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An Eastern Mind Attached to a Western Brain: The Influence of Zen Buddhism on Jack Kerouac

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An Eastern Mind Attached to a Western Brain:
Jack Kerouac's Writing Influenced by Zen Buddhism

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An Eastern Mind Attached to Western Brain:
Jack Kerouac's Writing Influenced by Zen Buddhism
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I. Introduction

The requirements for prose & verse are the same, i.e.
blow--What a man most wishes to hide, revise, and
un-say, is precisely what Literature is waiting and
bleeding for—... (Jack Kerouac, quoted in Lombreglia 3)

Jack Kerouac writes the way Japanese people dry their laundry: clothes hanging through the rails of the balcony, including worn underwear, t-shirts with yellow stains in the armpits, and a bright orange silky bra next to old grey socks with holes. Just walking down the street in the afternoon and looking at everyone’s laundry, I hear many real stories of each family’s life. My next door neighbor, Mrs. Oda, and her daughter once returned my Winnie the Pooh socks, which had traveled five feet away on the wind. Mrs. Oda asked me where I had gotten my socks; her four year-old daughter loved my socks decorated with the precious face of Pooh, and she wanted to get some for her. I had bought the socks in Minnesota, and they cannot be found in my Japanese town. So I offered her my socks, which would be awfully big on her daughter’s feet. Mrs. Oda accepted them with thanks and said, “I had no idea grown up women like you wear Winnie the Pooh socks!” We wear clothes to hide our bodies, and just seeing the clothes we
wear closest to our skin says something about the people to whom the clothes belong.

Kerouac's novels reflect his sexual life and his personal beliefs through vivid and intimate descriptions of himself and his friends. After reading six novels by Kerouac, I feel I know him like a good friend whom I had not seen for twenty-two years. His spontaneous prose challenges the American audience by showing the most private parts of people's lives. These private parts include shameful thoughts, ugly body parts, views of women as sex objects, and more usually hidden aspects of life. Kerouac was aware that privacy concealed something uncomfortable, shameful, embarrassing and socially unacceptable. Because he opened his privacy through spontaneous prose, society reacted to him with shock.

Early in 1954, Kerouac began reading Buddhist literature, and this encounter influenced the first fifteen years of his writing career. He studied the philosophy of humans and nature in Buddhist terms and tried to live a Zen life through the practice of meditation. Kerouac was always open to new thoughts, and one of his letters to a friend explains that Zen Buddhism led him to discover a new view of the United States:

My subject as a writer is of course America, and simply I must know everything about it ... What does the study of thought amount to if you yourself don't think new thoughts?--and how are you to think new thoughts if you don't at first fire yourself with a new purpose. Well, my purpose is Balzacian in scope--to conquer knowledge of the U.S.A. ... (Birkerts 45)

Zen life seemed to fit into Kerouac's lifestyle as a lonely traveler who searches for the meaning and purpose of his life. Kerouac was especially fascinated with meditation to train the mind to stop thinking, which allows the mind to become aware of the truth about human nature.
Kerouac’s spontaneous prose reflects his search for the meaning of life under the influence of both Zen Buddhism and jazz:

He thought that the making of true spontaneous prose was more difficult and demanding than ordinary writing accomplished through a process of revision. Like a jazz musician or a silk painter, the true spontaneous-prose artist had to be utterly “present” during the act of creation, completely in the moment, and had only one chance to get it right. Kerouac saw writing as a performing art, and a grueling one, requiring arduous compositional marathons and habits of mind cultivated by long practice. (Lambreglia 92)

Kerouac believed that spontaneous prose involves an intuitive experience, such as the state of enlightenment achieved during meditation and musical performance, which helps one to understand the truth about life.

Kerouac loved the spirit of nature, which he learned to appreciate through Zen Buddhism. Kerouac chose to be a lonely traveler, but the more he experienced separation, the more desperate he became for attachment. He felt at home being close to nature as understood through Zen Buddhism; therefore when he began to doubt the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, he lost his inner home of fifteen years. Kerouac’s fascination with Zen Buddhism became his inner home, but unlike the enlightened one, his life was not free of desire. Kerouac had grown up in a Roman Catholic family, where he learned about Christ’s unconditional love and eternal life in heaven. Since Zen Buddhism does not deal with what happens after death, he felt a piece was missing from Zen Buddhism.

Kerouac was especially infatuated with the Buddhist theory of simplicity. He describes
many aspects of nature through his Buddhist vision, which appreciates and recognizes nature as the example of how simple human life can become. This simplicity is difficult to reach, however, because life is terribly complicated by human emotions and desires. Zen Buddhism challenges humans to separate themselves from their desires, which cause suffering. The philosophy of Zen Buddhism made great sense in Kerouac’s mind, though his lifestyle seemed to contradict the life of Zen.

The loneliest moment of Kerouac’s life was when he lost faith in Zen Buddhism. His love for Buddhism still remained, even though he could not live up to its expectations. The life of simplicity seemed far removed from the contemporary world, yet Kerouac was challenged by Zen Buddhism to find his inner home in simplicity. Is it unrealistic to strive for simplicity in today’s terribly complicated world? Or was Kerouac, the individual, simply unable to abandon the comforts of the material world for a simple life? Kerouac’s struggle can be attributed to both Zen Buddhism requiring an unrealistic way of human life in the Western world, and to Kerouac’s life being trapped in the contemporary world full of mental, emotional and physical complications far from the essence of human existence.

Since Kerouac believed that he was a special messenger whose purpose was to influence the complicated American society with his knowledge of the Eastern religion through spontaneous prose, he is often seen as a “tedious and self-absorbed” writer by American publishers (Birkerts 46). Sven Birkerts, editor of The New Republic, criticizes Kerouac’s expressions of the Buddhist vision, saying that Kerouac’s love for the idea of Buddhism is evident, but not his mastery of the practice of meditation needed to attain Enlightenment:

In the popular imagination he is often seen as a kind of non-doctrinaire Buddhist--
a transcendental celebrant—but the grand sum of the works represents far less the meditations of a self divested of selfhood than the necessarily self-involved outpourings of a good Catholic boy on his knees before the confessional. (Birkerts 43)

I agree that Kerouac did not live the life of Zen; he could not see himself as a part of the big circle of life like a raindrop falling invisibly into the lake. But I argue Birkerts’ point that Kerouac’s writing from the study of Zen Buddhism was the presentation of his confessional attitude; rather than confession, his realization of the impossibility of achieving the absolute truth after studying Zen Buddhism seems to be a more significant perspective. Many of us wonder about the meaning of life and the existence of God, but Kerouac seemed to be obsessed with searching for the truth. Kerouac’s intention for learning Zen Buddhism seemed to come from his desire to encounter the philosophy which teaches the truth of everything, but instead, he achieved a different conclusion: self-discovery. This discovery disappointed him because he hoped for human life to be more than the simple life of Zen. He discerned that his egoism and desire had motivated him to study Zen Buddhism, and his attempt to learn Zen Buddhism ironically conflicted with the most important study of Zen. Kerouac realized this conflict later in his life and struggled with feelings of guilt and shame. Kerouac lived passionately, wrote passionately, and desired his passion to influence the world through his writing. Kerouac’s love for Zen Buddhism and his Buddhist vision certainly helped him bring beautiful imagery into American literature.
II. Biography of Jack Kerouac and His Buddhist Writing

Jack Kerouac, a mixture of Roman Catholic, French Canadian, and American heritage, became fascinated with the Eastern philosophy of Zen Buddhism, which greatly influenced his writing. The study of Zen Buddhism guided Kerouac to live differently than the majority of Americans, and he portrayed this different kind of American life in his writing. His fifteen years of study and fascination with Zen Buddhism influenced his philosophy of life, and was reflected in his writing, including fourteen novels over ten years. His novels are often fictionalized autobiographies whose characters are his friends of the Beat Generation: Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Lucien Carr, William Burroughs, and Neal Cassady, who were also fascinated by Zen Buddhism. Kerouac’s intense study of Zen Buddhism is often described through the stories of a lonely traveler, who is usually Kerouac himself in real life, moving from one place to another. For example, The Dharma Bums, Desolation Angels, Satori in Paris and Big Sur introduce the stories of men who continue to travel as a form of Zen meditation. Some of Kerouac’s novels, such as On the Road, about a group of men hitchhiking all over the United States in search of the essence of life, and Visions of Gerard, about Kerouac losing his older brother in childhood, do not include direct Buddhist descriptions and vocabularies; however Kerouac’s questions about human life and nature are examined with the underlying philosophy of Zen Buddhism.
Jack Kerouac was born in 1922 in the New England mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts, an area heavily populated by French-Canadians. He grew up in a strict Roman Catholic family with his parents, older brother Gerard, who died of rheumatic heart disease, and younger sister Nin (Charter xvi). Kerouac’s religious background stayed with him throughout his life, even when he studied Zen Buddhism intensively. Gerard’s death caused Kerouac to think about the existence of evil and from an early age to realize the closeness of death and life. At the same time, Kerouac saw his family differently after the death of his brother, which he explains in *Visions of Gerard*:

> For the first four years of my life, while he lived, I was not Ti Jean Duluoz (Jack Kerouac), I was Gerard, the world was his face, the flower of his face, the pale stooped disposition, the heartbreakingness and the holiness and his teachings of tenderness to me, and my mother constantly reminding me to pay attention to his goodness and advice...(2)

*Visions of Gerard* is the reflection of Kerouac’s memories of Gerard, which complicated Jack’s relationship with his parents during his youth. His family expected him to embody the perfection Gerard had achieved in their memories. The death of Gerard gave Kerouac an understanding of sorrow as a part of life.

