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“A new life for me”: Samsaric Existence in Jack Kerouac’s

The Dharma Bums and Desolation Angels

By

Paul Dreisbach

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Approved by:

Brady Harrison, Chairperson

David L. Strobel, Dean, Graduate School

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The crisis of modernity, a fragmented world in which the individual exists separately from any "higher" power, affects and influences Kerouac's prose. In the two novels focused on here, Kerouac attempts to track the individual searching for some meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Like Kerouac, his protagonists, Ray Smith and Jack Dulouz, react against the modern, the bureaucratic, industrial, capitalist, and faceless, world by their actions which reflect a variety of beliefs, some that do not necessarily "fit" together. These beliefs are: Buddhism, Existentialism, Catholicism, and Mystical Transcendentalism. Both Smith and Dulouz want most to be good, practicing Buddhists, but neither can fulfill this.

These novels follow a cyclical structure, which flows between the protagonist's place in nature, in civilization, and on the road. This structure mirrors a traditional Buddhist icon, the Wheel of Life, which reflects Samsara and defines life as ignorance, desire, and the creation of an illusion for the individual. Buddhist belief draws a strong distinction between this Wheel and the Noble Eightfold Path which leads the practitioner to Nirvana. Most importantly for my project, any continued belief in or desire for a static Self forces the individual to remain on the Wheel indefinitely. The novels' narrative structure thus echoes this Wheel as we follow the two protagonists through every turn.

Ultimately, we find that Kerouac's protagonists are most Buddhist when alone and in nature. They cannot perform or act as Buddhists truly when in civilization or on the road because their belief remains solitary, doctrinal, reactive, and passive, rather than the active and connected belief demanded by Buddhist tradition. Smith and Dulouz seek nature out as a space for practice because there they can escape all the diversions and delusions that haunt them elsewhere. Ultimately, both narrators prove unable to escape their belief in and need for solipsism, so despite their Buddhist inclinations, they must remain tied to the Wheel of Life and Samsara.
Due to his treatment of characters in the modern world, Jack Kerouac's novels continue to be widely read and studied. His most popular work, *On the Road* (1957), attempts to create a sense of identity through the wanderings of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise as they crisscross the country. This attempt at the creation of an identity continues into both *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Desolation Angels* (1965). In *On the Road*, Kerouac uses the road as a "search for salvation" (Sorrell 193). The religious space can transform Sal into an individual and transport him out of the faceless modern, a world of machines, bureaucracies, consumerism, and technologies of mass destruction. As Sal hitchhikes across the country, Kerouac slowly equates him with Dean and thereby creates an identity. However, when Sal's misfortunes force him to call his mother for money for the trip back to New York, we see him losing that adopted identity. Kerouac portrays Sal as the religious wanderer who ultimately cannot live by himself. While this metaphor of the road continues in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*, nature becomes the more important space. This change in focus represents a significant shift in Kerouac: "The shift from the need to express self through adventure to an absorbing and contemplative adoration of nature is part of the general movement from beat to beatitude" (Tytell 174).

This movement seemingly represents a movement from an existential to a Buddhist understanding of existence; upon closer examination, however, this movement cannot occur simply along these lines. The movement does proceed away from the constructive power of the solitary Self towards the re-unification of the Self to beatific existence and the ensuing dissolution of the Self. Kerouac sees a new religious and spiritual vulnerability arising out of his characters' place in nature. Moving away from a hitchhiking existence allows Kerouac more fully to develop his protagonists in light of Buddhist understandings. Ray Smith, in *The Dharma Bums*, and Jack Dulouz, in *Desolation Angels*, both participate in Buddhist practice, especially meditation and study. They experience different senses of spiritual identity based on where they are physically. In civilization, they experience their identity based on desire and lust; they want to get drunk, they want to impress their friends, they want to "make" some girl. Civilization here is signified
by the city, the houses of other characters, and, in general, the space of other characters, areas where diversion and delusion occur in abundance. In contrast, when in nature, they experience their identity in the effort to lose the Self. The physical mountains in both novels as well as the hill Ray must climb to reach his Buddhist hut which he shares with Japhy Rider signify nature. Ultimately, the dichotomy illustrates the Western concept of nature, which unavoidably separates man from nature.

The narration of these novels breaks into three distinct sections: the time in civilization, the time on the road, and the time in nature. I see these sections through the spiritual lenses of Buddhism, Existentialism, Transcendentalism, and Catholicism. In civilization, Kerouac's protagonist loses his Buddhist sensibilities and reverts back to his delusional ways. These ways are delusional in light of Buddhist aims that will be discussed below. Kerouac’s choice of names for his protagonists, Smith and Dulouz, represent fundamental characteristics of these narrators. Kerouac uses “Smith” in an effort to suggest the universality of his protagonist’s dilemma and “Dulouz” to allude to “delusional.” While in civilization, they act out an existence based on existential, Catholic, and transcendental ideologies that all demand a Self. The time on the road reflects the duplicity of the protagonist in that he may either be moving in a direction towards an enlightenment in the Buddhist sense or in such a way as to solidify the Self. The protagonist’s real struggle begins and ends here. He must prove that he can carry the Buddhist understanding from the mountain back to civilization, or that he can lose his solipsistic urge to affirm his Self as he travels to and ascends the mountain. Kerouac’s road metaphor functions well in that it represents a movement with the only indication of direction coming from the narrator himself. Finally, the protagonist is most Buddhist when in nature; he moves from delusion into a search for truth.

Our various understandings of “nature” complicate the time each protagonist spends in nature. In both novels, the protagonists do indeed spend time in places that rely on the traditional understanding of nature. In The Dharma Bums, for example, Ray Smith travels with Japhy to
Mount Matterhorn in California and lives by himself on Desolation Peak in the Northern Cascades in Washington. Jack Dulouz begins his story from Desolation Peak and later spends a great deal of time in the woods behind Nin's house in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. I am not, however, reading nature as characterized only by the outdoors, the wilderness, or the forest. I contend that other spaces that other characters inhabit can act as nature. For example, the hut Smith shares with Japhy serves as a space of Buddhist study and practice. The space Smith rents in Mexico also serves as a space outside of civilization. Dulouz too spends time in places that may act as nature in the midst of civilization. His vacation with Bull in Tangiers, for example, reflects this space. These spaces remain natural and important for the very reflection of nature in the midst of civilization. This complicates any reading of the protagonist at that time. He may act as a Buddhist, an existentialist, or a transcendentalist in this environment. His actions and thoughts deserve and beg the question of how effective the protagonist's Buddhism can be in the company and space of other characters.

These characters' understandings and manifestations of Buddhism come into question when the necessity for a natural environment in order to be truly Buddhist exists. According to much Buddhist thought, especially that of the "late" schools, Zen, Tibetan Vajrayana, and Pure Land, these characters would not be considered wholly Buddhist in that their Buddhism is a solitary, doctrinal Buddhism. Neither Ray Smith nor Jack Dulouz exhibit much active practice of Buddhism within civilization and towards other people. Rather, they choose to meditate and study alone and apply their learning mostly to and on themselves. Their Buddhism consists not in an active Buddhism, which comprises meditation, scholarship, and compassion directed towards others. They appear as lone, passive, and dogmatic Buddhists who search for enlightenment on their own terms and only for themselves. Along with this delineation, their Buddhism hinges on a significant point for all Buddhists: the point of clinging and grasping. Both Smith and Dulouz cling not to the world-as-cause, the world of desire for "true" existence, Nirvana; rather, they cling to the world-as-result, Samsara, which is characterized by ignorance towards and desire for
the continuation of Self in this existence. Because of their passivity, they react to their world rather than act on it.

These three sections, the time in civilization, nature and on the road, do not flow linearly, from one to another, but rather, cyclically. They move from one to another in no particular order but never remaining in one for too long. Despite the fact that the novels end with the protagonist in one section -- Smith leaving Desolation Peak and Dulouz living with his mother outside of New York City -- I am not left with the feeling that he will remain there. This movement is in itself very Buddhist as Buddhism calls for continual change. The Buddhist tradition characterizes this change as, either cyclical, represented by the Wheel of Life or Samsara, or continual, represented by the Path to Enlightenment or Nirvana. The cyclical pattern occurs because of reaction rather than action, whereas the Path demands an active assertion. Ray Smith and Jack Dulouz, both reactive, passive, and doctrinal Selves, do not change significantly enough to make me believe that they attain any real enlightenment. Their identities, because they are ultimately solipsistic or Self-affirming, are inevitably stuck in Samsara.

I. THE BEAT GENERATION AND MODERNITY

The Beat Generation has become the focus of a wide-range of criticism and analysis in the last decade. Perhaps as the post-modern crisis becomes more universally recognized, as many recognize the utterly indeterminate nature of the world, they have begun to take notice of the Beat prophecies of the early 1950s. My intention here does not rest on providing a political-historical review of the Beat Generation's famous complaints against American society and culture. However, in hoping to understand what Jack Kerouac was rebelling from in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*, we must have some historical understanding of what this group of writers was rebelling against.

The Beat Generation grew up amidst the progressive era from the Depression, through World War II and into the economic booms of the forties and fifties. While these booms ushered
in materialism and unprecedented technical growth, they forced America away from its values according to many Beat thinkers. The crisis of values, in America, can be traced back to the end of the Nineteenth Century as Victorian society increasingly felt itself being pulled apart. Thomas Tweed’s *The American Encounter with Buddhism* analyzes American Victorian society and rightly argues that religious and cultural values began to be questioned by “radical” thinkers. According to Tweed, the world became increasingly globalized as “intellectual forces such as Darwinism, biblical criticism, and comparative religion, and social forces such as industrialization, urbanization, and immigration were combining to produce a ‘spiritual crisis’” (26). The first half of the Twentieth Century did little to halt this crisis. America, according to many intellectuals, underwent spiritual and psychological crises as the economy boomed in the 1910s and 1920s. The prolonged economic despair of the Depression followed this economic prosperity and continued until the Second World War. At the end of the war, America was “more prosperous than the country had been in all its three centuries of zest for good living. The boom rolled out in great fat waves, into every corner of the nation and up and down the social ladder” (Goldman 12). Despite this affluence of wealth and good fortune, the country shared a sense of doom as the Cold War began. For most, the ever-present fear of war or economic depression settled into the people’s collective consciousness. The intellectual community recognized that the country remained in its “spiritual crisis” begun in the previous century: “A zest in today, wondrous hopes for tomorrow – but always, in the [postwar] America, there were shadows. A nation accustomed to the categorical yes or no, to war or peace and prosperity and depression, found itself in the nagging realm of the maybe” (Goldman 14).

The American 1940s and 1950s, as Goldman writes, become times of “maybe.” In *The Age of Doubt*, William Graebner recasts this instability as the “culture of contingency.” He argues that as the century progressed, people came to see their existence and the existence of all that surrounds them as only chance. There is no longer some “plan” created by a “higher being” and implemented upon the Earth. As Graebner writes,
While cities, old age, and fears of joblessness were hardly new to the 1940s, events unique to that decade – Pearl Harbor, World War II, the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bomb, the cold war – produced a culture of profound contingency, in which virtually everything, one’s employment, one’s values, one’s very life, seemed dependent on the vagaries of chance. The sense of contingency that hung over the forties, then, was more than the contingency of capitalism – more, that is, than worries about the state of the economy, inflation, the stability of the banks, or the job market.

Aside from the economic, two sorts of contingency affected the mood of Americans during the decade. One was the contingency of existence, a contingency that flowed from being drafted and shot at, from witnessing the murder of the Jews, and from subjecting others – the populations of Dresden and Hiroshima, to start with – to the possibility of sudden, undeserved death. The other, a moral and ethical contingency, was characterized by the growing sense that it was now more difficult than ever before to ground one’s conduct in a stable system of values. Although moral contingency was a matter of general concern as early as the Darwinian revolution of the mid nineteenth century, the seminal events of the forties seemed to confirm that humanity had, indeed, been set adrift from its ethical moorings. Like life itself, values seemed to come and go, without pattern or reason. (19-20)

These spiritual and psychological crises forced the individual consciousness from its center. The western world contested and renounced the undeniable belief in a loving creator who watched over all humankind. Nietzsche’s cry in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “God is dead,” predicted the inevitable movement towards the radical indeterminacy of the early Twentieth Century. The post-Nietzschean Western world encountered a spiritual existence that lacked a spiritual center. The burden, partially created by Nietzsche’s “Overman,” forced the individual to make meaning for him - or herself. Some welcomed this “freedom” with enthusiasm. Others found this to be destabilizing as the individual must now be self-determinate. Peter Nicholls states in *Modernisms* that Modern man is “dominated by a ‘psychology of nerves’ and increasingly unpredictable, caught between a cult of ‘multiplied sensation,’ on the one hand, and an impasse of inaction and impotence, on the other. Afflicted by this typically ‘modern’ vacillation, the axis of the self seems precarious, barely sustainable, as it is buffeted by dizzying excesses of emotion which veer from disgust to inexplicable exaltation” (8). This sentiment results in a fear of this new “freedom” for the individual. William Butler Yeats’ “The Second Coming” expresses this very sentiment and reveals a desire to which Kerouac, in particular, would cling. In the poem, modernity pulls the individual in to a realization he simply does not want to have: “Turning and turning in the
widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/ Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (Yeats 215). Disconnected from his center, God, man now yearns for some meaning: “Surely some revelation is at hand” (Yeats 215). In the eyes of the Beat Generation, this lack of center led to the installation of a new God in the spirituality of America: capitalist materialism.

Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (1955-6) serves as an excellent literary elucidation of the status of America in the 1940s and 1950s. According to Ginsberg, America has lost its way and has become defiled:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks! Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb. (17)

In the above excerpt, America in the 1950s is Moloch. It is a place of horrific nightmares fueled by war, conformity, capitalism, and most importantly, loss of youth and innocence. This America encroaches into the mind of the people, leading them to search for and be comforted with little of consequence. As Graebner rightly notes, social analysts of the 1940s predicted that the uncertainty created by a nuclear culture would result in a culture centered around “products of the fleeting and trivial” (21). With “Howl,” Ginsberg seeks to fight against the cultural lethargy formed after World War II. He writes the story of the lone hipster suffering the atrocities of modernity. The first lines of the poem present the hipster seeking reprieve from his world: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/ dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,/ angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of the night” (9). Facing the prospects of modernity, the hipster looks back rather neo-classically to a time when the individual was connected to some meaningful and meaning-creative force. In this
world, the individual is separated and alone, struggling to live a creative, meaningful existence, or part of the whole, conforming to systems which have no real significance.

Ginsberg allows the hipster several possibilities for action. These may either be undertaken by the hipster, or they may be forced upon him. The hipster may travel alone seeking value: “who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went” (10), or he may remain solitary, though maybe not of his own decision, “cower[ing] in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall” (9). In either case, the hipster must remain separated from his goal, unable to attain it because of the overbearing power of Moloch. Ginsberg’s text presents a bleak vision of the individual in the modern world. The only redemption offered is in his “Footnote to Howl,” which by its very name can exist only as a vain attempt at a form of resurrection.

In reaction against the new God of capitalist materialism, many writers of the 1940s and 1950s began to seek alternatives to the lifestyle that was being forced upon them. In line with “Howl,” Graebner states: “In a world dominated by a sense of the contingent, writers increasingly dispensed with the kinds of social and economic explanations for conduct that had made perfect sense only a decade before. The new explanations were psychological, and often they were hardly explanations at all, laced as they were with idiosyncracy, mystery, and indeterminacy” (26). The Beat Generation writers fell into this group, using their material to not only confront the new America but also to pose a potential solution for the individual. John Tytell explores this Beat sensitivity in Naked Angels, his study of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. Tytell declares the Beat movement as "a crystallization of a sweeping discontent with American 'virtues' of progress and power" (4). The post-war American lost the ability to govern himself and the ideal of progress forced him into a uni-directional life devoid of self-determinacy. The Beats sought to counter this by placing the subject again in the center of his life; they sought to restore to man the ability to choose his own destiny. In so doing, these writers and thinkers "announced the death of the tribal god of American materialism and mechanization" (Prothero 209). Yet, this movement
was not only a nightmarish realization of man's place in the modern world, the Beats "sought to move beyond predictions of individual sadness to some transcendental hope"(Prothero 210).

The effects of modernity forced many concerns, fears, and questions onto the intellectual thinkers arising out of modernity and reacting against it. With the loss of traditional "values," writers and thinkers began to search for either new values or for ways to return to the older values. Technology and industrial progress, coupled with the new God of capitalism, created a furious drive for modernity and many felt an incredible need to criticize and remove themselves from modernity. The Beat Generation certainly involved themselves in this progress while at the same time reveling in the indeterminacy and radical new moral freedom associated with it. While many Beat Generation thinkers turned to this post-modern world, the world of faceless bureaucracy and industrialization, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Snyder turned from it and towards older, more established systems, which they believed would either free them from modernity or allow them to work and live productively within the maelstrom. For these answers they looked to Buddhist, Existentialist, and Transcendentalist sources. These sources may have provided the answers to a number of these writers, but they afforded little for Kerouac.

II. MYSTICAL TRANSCENDENTALISM AND THE "FELLAHEEN"

For Prothero's "transcendental hope," the Beat movement partially looked back to the Transcendentalist movement of the previous century. They found and ultimately assimilated into their work a belief in the sacredness of the everyday and of the individual. Scholars point out the influence of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman on various writers of the Beat Generation, in particular, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Certainly the long line of Whitman influenced Ginsberg's style, but it was the ideas Emerson set forth and Thoreau's interest in the East which most influenced Kerouac. Charters asserts that Kerouac "comforted himself with the ideal of Emersonian self-reliance" (Biography of Jack Kerouac 336). The radical individualism unmistakably struck the Beats, but the mystical leanings of Emerson were equally influential in
their yearning for both a supreme statement of Self and the great desire to lose Self in a complete unity with all that lies beyond.

Emersonian thought centers on the power of the individual and the understanding of “the sublime in the commonplace” (Matthiessen 40). Emerson refers to the Overman -- not to be mistaken with Nietzsche’s Overman -- as the quintessentially creative man. Where Nietzsche sees man as ultimately alone, Emerson believes in the possibility of re-connection or re-unification to a “universal.” This transcendental mystical outlook makes these two “overmen” different. In “An Address,” Emerson writes: “When a man comes, all books are legible, all things transparent, all religions are forms. Man is the wonderworker” (75). Emerson’s expressions of the power of the individual, revealed through his ability to make sense of his world, help draw the Beats to the Transcendentalists. Snared in the modernity of the 1950s, a world in which man is a “victim of circumstances” (Tytell 9), the Beats sought the ability to make sense of their world for themselves. Emerson’s Overman offers this possibility in his desire to connect to an underlying “Truth,” often referred to by Emerson as the Universal Being or Oversoul. Given mystical proportions this “Truth” reveals both a belief in the individual observer’s separation from the Universal Being and the eventual joining of the individual with the Universal Being through ecstatic observation.

Emerson’s “Truth” is a form of mystical truth. Defining mysticism remains problematic due to the appropriation of its ideas by various ideologies. In Mysticism and Philosophy, W.T. Stace attempts to trace the underlying aspects of mysticism thereby revealing the “One.” In so doing, he encounters the paradoxical nature of mysticism, which I believe Emerson incorporates into his concept of the Universal Being. Stace divides the mystical experience into two types, extrovertive and introvertive, in order to reveal both the subjectivity and objectivity of the experience. These two types share characteristics, such as a feeling of joy or blessedness, the feeling that the experience is holy, an awareness of the ineffability of the experience, and a feeling of unity. They differ in the expression of this unity and in the subject/object of their
viewing (Stace 79,111). On the one hand, the unity expressed is objective; the individual views a
sense of unity in the world at hand. This extrovertive mysticism is spatial and temporal and very
much of the world. An introvertive mystical experience, on the other hand, results in a non-
temporal, non-spatial loss of individuality, thus experiencing unity with the Universal Being that
lies outside yet inherent in everything. While the extrovertive experience depends on the physical
senses, the introvertive denies and rejects them. The extrovertive is exterior and objective; the
introvertive is interior and subjective.

While these two types are not mutually exclusive, a famous passage by Emerson will
help to differentiate between them:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without
having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect
exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years,
as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods
is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a
perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a
thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith...Standing on the bare ground
- my head bathed in blithe air and uplifted into infinite space - all mean egotism vanishes.
I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal
Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (6)

This passage suggests both an extrovertive and an introvertive mystical experience. They may
seem to occur simultaneously, but the occurrence moves from extrovertive to introvertive.

Emerson begins the passage by situating himself in the world. He makes no assertion that the
experience requires the quietude of the “woods” or the energy of the “common.” This
extrovertive experience can occur in either place and, importantly, at any time. Noticeably, what
the passage lacks is any mention of a practice or ritual that leads to the mystical happening. This
experience can occur “without having in [his] thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune.”

As I have already stated, this experience begins as the extrovertive type. The very object of his
contemplation suggests this. He shows himself walking in the world, viewing the world, and
experiencing “a decorum and sanctity.” Emerson’s language, including the usage of “reason,”
“faith,” and “God,” complicates our understanding, but the “decorum and sanctity” Emerson
speaks of are strikingly similar to the expression of a unity in the world. This unity is a key aspect of the Universal Being.

The individual in extrovertive experience views a separated object and this object reflects the Universal Being. The mystic “sees the world as divine and therefore speaks pantheistically of it, or of the divine element in it, as God” (Stace 74). Emerson views a unity in the common and in the woods, but he does not see these places and the objects there as one, rather, he sees them as differentiated and separate from him. That Emerson “senses” this unity with his eyes factors importantly because the extrovertive experience requires perception “through the physical senses” (Stace 78). The use of the eye connects the extrovertive and introvertive aspects of Emerson’s mystical experience.

Introvertive mysticism shares certain aspects with extrovertive mysticism, like the feeling of a unity, but the understanding and the representation of this unity is different. Introvertive experience negates the differentiation between the individual and the various objects experienced in extrovertive mysticism. No distinction exists between the subject and the object. In Emerson’s passage, he transcends the distinction between himself and the world when he becomes the “transparent eyeball.” Emerson loses his individual ego and he experiences unity with the One: “I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.” The unity includes a direct relationship with the One: “In essence man is God. In essence he is one with the Oversoul, not fragmented or detached from It” (Politella 13). The loss of the individual’s “mean egotism” implies a subjective, internalized mysticism unlike the objective, externalized expression inherent in extrovertive mysticism.

Introvertive mysticism also differs from the other type in its transcendence of spatial and temporal reality. The mystic undergoing an introvertive experience becomes part of the infinite. This individual, united with the Universal Being, transcends both spatial and temporal limitations; he is at all places and all times at once. Emerson’s passage reveals this aspect of the experience. After the extrovertive experience, Emerson’s head is “bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into
infinite space.” The subjective experience removes Emerson’s head, the part of his body which
will experience this mysticism, from the finite realm to the infinite where he can “see all.”

This ecstatic mysticism affected Kerouac’s notions of both the Transcendentalists and
Emerson. His prose style and the content and characters of his stories reflect a desire to show,
like Emerson, the “sublime in the commonplace.” Kerouac presents a world of the “beat”
becoming beatific. It is a world where the individual can and often does have an ecstatic,
mystical vision, the seedy underworld of hipsters and intellects who have dropped out of the race
for the inconsequential “modern,” the soulless world of houses with white picket fences, in order
to question it and to make their existence important. Kerouac, through his depictions of his
friends, sought to glorify his and their position in America. On the Road presented Neal Cassady
to the world, the wild “angel-headed hipster” who was on the fringe of acceptable values.

Cassady, written as Dean Moriarty, steals cars, smokes marijuana, commits adultery, fathers
children whom he never sees, and generally reflects the desire to make something of himself out
of his meager existence as the son of a train hobo. Cassady wants to be successful on his own
terms, to live the excited life as he creates, not as it is created for him. Kerouac, for the most part,
portrays Cassady as Moriarty as a transcendent character. Despite his many setbacks, both in his
past and in his present, Cassady remains the hipster unaffected and unafflicted by the world
which surrounds and wants to oppress him. The hipster is reactionary. He reacts against and
resists the encroaching values and norms that surround him by indulging in the world that lay
outside of accepted mores: “Living in close contact with criminals, prostitutes, knowing the
brutality of the police, the hipster acted as if he wanted to laugh the sadness of his world out of
existence, always illuminating his despair or ecstasy with music and drugs” (Tytell 22).

The term ‘beat,’ especially for Kerouac, evolved from the connotation of the individual
oppressed by the new, Modern American values to the idea of a beatific vision. Stephen
Prothero, writing from the position that the Beat movement was primarily religious, grants this
transformative power to the arrival of Neal Cassady into the lives of both Ginsberg and Kerouac.
Kerouac deliberately attempts to write out the world of revered intellectuals and hopes to display the plight and situation of the common man, not only as he does something truly worthy with his life, but also as he does so almost completely unrecognized. Thus the hipster becomes for Kerouac the vision of the transcendent.

If we were to level a criticism at Kerouac’s vision of the hipster, it would be that he always uses a male figure to portray the hipster; women thus play a subordinate role in all of his texts, generally reflecting the male characters’ actions. From the assortment of women in Dean Moriarty’s life and Mardou Fox in The Subterraneans (1958), to those in The Dharma Bums and Desolation Angels, women play primarily the role of the object in Kerouac’s fiction. In both of the novels focused on here, Kerouac presents women as objects that the male characters act upon. He generally represents women in two ways: the mother and the sexual partner; occasionally, they play both roles. He consistently, throughout his novels, portrays his mother as a protective force to which he can run when he needs help. However, she also represents the object of his (failed?) manhood as he must take care of her. The characters who participate in yab-yum in The Dharma Bums, especially Princess, become objects of sexual and spiritual desire for Smith and ultimately only fulfill him and the other male characters sexually. While Smith, Ryder, and Goldbook give the act some spiritual significance, this meaning does not transfer onto the female participant. According to the three male practitioners, she can only experience yab-yum as sexual. Finally, Kerouac gives the only real agency of action or authority to men. Because of this, his novels concern themselves with the lives of men, not women.

Concentrating on the common man, both The Dharma Bums and Desolation Angels are filled with praise for what Prothero terms the “fellaheen.” The novels present the lives of not only the protagonists, Smith and Dulouz, struggling writers fighting to write their worlds and gain recognition for their efforts, but also the lives of those who surround them: the truck drivers and train riders with whom they crisscross America and the globe, the loggers and fire lookouts, the spiritual seekers, the heroine addicts and alcoholics, and the other intellectuals searching for some
creative and productive outlet. The Beats turned from the normalized society and “looked for spiritual insight not to the religious elites but to the racially marginal and the socially inferior, ‘fellah’ groups that shared with them an aversion to social structures and established religion” (Prothero 212). The influence of this mystical transcendentalism presented itself as "the sacralization of everyday life and the sacramentalization of human relationships" (Prothero 214).

This "transcendental hope," constituted by the Transcendentalists, triggered the study of Buddhism in both Kerouac and Ginsberg, as well as in a few of the San Franciscan Beat poets, primarily Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder. The interest both Emerson and Thoreau shared for Eastern Literatures, in particular the Bhagvat-Geeta, a Hindu text, may have ultimately led the Beats to Buddhism. Thoreau, too, translated what became the first English translation of the Lotus Sutra in 1844, although what knowledge the Beats may have had of that translation remains conjectural. Kerouac, in particular, began to study Buddhism in 1954 and began to see it as a method to escape the "morass of the Self" (Tytell 25) and as an "eventual merger with entities larger than the Self" (Tytell 75). This became an important paradox, because while the Beats in their new freedom began to focus their writing on the personality of a subject, a few hoped to remove themselves completely from the confines of the Self. Where Tytell sees Kerouac’s study as a subconscious desire “to gain perspective on his own disappointments, delusions, anger and temporal failures” (76), I see his study of Buddhism as a conscious effort to move beyond those "failures" through his own acceptance and overcoming of them.

