s a pretty sight for sensitive human eyes, and all of it comes out of sex.” So I put sex out of my mind again.” (Kerouac 187)

Some may argue that such hesitation, such a binary point of view, is not a true Buddhist attitude. For example, ' O'Brien comments that " Western culture at the moment seems to be at war with itself over sex, with rigid puritanism on one side and licentiousness on the other. Always, Buddhism teaches us to avoid extremes and find a middle way. As individuals we may make different decisions, but wisdom (prajna) and loving kindness (metta), not lists of rules, show us the path" (' O'Brien 1). While Smith is caught up in his contradictions, Ryder spontaneously, matter-of-factly internalizes Buddhist spirituality in regards to sexual behavior. " There was no question of what to do about sex", he says, " which is what I always liked about Oriental religion. [...] I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values" (Kerouac 32) It is easy to see Gary Snyder's personality and mindset behind Japhy's.

In his article Buddhist Anarchism, Snyder himself stood up for a similar position. " The " free world" has become economically dependent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled, sexual desire which cannot be satiated and hatred which has no outlet except against oneself, the persons one is supposed to love", he writes, " There is nothing in human nature or the requirements of human social organization which intrinsically requires that a culture be contradictory, repressive and productive of violent and frustrated personalities" (Snyder 1). It almost sounds like Ryder giving a speech to his less emancipated friend Ray. He later insists on the necessity of " defending the right of individuals to smoke hemp, eat peyote, be polygynous, polyandrous or homosexual" (Snyder 1).

Other Buddhist experts seem to agree with his and Japhy Ryder's view. For example, Winton Higgins, in a speech about Buddhist sexual ethics, explained that " Buddhism does have a strong sexual ethic, but not a repressive one. The main point of this ethic is non-harming in an area of life where we can do a lot of damage by acting violently, manipulatively or deceitfully. These and breaches of the other precepts - ill will, taking the non-given, lying and stupefaction - are the Buddhist no-no's in sexual practice" (Higgins 1). So, according to these principles, Japhy Ryder isn't breaking any Buddhist rule by living out his sexuality. Higgins further specifies that " because of its universalistic character, Buddhism as such certainly does not buy into prejudices and inhibitions associated with social engineering". Kerouac's auto-biographic character Ray Smith might also be affected by the writer's concerns with the concept of stoic masculinity and a certain irrational fear of women.

As explained by Pierre-Antoine Pellerin in his Jack Kerouac's Ecopoetics in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*, " Kerouac's alter ego and first-person narrator engages in an escapist fantasy into the animal realm where he can regain a sense of authentic masculine identity, away from the feminizing effects of domesticity and civilization." (Pellerin 6) In an essay from his early writing years, Kerouac appears worried about men losing contact with their primordial nature, their authentic wild side, and being emasculated by mothers and partners: " Man in the Beginning was a proud animal who went out and killed his game and dragged his woman to a cave and ate with her, and performed the sticky art of love on her, and slept with her, and awoke in the morning, cold and dreary in the prehistoric pink of

primeval dawn" (Kerouac 6. 13). So it is possible that this is what Ray Smith - and, therefore, Kerouac himself - truly wants but he is scared to admit it since it obviously does not harmonize with his commitment to Buddhism. Kerouac goes on: " Today, he shells out five bucks for some grocery food, takes it home to a haughty, commandeering wife, meekly performs the sticky art of love on her at night in a soft willowy bed, and wakes up in the cold and dismal pink of civilized dawn. The difference? Man is now a civilized animal, but he is no longer a proud animal". (Kerouac 6. 13) This loathing of Western civilization is what holds Ryder and Smith together and pushes them towards the physical and spiritual adventure they share but, while the first manages to make the most of it, the latter can never come to terms with himself.

In *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics*, Robert Aitken Roshi says that " for all its ecstatic nature, for all its power, sex is just another human drive. If we avoid it just because it is more difficult to integrate than anger or fear, then we are simply saying that when the chips are down we cannot follow our own practice. This is dishonest and unhealthy". (Roshi 41) So, in regards to sexuality, despite his carnal weaknesses, incoherences, and undoubtedly " Western" interpretation of the Eastern way, the " truest" Buddhist out of the two seems to be Japhy Ryder.

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