After winning a football scholarship in 1940, Kerouac entered Columbia University, which became the turning point of his life. He met Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and other writers, who were later called the Beat Generation, and the American public labeled them a rebellious group. The term “Beat” was coined by Kerouac, meaning “weirdly courteous patience” (Charter xi). In 1941, Kerouac dropped out of Columbia and began his life as “an
adventurer, a lonesome traveler” (xi).

Kerouac’s career as a writer had two parts; in the first part of his life, he tried to show his visions to the world through publications, and in the rest of his life, he tried to live his reputation down. His writing career began with his first publication, *The Town and the City*, in 1950, and this first novel already expressed his vision of living freely. Kerouac completed his second novel, *On the Road*, which surprised the American literary world with his original spontaneous prose. He went on to write *Visions of Cody*, *Doctor Sax*, *Maggie Cassady*, and *The Subterraneans* in the next two years, but none were published until six years later.

In 1953, Kerouac encountered Zen Buddhism and became intrigued with its philosophy and technique of meditation. Zen Buddhism teaches that desire causes suffering and offers a different way of living in this suffering world. Zen meditation guides us to separate our minds from the outside world to search for Reality, the true essence of nature and human life. Kerouac began to write journals, notes and poems which expressed his new knowledge of Zen Buddhism. These notes were later collected in a set of reading notes, and eventually became *some of the dharma*, which was meant to be a Bible of Buddhism for American society. Kerouac wanted to influence American people by sharing Zen Buddhism, and believing that because he understood Eastern philosophy, he could teach how Zen Buddhism might fit into American society. As he mentioned in a letter to Ginsberg, “I dug Suzuki [the chief emissary of Zen to the West] in NY public library, and I guarantee you I can do everything he does better, intrinsic Dharma teaching by words” (Kerouac 3). He also felt special about his knowledge, which most American people did not recognize, and believed it was his duty to write about the truth of nature and human life. He sums up this calling in *Big Sur*:
I conceived myself as a special solitary angel sent down as a messenger from Heaven to tell everybody or show everybody by example that their peeking society was actually the Satanic Society and they were all on the wrong track. (117) Kerouac’s discovery of the new Buddhist vision pushed him to introduce Zen to American society.

Kerouac was disappointed with American society’s narrow emphasis on science and Christianity; he wanted to share his conviction that knowing about the essence of life and nature is most important for humans to live in this suffering world. Kerouac expresses his concerns to the Western world in *some of the dharma*:

> WESTERNERS ARE SO IGNORANT OF ENLIGHTENMENT, think the basic premises of Nirvana are so ‘irrelevant’ ... When I asked brilliant Lucien whether the perception of a halo around a lamp by some diseased eyes belonged to perception of the eyes or to the lamp, he said “I could care less” and yet I was asking him the basic and the crucial question if the world is real or imaginary ... Scientists study the “forces” of the atom, they have seen that it is of the Nirdana chain-link concatenative dependence, one link destroyed the whole chain is destroyed, yet they continue to play with the force, the energy of the structure of the atom of the dream, instead of stopping and realizing they don’t have to do anything at all because it is only a dream already ended, a fantastic blossom in the air. (80)

Zen Buddhism explains the investigation of the essence of nature, Reality, through careful observations of how nature works. These observations show humans how to live. Kerouac’s
dissatisfaction with living in the United States, caught up in modern technology, economy, 
patriarchy, and ignorance of nature, caused him to look to the Eastern world.

His novel On the Road was published in 1957, seven years after he completed it. The 
publication of On the Road shocked Kerouac by making him terribly famous. Then the second 
part of his life began as he tried to live his reputation down and escape from the pressures of the 
public. The image of Kerouac in On the Road was strongly promoted to the public, and as a 
celebrity, he was expected live as free as the hitchhiker character in On the Road. As the 
pressure from the public and Kerouac’s own desire to achieve Satori (Enlightenment) 
overwhelmed him, he became stricken with alcoholism, depression, and a nervous breakdown. 
Kerouac realized that his way of living contradicted the Zen Buddhist teachings of simplicity and 
silence, and he began to question his beliefs and suffer from confusion. Three years after the 
publishation of On the Road, Kerouac returned to writing to complete his last novel, Big Sur, 
which illustrates the confusion, doubt and fear of the last stage of his life. Kerouac realized that 
perhaps he was only “... playing like a happy child with words words words in a big serious 
tragedy ....,” and not really living the life of Zen Buddhism (Kerouac 187). In the second part of 
his life, he struggled with his fear and love of Zen Buddhism and the confusion of not knowing 
what to believe. Kerouac was unable to let himself trust or believe in anything; he died in 1967 
at the age forty-seven at his mother’s home (Charter xii).

Kerouac’s fascination with Zen Buddhism was very strong, and he believed that he 
understood the meaning of the enlightened mind. But when he failed to live the life of Zen that 
focuses on separation, self discipline and individuality, he saw the clear difference and 
misunderstanding between his original attempt and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. Kerouac
believed that his soul could be saved by Zen Buddhism and wished to become a lonely traveler, which fit with Zen Buddhism well in the first part of his life, but he fought with loneliness and desperation for love during the end of his life.
III. The Influence of Zen Buddhism on Kerouac’s Writing

*It was a river wonderland, the emptiness of the golden eternity,*

*odors of moss and bark and twig and mud, all ululating mysterious*

*visionstuff before my eyes, tranquil and everlasting nevertheless, the*

*hillhairing trees, the dancing sunlight.* *(The Dharma Bums* 225)

Jack Kerouac’s novels reflect his study of Zen Buddhism, including poetic descriptions of nature and the image of emptiness. Kerouac often uses such words like Emptiness, Reality, Awakening, and Nothingness to describe the essential philosophy of Zen Buddhism, which is “Living experience of Reality ... what life is in itself, unmediated by words or ideas” (Bancroft 7). The meaning of Reality in Zen terms can never be fully described, because words are limited. Reality is not a knowledge that can be replaced by words, since the replacement is only a substitution of one kind of Reality for another. Reality is the immediate essence of “what is actually there before thoughts and words arise” (Bancroft 7). Therefore Kerouac’s description of Reality seems abstract to readers, but he expresses the way he understands Zen Buddhism. In the study of Zen Buddhism, Kerouac especially incorporates into his writing the two types of Buddhist knowledge: what is in our control is our mind, and what is out of our control is nature.
In Control: Mind

Kerouac delineates the true Reality of nature as emptiness: “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form and we’re here forever in one form or another which is empty. What the dead have accomplished, [is] this rich silent hush of the Pure Awakened Land” (*The Dharma Bums* 147). In other words, all creations are representations of what is real, and our six senses, which are human representations of Reality, perceive Reality in the representations of external objects. The shapes and colors of creatures may be different, but we were all born from Reality, which makes us the same as everything else. Reality “cannot be understood by logic; it cannot be transmitted in words; it cannot be explained in writing; it cannot be measured by reason. It is like a poisoned drum that kills all who hear it, or like the great fire that consumes all who come near it” (Bancroft 14). The reason for not being able to explain Reality is the limitation of language, which only replaces the thing with words, and this replacement is no longer the thing itself, but its replacement. For example, a deaf person can never fully understand the sound of music by studying the definition of music, because the definition is not music, but rather the language describing the music is only its replacement.