III. KEROUAC’S SPONTANEOUS PROSE METHOD AND MEDITATION

This “overcoming” partially describes what I believe Kerouac hoped to accomplish with his Spontaneous Prose technique. As Ginsberg remarks:

Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect, said: 'Form follows function.'
Here, I'm defining the content and function - or the theme of a certain kind of modern poetry and film - as a mirror of the activity of the actual mind during the time of writing. Which was Kerouac's idea. So that the prose or poetry would include
everything that goes on in the mind of the writer during the time his pen is touching the paper until it picks up from the paper. (Ginsberg, *Big Sky Mind* 136)

Nelson Eddy credits Neal Cassady’s “Joan Anderson Letter” with the creation of Kerouac’s prose method. The letter, as Ginsberg states, “read with speed and rush, without halt, all unified, one molten flow; no boring moments, everything significant and interesting, sometimes breathtaking in speed and brilliance” (Eddy 16). It would eventually display to Kerouac the very technique he sought. In a brief piece entitled “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose,” Kerouac set down a list of essentials for his new process. Three of the most interesting “essentials” lead the observer to notice the ease with which this prosaic procedure becomes meditative:

8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monologue. (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 483)

In “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” written very much in the style it hopes to describe, Kerouac describes not only the way to write but also from what perspective and mental state. He writes:

“Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion” (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 485). And later:

If possible write “without consciousness” in semitrance (as Yeats’ later ‘trance writing’) allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so ‘modern’ language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich’s ‘beclouding of consciousness.’ (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 485)

With the implication of the “subconscious,” the reader may immediately believe that this statement reflects a psychological urge, an urge created by the Self, for the non-rational and therefore contradicts my assertion that by writing, Kerouac hoped to escape his own mind.

Ultimately, though, it reflects the Buddhist practice of meditation in which the practitioner begins by focusing on himself so that he may ultimately lose himself. In this way, Kerouac's writing was a form of meditation.
Meditation, according to Buddhist doctrine, acts as a "way of affecting one's behavior to the world, other people, and oneself" (Tytell 26). The practice of sitting meditation both calms and concentrates the mind. The practitioner concentrates on his self-nature, which will eventually reveal to him the Buddha-nature, the true understanding of existence. However, as many Buddhist scholars and teachers stress, one can only reach self-nature by not grasping for it. The practitioner must allow the mind to go free in order to attain pointed concentration. The starting point is also not fixed: "In principle, any material or mental object, from a matchbox to the loftiest philosophical conceptions, may serve as the external basis for the development of one-pointedness of mind" (Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* 177). Sitting meditation requires peaceful quiet. As Edward Conze, a pre-eminent Buddhist scholar, writes: “No distractions can touch the man who’s alone both in his body and mind” (100).

The act of meditation is of seeing, which is very much in the vein of thought surrounding Emersonian transcendental mysticism. Buddhist meditation differs from mysticism in the necessity for an exercise, which leads to an experience. As will be discussed in more depth later, the seeing into one’s self-nature re-unifies that nature to the Buddha-nature, which is the true understanding of existence. Buddhist ideology holds that all existence is empty/void of intrinsic existence. Because of this philosophic belief, the practitioner, upon finding his self-nature, actually loses himself and has what may be termed something akin to an introvertive mystical experience. However, where introvertive experience aims to gain unity with the surrounding world for a certain amount of time, meditation aims to reach a point where the practitioner is continually in this state of unity: “When meditation is attained, an illumination inside and outside comes by itself upon one; and because of this illumination inside and outside, one sees purity” (Suzuki 162). The seeing does not view a specific consciousness or existence; in fact, that can actually keep the practitioner from his goal.

Kerouac’s spontaneous prose method and transcendentalism intersect at this point of meditation. Kerouac, through prose, which would begin with his Self and travel “from center to
periiphery," seeks to lose himself and find the Buddha-nature. Many scholars, including Matthiessen, describe the work of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman as a "language experiment" which sought to display experience through language. Matthiessen states that Emerson "would have agreed that when the poet is receptive to the divine effluence, his mind is endowed directly with the word that embodies the thing" (31). This "effluence" can be seen as the Buddha-nature, that which underlies all existence. In order to get to this underlying essence, the poet must recognize that language not only embodies the thing itself but can also become a process by which we can arrive at the thing:

In veering into the idea that not only words are emblematic but things as well, [Emerson] could carelessly toss language aside as being insufficient to encompass the reality that lay beyond it. At this point the thing that the word should cover is no longer the natural object that can give body to the thought; it has become the process of thought itself, by which the poet’s mind shares in the divine mind. (Matthiessen 43)

The active nature of meditation will prove to be of utmost importance for my task here. While meditation represents a passive pursuit in that the practitioner seemingly sits and waits, the effect and the process initiate an active joining of the individual with all existence and the loss of the subject. The seeing “is not reflecting on an object as if the seer had nothing to do with it. The seeing, on the contrary, brings the seer and the object seen together, not in mere identification but the becoming conscious of itself, or rather of its working. The seeing is an active deed, involving the dynamic conception of self-being; that is, of the Mind” (Suzuki 160). Both Ray Smith and Jack Dulouz, like Kerouac, are writers. They are incapable of losing their subjectivity, not only through Buddhist practice and study, but also through the act of writing. They finally can only see language and writing as means to display or signify an experience rather than as the experience itself. Like their writing, their Buddhist practice cannot help them lose themselves. Meditative practice serves almost solely as their base for Buddhist belief and practice. A classic Zen exchange reflects the inadequacy of meditation alone:

Observing how assiduously Ma-tsu was engaged in practicing tso-ch'an ["sitting in meditation"] every day, Yuan Huai-jang said: "Friend, what is your intention in practicing tso-ch'an?" Ma-tsu said, “I wish to attain Buddhahood.” Thereupon Huai-
jang took up a brick and began to polish it. Ma-tsu asked: “What are you engaged in?” “I want to make a mirror of it.” “No amount of polishing makes a mirror out of a brick.” Huia-jang at once retorted: “No amount of practicing tso-ch’an will make you attain Buddhahood.” (Suzuki 177)

Along with their too narrow focus on meditation, Kerouac’s protagonists’ reliance on the Transcendentalists’ ideology limits the search for the loss of Self. Despite the linguistic experiments performed by both Smith and Dulouz, they use language ultimately only in a way in which to describe existence and as a way to live it, but not in such a way as to become it:

Like Emerson, the Beats aimed to make contact with the sacred on the nonverbal, transconceptual level of intuition and feeling, and then to transmit at least a part of what they had experienced into words. Like Thoreau, they insisted on the sanctity of everyday life and the sainthood of the nonconformist. And like George Ripley and his associates at Brook Farm, they aimed to create a spiritual brotherhood based on shared experiences, shared property, shared literature, and an ethic of ‘continual conscious compassion.’ (Prothero 220)

Whatever the influence the Transcendentalists had finally, they certainly led the Beats, and especially Kerouac, towards Buddhism and towards a belief in “the sacralization of everyday life and the sacramentalization of human relationships” (Prothero 214).

IV. KEROUAC AND BUDDHISM

Undoubtedly Kerouac understood some Buddhist practice and studied the religion quite extensively. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg, written in May 1954, Kerouac lists a brief bibliography of the texts he believes must be read in order to gain access to Buddhism: “and of course, for your beginning studies of Buddhism, you must listen to me carefully and implicitly as tho I was Einstein teaching you relativity or Eliot teaching the formulas of Objective Correlation on a blackboard in Princeton” (Selected Letters 215). He goes on to list a wide variety of texts encompassing the whole tradition of Buddhism. They include a biography of the Buddha written by Asvaghosa the Patriarch; several texts concerned with the various Sutras: Texts from the Buddhist Canon known as Dhammapada, Henry Clarke Warren’s Buddhism in Translations, and Dwight Goddard’s The Buddhist Bible; and various other texts all dealing with Buddhism
throughout its tradition. The letter cites nine different sources and tells Ginsberg which to read first. Along with his own writing, Kerouac began to compile a book of notes, later published as *Some of the Dharma*, for Ginsberg to study by. Despite this admirable study and production, it is readily apparent that although Kerouac had an interest in both Buddhism and Catholicism, he was neither. Kerouac wanted to write a multi-volume account of his life, after the examples of Proust, Flaubert, and Balzac. The content of his novels would then be based on some degree of fact. As Kerouac never directly states that the story he writes concerns himself, the reader must take into account the possibility of hyperbole, which calls any biographical truth as depicted in his novels into question. Given this problematic, Kerouac's belief in Buddhism plays only a minor role here. However, his Buddhist interests definitely affected his narrative style and content and helped determine his characters.

Any understanding or analysis of Buddhism must begin and end with the Four Noble Truths. They are:

1. Suffering
2. The Arising of Suffering
3. The Cessation of Suffering
4. The Path to the Cessation of Suffering

(Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* 143)

These "Truths" represent the two key Buddhist concepts of ignorance and enlightenment. Buddhist teaching holds that ignorance and desire cause suffering. These attributes stay the individual from the attainment of enlightenment. Ignorance is a lack of understanding of the true nature of existence, whereas enlightenment is the ability to see existence as it truly is. Edward Conze's translation of the Four Noble Truths provides an adequate explanation of each. For the first, Conze explains that "Birth is ill, decay is ill, sickness is ill, death is ill . . . In short, all grasping at (any of) the five skandhas [the constituents of the personality: body, feelings, perceptions, volitional impulses, and consciousness] (involves) suffering" (Conze 43). The origin and cessation of suffering, according to Conze, resides in the craving associated with the continuation of the Self both on Earth and in some heavenly realm and the necessary release or
halt to such craving. Finally, the Noble Eightfold Path, the “path” the practitioner must take, consists of: “Right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration” (Conze 43). I will return briefly to the “path” below. The Four Noble Truths thus recognize suffering but they also recognize a way out, the Path to Nirvana.

What do these "Truths" have to do with Kerouac's work? Along with his own recognition of these (Some of the Dharma 3) in his own study of Buddhism, he tended to argue that all life is suffering (Charters, Biography 189). Exactly what he meant by this we cannot say. In light of his letters written to friends across the country, Kerouac must have felt that the desire for something “out there,” like a heavenly realm or a Universal Being, and the ignorant view people had of existence caused suffering, not only for himself, but for everyone. Much that he does say on the subject has to do with the ego. Traditional Mahayana Buddhist belief rests heavily on the idea of emptiness or sunyata and suchness or tathata. These concepts act as polar opposites that merge in the realm of Nirvana. When the practitioner recognizes what existence consists of in actuality, he reaches sunyata and tathata at the same time as he attains his self-nature, which is the Buddha-nature (Suzuki 210). In all cases, in order to erase the opposition, the practitioner must deny the existence of any static Self. By reading and accepting the Four Noble Truths, the practitioner recognizes that no individual spirit survives intact from birth to death and beyond. This, in part, causes Kerouac's suffering, the desire to overcome a belief and need for a Self. Kerouac himself recognizes the inherent suffering caused by belief in a Self in a letter to Carolyn Cassady dated May 17, 1954. Here, he discusses Neal Cassady's acceptance of the philosophies of Edgar Cayce:

Then, yes, carbumming around land, I would return to San Jose, and see you, and already look forward to that, tho, nothing is real, all is a dream, yet, we should get together once and for all and have a real battle because I still say you have been duped into belief in ego and self-nature and immortality by Cayce, who in every respect is radiantly right, excepting the matter of ego-personality as an entity, an atman, that lasts from life to life. With what material, I pray you, does an entity carry itself over; what is that essential permanent and indestructible stuff and suchness of the stuff that makes what you call a
This passage characterizes Kerouac’s confusing outlook on Buddhism. He contradicts his own understanding when he declares any belief in self-nature to be a “dupe.” Zen Buddhism makes use of a self-nature to equate a person’s self-nature to the Buddha-nature or the reality of existence. Suzuki declares: “So long as this world, as conceived by the human mind, is a realm of opposites, there is no way to escape from it and to enter into a world of emptiness where all opposites are supposed to merge” (184). By proclaiming self-nature wrong, Kerouac perpetuates the system of opposites.

Kerouac speaks here from a position directly opposing any Catholic viewpoint. He refutes the idea of the Soul and any traverse to Heaven. While he freely admits that craving and clinging to a Self is wrong, whether Kerouac himself ever escaped his own soul, his own Self, remains questionable. His Buddhist practice halted sometime in the late 1950s and he died conflicted about that Self. As Charters writes in her biography, Stella, Kerouac’s wife, “told everybody that he’d been sick for weeks, and that he’d been ‘so lonely, so lonely’” (367). Kerouac knew that clinging to an ego caused suffering and this supplied much of the motive force for his treatment of both Ray Smith and Jack Duluoz.

In his comments to Carolyn Cassady, Kerouac suggests the opposition between Samsara and Nirvana, between life within the desiring Self and life unattached to a desiring Self. Sangharakshita, an Englishman who heads the Western Buddhist Order, writes that Nirvana "can be described not only as the cessation of ignorance, but also, more positively, as the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment" (A Survey of Buddhism 136). Just what this state of Nirvana is, no one can say definitively, but it requires a distance from the “normal” Self, if not the cessation of conscious operations. Even the Buddha does not define Nirvana in any other way than as the opposite of a state of ignorance or Samsara. Despite its inherent ineffability, Sangharakshita declares Nirvana to be "a state of absolute illumination, supreme bliss, infinite love and
compassion, unshakable serenity, and unrestricted spiritual freedom"*(A Survey of Buddhism 27).* Both the early and late schools concentrate on the path to enlightenment and the behavior of supposed enlightened beings.

Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle," Buddhism concentrates much of its effort on the delineation of the path of Samsara and the path to Enlightenment, which later schools, such as Mahayana and Zen, will use as a focal point for active practice. This “early” focus results in the formulation of the "Wheel of Life," an icon crucial to understanding the nature of sentient, Samsaric existence. Existence, in Buddhist terms, necessitates willful, volitional action, in a world of endless cause and effect: “karma.” Karma functions on the principle of conditionality, a belief held by Buddhists that actions and incidents do not occur of their volition, but rather by the volition of a sentient being. Thus, every action has its precedents and its consequences all contrived and executed by the sentient being. A being, anything that has a conscious, typically believed to be anything “alive” by Buddhist thinkers, may either be reborn to this existence or to the realm of Supreme Enlightenment based on that being’s actions.

Traditional Buddhist iconography draws the Wheel of Life as four successive circles surrounded and held by the demon of Impermanence. Its proposes to show the world of ignorance thus displaying all the aspects of Samsara. The outermost circle, that part of the wheel most useful here, divides into twelve different pictures and represents the Twelvefold Path. Hereafter, I will refer to this section as the Wheel of Samsara. The Twelvefold Path is the most common method of describing Samsara. It serves two purposes:

Firstly, by pointing to a definite series of concrete instances it enables the disciple to develop a clearer insight into the universal law of the impermanent and conditioned nature of all phenomena. Secondly, by showing how birth, old age, disease and death, and the rest of the woes inherent in phenomenal existence, arise in dependence upon conditions, and how in the absence of those conditions they cease, it offers an intelligible explanation of human suffering, and points out a way of escape from the mundane to the

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1 For an illustration and further information concerning the Wheel of Life, see Sangharakshita. *A Guide to the Buddhist Path* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1990) 70-84.
transcendental, from the bondage of Samsara into the state of perfect Freedom which is Nirvana. (Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* 126)

The stages of the Wheel correspond to either life-as-result or life-as-cause. The individual trapped in the life-as-result is seen either as eternalistic or annihilistic; he either believes in the existence of another "heavenly" realm or he sees no inherent meaning in anything. In either case, both necessitate a belief in a self. Mahayana Buddhism, often called the Middle Path, assimilates aspects of both of these beliefs while never affirming the existence of an ego or soul. The individual who holds these eternalistic or annihilistic beliefs remains ignorant to the true nature of existence. He continues on the Samsaric passage of birth and death never escaping the circle.

Samsara is the nature of all ignorant existence. It is life as we know it, when we continue to desire life or we desire either the end of life or the passing on to a heavenly realm. When a sentient being continues to crave these things, he must remain in Samsara. This craving is what is important for Kerouac's novels.

A sentient being's ignorance and Karma, or volitional actions, do not lead him towards freedom but away from it. Ignorance and Karma direct him towards the life-as-cause, in which he corrupts his mind and body with ignorant thought. The development of the individual's consciousness, personality, and senses open him to craving the false. The individual believes that life will lead him to God or Heaven thus causing the continuance of ignorance. The individual in this case views the world as a means to attain to the next world rather than seeing Nirvana in this one. On the other hand, the nihilist sees no inherent meaning or truth in this existence thus bonding himself to the Wheel of Suffering or Samsara.

The life-as-cause is thus completed at craving or thirst. At the time that the individual craves that which does not characterize enlightenment, the individual must continue in Samsara. The individual must continue to grasp for this life, for the next life, for that which unknowingly causes suffering, finally, for the existence of a self. Kerouac knew the danger of craving: "And
all because you wanted more, more, more, always more, more, more. I'm the same way, don't blame ya. But there's got to be an end to clinging, I say" (Charters, Selected Letters 420).

However, the individual can break free from the circle of Samsara and follow the path to enlightenment at this very juncture. If the individual recognizes and renounces that which causes ignorance and suffering, the individual may proceed on the Path to Nirvana. The individual still has craving, but now it becomes a desire to remove himself from suffering, ignorance, and ultimately from any distinction between himself and his surroundings. Once the individual reaches this form of craving, he may follow the spiral Path to Nirvana. This path, already mentioned as the Noble Eightfold Path, reflects a set of beliefs and actions that lead one from the Wheel of Samsara at the point of craving. From this ignorant stage, the practitioner may slowly realize the true nature of his existence, ultimately attaining Supreme Enlightenment. This Supreme Enlightenment discards any belief in a Self or soul and results in an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life. In the “Diamond Sutra,” Subhuti, one of the Buddha's disciples, states this as one of the Buddha's teachings:

And if there is such a disciple the reason he will be able to awaken a pure faith will be because he has ceased to cherish any arbitrary conceptions as to his own selfness, the selfhood of others, of living beings, of an Universal Self. Why is this so? It is because, if he is cherishing any arbitrary conception as to his own selfhood, he will be cherishing something that is non-existent. It is the same as to all arbitrary conceptions of other personalities, living beings, or an Universal Self. They are all expressions of things that are non-existent. If a disciple is able to discard all arbitrary conceptions of phenomena or about phenomena, he will immediately become a Buddha. (Goddard 107)

Kerouac knew this as well. In a letter to Carolyn Cassady dated July 2, 1954, he writes:

The thing that's alive is Dharmakaya [the Buddhanature], the Truth Essence. Permeating everywhere all the time. Nothing to worry about. Biggest trouble is hangup on self, on ego-personality. I am not Jack, I am the Buddha now. I am only Jack when I act myself, which is, mean, silly, narrow, selfish [emphasis mine]. The Buddha has come into me, taken my place like Burroughs monsters growing within, and now I look in the mirror and those individual marks I see, of Jack-self, are false and phantasmal. (Charters, Selected Letters 428)

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This awareness appears as shallow in light of its similarity to introvertive mystical experience and the fact that Kerouac was unable to complete the transition from Samsara to Nirvana. However, the point is well made that when the practitioner attains Nirvana, he becomes the Buddha in so much as there exists no difference or distinction between the two. As Suzuki states, the world of Nirvana is the world "of emptiness [of intrinsic being] where all opposites are supposed to emerge" (184).

Certainly Buddhist practice aims for the attainment of Nirvana. However, Buddhist tradition attributes equal importance to the path that leads to enlightenment and enlightenment itself. In many ways, and for our purposes, Mahayana, or Middle Way, Buddhism is more performative than conceptual, more active than passive or reactive. What then must be performed in order to become enlightened? Buddhist tradition describes ten precepts that must be followed in order to be like the Buddha and eventually to attain to Nirvana. Susan Kayorie describes Ray Smith's adherence to the Precepts in her article "The Ten Precepts of Zen in Kerouac's The Dharma Bums." Her findings stress Smith's momentary failure or triumph with the Precepts but do not discuss the overriding implications. Smith holds true to some of the Precepts and falters on others. His inability to relinquish his belief in a Self causes this faltering. The ultimate goal must be this relinquishment and the practitioner must achieve the goal in two ways. First, this relinquishing can occur internally as the practitioner realizes the interconnectedness of all existence and therefore the lack of Self. Second, and equally important, this relinquishing can occur externally through compassion where the practitioner practices giving for itself rather than for himself. The Buddhist tradition often refers to the Buddha as "Tathagata." Phonetically, "tathagata" can be pronounced in two ways and either means "He who has thus gone" or "He who has thus come" (Goddard 103). The word thus represents both the internal and external means of attaining to enlightenment while maintaining that both reside in the individual practitioner. "He

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4 For a description of the precepts, see Edward Conze's Buddhism: Its Essence and Development, page 86 or Sangharakshita's A Survey of Buddhism, pages 163-165.
who has thus gone" refers to the ascetic who leaves the world of ignorance and suffering to purify himself and prepare for Nirvana. On the other hand, "He who has thus come" refers to the ascetic who re-immerses himself in the world in order to practice compassion thereby leading not only himself but those who surround him to enlightenment. The Buddha declares himself to be Tathagata in the Diamond Sutra but says, "the true Tathagata is never coming from anywhere, nor is he going anywhere. The name, Tathagata, is merely a word" (Goddard 103). With these words, the Buddha praises action over words. This will figure prominently in *Desolation Angels* with Kerouac's continual calling forth of Avolikiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion.

As stated before, Middle Way Buddhism describes a path between eternalistic and nihilistic beliefs. Kerouac represents the perfect specimen for this analysis because he is a Catholic trapped in an existential world. He attempts to not only include God/Buddha in his life, but to make connections with both while still making meaning out of his own life. I will not attempt to identify to what degree Kerouac is a Catholic or a Buddhist because I believe he has a slippery grasp of both religions, melded in just such a way as to suit his needs. Richard Sorrell's article "The Catholicism of Jack Kerouac" describes very well the Catholic education and influence received by Kerouac and his subsequent Buddhist period. Sorrell attributes Kerouac's Buddhism more to his Catholicism than to any real belief in the Eastern religion (195). Ultimately, Sorrell writes, "Kerouac came to the conclusion that the meditative isolation of Buddhism was too boring. Its blandness went against his Catholic nature which sought the heroics of 'terrible' suffering. Kerouac's fervent, pious sentimentality was more at home in Catholicism" (195). Kerouac, like Sorrell in this instance, mistakenly assumed a reactivity and passivity in Buddhism, which describes simply one part of the later schools. They both miss the inherent activity required for a shift in consciousness arrived at through practice, both solitary and in the world. Mahayana Buddhism weaves its way around the eternalistic tendencies of Catholicism. In the case of Catholicism, the existence of a God that the "fallen" man must return to, necessitates the existence of a Soul that will pass on from this life and reside either in Heaven
or Hell. Along with the continued dichotomy of God/Man, this "return" insinuates that some static part of the Self will pass on complete with memories. Middle Way Buddhism avoids the nihilistic tendencies of thought associated with existentialism. As with Catholicism, Sartrean analysis demands a dichotomy, either between Self/Other or Self/Self. Also, in terms of Sartrean analysis, I will argue that through the recognition of an Other, there must be a Self. This will return us eventually to the Buddhism of both Ray Smith and Jack Dulouz. Are these characters able to relinquish any distinction of themselves from their surroundings? If not, how can the reader see them in any other way than as trapped in a Samsaric existence still clinging and craving suffering and ignorance?

V. JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND EXISTENTIALISM

In opposition to Buddhism's stance lies Existentialism's affirmation of the Self. Existentialism, as William Barrett sees it, began with Soren Kierkegaard. Indeed Barrett includes a story which Kierkegaard used to illustrate the modern man's existential plight: "The story is told of the absent-minded man so abstracted from his own life that he hardly knows he exists until, one fine morning, he wakes up to find himself dead" (3). The story illuminates man's awareness of the abstraction occurring in his life: the abstraction of meaning as determined by a "higher" power. The existentialist sets the individual in this world free to make meaning for himself and universalizes this struggle:

The divorce of mind from life was something that had happened to philosophers simply in the pursuit of their own specialized problems. Since philosophers are only a tiny fraction of the general population, the matter would not be worth laboring were it not that this divorce of mind from life happens to be taking place, catastrophically, in modern civilization everywhere. (Barrett 8)

Sartre certainly comes out of this tradition, trapped in a world of fragmentation and negation. With his pronouncement of existence before essence, Sartre attempts to provide a way out for the individual. These concerns represent the concerns of Kerouac as well. Realizing his solitude in the world, Kerouac's existential beliefs may have helped to push him towards desiring mystical
experience and towards study and belief in both Catholicism and Buddhism. Failure to achieve some re-union or union with God/Buddha/Universal Being may well have pushed Kerouac back towards existential belief both in his life and in the lives of his protagonists. The understanding of the Other in both men's eyes connects Kerouac and Sartre. In very definite ways, the Other stands as a powerful identifying factor in the individual under analysis. For Sartre, the Other stands in opposition to the Self, as either object or subject, thus providing some quality to the life of the individual. For Kerouac, this will actually cause him to lose any real opportunity for enlightenment. As long as he continues to see an Other, he cannot have relinquished his own Self.

Sartrean metaphysics denies any power to return to a higher being:

Sartre, however, is the Cartesian doubter at a different place and time: God is dead, and no longer guarantees to this passionate and principled atheist that vast structure of essences, the world, to which his freedom must give assent. As a modern man, Sartre remains in the anguish of nothingness in which Descartes floated before the miraculous light of God shone to lead him out of it. For Sartre there is no unalterable structure of essences or values given prior to man's own existence. That existence has meaning, finally, only as the liberty to say No, and by saying No to create a world. (Barrett 217)

The individual here says "No" to the assertion of a universal behind all existence and thereby firmly establishes himself in the world around him without the constraints of the ego. Sartre sets up a dichotomy of existence: being-in-itself (en-soi) and being-for-itself (pour-soi). Being-in-itself assumes the separation of the object from its surroundings: a table is a table because it is not the floor. Being-for-itself stands outside of the object altogether and thus outside of the subject/object distinction. Sartre sees existence as absurd if lived from the position of being-in-itself. However, if the individual can integrate himself into the world meaningfully, as being-for-itself, his existence gains great significance. The individual who experiences existence as being-for-itself views himself and everything around him as a subject. He recognizes subjectivity and consciousness equal to his own in those things around him, primarily other people.

Importantly, the existence of the Self does not depend on the existence of the Other. However, the existence of the Self as being-in-itself or being-for-itself does depend on the
relationship the Self has to the Other: "He is the test of my being inasmuch as he throws me outside of myself toward structures which at once both escape me and define me" (Sartre 331).

The Other cannot truly know the Self just as the Self cannot truly know the Other. The Other derives importance not from how the Other sees the Self but rather from how the Self perceives itself to be seen by the Other. The Other then becomes the true movement towards value because the Other pulls the Self towards self-consciousness:

Thus the 'moment' which Hegel calls being for the Other is a necessary stage of the development of self-consciousness; the road of interiority passes through the Other. But the Other is of interest to me only to the extent that he is another Me, a Me-object for Me, and conversely to the extent that he reflects my Me. (Sartre 320)

The Other interests Sartre in so much as the Other can be used to combat solipsism and thus being-in-itself.

