

## The Beatnik Buddhist: The Monk of American Pop-Culture

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Part of the GAP clothing line's 1990s advertising campaign was a black and white photograph of a smiling middle-aged handsome man leaning against a city building with the subtitle, "Kerouac wore Khakis." The implication was that if the customer wore Khakis, they would be cool - just like Jack. The figure advertized, Jack Kerouac, is undoubtedly imbedded in the popular American imagination as a cool free spirit from the fifties, who did and said whatever he wanted. More importantly, he still has cultural capital, as his image sells Khakis. However, Kerouac did much more; according to some American Buddhists and scholars, he was one of the premier patriarchs of American Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Because Kerouac was both a prominent figure in American popular culture and a Buddhist teacher, he created a massive platform with which he could teach and popularize his Buddhism. Often, scholars and American Buddhists acknowledge the works of Kerouac, but fail to examine his Buddhist texts. In order to understand the spread of Buddhism in the twentieth century, it is essential to understand Jack Kerouac's Buddhist teachings. This is shown through an analysis of Kerouac's Buddhist works and current scholarship, his role as a Buddhist teacher, and the religious inclusivity and non-sectarianism in his Buddhist teachings.

### Kerouac's Buddhist Works and Current Scholarship

Although Asian immigrants and colonialists practiced Buddhism as early as the mid-nineteenth century, Kerouac was the first to successfully portray non-Asian Buddhist practitioners to a mainstream American audience. Initially, as a close friend of Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac taught Buddhist practice and philosophy within the Beat Generation. This influence later penetrated into the center of American society and scholarship; for example, Jackie Kennedy was photographed in 1961 reading his *The Dharma Bums* next to the President,<sup>2</sup> and the well-known Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman encountered Buddhism through Kerouac's work in 1958, when he was only seventeen years old. Reflecting on it nearly fifty years later, Thurman called Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*: "the most accurate, poetic, and expansive evocation of the heart of Buddhism that was available at that time."<sup>3</sup>

Although Kerouac's influence was so expansive, there exists very little scholarship on it. Most works on the development of American Buddhism give Kerouac only passing mention.<sup>4</sup> These works demonstrate that in the late nineteenth-century and

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Tworckon, the former editor of the prominent America Buddhist magazine *Tricycle: the Buddhist Review* once called Kerouac "the first American patriarch of American Buddhism." Rehn Kovacic "'Buddha's me': Jack Kerouac and the Creation of an American Buddhism" (masters thesis, Arizona State University, 2004), 81. Robert Thurman, in the introduction to *Wake Up: a Life of the Buddha*, wrote, "Working on this introduction, it has become apparent to me that Jack Kerouac was the lead Bodhisattva, way back there in the 1950s, among all of our very American Predecessors." Robert Thurman, introduction to *Wake Up: a Life of the Buddha*, Jack Kerouac (New York: Viking Press, 2008), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Kovacic, "'Buddha's Me'," 2.

<sup>3</sup> Thurman, introduction to *Wake Up*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> See Rick Fields, "Divided Dharma: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 196-252, Robert E. Goss, "Buddhist Studies at Naropa: Sectarian or Academic," in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Duncan Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 215-238, and Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 34-42.

early twentieth-century, Buddhist practice and discourse was limited to missionary and intellectual circles. In this time, Asian Missionaries such as Shaku Soen, D. T. Suzuki, and Anagarika Dharmapala and American missionaries like Dwight Goddard had all attempted to introduce Americans to Buddhism. Meanwhile, intellectuals such as Paul Carus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau incorporated Eastern philosophical concepts (including Buddhist ones) into their philosophy. Most research on Kerouac acknowledges that he related the Buddhism of these missionary and intellectual circles to the mainstream American populace. In other words, the portrait most research paints is that Kerouac was a link between the rather limited intellectual Buddhism of the early nineteenth-century and the popular Buddhism of the 1960s.