Because it is impossible to describe what Reality is, Kerouac’s writing about Reality can seem abstract. Kerouac illustrates his experience of the difficulty of communicating with others about Reality in *Dharma Bums*. The main character, Ray Smith (in real life Jack Kerouac), tries to convince his family members that external objects are representations of Reality, which is really Emptiness. They don’t understand how everything can be empty, since they perceive the existence of external objects through their senses. He explains the relationship between our minds and the existence of substances:
your mind makes out the orange by seeing it, hearing it, touching it, smelling it, tasting it and thinking about it but without this mind, [as] you call it, the orange would be not be seen or heard or smelled or tasted or even mentally noticed, it’s actually, that orange, depending on your mind to exist! Don’t you see that? By itself, it’s a no-thing, it’s really mental, it’s seen only of your mind. In other words, it’s empty and awake. (145)

This argument is similar to a metaphysical claim that a substance depends on the minds of humans in order to exist, because the substance lacks the ability to exist by its own power. Kerouac means that we see external objects, and we only understand the representation of the objects through the perceptions of our sensory system. However, we are not aware of the Emptiness of which the representation is made. Kerouac believes that the “FIGURE IS NOTHING” because “it is interchangeable, it is a shadow, emptiness in essence fills in—-it is subject to pain and death” (25). Kerouac describes that substances constantly change and disappear when their existences end as time passes; therefore all the substances that exist in emptiness are the same. Even though words cannot define what exactly Reality is, Kerouac portrays his image of Reality in *some of the dharma*:

> The black sea of time across which I sail, my port death, my wake a temporary opening of the foam and closing after, the water uncharted, unmeasurable, formless, all the water already crossed of the same substance and meaning the same to me the sailor as the water I see in the present and to the three unbearable aspects of time, past-present-future, when they dont make any difference to this traveler on this time-sea water—-The intrinsic nature of time is of the torment-
essence, and the nature of torment is the real emptiness. (27)

Reality is "intrinsic" for all creatures, and Kerouac continues to incorporate his images of Reality into his writing.

Kerouac often uses the word "it" to describe the intuitively given idea that comes to mind after practicing or meditating, which is perhaps another way to describe Satori. Buddhism focuses on intuition as the center of the human personality. According to Buddhism, intuition comes from our practice of the perfect pure state of mind, Satori, and the debate between the unity of opposite matters, such as reason and unreason, intellect and senses, and morality and nature (ed. Barrett XV). Zen Buddhism teaches humans both losing their desires, and that seeing with only two eyes doesn't complete our mind's perceiving process. Seeing with a third system, intuition, influences the human mind to understand, judge, and perceive clearly. Therefore, when we meet intuition after hours of practice or meditation, we "see essence or nature" (ed. Barrett 104). In On the Road, Kerouac mentions "it" as a mysterious power which enters his mind:

"That Rollo Greb is the greatest...I want to be like him. He's never hung-up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man, he's the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you'll finally get it"/ "Get what?"/ "IT! IT! I'll tell you--now no time, we have not time now."(127)

To get "it" in the passage seems to mean to have intuition. Intuitive experience seems to be common for many people; they think and search for the right direction, and after awhile suddenly know what to do. However, intuition is different from the miracle given by the higher power. The intuitive certainty comes from the third eyes in our minds.
Nature is unknown and mysterious to humans, except for the space and time in which we live, in Emptiness (Minakami 90). To understand living in Emptiness, Zen Buddhism focuses on having the perfect condition of the human mind, which is called Satori, or Enlightenment (Tomomatsu 41). The perfect state of mind, which Kerouac called a Moveless mind, a Changeless mind, and a Tranquil and eternal mind, is like Reality, which has no transformation. In this state, the mind accomplishes the understanding of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths: “1. All life is sorrowful/ 2. The Cause of suffering is Ignorant Craving/ 3. The suppression of Suffering can be Achieved/ 4. The way is the Noble Eightfold Path” (some of the dharma 3). Buddhism sees life as a suffering existence, and the practice of surviving in this world is taught through Zen meditation (Minakami 95).

According to Buddhism, evil has always been caused by an individual’s behavior, which leads to suffering (Kamata 4). Evil is not a part of nature, but rather something that humans and their societies create both consciously and unconsciously. There is no coincidental evil randomly visiting people’s lives. Therefore, Buddhism expects humans to be responsible; attitudes such as complaining, blaming, and feeling like a victim are proofs of the untrained mind (Tomomatus 130). In Desolation Angel, Kerouac describes his experience of Satori, his understanding of the importance of being responsible for our own suffering: “... first time suddenly realizing ‘It’s me that’s changed and done all this and come and gone and complained and hurt and joyed and yelled, not the Void’...” (3). We must think back to how and why evil was created. Zen Buddhism teaches people to take responsibility for their own suffering rather than blaming an external evil or fate for causing pain.

Buddhism believes that evil brings pain and suffering to human lives, but also recognizes
that pain is the most effective lesson for humans. This is described by D. T. Suzuki:

For the more you suffer, deeper grows your character, and with the deepening of your character you read the more penetratively into the secrets of life. All greats, all great religious leaders, and all great social reformers have come out of the intensest struggles which they fought bravely, quite frequently in tears and with bleeding hearts. Unless you eat your bread in sorrow, you cannot taste of real life. (Suzuki 6)

Buddhism admits that evil causes suffering, which is difficult to live with, but humans must recognize evil as the strongest source of lessons in human life. Because it seems impossible to separate human life and suffering, Zen Buddhism teaches how to endure a life of suffering by reaching for Satori.

Pain is one of the main themes in Kerouac’s study of Buddhism. He sees the world as a place of suffering, which he describes in Visions of Gerard:

“God doesn’t look like he made the world for people” he guesses all by himself as it occurs in his chilled bones the hopeless sensation--No help in sight, the utter help-less-ness up, down, around--The stars, rooftops, dusty swirls, street lamps, cold storefronts, vistas at street-ends where you know the earth flat just continues on and on into a round February the roundness of which and warm ball of which wont be vouchsafed us Slav-level foots as but flat--Flat as a tin pan ... No thought, no hope of the mind can dispel, nay no millions in the bank, can break, the truth of the winter night and that we are not made for this world... (42)

Kerouac’s hopeless feelings toward this world, full of pain, are reflected in this view of winter.
He also wonders how a loving, kind and perfect Christian God could exist in this suffering world. If God really exists, He may be a powerful being, but not kind or perfect, for He must have made a big mistake by creating humans in the wrong place, to live lives of suffering on this earth. This argument separates Kerouac from belief in the Christian God. Zen Buddhism explains that humans live with suffering, and Kerouac’s realization that “...the world was real and fear” came from one of the Four Noble Truths.

One of the fundamental teachings of Christianity is to live the way God wants humans to live, but Kerouac questions, “Don’t you realize you are God?”(118), meaning “Don’t you realize you are the master of your mind?” Our minds are not in control of nature, but are in control of finding a way to be part of nature. Rather than focusing on how God wants humans to live, Buddhist theory focuses on the way our minds discover how to live with all the creations around us. In the book *Christian Zen*, Kerouac’s point is illustrated by the conversation of Fr. William Johnston and a Zen master during Johnston’s experience of meditation:

The master ... asked him what practice he has followed in his meditation.

Johnston replied that he was sitting silently in the presence of God without words or thoughts or images or ideas. The master asked if God was everywhere, and when he replied yes, asked if he was ‘wrapped around in God.’ The answer was yes again. ... ‘Very good, very good,’ said master, ‘continue this way. Just keep on. And eventually you will find that God will disappear and only Johnston remain.’ Johnston was shocked ... and said, smilingly, ‘God will not disappear. But Johnston might well disappear and only God be left.’ ‘Yes, yes,’ said the master answered, smiling, ‘It’s the same thing. That is what I mean’ (Bancroft 8).
Kerouac realizes that belief in the Christian God may take away our control to decide how we should live, whereas Zen Buddhism teaches that our minds are the masters of our own lives. Kerouac describes his realization of his control over his life in *Desolation Angel*:

Why not I be like the Void, inexhaustibly fertile, beyond serenity, beyond even gladness, just old Jack (and not even that) and conduct my life from this moment on (though winds blow through my windpipe), this ungraspable image in a crystal ball is not Void, the Void is the crystal ball itself ... (6)

The transcendent belief in the Christian God, who is all perfect, loving and kind, becomes only an illusion, and the truth becomes immanent in Kerouac’s eyes.

Since Zen Buddhism discovered that life is a place of suffering, the important task is how to live in harmony with the nature we were born into (Tomomatsu 263). It is difficult to live without being aware of the reason, purpose and meaning of our existence. But suffering can be prevented by having the perfect mind condition, Satori, which requires emotional, mental and physical training in Zen Buddhist meditation.