Because of the difficulty involved in any effort to overcome solipsism, Sartre states that "Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state" (140). So the question remains: what is “the possible?” Human reality lacks something that necessitates “the possible” in order to overcome it. As Sartre says earlier: “A lack presupposes a trinity: that which is missing or the 'lacking,' that which misses what is lacking or 'the existing,' and a totality which has been broken by the lacking and which would be restored by the synthesis of 'the lacking' and 'the existing' - this is 'the lacked'" (Sartre 135). “The lacked" reflects in Buddhist terms what would be called a craving or thirst by the Self for something outside of the Self (i.e. the continuation of existence or a return to a heavenly realm). But what does the Self aim for in this existential life? The Self aims for value, according to Sartre, which is "the lacked." In order to achieve this value, the Self must change from being-in-itself to being-for-itself because being-for-itself annihilates, by a valuable consciousness, the being-in-itself and

I take my reading of Sartre’s Self/Other dichotomy as well as the en-soi and the pour-soi from his Being and Nothingness. The reading then of value, so integral to any understanding of the Self/Other dichotomy, while not necessary here, will prove useful for the understanding of the construction of the “subject.” In reading Kerouac, I assume the existence of the subject already, although I do not presume to state either Smith’s or Dulouz’s existence as “value.”
the “unhappy state.” Thus, what is "the possible" is also what is "the lacking" and it is ultimately impossible for the Self to combine with it to reach "the lacked", i.e. value: “In short, from the moment that I want to account for my immediate being simply in so far as it is what it is not and is not what it is, I am thrown outside it toward a meaning which is out of reach and which can in no way be confused with immanent subjective representation” (Sartre 152). What must occur in order to reach value is ultimately the annihilation of the Self and the insistence on singular subjectivity. This appears to approach a Buddhist understanding. However, according to Sartre, the Self cannot be overcome, but one can become conscious of it through an understanding of the relationship of the Self to the Other. Ultimately, Kerouac’s protagonists must choose either a valued existence based on the continuation of Self or the annihilation of Self.

VI. CONCEPTIONS OF THE SELF/OTHER AND MANIFESTATIONS IN NATURE

This Self/Other dichotomy depicts the greatest difference between existentialism and Buddhism. Despite the ability to attain value according to Sartre, being-for-itself still recognizes the existence of a subject, of a Self. Buddhism at its very core, denies this existence and states any belief in a Self to be based on ignorance and craving. Kerouac’s struggle involves the need to make significant meaning in the world for himself and all others. As a practicing Buddhist and a seeker of Nirvana, he must renounce any belief in a Self and practice compassion amongst mankind. His own existential crisis reflects a solipsism he either cannot or refuses to relinquish. With his protagonists, Kerouac tests the Self/Other dichotomy on the Western modern man who faces a crisis of spirituality in a fragmented world.

This dichotomy returns the reader to Kerouac's differentiation between identity in nature and civilization. As I note above, the Western concept of nature states that nature stands outside of the Self and civilization. D.T. Suzuki, a prominent Zen monk, discusses this dichotomy in his study Zen Buddhism. He states that reason acts as the fundamental obstacle to man's connection to nature:
Man is rational, whereas Nature is brutal, and Man strives to make Nature amenable to his idea of rationality. Rationality is born with the rising of the consciousness out of the primordial Unconscious. Consciousness makes it possible for the human being to reflect upon his own doings and the events around him. This reflection gives him the power to rise above mere naturalness and to bring it under his control. (230)

We must read sarcasm into Suzuki's comments here as it is Buddhist belief that there can be no separation between the individual and his world; the individual's consciousness is the consciousness of all of nature, of the Buddha-nature. In Western philosophy and thought, nature "is all that constitutes what is commonly known as Man's objective world" (Suzuki 231). This immediately implies that nature lies somehow outside of man and either he acts upon it or it acts upon him. However, according to Suzuki, who speaks from an Eastern/Buddhist stance, "Nature cannot be conceived as a merely passive substance upon which Man works" (233); rather, nature, or the world including man, is Nirvana. When the ignorant man, one who still travels in Samsara, looks on nature in a reflective way, that is in an attempt to see the true nature of existence, nature "will cooperate with Man and reveal to him all its secrets and even help him to understand himself" (Suzuki 233). Ultimately, Ray Smith and Jack Dulouz must deny the Western understanding of nature and embrace the Buddhist ideal in order to remove themselves from the Wheel of Samsara.

VII. THE DHARMA BUMS

The Dharma Bums is arguably the first novel in which Kerouac actively pursues the role of Buddhism in the life of his narrator. If, in some ways, the fact that the narration comes from the perspective of the practitioner hinders any real examination of his adherence to Buddhism, it also reveals Smith's faults in a more honest way as the reader does not have to see through the lens of another observer. Because of the use of more traditional language structure, Smith's story is also easier to explain than Dulouz's in Desolation Angels, yet The Dharma Bums complicates the issues at hand much more forcefully. Both protagonists/narrators face the same scrutiny under Kerouac's pen.
Ray Smith narrates his own story in *The Dharma Bums*. Set predominantly in San Francisco and in the Northern Cascades in Washington, Kerouac examines the spiritual life of a man tested by life and his own Self. The novel follows a Kerouacesque pattern of the ups and downs of Ray Smith centered around the traversing of "mountains," whether it be Mount Matterhorn or the hill Smith must climb to get to the hut he shares with Japhy Ryder. The novel circles around Smith's spiritual understanding of the world and his place in it. Smith's Buddhism does not prove strong enough to take him out his Self and the novel's structure out of the circle of Samsara. Taking up where *The Dharma Bums* leaves off, *Desolation Angels* continues the story of Ray Smith, though now his name is Jack Dulouz. Kerouac's structures Dulouz's story much more simplistically though the use and purpose of language makes the narration more complicated. Set across the globe, Dulouz's story begins in the Northern Cascades, moves to California, to Mexico, to New York, to North Carolina, across the Atlantic to Europe and North Africa and back again. The novel follows Dulouz as he descends from his mountaintop, presumably having attained some enlightened perspective. Where Smith's story allows for the question of his spirituality, Dulouz's story is the story of a spiritual man broken by an existential world.

As remarked upon earlier, these protagonists serve a universalizing purpose. The choice of names, Smith and Dulouz, connote meanings and implications that traverse out of the confines of the novels. "Smith" suggests the immediacy of the struggle to every reader and individual living and "Dulouz" hints at the delusional aspect of consciousness in this existence. Kerouac's novels then reach outside of themselves to question and contest the reader. I believe that the Dulouz Legend, and especially these two novels, seeks to find some way of understanding and illuminating human experience. Kerouac's fiction asks: what can the individual do when faced with overwhelming oppression from not only his existence but also from the society in which he lives? Ultimately, Kerouac, without the answers himself, can provide only an exegesis on exactly
what methods do not work. According to him, the individual can never hope to overcome fragmentation through a fragmented belief system.

Neither protagonist breaks free from the Wheel of Samsara, yet both do accomplish some form of enlightenment. This cannot be denied. Where they accomplish this satori complicates these stories. I mentioned above the two meanings behind the name Tathagata. In both novels, the distinction between the "Thus gone one" and the "Thus come one" determines the status of Smith and Dulouz. Both characters will fail in civilization and triumph in "nature."

Smith's story begins on the road. He once again travels west towards his friends, but now there seems to be a purpose. Rather than traveling to escape the cramped world of his Mother and the East Coast, Smith believes that he is "an oldtime bhikku [a monk] in modern clothes wandering the world" (5). He no longer seems to be searching for some purpose; the traveling is not about arriving any longer, rather his traveling concentrates on continuous movement, whether that be physical or spiritual. Spiritually, though, the movement Smith describes often reflects the movement of other characters and rarely his own. He acts as more of a passive observer rather than an active agent in this novel. Immediately Smith undercuts his narrative and explains that he writes from a position of greater self-knowledge:

I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I have become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I have grown so old and neutral . . . . But then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquillity and wisdom and ecstasy." (5)

We see immediately that Kerouac dooms Smith to failure. Kerouac bases this failure on his protagonist's fundamental character as a passive agent. Like this character, Smith's pursues Buddhism almost completely passively rather than actively. Keith Hull writes, "Ray is a devout non-Zen Buddhist, full of all sorts of Sanskrit terms, who reads the Sutras faithfully and constantly recites Buddhist prayers. Though he meditates he does not seek in meditation the enlightenment characteristic of Zen; he seeks truth on a doctrinal, abstruse level" (322). An actively pursued enlightenment, the Zen enlightenment depends on the practitioner being of the
world, not removed from it. It depends as much on personal enlightenment achieved through solitary meditation as an enlightenment achieved through one's actions in the world. As Suzuki states: “The Truth of Zen is the truth of life, and life means to live, to move, to act, not merely to reflect” (129). Smith relies almost exclusively on solitary meditation as a means to an end. He connects to the world as an independent traveler, not bound to any one place or to any other person. Ironically, he talks of his Self believing in the "reality of charity and kindness," the very notion of which goes against the Buddhist concept of sunyata.

There exists an immediate contrast between Smith and Japhy Ryder, the proponent of Zen and individual action in the world. Where Smith characterizes himself as a "Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism" (13) who focuses his attention on the first Noble Truth, "All Life is Suffering," Japhy represents the Zen lunatic who actively pursues the third Noble Truth, "The Cessation of Suffering." Smith, the lonely Buddhist, concentrates on the ugly fact of existence. Japhy, on the other hand, happily walks through life diligently seeking the immediate enlightenment of Zen. The Dharma Bums demands a sense of action in which the individual who will attain to Nirvana will actively seek it out rather than wait for it to come to him. Smith cannot wait passively for death to return him to a heavenly realm or for the sudden ecstasy of mystical experience. Here, he must act or he will remain ignorant. This defines the opposition of Smith and Ryder and ultimately directs the structure of the novel in a circular direction. Hull believes the narrative structure to be a "slow, backsliding progress that Ray makes toward achieving the Zen ideal which Japhy holds out for him" (321). While the novel provides a sense of progress, Smith ultimately only seeks his enlightenment in his solitude, thus remaining religiously solipsistic and sending the narrative into a continuation of the Wheel of Samsara.

Critics point out that the need both Ray Smith and Sal Paradise in On the Road have for a primary directing character serves as the connecting strain between the two protagonists. In On The Road, Paradise depends on Dean Moriarty to show him to the light. In The Dharma Bums, Japhy Ryder plays the part of that directing character who, like Dean, stands in opposition to the
other characters of Kerouac's novel. Kerouac depicts these other characters as literary Bohemians who were:

- either hornrimmed intellectual hepcats with wild black hair like Alvah Goldbook, or
delicate pale handsome poets like Ike O'Shay (in a suit), or out-of-this-world genteel-looking Renaissance Italians like Francis DaPavia (who looks like a young priest), or
- bow-tied wild-haired old anarchist fuds like Rheinhold Cacoethes, or big fat bespectacled quiet booboos like Warren Coughglin. (DB 11)

In opposition to these Existentialist heroes stands Ryder, who, "in rough workingman's clothes he'd bought secondhand in Goodwill stores to serve him on mountain climbs," reminds Smith more of an "oldtime lumberjack." Depending on Smith's leanings, both types of "fellaheen" characters, the hipster and the "oldtime lumberjack" all serve a purpose. Like Dean, Japhy appeals to Smith because of what he represents. Where the others are men trapped in a modern existence who can only fight against, Dean and Japhy are the individuals who place themselves in the world in order to fight for. The others serve Smith's need as an existential character, forging their own meaning and significance in a world that declares them useless. Japhy and Dean, however, act as the catalyst to a divine Catholic vision, mystical transcendentalism, and the Enlightenment experience. Both Dean and Japhy stand as transcendental characters that provide Paradise and Smith with visions of the sublime. When Smith characterizes these individuals positively, they reflect a mystical transcendentalism in the narrator. When he fails to do so, they can "fail" the narrator's expectations thus leading him to an existentialist experience. Unlike Dean, who becomes little more than another character riddled with problems and flaws, Japhy proves triumphant.

Smith's Buddhism, unlike Japhy's and even Alvah Goldbook's, is ultimately "life-denying" (Blackburn 15) in his need to experience his enlightenment in his own solitude. Because he can escape the calculated and typically raucous nature of his friends, Smith tends to be more Buddhist in nature. Here, presumably, he may throw off the "external trappings" of his existence, or at least those he assumes to be figures of ignorance and suffering. These "trappings" include lust, drinking, and lack of concentration, the former not recognized as necessarily
detrimental to a Buddhist practitioner. In fact, the way in which Japhy and Alvah practice "yabyum," the sexual exercise in which they each take a turn with whatever girl happens to be around, mirrors an ancient Tibetan meditative exercise. In this exercise, the sexual union of man and woman, with the couple seated and the woman on the man's lap facing him, expresses a meditative exercise in which all aspects of the individual's existence join together. While the motivation behind this exercise here does not seem to be purely driven by religious spirituality for either Alvah or Japhy, in one sense, Japhy views "yabyum" as part of his meditative practice. In quite another sense, and one not recognized by Smith, Japhy gains sexual pleasure and fulfills his desire and lust through yab-yum. Smith, always the passive Buddhist, does not recognize any religious potential in this exercise and views all sexual lust as a deviation from his practice: "I'd also 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 cruel" (29). This initially seems almost Christian in nature, but unlike the sin of lust, Smith views it in light of the Buddhist precepts that focus a monk on becoming an enlightened Buddha.

What is noticeable in this situation is that, as Alvah says later, Smith does not join in with Japhy and Alvah because of his fear of removing his clothes in front of the others. Smith's shyness traps him in his Self until he later understands that "yabyum" traditionally plays a part in Tibetan meditative exercise. Even then, Smith cannot separate the sensual act of sex with the spiritual act of "yabyum," realizing only later that he finds Princess physically attractive (94). His lust will eventually get the better of him and he will participate in yab-yum with Princess not for the meditative exercise, but out of a desire to satisfy his lust. In opposition to his conflicted feelings about drinking, other than a few off-hand remarks about the lustful nature of sex, Smith never hesitates to "make" any woman that holds his interest. This does not reflect a Sartrean valuable existence though, free from religious edicts denouncing sexual lust, because Smith cannot see these women as anything other than an object for his desire. Even Japhy here cannot
escape the subject/object distinction. The men do not allow the women to participate in the
intellectual or philosophical discussions, rather the women come to the house only as objects for
the men to “meditate” with. The women thus become the object of Smith’s blame for his lack of
control. They distract the men from their quiet, meditative, and mindful lifestyle with their
bodies. Unlike the Tibetan exercise, the purpose here is ultimately only sexual where there is no
joining of subject and object but rather the perpetuation of the distinction.

Smith’s confusion of practice for lust confuses him less than his drinking. Kerouac rarely
places his protagonist far from alcohol and as Hull notes, "Ray is restless, searching, rootless,
and, fortunately for us, superficial, forever reducing Buddhist principles to cant as he hoists his
bottomless wine bottle" (321). Smith’s drinking reveals simply another aspect of his Self that will
not allow him to concentrate on Buddhist study. Along with this lack of concentration, alcohol
generally places Smith into either an ecstatic enthusiasm or a horrendous depression, which
moves him farther from any Emersonian transcendental belief or insight. In this case, Smith
perpetuates the dichotomy between Self and Other by declaring himself the observer of life as he
attempts to write his craziness down in the drunken style in which it occurred. When with his
friends, he consistently drinks himself into either an uproar or a stupor which ultimately leads him
to say, "That’s the story of my life rich or poor and mostly poor and truly poor" (45). He admits
that his life lacks value because of his dependence on alcohol.

Smith’s need for alcohol follows him even to one of the pivotal points of this novel: the
climbing of Mount Matterhorn with Japhy and Morley. Prior to leaving, Japhy prepares the food
and material they will need to make the grueling climb, which includes bulgur, tea, real chocolate
pudding and some "energy food" (37). Smith noticeably lacks his port wine, which he convinces
his companions to drink prior to leaving for the last jaunt before the hike. Ultimately, Ray will
learn much on this trip including how little he needs alcohol: “And true to what Japhy had
predicted, I had absolutely not a jot for alcohol, I’d forgotten all about it, the altitude was too
high, the exercise too heavy, the air too brisk, the air itself was enough to get your ass drunk”
Even the writing at this moment clarifies his clean mind that reacts with ease and comfort to the situation unfolding before him. The language maintains a rhythm much less hurried and frenzied than that which characterizes his inebriated consciousness.

Smith will have a vision on the mountain and it will call him to activity. As Smith ascends the mountain, the narrative swings towards the beatific. Smith's thoughts concern themselves more with the spiritual nature of existence and in line with Zen thought, the very simplicity of existence. As he ascends higher, Smith's dependencies fall away and he is left with only the picture of his Self. At one point in their climb, Japhy remarks to Smith that nature is like a Buddha: “Yeah man, you know to me a mountain is a Buddha. Think of the patience, hundreds of thousands of years just sittin there bein perfectly perfectly silent and like praying for all living creatures in that silence and just waiting for us to stop all our frettin and foolin” (67). We cannot determine exactly what Japhy means by "frettin and foolin," but Japhy's language, inherently energetic, reveals his status as a man of action, not passive reflection. His language is colloquial and without the difficulty and confusion of Smith's. He sees man's release from Samsara as an activity and not something to be fretted and fooled over. It is clear that Japhy desires actions from Ray rather than his usual linguistic approach to Buddhism. The very act of climbing the mountain becomes a religious exercise as Japhy tries to show Ray the Zen path to enlightenment.

At a point when Smith seems to be having trouble, Japhy says, "The secret of this kind of climbing is like Zen. Don't think. Just dance along. It's the easiest thing in the world" (64). And with this, we realize that Japhy understands Smith better than he professes. Smith's Buddhism, a selfish, life-denying, and difficult Buddhism, declares that “All life is suffering,” and because of this, every action or event becomes something to labor or lament over. Smith must lose his Self in order to concentrate on the very ease of life. Where Kerouac almost always portrays Japhy as an easy-going, carefree character, he shows Ray as always the brooding drunk who occasionally shines when he forgets himself.
On this trip, Smith realizes the necessity of action as climbing the mountain becomes a meditative experience. As he climbs, he does not forget himself and the world below him. Rather, his Self appears larger than before. As he and Japhy approach the top, Japhy pulls further away leaving Smith alone with his thoughts. These thoughts keep him from the top:

But with nutty desperation I followed him. Finally I came to a kind of ledge where I could sit at a level angle instead of having to cling to not slip, and I nudged my whole body inside the ledge just to hold me there tight, so the wind would not dislodge me, and I looked down and around and I had had it. "I'm staying here!" I yelled to Japhy. "Come on Smith, only another five minutes. I only got a hundred feet to go!" "I'm staying right here! It's too high!"

He said nothing and went on. I saw him collapse and pant and get up and make his run again.

I nudged myself closer into the ledge and closed my eyes and thought "Oh what a life this is, why do we have to be born in the first place, and only so we can have our poor gentle flesh laid out to such impossible horrors as huge mountains and rock and empty space," and with horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, "When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing." The saying made my hair stand on end; it had been such cute poetry sitting in Alvah's straw mats. Now it was enough to make my heart pound and my heart bleed for being born at all. (83-4)

The fact that all life is ignorance does not make Smith suffer here, rather his own selfish fear makes him dread his life. Smith's Self comes crashing down into him as he has an existential moment while hanging onto the mountain. Smith fears for his life and with this fear, he shuts his Self into him and his consciousness invades all thought. The first few lines here reflect the desperation with which Smith surveys his position, both physically and mentally. His line lengthens as his crisis becomes immanent. The longer he rests and ponders, the more frightened he becomes until the existential awareness even encroaches on the Zen expression which should be read as affirmative and carefree. Here, the saying takes on the aspects of an existentialist nightmare in its horrific entirety. Scared into inactivity, the Zen saying forces Smith to a negative withdrawal into both the face of the cliff and himself rather than the positive bursting forth from the earth and the Self. His consciousness reads all material in the light of an existential fright.

It is not the trip up the mountain that reveals a minute awakening in Smith but rather the experience while on top of the mountain. Definitely not an Emersonian moment, Smith's
existential experience near the top shows him to be afraid for his life. He simply fears that he will fall off the mountain. However, Japhy proves him wrong when

in one insane second or so: I looked up and saw Japhy running down the mountain in huge twenty-foot leaps, running, leaping, landing with a great drive of his booted heals, bouncing five feet or so, running, then taking another long crazy yelling yodeling sail down the sides of the world and in that flash I realized it's impossible to fall off mountains you fool. (85)

Smith's understanding here is experientially Buddhist; it is an active release of the Self. He has entered into the realm of Zen where the practitioner gains enlightenment quickly and through active meditation on the existence that surrounds him. Kerouac replaces the disjunction in the writing describing Smith's fear with the spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness writing here. The choice of verbs and adjectives suggests a happiness of the spirit as Japhy runs, leaps, bounces, and yodels himself down the mountain immediately followed by Smith's epiphany. The frenzied nature of the prose mirrors the lightning-quick satori which strikes Smith.

The most difficult act for Ray Smith is to take the understanding he gains in Nature and bring it back within him to the world. Smith is always unable to do this. Though he may continue to understand things in a Buddhist way, he remains solitary and separate. He has not understood the idea that Tathagata also means the "thus come one." Opposing Smith, Kerouac gives us Japhy Ryder, the crazy Zen lunatic with the heart of gold. Smith almost always portrays Japhy as a compassionate human being: "There was another aspect of Japhy that amazed me: his tremendous and tender sense of charity. He was always giving things, always practicing what the Buddhists call the Paramita of Dana, the perfection of charity" (75). While mostly true, Japhy does not treat everyone compassionately at all times. In line with Smith's own narration, Japhy "handles" some women very harshly, in particular Princess who he passes on to the other men when she ceases to excite him. Although Smith does manipulate women as objects, I must admit that he does practice charity in this novel, but his reason for doing so differs from Japhy's.

In the opening scene, Smith gives the other train rider a portion of his provisions because he "took pity on him" (4). The act of pitying presences the Other. The Other may be recognized
as a subject but only after it has been seen as an object, a poor, hungry, meager object that could as easily be me. Smith's act of charity, more an act of pity, is based on the very recognition of the Self and the Other and being-in-itself. When Smith gives the bum some of his food and wine, Smith practices a warped charity. He has to remind himself of a line in the Diamond Sutra: "Practice charity without holding in mind any conceptions about charity, for charity after all is just a word" (5). Following his linguistic Buddhism, Smith acts charitable because it is a word, a "rule," and in this light, Smith becomes more a practicing Catholic than a Buddhist. Smith, unable to simply see the bum and pity him, must prove himself charitable in order to verify to himself that he is "an oldtime bhikku" practicing his "religious devotions almost to perfection" (5).

Ray's act of charity actually removes him further from enlightenment; it solidifies the distinctions he makes between himself and others around him and forces him back onto the Wheel of Samsara. Charitable practice, a spiritual gift for both the giver and the receiver, breaks down the differentiation between Self and Other. When one comes to realize that by practicing charity, he not only helps someone else, but also helps himself and all other sentient beings as they are all interconnected, the practitioner recognizes Nirvana, in terms of Buddhist practice, and he also recognizes being-for-itself, in terms of Sartrean existentialism. The act then represents the recognition of the inherent subjectivity of the Other. The true Buddhist gives in order that all may receive, not only himself. Japhy understands this. In fact he tells Ray once, "Smith you don't realize it's a privilege to practice giving presents to others" (76). But I said that Smith does practice charity in the novel. On the mountain, he learns this lesson. Seeing Japhy bounding down the mountain reveals to Ray that Japhy is there to teach him: "Ah Japhy you taught me the final lesson of them all, you can't fall off a mountain" (86). But Smith proves himself wrong; he will fall off his mountain and land exactly where he started.

Smith goes out of his way to prove that he is charitable. He tells the reader that Japhy taught him to give gifts. After climbing Mount Matterhorn, Smith describes the way in which he
and Japhy exchange gifts: “In fact he taught me, and a week later I was giving him nice new undershirts I'd discovered in the Goodwill store. He'd turn right around and make me a gift of a plastic container to keep food in. For a joke I'd give him a gift of a huge flower from Alvah's yard” (76). But this too must pass, must slowly fade as civilization encroaches on Smith, because he cannot contain and continue the euphoria he experiences on the mountain. Ray is never able to bring the understanding he has in nature to civilization.

The episode with Rosie provides an excellent example of the shift within Smith as he travels from nature to civilization. Rosie, the poor woman suffering a mental breakdown, represents one women in the novel who does not fall into either the category of mother figure or figure of sexual desire, in fact she comes across as almost androgynous. This perhaps makes the episode all the more powerful because the reader cannot simple blame Kerouac’s or Smith’s misogyny for the treatment of Rosie. When Cody asks Ray to watch her, because he fears she will attempt to kill herself, Ray reluctantly does so only after voicing his opinion that it will ruin his good time. This stands as the ultimate test of Ray's charity. He must recognize that he suffers along with Rosie and because of Rosie as much as she suffers because of him. Instead, Ray can only plead with her to listen to his plans of a “Rucksack Revolution.” Eventually, Rosie declares the real problem with Ray which will only be understood more fully later: "No, I'm laying off the lush, all that wine you drink is rotgut, it burns your stomach out, it makes your brain dull. I can tell there's something wrong with you, you're not sensitive, you don't realize what's going on!" (112). Rosie is cryptically correct. Ray's dependence on his Self clouds him from any real connection to others. This dependence renders Ray passive and without the ability to truly concentrate. Ultimately, Ray fails to make any impression on Rosie and, later that evening, she kills herself.

Without realizing, Rosie reveals Smith's major flaw: insensitivity. Japhy will later complain about this when Ray tries to tell Japhy about his winter in Rocky Mount. Japhy can only say, "Ah. it's just a lot of words. I don't wanta hear all your word descriptions of words
words words you made up all winter, man I wanta be enlightened by actions" (169). Smith’s insensitivity reveals itself in his relations with the other characters. Other than a few instances in which Smith practices charity, the other characters often become “sounding boards” for his ideas. Smith uses Rosie, despite her degenerated mental status, simply for that purpose. He cannot form any real connection with her preferring to bully her into agreement with him through his words. His lack of action, and therefore any real concern for Rosie’s well-being, reveal Smith’s passivity to be extremely detrimental and selfish. This insensitivity manifests itself, whether in civilization or in nature, in Smith’s inability to concentrate fully on anything but his own suffering and practice. In nature, Ray throws off the external "trappings" of his existence, his lust, drinking, and lack of concentration. The former two do not hinder Ray when in nature, however the latter does.