Zen meditation is the physical, mental and emotional training to encounter true Emptiness, Satori. The purpose of Zen Meditation is to keep the mind still and separate from thinking. Zen meditation is called Zazen, which is to sit cross legged for a long period of time for effective concentration, and to regulate the breath. Breathing naturally without any physical control or force will regulate the mind to concentrate on counting one breath in a repeating cycle (Knaft 32). But “what is most important is how you keep your mind sitting. True sitting means cutting off all thinking and keeping a mind that does not love. True Zen means becoming clear” (Bancroft 66).
In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac recognizes that “Compassion is the heart of Buddhism” (132). Zen meditation focuses on three stages of mind: attachment mind, one mind, and clear mind. First, attachment mind is the mind before meditation, which is small and full of desire. For example, when a robber breaks in, the small mind’s response is “Don’t hurt me, please don’t take anything,” because all the small mind can think of is his desire to keep everything. Kerouac describes this small mind stage in *The Dharma Bums*:

... you are just drinking too much all the time, I don’t see how you’re even going to gain enlightenment and manage to stay out in the mountains, you’ll always be coming down the hill spending your beans money on wine and finally you’ll end up lying in the street in the rain, dead drunk, and then they’ll take you away and you’ll have to be reborn a teetotalin bartender to atone for your karma.” (191)

A modern translation of Buddhism explains that if we don’t complete our lives with Satori, we will be reborn again in one form or another until we become one Reality. A life without the separation brought about by desire is perhaps the way to be reborn again.

Second, the one mind stage is the empty mind during meditation. For example, when a robber breaks in, an empty mind doesn’t respond. If a robber demands one’s life, an empty mind does not care because it is already in the stage of “no life and no death” (Bancroft 67). Kerouac describes the one mind stage in *The Dharma Bums*:

I immediately fell into a blank thoughtless trance wherein it was again revealed to me: “This thinking has stopped” and I sighed because I didn’t have to think any more and felt my whole body sink into a blessedness surely to be believed, completely relaxed and at peace with all the ephemeral world of dream and
dreamer and the dreaming itself. (134)

The empty mind is a mind unmoved, in a deep concentration which does not care for its surroundings. Kerouac explains his experience of feeling this emptiness mentally and physically.

Third, the clear mind stage of compassion occurs mainly after the long process of meditation. For example, when a robber breaks in, a clear mind is not afraid of the attack, and also offers everything that belongs to him or her. At the same time, a clear mind feels sad and worries about the robber, thinking, “Why is he doing this terrible thing? Is he going to be all right?” This compassionate attitude would be an example for the robber to realize that he must stop hurting others (Bancroft 67). This compassion is described in The Dharma Bums:

I’m empty, awake, and that there’s no difference between me and anything else. 

In other words it means that I’ve become the same as everything else. In other words it means I’ve become a Buddha ... I felt great compassion for the trees because we were the same things; I petted the dogs who didn’t argue with me ever. All dogs love God. (145)

Becoming a Buddha means having a clear, compassionate mind.

The ultimate goal of meditation is compassion, beginning with the separation of desire. However, the separation of desire does not mean “having no feelings, or having no sensations of hunger, pain, etc. It means entering into everything with the whole self, nothing held back, free to be entirely at one with any circumstance” (Bancroft 18). Therefore Zen meditation helps us to open up the self to its own Reality. We tend to believe that we need so much more than what is around us, and the process of meditation makes us see who we are and what we need. After seeing ourselves, we realize that the majority of our needs come from many unnecessary desires.
Separation of desire means separation from the “I,” which leads us to see the freedom of unconditional compassion in the true nature, with the eyes of the self. Kerouac describes his perspective on human lives with the eyes of his self, Reality, in *Desolation Angels*:

... everything is one dream, one appearance, one flash, one sad eye, one crystal lucid mystery, one word -- Hold still, man, regain your love of life and go down from this mountain and simply be---be---be the infinite fertilities of the one mind of infinity, make no comments, complaints, criticism, appraisals, avowals, sayings, shooting stars of thought, just flow, flow, be you all, be you what it is, it is only what it always is -- (6)

Kerouac also recognizes that separation from desire is the key to Zen study, and he criticizes American society, which now seems very complicated and full of unnecessary objects. He explains how Zen, which Americans look down on as being simple, can bring more happiness to the western world, in *The Dharma Bums*:

Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't want anyway, such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier... (97)
The economic and industrial development and continuous improvement of modern techniques may cause humans to believe that having more material things is better and will make them happier. Kerouac responds that the true nature of simplicity should be the source of happiness.

Kerouac’s writing includes poetic expressions of scenic views in nature, often observed during meditation. The study of Zen Buddhism influenced Kerouac’s expression in writing, because Zen masters often teach the philosophy of Zen and meditation with many examples from nature, and Kerouac became aware of the beauty of nature during meditation. An example is described in *Visions of Gerard*:

June, late June, with the trees having burgeoned green and golden beewax bugs are high chickadeeing the topmost trees embrowsying the drowsy air of reader’s moon, the back fences of Bealieu street sleeping like lazy dogs, the flies rubbing their miser forelegs on screens, “The little flies too, you don’t have to kill them---they rub their little legs, they don’t know how to do anything else” --- (105)

This compassionate vision gained from meditation shows how nature now revealed itself differently to Kerouac.

Out of Control: Nature

One of the most important parts of nature is time; to understand time means to know that all objects and their shapes will change as time passes. The process of time passing is beyond the human’s power, because time controls nature, which controls human lives. Therefore the human’s experience of being certain and uncertain is natural, and something which seems
uncertain may later change. Time itself exposes the uncertainty, because everything changes as time passes. We often say that elders are wise because of their knowledge gained by years of experiences and living. Just like an injury cannot be healed overnight, uncertain matters cannot be solved right away before knowledge is gained through experience. This process requires the patience to release the desire to know everything, since certainty is only reached as time passes. D.T. Suzuki describes the relationship of the human intellect to time and nature:

Those who take [idle distinctions ... designed by the intellect for its own purpose ...] too seriously or those who try to read them into the very fact of life are those who take the finger for the moon ... Let the intellect alone, it has its usefulness in its proper sphere, but let it not interfere with the flowing of the life-stream. If you are at all tempted to look into it, do so while letting it flow. The fact of flowing must under no circumstance be arrested or meddled with. (ed. Barrett 9)

Zen Buddhism teaches humans to find a way to fit into the movement of time, which it considers as the most natural way to live.

The philosophy of time is one of the main themes that Kerouac carries into his writing. Many of his novels, such as On the Road and The Dharma Bums, show their characters living and caring only about the present moment, not the future. The spirit of living free is described in Kerouac’s writing, which reflects his focus on the present moment in his own life. Kerouac criticizes how adults tend to push children into the future too fast in On the Road:

Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together; sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk. Not courting
talk--real straight talk about souls, for life is holy and every moment is precious (57).

The attempt to grow faster by ignoring time’s movement happens often in the world; this attempt is dangerous in Kerouac’s eyes because the ignorance of time is terribly unnatural and may destroy the children. Kerouac’s belief in living for the present moment is reflected in characters who often search for pleasure only. His philosophy is to go along with time, which he illustrates in *Big Sur*:

---We will pass just as quietly through life (passing through, passing through) as the 10th century people of this valley only with a little more noise and a few bridges and dams and bombs that won’t even last a million years---The whole world being just what it is, moving and passing through actually alright in the long view and nothing to complain about--- (35)

Time flows from the past to the present and will carry life into the future; this knowledge explains a part of nature.

However, since the time between life and death is the only period in which humans live, time seems to passe only to bring us to death, which is difficult to accept. These difficulties are seen in *Visions of Gerard*. When Kerouac’s brother Gerard is dying, Kerouac says that “Gerard ...listened to the holy lazy silence of Time as it washed and washed forever more”(116). Time exists without being fast or slow, but the human consciousness interprets time differently depending on the situation. Kerouac reveals his hopeless feelings toward time as an unstoppable force of nature, like waves in the ocean that come and go continuously.

Buddhism recognizes the power of nature and the fact that conquering nature is
impossible, because time controls nature and nature responds to time with changes, such as seasons. The effect of time passing is the same for all creatures: to age and die. Buddhist theory makes the human a part of nature like everything else. Humans learn through nature that time is the beginning and end of everything, and we become aware of our limits in the present moment, which passes with the movement of time.

Since time passes unstoppably in our lives, death will be brought to each person’s life by time. Nevertheless, humans often perceive death as a fearful event. What happens after death was never described by Buddha originally, but his philosophy was applied to death by his pupils. According to Hui Neng (637-714 AD), one of the greatest masters of Zen, the reason humans are afraid of death is because we are not aware of where we are going (Bancroft 15). Hui Neng explains that birth and death begin from the true nature. Before birth, we are Reality itself, which is pure and empty. While we are alive, we have a body and mind, which are representations of Reality, but these representations are limited. We no longer know the existence of Reality beyond our bodies and minds. In order to realize that our bodies and minds are representations of what is real, Zen meditation trains our minds. Unless we experience the existence of Reality, these explanations seem abstract and difficult to understand. The relationship of a river and the ocean explains the relationship of human lives and Reality; river water is only aware of the existence of the river while the water stays in the river. River water never sees the larger picture, that the water is a part of the ocean until the water returns to the ocean. While we are alive, we will never be able to know what exactly Reality is, but we can be aware of the existence of the larger picture, which we will reach after death. Death really means cessation for the six senses of the conscious body: sight, smell, hearing, taste, feeling, and mind (Tomomatu 134). These six
senses stop functioning upon the arrival of death, which simply erases one’s physical existence or representation of Reality. But Reality goes on, as Hui Neng says, “the true nature is without birth or death, without going or coming,” and understanding Reality should take our fears away (Bancroft 15).

This theory of Reality, described as the essence of human life and nature, fascinated Kerouac greatly. Therefore, he denied the idea of Heaven and God, thinking that belief in heaven only brings a sense of comfort to humans who are afraid of what happens after death. Kerouac sees such fear as the cause for the creation of the illusion of heaven, depicted in *Visions of Gerard*:

...We talk about “the Lord” out of the corner of our hands for want of a better way to describe emptiness of the blue sky...It’s typical of us to compromise and anthropomorphize and He it, thus attributing to that bright perfection of Heaven our own low state of selfbeing and selfhood and selfconsciousness and selfness general—The Lord is no-body...We are baptized in water for no unsanitary reason, that is to say, a well-needed bath is implied... (31)

Kerouac sees the earth as “the kingdom of consciousness...with pain” and heaven as an illusion, born out of fear and the desire of humans to live forever with pleasure (61).

Once the life of any living creature begins, its death is certain, or as Kerouac mentions, it is “living but to die” (118). Kerouac focuses on the relationship of time and death, explaining that we live and die the way time passes in *The Dharma Bums*: “All living and dying things like these dogs and me coming and going without any duration or self substance” (134). Since time determines death, and death is a part of nature, to live means to let one’s life move as nature
moves in Zen Buddhism. Each individual is a part of the big picture of nature; therefore, we
must not single an individual out or recognize our own existence more than others, because the
desire to gain more than others leads to destruction and separation between the human and the
movement of time in nature. As Kerouac poetically remarks in Some of Dharma: “Ego leaps to
vain” (13).

Kerouac uses “it” in his writing to describe the intuitive experience after the long process
of meditation, but he also describes “it” to be another word for nature, which has its own
movement, beyond human control. Zen Buddhism focuses on fitting into the movement of
nature, which seems controlled by time passing through space, which means that humans live in
Emptiness. In On the Road, Kerouac describes the relationship of humans and nature, or “it.”
One of the characters, Dean, explains:

He no longer cared about anything (as before) but now he also cared about
everything in principle; that is to say, it was all the same to him and he belonged
to the world and there was nothing he could do about it. (188)

Some parts of life cannot be changed, so it is better to find out how to fit in the circle of time; life
“will go along of itself ...” (120). Kerouac recognizes the power of “it,” nature, and how we are
aware of its existence, but we cannot understand the meaning of any real existences on the earth
because of our limited human abilities.

The theory of Zen Buddhism, which teaches how one life connects to the big picture of
universe, seems to make sense in Kerouac’s mind. His search for his own Reality through
meditation brought him many philosophical ideas and visions, which he incorporated into his
novels. Kerouac believed that he was an angel or prophet of Eastern Philosophy, sent to save
American society by teaching them his knowledge of Zen Buddhism.
IV. An Eastern Mind Attached to a Western Brain

... This world is the movie of what everything is,

It is one movie, made of the same stuff throughout,

Belonging to nobody, which is what everything is.

(The Dharma Bums 181)

The search for the Reality which exists without any desires is one focus of Zen Buddhism; meditation trains the mind to detach itself from the outside world and become one with Reality. Kerouac was attracted to this philosophy of wholeness, and he intensively studied it and meditated to clear his mind to reach the most important stage of mind, compassion. When Kerouac’s second novel, On the Road, was published in 1957, he suddenly became famous. American society saw and expected Kerouac to be a spontaneous traveler and writer like Dean Moriarty, one of the main characters in On the Road. The public pressured Kerouac and stole his private life, which he describes in Big Sur: “... all over America highschool and college kids thinking ‘Jack Duluoz [Kerouac in real life] is 26 years old and on the road all the time hitch hiking’ while there I am almost 40 years old” (5). As a result, he could no longer control his mind, and he experienced a long-term nervous breakdown. Kerouac’s mental state was so
destroyed that he was no longer capable of writing. *Big Sur*, Kerouac’s last novel, was published in 1961, ending his fifteen years of writing. *Big Sur* portrays the sorrow of Kerouac’s life, fighting with his doubts and fear of Zen Buddhism. Kerouac now saw Satori as hopeless perfection, and his inability to separate himself from desire for attachment caused him to suffer from loneliness, to lose confidence in living, and to escape the questions of life by drinking. Kerouac also began to fear death, and he returned to his original religion, Roman Catholicism, believing that he would enter Heaven. His fear of living and dying continued until his death in 1969 from massive abdominal hemorrhage, caused by drinking (Charters xi).

**Kerouac’s Struggles with Society**

Kerouac’s life of Zen Buddhism deteriorated after the publication of *On the Road*. Ironically, although Kerouac was desperate to publish his novels for many years, once they were published and made him famous, he faced a strong response by the public, which restricted him from Zen life. Kerouac explains his life as a famous writer and the pressure from the public in *Big Sur*:

I’m supposed to be the King of the Beatniks according to the newspapers, so but at the same time I’m sick and tired of all the endless enthusiasms of new young kids trying to know me and pour out all their lives into me so that I’ll jump up and down and say yes yes that’s right, which I cant do any more.(109)

Kerouac wanted to explore the Western world with Zen Buddhism, but he realized that the life of Zen is “noble and idealistic,” and that he could not live up to the expectations of both American society and Zen Buddhism.
Kerouac also struggled with a change in American society which contradicted American people’s expectations of his life. He describes this change in *Big Sur*:

>This is the first time I’ve hitch hiked in years and I soon begin to see that things have changed in America, you cant get a ride any more ... Sleek long stationwagon after wagon comes sleering by smoothly, all colors of the rainbow and pastel at that, pink, blue, white, the husband is in the driver’s seat with a long ridiculous vacationist hat with a long baseball visor making him look witless and idiot—Beside him sits wifey, the boss of America, wearing dark glasses and sneering, even if he wanted to pick me up or anybody up, she wouldn’t let him—But in the two deep backseats are children, children, millions of children ... There is no room anymore anyway for a hitch hiker ... (45)

The public saw Kerouac as a lonely traveler who was not afraid of anything and only lived to be free from attachments and responsibilities. Even though Kerouac was expected to live as the character that he introduced to the world, there were no opportunities or places in this changed American society for Kerouac to live like his character. The changes in American society didn’t allow Kerouac to live the way society expected; he felt unable to achieve such expectations.

The Necessity of Heaven

Even though Kerouac was fascinated with Zen Buddhism and denied some Christian beliefs such as the existence of God and Heaven, he never completely separated his mind from Christianity. He often combined his love for Jesus Christ and Zen Buddhism by using the words
God and love together; God meant Reality in Zen Buddhist terms, and love meant Christ-like compassion in Kerouac’s early novels. He often combines these beliefs in his novels: Buddhism, which focuses on the simplicity, nature and compassion of Reality; and Christianity, which emphasizes the unconditional love and kindness of God. Kerouac’s love for both religions created combined beliefs, described in *The Dharma Bums*:

> Life’s already shoved an iron foot down my mouth. But I don’t think that’s anything but a dream cooked up by some hysterical monks who didn’t understand Buddha’s peace under the Bo Tree or for that matter Christ’s peace looking down on the heads of his tormentors and forgiving them ... he [Jesus] is Maitreya, the Buddha prophesied to appear after Sakymuni, you know. Maitreya means ‘love’ in Sanskrit and that’s all Christ talked about was love.(202)

Kerouac asks in *The Dharma Bums*: “... I felt suppressed by schism, East from West, what the hell difference does it make?”(114) However, he began to realize the differences between Christianity and Zen Buddhism by their definitions of death. According to the philosophy that was applied by Buddha’s students, death leads to rebirth back into life, or Reality. If we completed our lives with Satori, then we become Reality, the true essence of nature; but if we could not complete our lives with Satori, then we must be born again into another life of suffering. Achievement of Satori does not require one to be Buddhist, but an enlightened person must live the life of Zen, which means growing “third eyes” or intuition in the heart. Christianity focuses on eternal life in Heaven as the explanation of existence after death. This belief also requires humans to live morally with the guidance of the Bible, the Word of God, in order to arrive in Heaven.
Kerouac states in *The Dharma Bums* that “I think death is our reward. When we die we go straight to nirvana Heaven and that’s that” (202). However, the translation of “Nirvana” is not the same as the Christian Heaven. Perhaps even though Kerouac understood the meaning of “Nirvana,” he held on to the image of the Christian vision of Heaven as eternal life close to God’s unconditional love, during his study of Zen Buddhism. When Kerouac became aware of his own coming death, he became very fearful of Zen Buddhism because of its definition of after death. Kerouac was living in pain, and believed he might have to come back to this painful earth. The idea of rebirth was terribly dreadful to Kerouac because living meant suffering to him.