Ray’s major problem, his insensitivity to his actions, or rather his lack thereof, reflects his characterization as a man of words, not actions. He observes and comments on life, but does not physically act like Japhy. Smith frequently states his need for absolute solitude in order to pursue his studies. He becomes the 'thus gone one,' the practitioner concentrated only on his enlightenment and the ways in which he differs from others. In this way, Smith’s Catholicism influences his Buddhism in that he tries to form an individual relationship with the “higher” power. Ray goes to North Carolina in order to escape the insanity that he perceives among his friends in San Francisco saying that: “Behind the house [his sister's] was a great pine forest where I would spend all that winter and spring meditating under the trees and finding out by myself the truth of all things.” (132) Nature, thus becomes a normalizing element, a place for drying out Smith’s soul and Self; he can clear his mind of all that clutters it in nature. His meditative experience, while meant to clear his mind of all that clouds it and even itself, actually perpetuates his confusion. Smith leaves civilization to get away from the confusion only to bring the confusion with him, in a much more subtle form, in the guise of his clinging to Self.
That he must leave not only his friends on the West Coast, but even his sister's house implies Smith's necessity to escape "civilization" in his pursuit of Buddhism. His need for solitude and doctrine also reveals a lack of transcendental understanding. Where Emerson can experience ecstatic vision in the "common" without any sense of practice or ritual, Smith must leave any vestiges of civilization in search of words to communicate his understanding. Smith's Buddhism remains almost essentially doctrinal despite all the teaching given to him by Japhy concerning the Zen need for action. Nevertheless, Smith does find a degree of enlightenment here, as he did on Mount Matterhorn. Sitting under his own "bodhi" tree,

The warm wind made the pines talk deep one night when I began to experience what is called "Samapatti," which in Sanskrit means Transcendental Visits. I'd got a little drowsy in the mind but was somehow physically awake sitting erect under my tree when suddenly I saw flowers, pink worlds of walls of them, salmon pink, in the Shh of silent woods (obtaining nirvana is like locating silence) and I saw an ancient vision of Dipanakara Buddha who was the Buddha who never said anything. (147)

Smith's language reveals the collapsing of the Self. As his line lengthens and seems to encase several thoughts into one, his mind does the same. It expands and draws what lies outside of him, the Other, into a merger with his Self. This vision eventually leads Smith to a kind of introvertive mystical experience in which he loses sense of his own ego: "It, the vision, was devoid of any sensation of I being myself, it was pure egolessness, just simply wild ethereal activities devoid of any wrong predicates...devoid of effort, devoid of mistake" (147). That he characterizes the event as a "vision" implies the transient nature of the mystical experience. Despite the impermanence, the "vision" is not completely without Buddhist attributes. This signifies the first occasion in which Ray understands truly what it is to be a Buddhist. Excited about his discovery and experience, he feels that he must bring it out of the woods to his family so that they may experience it too. This desire to communicate the experience, on behalf of the practitioner, traps it in time. However, when Smith tries to relay the event to his family, he encounters only skepticism prompting him to declare, "I had to tell Japhy now when I got back to California. 'At least he'll listen'" (145). Smith still relies on words rather than action. This reliance results in
Smith’s incapacity of convincing his family to feel the way he does. Not perpetual like the realization of enlightenment, the time in nature bounds and limits Smith’s vision. It resembles Emerson’s experience, a mystical event that lasts only a short time before the participant returns to his former state of consciousness, more than the “lightning response” of the Zen monk, a perpetual enlightenment signifying a permanent change in consciousness. Leaving the forest to communicate his new insight pulls Smith away from the vision and grounds him once again in worldly cares and his Self.

Smith describes how he performed a miracle when he told his mother about a dream that led ultimately to a cure for some symptoms she had been having. Smith, of course, attributes this to his newly acquired compassion and understanding. Inevitably, he undermines himself: "This was my first and last 'miracle' because I was afraid of getting too interested in this and becoming vain. I was a little scared too, of all the responsibility" (148). Ray is wrong again. The very fact that he does not decide to help people with this understanding displays his vanity, egotism, and selfishness. This misunderstanding stems from his incapability of seeing that there exists no distinction between those he helps and himself. The only distinction is the lie of the Self, the ignorance of existence, which once again invades his conscious when in "civilization."

Whatever inhabits his person when he is in civilization must eventually influence Smith's desire to rid himself of all of its trappings and its weight. There are numerous occasions in the novel during which Ray declares his mistrust of civilization and certainly Modern America. The instances revolve around his lack of concentration or his lack of desire to concentrate. In a sense, according to Smith, this new, materialistic, selfish America leads him to the bottle and dissolution though, perhaps the movement away from sublime, transcendental values towards base, economic motivation leads to this mistrust and disgust. Whatever the cause, Smith still feels the pull of the energetic city and can only employ immature methods of avoidance. During one of the parties held at Sean's house, Smith describes how he found that if he can "keep my eyes closed" (178) then he can "sincerely" hold lust at bay. Later, in the shack he shares with Japhy, he has "an
overwhelming urge to close [his] eyes in company" (187). Evidently, Ray must close his eyes to keep the world outside, to protect himself from whatever harm may come from those around him. By doing so, he unavoidably restricts himself from any mystical experience while in civilization. Smith, consciously or not, still does not perceive the inherent interconnectedness of all existence as taught by Buddhist tradition. By blinding himself, he can return to his solipsistic existence from which he can define himself only in opposition to the Other. This existential angst reveals Smith's fear of becoming abstracted from his world. If he opens himself out to the world around him, he fears that it will envelop him thus destroying his Self in its modernity. He does not see any Buddhist enlightenment in this dissolution of Self. Here, as it is now, he sees only his true Self reflected by the others in the shack. They, like him, are not Buddhist and he stays utterly frightened.

Smith finishes his story with the escape to the Cascades. While Japhy leaves to continue his studies in the company of Japanese Zen monks, Ray flees into solitude to continue his own search for enlightenment. As Blackburn writes, "Despite all Japhy's lessons, Smith still associates sanctity only with detachment from the world" (17). On Desolation Peak, he will come face to face with Hozomeen, the void or sunyata, and he will need to overcome his fear of it in order to descend on the world as compassionate.

_The Dharma Bums_ concludes with Smith descending his mountain to come back down into the cities. Kerouac opens the door for the reader on a happy note. Ray may finally enliven his spirit and take an active role in his life amongst his friends:

"Japhy," I said out loud, "I don't know when we'll meet again or what'll happen in the future, but Desolation. Desolation, I owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for guiding me to the place where I learned all. Now comes the sadness of coming back to cities and I've grown two months older and there's all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upsidedown in the void God bless them, but Japhy you and me forever know. (244)

Smith's declaration exhibits a Buddhist understanding. Smith takes comfort in Desolation, not only his solitude, ironically, but also the connotation of Desolation as the Void: the world as
emptiness and suchness. Smith knows the difficulty of bringing this enlightenment back to the world of earthly desires, of "humanity," but while he recognizes the understanding of Void as sunyata and tathata, he still uses "void" to signify an existentialist emptiness of meaning. The reference to the city as "upsidedown in the void" should reflect a Buddhist awareness of the immediacy of Nirvana and Samsara to everything. Everywhere and at all times reflect both Samsara and Nirvana depending on the way the observer views existence. Curiously enough, Smith himself maintains the dichotomy of nature and civilization, Object and subject, Other and Self, and ultimately Nirvana and Samsara. While Kerouac's novel ends with the protagonist in a position of knowledge, the reader cannot rely on Ray's apparent epiphany to be anything but momentary and finally wrong.

VIII. DESOLATION ANGELS

*Desolation Angels* continues the story of Ray Smith through the perspective of Jack Dulouz. Where *The Dharma Bums* winds the reader through Ray Smith's exploration of Buddhism and Japhy's Zen, *Desolation Angels* presents the solitary figure of Jack Dulouz as a character trapped in Samsara watching his life and the lives of those around him endlessly circumvent any real value. *The Dharma Bums* leaves Ray Smith in a position of action; he can actively lead his life to an enlightenment. Dulouz, however, begins his story as a reactive agent and remains so throughout. The narrative structure of *Desolation Angels* is somewhat more simplistic than *The Dharma Bums*. Here, Dulouz begins from a conflictedly enlightened position, descends from the mountain to rejoin civilization, and never really ascends another mountain. Whereas Smith's story moves in a very circular or cyclical fashion, Dulouz's story completes the circle begun by Smith when he descends from Desolation Peak to the cities of the world. In certain ways, *Desolation Angels* examines the individual in a more interesting fashion than in *The Dharma Bums*. Finally though, *Desolation Angels* lacks the sophisticated structure of *The Dharma Bums*. 
This novel, written years later, chronologically follows *The Dharma Bums* and represents a growing disinterest and pessimism in the mind of Kerouac. His protagonists no longer have the guide represented by Dean Moriarty and Japhy Ryder; there is only Dulouz, trapped in loneliness on Desolation and in desolation when he descends back down to the world. Kerouac presents a picture of a man enmeshed in an existential crisis. The final quarter of *The Dharma Bums* chronicles Smith's time on Desolation Peak and ends somewhat enthusiastically with the notion that Smith will bring his enlightenment back down the mountain with him. Regardless of my optimistic view, Smith still has not transcended the dichotomy of Self/Other therefore proving him still subject to the suffering caused by existence.

*Desolation Angels* begins with a heightened exploration of Dulouz's time on Desolation Peak. All alone on the mountain, Dulouz has nothing but time to meditate. Nature derives great importance here not only in providing a space for Dulouz, but like Japhy's description of Mount Matterhorn, "to me a mountain is a Buddha" (*DB* 67), nature becomes the essence of Buddhism. Hozomeen, the mountain facing Jack that instills in him alternately fear and amazement, becomes the strongest projection of this new meaning for nature. Hozomeen reflects the Buddhist notion of no-self to Dulouz in its significance as the Void:

Hozomeen, Hozomeen, most beautiful mountain I ever seen, like a tiger sometimes with stripes, sunwashed rills and shadow crags wriggling lines in the Bright Daylight, vertical furrows and bumps and Boo! crevasses, boom, sheer magnificent Prudential mountain, nobody's ever heard of it, and its only 8,000 feet high, but what a horror when I first saw that void the first night of my staying on Desolation Peak waking up from deep fogs of 20 hours to a starlit night suddenly loomed by Hozomeen with his two sharp points, right in my window black - the Void, every time I'd think of the Void I'd see Hozomeen and understand - Over 70 days I had to stare it. (4)

Dulouz’s language reflects the conflicting emotions he feels towards Hozomeen. The first section of the novel follows the pattern set here. The first part of this description poeticizes the mountain presenting it romantically and lyrically. Revelling in the “sheer magnificent Prudential mountain,” Dulouz sees and enjoys the indeterminacy of modern life, although not in a transcendental way. However, as the passage continues, the language becomes more jagged as
does his feeling towards that radical indeterminacy. He begins to use words like “horror,” “deep,” “loomed,” and “sharp” that reflect a more gothic awareness of his surroundings. Despite this shift, in nature and through nature, Dulouz recognizes the transitoriness of all existence, that life is void of any inherent being.

Dulouz learns the concept of no-self through Hozomeen. He begins to equate himself to the mountain, "But I will be the Void, moving without having moved" (7). He desires the active transformation from the Wheel of Samsara to the Path to Nirvana. In this way, he will move from one to the other, without having given up his understanding of existence as suffering. In the midst of meditation, he realizes the dream-like quality of existence: "In about twenty seconds comes the understanding to my mind and heart: 'When a baby is born he falls asleep and dreams the dream of life, when he dies and is buried in his grave he wakes up again to the Eternal Ecstasy'" (30). It is only when the baby can release his grasp on a Self that he will pass through to enlightenment. This passage also reveals a movement away from a complicated character development wrought from numerous spiritual paths, like Buddhism, Catholicism, and mystical Transcendentalism, to one based around a clearer distinction between spiritual understandings of Self and Other, between Buddhism and Existentialism.

The first section of this novel presents the understanding of Buddhism that Dulouz always achieves when in nature. Through his study of the Diamond Sutra, he can deny the existence of an "universal self" (42) and realize the "Bottomless horror [of existence] everywhere" (50), while at the same time, in typical fashion, still believing that, unlike the child, he "can never be that pure again" (50). The disparity between Smith's seemingly unending optimism and Dulouz's inevitable pessimism differentiates *The Dharma Bums* from *Desolation Angels*. Where Smith leaves Desolation Peak complete with hope, Dulouz will flee Desolation to escape from the never-ending loneliness he feels.

Contrary to his understanding of no-self, Dulouz still seems enmeshed in a feeling of Self. He asks himself at one point on Desolation Peak: "What earthly use to know this? What
earthly use is anything?" (55). He longs here for a return to value. As Sartre searches for value as being-for-itself for the being-in-itself, Dulouz also seeks value for his existence. The question "Why am I here?" always hovers on the periphery of his questioning. Even when he denies the Self, a feeling that he cannot quite escape its pull asserts itself: "What did I learn on Gwaddawackamblack? I learned that I hate myself because by myself I am only myself and not even that" which leaves him "finding at the bottom of myself abysmal nothingness worse than that no illusion even - my mind's in rags" (68). An argument can be made that he affirms the lack of Self here. However, the tone of his language and the repetition of "myself" suggests not the reassuring lack of a Self for a Buddhist practitioner and scholar but the frightening lack of essence that causes the "divorce of mind from life" (Barrett 8) that had bothered Sartre so tremendously.

This might appear to contradict my earlier statements. While Dulouz splits himself along this issue of the Self on Desolation Peak, it appears to be more a cry for help or meaning than a refutation of the Buddhist understanding. He says later, once again contradicting himself, "That which passes through everything has passed through me and always through my pencil and there is nothing to say" (71). The fact remains that while he frantically searches for meaning in this world he takes to be nihilistic, he still recognizes his connection to his surroundings. The language of this section reveals this conflicted personality. Here, unlike the language in The Dharma Bums and the language of the rest of this novel, Dulouz’s pen gets away from himself. In several instances, the language of the novel disintegrates into only letters and then into only figures, such as triangles. The language deconstructs itself into lack of meaning and signification. On the one hand, this could reflect the meditative goal I suggested for the Spontaneous Prose method. Through his furious writing, Dulouz escapes his Self and watches it dissolve. On the other, the language represents Kerouac’s own ambition that his writing method would reflect “the unspeakable visions of the individual” (The Portable Jack Kerouac 483). These “visions” reflect Kerouac’s transcendental leanings, in the sense that they act as both introvertive and extrovertive
mystical experience, while perpetuating and demanding the Self. By the novel's conclusion, the prose returns to a more stable and traditional style. Dulouz abandons transcendental mysticism by the end of the novel.