In *Big Sur*, many creatures die: Kerouac’s cat, which he loved deeply, his good friend George, a mouse at the cabin, a snake in the woods, and seaweed in the ocean. His cat Tyke is the symbol of his brother, Gerard, who taught Jack to love a cat and died at the age of eight. The death of Tyke hurts Kerouac deeply, and he wishes to be saved by alcohol after this sad news: “I ran out to get drunk with the boys and still once in a while that funny little smile of joy came back as I drank, and melted away again because now the smile itself was a reminder of death” (52). His drinking habits brought him a short period of relaxation, but the memory of Tyke and fear of death hunted him down with a frightening vision and pulled him back into depression. The death of George was a reminder for Kerouac that death would meet him someday. Even though Kerouac studied Zen Buddhism, he had a difficult time accepting the definition of death in Zen terms, which Kerouac describes: “DEATH things piling up suddenly—But I can’t believe old Zen Master George is going to allow his body to die just now tho it looks like when we pass through the lawn” (78). Kerouac’s reaction to death of a mouse show how guilty he felt for being a human, who should be the same as everything else on the earth because we all have the same
Reality. But the truth is he has the power to kill small beings, which makes him not only a stronger being, but also a murderer. Kerouac struggles with his influence on smaller animals:

"... my mouse--It's lying there dead--Like the otter in the sea--It's my own personal mouse that I've carefully fed chocolate and cheese all summer but once again I've unconsciously sabotaged all these great plans of mine to be kind to living beings even bugs, once again I've murdered a mouse one way or the other--" (110)

Kerouac became hopeless again, because his power unconsciously hurt other creatures, which is far from the compassion of Zen Buddhism. Even though he tried to be compassionate to other creatures, some animals like snakes attack people, and the only way to protect ourselves is to kill snakes. This incident frightens Kerouac greatly: "LOOK OUT! You never can tell what kind of snake it is!" which really scares me, my heart pounds with horror" (110). Kerouac becomes confused with his own being, even stranger to him than many small creatures. He who is supposed to be compassionate, ends up killing out of fear. Finally, his horror at the seaweed's death is described:

... at the surf, where long streamers of hollow sea weed always lie around dying in the sun some of them huge, like living bodies with skin, pieces of living materials that always made me sad somehow, here's the young hepcat lifting them up and dancing a dervish around the beach with them, turning my Sur into something seachange--Something brainchange. (110)

The sight that Kerouac saw relates the death of seaweed and humans, and makes him question what death really is and what happens after death. Kerouac becomes desperate to believe that the
death of humans is more than just all the dead seaweed bodies he saw.

Since Kerouac saw the potential for evil in himself after the death of the mouse, he was too nervous to communicate with other beings because he might unconsciously cause their deaths. When his goldfish dies, Kerouac breaks down with the fear of his being and of the unknown future after death, which is described in his conversation with his lover, Billie:

... the gold fish are dead. “What killed them?... Did I kill them because I gave them some Kelloggs corn flakes? ...But I thought they were hungry so I gave them a few flicks of corn flakes”--”Well I dont know what killed them.”--”But why dont anybody know? What happens? Why do they do this? Otters and mouses and every damn thing dying on all sides Billie, I cant stand it, it’s all my goddamn fault every time! ... It is because I’ve been sitting in that stumbling chair all week blowing smoke and all the talk?”... I am almost going mad from the sadness of it all--(168)

Kerouac feared that his compassionate offer to feed the goldfish might have caused their deaths, which did not make sense in his Buddhist mind. Zen Buddhism taught Kerouac that every evil has a cause, and if this evil was caused by his misguided compassion, then how should he live? This contradiction confused Kerouac so greatly that he does not know what to believe; his greatest fear was to find that what he studied and believed to be the absolute truth for years may be false.

Then what happens after death? Fear haunted Kerouac, and he even mentions in *Big Sur* that “Someday I’m going to commit suicide.” He knew that would not be the end of it, because in Christianity, suicide is a sin, and he would no longer go to Heaven; in Buddhism, an incomplete
life would return to earth again by rebirth. Kerouac expresses his agony:

O hell, I'm sick of life--If I had any guts I'd drown it over at all, I can just see the big transformations and plants jellying down there to curse us up in some other wretched suffering from eternities of it--(183)

Kerouac felt stuck in this terribly difficult life full of suffering, though he could take his life since he was not sure about after death. He struggled with questions: What does it really mean to be one and return to Reality? And how do we really feel when we become Reality, One whole true essence of nature?

Kerouac began to reach out to Christian beliefs, the existence of Heaven during this difficult time. This Christian belief of Heaven perhaps was the comfort that Kerouac desperately needed. In *Big Sur*, he expresses the image of God and his belief in Heaven:

For after all the sea must be like God, God isn't asking us to mope and suffer and sit by the sea in the cold at midnight for the sake of writing down useless sounds, he gave us the tools of self reliance after all to make it straight thru bad life mortality toward Paradise maybe I hope--But some miserables like me dont even know it...(42)

In this statement, Kerouac is speaking of the Christian God, and even though he cannot be sure of the existence of Heaven, he wants to believe that he will go to Heaven. He is torn by two religions: Zen Buddhism's theory of emptiness and Christianity's eternal life. He describes his mixed emotions pulled in different directions by Eastern and Western minds in *Satori in Paris*:

“But I’m not a Buddhist, I’m a Catholic revisiting the ancestral and fought for Catholicism against impossible adds yet won on the end” (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 582). Kerouac admits
that his study of Zen Buddhism might have been useless in life because he realizes that the belief in Heaven is necessary for him.

The Alienation of Kerouac’s Life and Zen Buddhism

Kerouac has always admitted that he wrote “under the influence of one substance or another—Benzedrine, marijuana, or alcohol in his early years, mostly alcohol later on” (Lombregilia 4). His life with the serious involvement of alcohol contrasted with the life of Zen Buddhism, and his guilt for not being able to live up to Zen Buddhism grew deep and destroyed his mental condition. Kerouac’s guilt grows as he recognizes himself as a waste in *Big Sur*:

... it’s not so much a physical pain but mental anguish indescribable to those ignorant people who don’t drink and accuse drinkers of irresponsibility--The mental anguish is so intense that you feel you have betrayed your very birth, the efforts you make the birth pangs of your mother when she bore you and delivered you to the world, you’ve every effort your father ever made to feed you and raise you and make you strong and my God even educate you for “life,” you feel a guilt so deep you identify yourself with the devil and God seems far away abandoning you to your sick silliness--You feel sick in the greatest sense of the word, breathing *without believing in it*, sicksicksick ... (111)

After studying and believing in Zen Buddhism for years, Kerouac found himself not being able to really believe in its doctrines. His heart without spiritual beliefs caused great fear and insecurity in his life. Kerouac didn’t trust his own vision because he had no idea what to believe; perhaps
the loss of one's beliefs may be as difficult as losing a part of one's body. His Buddhist vision decreased in his writing as he became caught in the cycle of drinking and suffering. His life with alcoholism is described in *Big Sur*:

Any drinker knows how the process works: the first day you get drunk is okay, the morning after means a big head but so you can kill that easy with a few more drinks and a meal, but if you pass up the meal and go on to another night's drunk, and wake up to keep the toot going, and continue on to the fourth day, there'll come one day when the drinks won't take effect because you're chemically overloaded and you'll have to sleep it off but can't sleep any more because it was alcohol itself that made you sleep those last five nights, so delirium sets in—Sleeplessness, sweat, trembling, a groaning feeling of weakness where your arms are numb and useless, nightmares, (nightmares of death)... well, there's more of that up later. (75)

Kerouac always associated with alcohol since his early life, though his use of alcohol significantly increased in later life. Alcoholism brought Kerouac “a physical and spiritual and metaphysical hopelessness” in which he must live, though living meant suffering to him, which made him feel even more hopeless (75). Kerouac was trapped by alcoholism, and he cried for the salvation. Kerouac doubted with Zen Buddhism during his alcoholic life, because he was reminded that Satori is not a miracle, as he had desperately hoped it would be. Kerouac’s sorrow seems ironic, since Zen Buddhism was supposed to help him live through a suffering life in the way of the Four Noble Truths. It seems like what he really hoped to find in Zen Buddhism was not emptiness, but some kind of magical salvation to save him from living in this suffering
Kerouac describes Satori as “hopeless perfection of pioneer puritan hope that leaves nothing but dead pigeons to look at ...” (172). He felt lost in “endless jabbering of blind nature” and realized that “Only a silly sober fool could think it, imagine gloating over such nonsense.” In other words, Zen Buddhism may impress people when they are healthy and happy, but Kerouac felt that the wisdom of Zen cannot save people who are suffering. Instead, such a perfect wisdom hurt Kerouac, because he could not live up to its philosophy. His hopeless feelings are described in *Big Sur:*

... because in one sense the drinker learns wisdom, in the words of Goethe or Blake or whichever it was “The pathway to wisdom lies through excess”) --- But in this condition you can only say “Wisdom is just another way to make people sick” --- ‘I’m SICK’ I yell emphatically to the trees, to the woods around, to the hills above, looking around desperately, nobody cares... (113)

Kerouac mentions the difficulties of achieving Satori through meditation in *The Dharma Bums: “Everything was far away from the easy purity of being”* (120). Despite his knowledge about the perfect state of mind, Kerouac could not bring his mind into Satori, and continued to suffer from feelings of hopelessness.

Kerouac lost his confidence and his belief in Buddhism, and he began to fear nature. He didn’t feel he deserved to be close to nature, to “the water which no longer [is] friends [with] me but sorta wants me to go away” (113). Kerouac continued to feel a sense of shame from being close to nature, and he could no longer meditate to keep his mind still. His shame is described in *Big Sur:***
... but I ran away from that seashore and never came back again without that secret knowledge: that it didn’t want me there, that I was a fool to sit there in the first place, the sea has its waves, the man has his fireside, period. (42)

Kerouac believed that he could find Reality by being close to nature, but instead, he was reminded during his visit to the woods and ocean that there was no place for him in nature. This rejection from nature hurt Kerouac deeply, and he felt the whole universe was against him for his behavior, which he believed was terribly attached to desires.

Kerouac’s fear of nature grew and caused him to develop low self-esteem, shame, guilt and depression. Kerouac cries in Big Sur, “I feel guilty for being a member of the human race--Drunkard yes and one of the worst fools on earth--”(166). Kerouac saw his life as a waste, and he didn’t trust his soul living on this earth. Kerouac realized he was caught up in desires, and he viewed himself as a failure of Zen Buddhism. He blames himself in Big Sur:

I remembered that frightening thing Milarepa said which is other than those reassuring words of his I remembered in the cabin of sweet loneness on Big Sur:

“When the various experiences come to light in meditation, do not be proud and anxious to tell other people, else to Goddesses and Mothers you will bring annoyance” and here I am a perfectly obvious fool American writer doing just that not only for a living ... but because if I don’t write what actually I see happening in this unhappy globe which is rounded by the contours of my deathskull I think I’ll have been sent on earth by poor God for nothing. (167)

Kerouac believed that his understanding of Zen Buddhism and view of himself as the prophet of Eastern philosophy to the Western world was a sinful illusion, and he felt shame for writing
about Zen Buddhism but not living the life of Zen.

Perhaps the most challenging lesson in Buddhism is training the mind to avoid desires. There are two kinds of desires: physical desire, which is necessary for humans to be alive; and emotional desire, which we need to gain materials or to demand others’ emotional attention. Zen Buddhism teaches us to fulfill only the minimum of physical desires, and to completely separate ourselves from emotional desire. Desire seems like a part of human nature, since we all live in the cycle of adding more desires as we accomplish previous desires. Buddhism teaches that such a mind set causes a suffering world, and meditation provides an opportunity to be alone with the self and to think of simplicity. In his prime, Kerouac greatly respected this theory, and in *The Dharma Bums*, he emphasizes the importance of solitude in order to meet with one’s self:

I saw it was the only decent activity left in the world. To be in some riverbottom somewhere, or in a desert, or in mountains, or in some hut in Mexico or shack in Adirondack, and rest and be kind, and do nothing else, practice what the Chinese call “do-nothing.” I didn’t want anything to do, really, either with Japhy’s ideas about society ... or with any of Alvh’s ideas about grasping after life as much as you can because of its sweet sadness. (106)

Thus, in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac denies the theories about society and after life because he wishes to be alone with his self through meditation. Such solitude later made Kerouac realize how lonely human life had become without connection to others and development of relationships based on love. In *Big Sur*, Kerouac is unable to stay in the woods for two weeks because he is deeply depressed. Then he meets his friend Pat and realizes the reason for his unhappiness: “Pat and I are in the serious talkative mood and I feel that lonely shiver in my chest
which always warns me: you actually love people and you’re glad Pat is here”(122). Without having any connections or relationships with other human beings, human life is a struggle with too much space alone with the self and solitude.

The focus of Christianity is both individual faith in God and growth of faith in community, whereas Zen Buddhism requires lonely mind training. Though Kerouac lived the life of a lonely traveler, he “did not like to be alone. Yet, nothing he did could repair his essential aloneness” (Lombreglia 3). His yearning for attachment pushed Kerouac to confusion and feeling that there was no way out of this hopeless suffering life. In Big Sur, Kerouac mentions his belief in the Christian God, feeling out of control in his life, and growing desperate to depend on the unconditional love of God and be saved by the power of His kindness and perfection. Kerouac was no longer master of his own being, perhaps because he needed to believe in the comfort and care offered by a higher power, instead of Zen Buddhism’s rather impersonal tone, described by D.T. Suzuki:

There is no reference whatever in Buddhist Satori to such personal and frequently sexual feelings and relationships as are to be gleaned from these terms: flame of love, a wonderful love shed in the heart, embrace, the beloved, bride, bridegroom, spiritual maternity, Father, God, the Son of God, God’s child, etc. ... There is no romance of love-making, no voice of Holy Ghost, no plenitude of Divine Grace, no glorification of any sort. Here is nothing painted in high colors, all in grey and extremely unobtrusive and unattractive. (Suzuki 106)

Kerouac was desperate for a personal touch, a reminder of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness during the difficult times in his life after the publication of On the Road.
Perhaps humans are lonely beings who always long for attachment and warmth from others. The attitude of dependence can be dangerous, according to Zen Buddhism, because desires separate us from our own selves. Buddhism focuses on the search for the individual’s Reality and becoming the master of one’s own self without depending on another’s power. Kerouac describes life as nothingness, emptiness, and a dream, according to his study of Zen Buddhism, but he mentions in *Desolation Angels*, “Nothing means nothing is the saddest thing I have ever heard.” Humans seem to be complicated beings full of intellect, emotions and power, and it is heartbreaking and pitiful to believe that we are based on nothingness. Kerouac questions in *The Dharma Bums*: “Are we fallen angels who didn’t want to believe that nothing is nothing and so we were born to lose loved ones and dear friends one by one and finally our own life ...?” (239). Kerouac struggles with the separation of people and feels that he is an incomplete being for still desiring human attachment.

Sexual drive is also a large part of human desire, from which Kerouac had difficulties separating himself. When Buddha left his wealthy life as a prince in India to be alone with himself and study the human soul and nature, he was completely separated from sexual activities. Therefore, even though Zen Buddhism doesn’t have a doctrine about sexual activity, keeping physical desires to a minimum means the exclusion of sexual activity for pleasure. Attraction often leads to a physical relationship, but such pleasure is created by a partner’s power, which is a dependence that takes away awareness of the self. Kerouac’s novels include many sexual activities, and the male characters often take advantage of female characters. However, once Kerouac became involved in Zen Buddhism, he tried to separate himself from sexual activities, which brought about a loneliness that Kerouac describes in *The Dharma Bums*: 
In all welter of women I still hadn’t got one for myself, not that I was trying too hard, but sometimes I felt lonely to see everybody paired off and having a good time and all I did was curl up in my sleeping bag in the rose bushes and sigh and say bah. (186)

Kerouac tells himself, “Don’t dispute with the authorities or with women, Beg. Be humble”(186). It is as if Kerouac had entered the priesthood, yet he does not separate himself from the desire for a sexual relationship. Perhaps a physical attachment would fulfill Kerouac’s lonely heart, trying to live in the world of emptiness: “... a new love affair always gives hope, the irrational mortal loneliness is always crowned”(147).