Sorting out what Dulouz feels at any one moment becomes the most difficult aspect of this novel. He comes to Desolation to face the Buddha: "'When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves on mules and I'm alone I will come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain' but instead I'd come face to face with myself" (4). On Desolation he finds that the world is the "palpable thought of God" (53) and that "I am God and I'm doing it all myself, who else?" (80). This appears to be his objective aim on the mountain. His language, however, does not characterize this situation as a carefree understanding of himself as enlightened. Instead, he fears this understanding. He fears the lack of God and the enslavement of the individual to radical indeterminacy. Ultimately, he fears his solitude in the world. His existential awareness here is not one of value; he still sees the world as object. Dulouz realizes that he must make meaning for himself in a world devoid of meaning. Despite this negativity, Dulouz acquires some Buddhist knowledge. He still understands that clinging to Self and this existence is ignorance. Upon leaving the mountain, however, he recognizes that Samsara "will never end" (84) and that what he has learned in solitude cannot be brought down to the cities:

What I'd learned on the solitary mountain all summer, the Vision on Desolation Peak, I tried to bring down to the world and to my friends in San Francisco, but they, involved in the structures of time and life, rather than the eternity and solitude of mountain snowy rocks, had a lesson to teach me themselves - Besides, the vision of the freedom of eternity which I saw and which all wilderness hermitage saints have seen, is of little use in cities and warring societies such as we have -" (73)

The transition from the mountain to the city oppresses Dulouz's Buddhist understanding and pulls him farther from a transcendental awareness of the sublime in the city. He spends close to three months in almost absolute solitude (his only connection to other people is over a short-wave radio, which allows him to talk to the other fire lookouts) away from the intensity of the
city. In doing so, he leaves behind all marks of the city including his lust and his need for alcohol during the time on Desolation. Now, in his descent, he encounters all of the intensity of the city. The road functions as the place of transition from the Buddhist understanding he attained to the ecstatic, sensual need he has for this intensity.

Arriving back at the Forest Service Center, Dulouz can feel the oppressive intensity already in the air: "And already the woes of the non-mountain world are pressing in" (97). He describes this situation as though he has "finally hit bottom" (111), and like Smith's description of himself as "truly poor" (The Dharma Bums 45), already Dulouz feels his enlightenment slipping away. Existentially, his Self comes crashing back into his consciousness and he finds it harder to feel the peace he had briefly experienced. He turns his back on nature to return to civilization.

As in The Dharma Bums, Dulouz contrasts nature and civilization in an attempt to create and display the tension between them. Where The Dharma Bums circles structurally, symbolically calling forth the image of the Wheel, the structure here reflects Hull's "backsliding" nature. For brief moments, Jack finds solitude after Desolation, but even in these, he cannot escape either the heroin addiction of Bull Gaines or the antagonism of Bull Hubbard. Jack Dulouz travels from Nature to civilization and fails to escape from it and all it implies again.

Arriving in Seattle, Jack experiences an ecstatic vision of the city: "and lo! here's all humanity hep and weird wandering on the evening sidewalk amazing me outa my eyeballs . . . .The doors of bars I fly by incredible with crowded sad waiting humanity" (113). This ecstasy he feels mirrors not the introvertive mystical type in which Dulouz loses his subjectivity joining the world around him, rather it reflects the extrovertive type in which the world becomes an object for his senses. He is immersed in his Self and the Otherness of his surroundings. The city reflects the sublime in all its baseness. This ecstasy cannot last long though as he does feel some remorse for what he perceives he has lost: "Now I'm back in that goddam movie of the world and now what do I do with it?" (129). The city is the place of Jack's greatest dreams. He often feels that he will make some great leap away from the suffering he undergoes in his life. In the city he
will bring himself, he will bring God or the Buddha (they seem to be interchangeable throughout this novel), to solve the ills of man. However, Jack is still attached to the idea that “God is words” (171) and so is utterly unable to be an active agent. For this reason, the city remains an elusive place to find peace: “‘Ah let’s go back to the sweet city,’ I think, which is showing across the bay, full of promise that never takes place except in the mind” (187). The city can only satisfy the Self/Other system, it can never dissolve this disharmony into a Void. It can only serve to reflect the Universal Being for a brief moment of time, though, finally, the mystic must return to the “normal” ways of seeing. Rather than moving himself as the Void, the city will move Dulouz, forcing him back into his old ways, now tainted with pessimism. The ignorance of existence slowly creeps back into his head the longer he remains to the point that he recognizes that “desolation is desolation everywhere and desolation is all we got and desolation ain’t so bad” (126). Here, unlike the connotation of “desolation” as the Void, the word signifies his absolute and meaningless solitude in the world. He gradually lulls himself into inactivity as he comes to see the existence of the city as the same as his existence on Desolation Peak: “I don’t understand the night – I’m afraid of people – I walk along happy – Nothing else to do – If I were pacing in my mountain yard I’d be just as bad off as walking down the city street – Or as well off – What’s the difference?” (192). His existential depression transforms this equation from a Buddhist understanding of the equality of all things to an existential understanding of the void of meaning inherent in all things.

*Desolation Angels* reverts back to the structural motif of the road and travel. Jack Dulouz, like Sal Paradise in *On The Road*, constantly moves because he is not comfortable in one place. Dulouz takes this movement to absurdity near the end of the novel when in the space of two weeks, he moves his mother from the East Coast to San Francisco, back again to North Carolina, and then goes alone to Mexico. His movement at this time has become frantic as he searches for some meaning for himself. Prothero credits the Beats with the urge “not to arrive but to travel” (211). Ironically, Dulouz, searching for some stability and place to rest, is utterly
unable to arrive at any one place. Coincidentally, he seems to have lost almost completely any Buddhist understanding he attained on Desolation Peak. Like Ray Smith, Dulouz “cannot really be home anywhere” (Blackburn 15). *The Dharma Bums* seems to be better written than *Desolation Angels*; in it, Kerouac handles the tension between nature and civilization and Smith’s Buddhism and his egocentricity more intelligently and stylistically. Despite the more complicated psychology presented in Dulouz’s story, Kerouac structures the novel more simplistically; as a repetitive cycle that reveals Dulouz’s inability to gain any coherent, valuable insight and the downward spiral of his mentality.

Regardless of this structural simplicity, a constant tension exists in the mind of Dulouz. He cannot decide between his mountain retreat and the extremity of the city:

> And now, after the experience on top of the mountain where I was alone for two months without being questioned or looked at by any single human being I began a complete turnabout in my feelings about life – I now wanted a reproduction of that absolute peace in the world of society but secretly greedy too for some of the pleasures of society (such as shows, sex, comforts, fine foods & drink), no such things on the mountain – I knew now that my life was a search for peace as an artist, but not only as an artist – As a man of contemplations rather than too many actions. (245)

While on the one hand he still desires solitude, he definitely wants the energy of the city without the contact it unavoidably brings. Dulouz, never able to do so, no longer even appears eager to play an active, compassionate part in his enlightenment, preferring to stand quietly outside the action as a contemplative observer. This begins to take hold when Dulouz travels to Mexico from San Francisco. While he does write quite a bit during this time, he does so out of an egotistic mindframe in which he will put the details of his life on the page. He spends some time relatively alone -- the only person there with him is Bull Gaines, who remains in his room in a heroin depression much of the time -- but no longer uses this time as contemplation of the Void.

The situation becomes chaotic when his friends Irwin, Simon, Raphael, and Lazarus visit him, “the boys were coming down to Mexico City to join me. The Desolation Angels again” (257). Significantly, they meet up together in Gaines’ room, taking “shots” of heroin and making their plans because Gaines “dramatized the way we all felt” (261). This completes Dulouz’s
transition, from mountain to city, in the mind of the reader. Dulouz has finally “hit bottom.” The sickly, disgusted mentality of Gaines, a man who prefers to remain in his room in a heroin-induced fog rather than face the city around him, reaches even the high ideals of Dulouz. Even in his attempt to escape his friends, he only finds them again with needles in their arms. They all try to escape the world but only towards an inwardness, only towards themselves. Dulouz even understands what the arrival of the “Desolation Angels” means to him but he fails to see a way out even if they leave: “Arriving at my room on the roof after all these frantic days I’d go to bed with a sigh. ‘When they leave I’ll get back on the beam again,’ quiet cocoas at midnight, long sleeps – Yet also I couldn’t imagine what I was going to do anymore anyway” (281). Ultimately, he can only continue to move along, looking forever for the peace he has lost.

The “turnabout” Dulouz experiences in San Francisco leads him to Mexico in a contemplative pursuit of the peace he had on Desolation Peak. This “turnabout” centers around a reaffirmation of his Self where, through his consciousness and his Ego, Jack will now find peace in civilization. However, this optimism can only last for so long in this world of continuous movement. Later in the novel, Jack has what he describes as another “complete turningabout” (335). Again, this shift centers around his Self, but here it is not affirmative; instead it is negative:

But even in so peaceful and simple an act as reading world history in a comfortable cabin on comfortable seas I felt that awful revulsion for everything – the insane things done in human history even before us, enough to make Apollo cry or Atlas drop his load, my God the massacres, purges, tithes stolen, thieves hanged, crooks imperorated, dubs praetorian’d, benches busted on people’s heads, wolves attacked nomad campfires, Genghiz Khans ruining – testes smashed in battle, women raped in smoke, children belted, animals slaughtered, knives raised, bones thrown – Clacking big slurry meatjuiced lips the dub Kings crapping on everybody thru silk – The beggars crapping thru burlap – The mistakes everywhere the mistakes! (338)

As with his description of Hozomeen (4), the passage suggests a shift in his consciousness. However, here, the language shift occurs almost instantaneous; from the very moment he begins reading, his existential crisis accosts him in all is “awful revulsion.” No longer can Dulouz think and write lyrically or romantically. He now can only write from the center of Yeat’s “gyre” as
the center implodes on him. This complete revulsion with the world around him, which includes him, leads Dulouz to again seek out solitude. By the end of the novel, we find Dulouz lost in himself, searching for solitude, but no longer in an effort to concentrate on enlightenment. Instead, he now searches for solitude to escape himself and the hideousness of the world: "How we continue in this endless Gloom I'll never know – Love, Suffer, and Work is the motto of my family (Lebris de Keroack) but seems I suffer more than the rest – Old Honeyboy Bill's in Heaven for sure anyway – Only thing now is Where's Jack Going? [emphasis added] – Back to Florida or New York? – For further emptiness?" (408). The "emptiness" no longer reflects the suchness of tathata or sunyata, it now echoes the lack of meaning Dulouz finds in himself and in his world. Finally, Dulouz ends his story by declaring a reaffirmation of his Self. In his words, "It's all over" (409), all that is left for him is to find peaceful solitude away from his friends with his mother: " so I told my Desolation Angels goodbye. A new life for me" (409). He completes his transformation from Buddhism to Existentialism. The "new life" he speaks of affirms completely his identity through a self-imposed solitude of the Self.

XI. CONCLUSION

Each epiphany attained by both Ray Smith and Jack Dulouz represents a turning of the wheel. In Smith's case, Kerouac allows the reader to question in which direction the wheel turns. Does Smith turn away from Self or back inwards toward Self? The end of The Dharma Bums leaves that question floating in the mind of the reader. On the one hand, the reader can see Smith's statement as an existential awareness and affirmation of the power of his Self. On the other, Smith's statement can represent the denial of the Self and the desire to transmit that understanding to the solipsistic world of civilization. As with the rest of both novels, the descent from the mountain to the city represents a turning of the Wheel of Life. As Kerouac progresses into Desolation Angels, the protagonist becomes more conflicted. The story represents Dulouz's awareness of his situation. In this light, the novel tells the story of Jack Dulouz, existential
creature, fighting to remove himself from an existential world. He fights throughout the novel for the Buddhist understanding he gained on Desolation Peak only to eventually succumb to the only belief system which will work for him: Existentialism.

Ultimately, Kerouac’s narrators must choose Self over dissolution of the Self. They must inevitably understand that what they have learned in solitude, in nature, cannot be brought down to society, to civilization. They must therefore be more Buddhist in nature; they must have the capacity there to begin the path to Nirvana. This search in solitude cannot and will not lead them away from the world and their Selves. On the other hand, in civilization they must be caught up in a Sartrean search for value, which can only lead to affirmation of the Self and a continuation of the Wheel of Samsara.

The question remains for Kerouac as well as the reader: what can the individual do to make meaning in this modern existence? Kerouac argues that answering this question helps to make that life valuable. The answer can take two avenues: either a Buddhist answer or an inevitably existentialist answer. The Buddhist solution demands the dissolution of the Self. The other answer is existentialist in that regardless of whether the individual bases the solution on a transcendental mysticism, on Catholicism, or on Sartre’s idea of “value” and being-for-itself, this solution can only maintain and perpetuate a belief in a Self. Ray Smith and Jack Dulouz could not overcome this dichotomy and did not choose one particular path to lead them.

Kerouac, like Smith and Dulouz, finally could not reconcile the different beliefs within himself to effect a solution for himself. While he turned towards Buddhism, Transcendentalism, Existentialism, and Catholicism in an effort to make meaning, he was unable to work through the fragments he perceived as modernity. Quite possibly this remains and posits itself as the most important and influential mark Kerouac has given to our post-modern existence. In an existence where we recognize our fragmented and irreconcilable Selves, perhaps we can only make meaning and achieve value by choosing one of these fragments and tracing it to its origin or its end. Kerouac becomes for me a writer faced against overwhelming experience who could not
come through triumphantly. This actually gives me great pause in considering how I think about
him as a novelist and as an individual. Personally, I cannot help but be disappointed in his
inability to overcome his circumstances. I must fault him for his own failure. Technically, I now
find myself a much greater supporter of his work and style. His words, which appear so full of
energy and joy upon first reading, must inevitably strike the reader as tremendously conflicted
and serious. The questions he asks himself and his characters must be the questions we ask
ourselves. The answers must ultimately come from the individual, as Kerouac would have liked.
Works Cited