Kerouac became desperate for love, and compassion was not enough for him to be satisfied. In a conversation with his friend Dave in Big Sur, Kerouac asks, “You like me Dave? ... I am glad I know you Dave. ... But Dave I love you”(173). He is desperate to know if he is loved. Kerouac has been a lonely traveler, a Dharma Bum, continuing to meditate in many different places alone, which Kerouac describes as a feeling of homelessness:

I realize I’m just a silly stranger goofing with other strangers for no reason far away from anything that ever mattered to me whatever that was--Always an ephemeral “visitor” to the Coast never really involved with anyone’s life there because I’m always ready to fly back across the country but not to any life of my own on the other end either...(178)

When Kerouac was younger, he was attracted to solitude, into which Zen Buddhism fit well. When he was in his forties, however, he realized how lonesome he was and how much he desired attachment.
Kerouac's studying about the simplicity of life and human nature ironically did not save him from struggles with loneliness and guilt caused by desires. Kerouac believed earlier that “All you gotta do is simply wash yourself with soap and water! It hasn't occurred to anybody in America at all?” instead of using “… Various expensive English imported hair brushes and shaving gears and pomades and perfumes … “ (Kerouac 98). However, Kerouac discovers that he is the one who is not happy, even with simplicity, perhaps because once he was trained to live in a complicated life, it became too difficult to live in simplicity and be satisfied as well. Kerouac’s belief that desire invades everyone’s mind, and that we cannot separate our desires from our selves, is illustrated in *Big Sur*:

The secret underground truth of mad desires hiding under fenders under buried junkyards throughout the world, never mentioned in newspapers, written about haltingly and like corn by authors and painted tongue in cheek by artists, agh, just listen to Tristan and Isolde by Wagner and think of him in a Bavarian field with his beloved naked beauty under the fall leaves. (148)

Kerouac describes desire as if it is a part of the human being, and if so, we cannot possibly separate ourselves from desire. If Zen Buddhist philosophy contradicts human nature, then this philosophy becomes false. Kerouac felt as if he had betrayed Zen Buddhism; but then Zen Buddhism also betrayed him, since he studied and tried to live the life of Zen for years. Kerouac was afraid to find out whether his beliefs had betrayed him.

Kerouac wondered about the purpose of preventing desires, and wished only to become a compassionate person. His honest feelings are depicted in the tenth letter he wrote to Philip Whalen:
Myself, the Dharma is slipping away from my consciousness and I cant think of anything to say about it any more. I still read the diamond sutra, but as in a dream now. Don't know what to do. Can't see the purpose of human or terrestrial or any kinda life without heaven to reward the poor suffering fucks. The Buddhist notion that Ignorance caused the world leaves me cold now, because I feel the presence of angels. Maybe rebirth is simply HAVING KIDS. (some of the dharma 2)

Heaven was the place that Kerouac wanted to reach, and without the promise of Heaven for his compassion, he did not see the purpose of living a simple life. For him, life on this earth was “too-much-ness” (64). Thousands of theories have been proposed in both the Western and Eastern worlds, and they are like “poems endless everywhere,” which Kerouac explains in Big Sur:

Macros and microcosms and chillicosms and microbes and finally you got all these marvelous books a man aint already piled up multiple world when you have to think of the Book of Songs, Faulkner, Cesar Birotteau, Shakespeare, Satyricons, Dante, in fact long stories guys tell you in bars, in fact the sutras themselves, Sir Philip Sidney, Sterne, Ibn El Arabi, the copious Lope de Vega and the uncopious goddamn Cervantes, shoo, then there’s all those Catulluses and Davids and radio listening skid row sages to contend with because they’ve all got a million stories too and you too Ron Blake in the backseat shut up! down to everything which is so much that it is of necessity dont you think Nothing anyway, huh? (65)

Perhaps beliefs are just the connection of vocabularies, and great stories of human lives move
people’s hearts, but nothing in the world is the absolute truth. Kerouac struggled with his doubt of Zen Buddhism and fear of becoming emotionally alone, without a belief that he could trust. The theory of Zen Buddhism, which is to prevent any desires, was very difficult for Kerouac to accept, since this theory provides no rewards, such as getting to Heaven, or finding unconditional love in a human relationship. Kerouac’s last novel, *Big Sur*, illustrates his profound confusion and heartbreaking fear.
V. Conclusion

*It is good to know something of the custom of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think that everything contrary to our own ways is ridiculous and irrational, as those who have seen nothing of the world ordinarily do. But one who spends too much time traveling eventually becomes a stranger in his own country...*

(Descartes 23)

Kerouac’s heart was always open to new viewpoints, and encountering Zen Buddhism gave him a new perspective of America. He expressed this perspective with spontaneous prose, attempting to reach his unconscious vision through intuitive writing experience. Kerouac not only physically did not settle down, he also searched for a new possible true spirituality. Kerouac loved the theory of Zen Buddhism that taught him what was in and out of human control as well as the true essence of nature. Kerouac reflected and described his daily life of Zen Buddhism in his novels, and Zen Buddhism certainly became his spiritual inner home for fifteen years. However, searching for a true spirituality never settled him down emotionally; therefore his loss of faith in Zen Buddhism demolished his inner spiritual home, and his struggle began.
Like a philosopher, Kerouac was obsessed with finding the true essence of this world, especially of the United States. Many Western philosophers have arrived at different theories to prove the existence of external objects as well as God. Each theory makes sense in some points, but there is no theory that is completely perfect and agreed on by everyone. Philosophers approach their ideas and present their theories, but unanswered questions remain. This incompleteness also exists in religions. Each religion has rules, theories, and histories that do not make perfect logical sense. Every theory has some kind of unproved statement, though people usually overlook the problems and just believe in the spirituality that was passed on to their family. Kerouac could not settle with such a theory; he sought the truth of humans and nature in order to understand the United States.

If Kerouac’s ultimate goal was to find the absolute truth, then he might have missed the most important point of Zen Buddhism, which teaches us how to live in this suffering world full of mystery. Because we live in a mysterious and difficult world, the desire to know everything may be the most dangerous desire, from a Buddhist viewpoint. Zen Buddhism concentrates on the present moment and teaches us the limits of our abilities to understand and to know. Kerouac believed Satori to be a miracle, which would save his soul, but Satori is the intuitive experience through meditation to stop one’s mind and to be aware of the existence of Reality. Perhaps Zen Buddhist practice opposed Kerouac’s goals and attempts.

Kerouac’s goal, “to conquer knowledge of the U.S.A.,” took him on both physical and spiritual journeys throughout his adulthood, and Zen Buddhism fascinated, influenced and motivated Kerouac to perceive a new vision of the United States. Perhaps he was able to see American society through Eastern eyes. Kerouac was a serious writer who never gave up on
searching for the true essence of human life, continued to write his visions, and hopelessly lived in the mystery of human life. Kerouac loved the theory of Zen Buddhism, but felt an important piece, the existence of heaven, was missing. Sven Brikerts’ view of Kerouac as “a good Catholic boy on his knees before the confessional,” doesn’t necessarily explain a whole picture of his failure at Zen Buddhism. Kerouac’s guilt for not being able to be the true Zen Buddhist seems somewhat confessional, but the most important point seems to be the desperate voice in his writing which explains his loss of hope in the search for truth. In other words, he realized that it is impossible to know everything. This realization seems to be the closest he came to Zen wisdom, which teaches that humans live within our limited ability to understand the mysterious world. I see Kerouac becoming a true Zen Buddhist when he began to doubt Zen philosophy, which may seem contradictory, but makes great sense. For Kerouac, searching for the truth was his lifelong goal, which led him to study Zen Buddhism for fifteen years and finally realize the meaning of the human’s limited ability. His realization of human limitations was a great disappointment for him, and his doubt and loss of inner spirituality lowered him to the loneliest feelings. It is possible to say that Kerouac’s realization was very realistic, but his desire perhaps was unrealistic.

Kerouac’s writing described his self-discovery process through the study of Zen Buddhism, showing his deep and hopeless sorrow and disappointment for human life. Kerouac became a stranger to everything physically and spiritually, perhaps because he was open to different possible aspects of human life. For Kerouac who lived passionately, with his imagination expanding endlessly, to understand the limitation of human knowledge was the most difficult fact to accept. To me, Kerouac’s vision sounds like water falling down fast from the top
of a mountain into a small pond covered by silence. His passion, full of curiosity and imagination, rushes into my mind, exposing his vision to the probing eyes of the world. Perhaps Kerouac’s desire for absolute knowledge combined with the study of Zen Buddhism was a dangerous mix; nevertheless, he created incredible voice through his involvement in Zen Buddhism.
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