While this portrait is not entirely inaccurate, it oversimplifies a crucial figure in the development of American Buddhism. Kerouac did not merely disseminate early American Buddhist philosophy and praxis to later American Buddhists, but he also transformed them, made them his own. He created his own understanding of Buddhism, and *that* was the Buddhism he taught. Therefore, understanding American Buddhism requires more than understanding that Kerouac transmitted and popularized the ideas from earlier generations to later ones; it also requires an analysis of how Kerouac shaped and transformed those ideas. Furthermore, most of the research that focuses on Kerouac is either biographical or examines his aptitude as a literary figure, analyzing his popular literature, his fiction and poetry.<sup>5</sup> However, Kerouac wrote much of his work as Buddhist teachings, and consequently, most research leaves the analysis of Kerouac's methods as a Buddhist teacher unattended.

Kerouac immersed himself in Buddhist practice from the fall of 1953 to 1956, composing many texts during this time. Kerouac's most comprehensive Buddhist text, *Some of the Dharma (Dharma)*, began as Buddhist teachings for his friend Allen Ginsberg in December of 1953, but it transformed into an agglomeration of poems, notes, and teachings for the general populace by the time he finished it in March of 1956. While working on it, Kerouac came to see the book as sacred and his most important work. In November of 1954, he wrote to Ginsberg "I keep reading it [*Dharma*] myself, have but one copy, valuable, sacred to me..."<sup>6</sup> In 1955, Kerouac began working on a biography of the Buddha, *Wake Up: a Life of the Buddha* (whose title underwent several changes). At the prompting of his friend Garry Snyder in the spring of 1956, Kerouac wrote *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity (Scripture)*, a Buddhist *scripture* (Sanskrit: *sūtra*) of sixty-six numbered prose paragraphs.<sup>7</sup> This text emphasized the importance of emptiness and the direct experience of awakening, culminating in an ecstatic meditative experience. In paragraph sixty-four Kerouac recounts how he saw the golden eternity. Then, in a koan-like fashion, in paragraph sixty-five, he says that his experience was the first teaching from the golden eternity, followed by paragraph sixty-six, wherein he says that the second teaching is that there was no first.<sup>8</sup> To Kerouac's dismay, although he regarded these three works as his most important and tried adamantly to get them published for a period of time, he only lived to see *Scripture* published. Nevertheless, these three texts constitute the entirety of Kerouac's work written as Buddhist teachings, and when he was immersed in Buddhism, he considered them more important than all the rest. These books—especially *Dharma*, since it is a journal (amongst other things)—provide the most honest and explicit account of what Kerouac actually thought about Buddhism. The ideas

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<sup>5</sup> See, Timothy D. Ray, "Syncretic Visions of the Buddha: Melding and Convergence in the Work of Kerouac and Ginsberg," *College Literature* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 187-195, accessed December 4, 2010, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lit/summary/v037/37.2.ray.html>.

<sup>6</sup> David Stanford, "About the Manuscript," in *Some of the Dharma*, by Jack Kerouac (New York: Viking Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: a Biography (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973)*, 258.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994) 59-61.

and practices contained within these texts explain the underlying thought that he popularized through his other work, as well as his ideas about how to popularize that thought.

However, *The Dharma Bums*, published in 1958, his second most popular work after *On The Road*, published in 1957, played the biggest role in propagating Kerouac's Buddhism. The book offered a fictional account of Kerouac (Ray Smith), Snyder (Japhy Ryder), and Ginsberg's (Alvah Goldbook's) adventures and experiences with Buddhism. The book provided the youth of the 1950's with a romanticized account of Buddhism, promulgating a generation of "dharma bums" who would engage in a "rucksack revolution" led by "Zen lunatics." In addition to the *Dharma Bums*, Kerouac wrote several other literary works—mostly poems and novels—imbued with his Buddhist ideas.<sup>9</sup>

At first glance, Kerouac's Buddhist writings appear Americanized and Christianized, on the grounds that they are in English and use Christian metaphors. For example, the opening page of *Some of the Dharma* includes three biblical passages and references.<sup>10</sup> On page nine, Kerouac likens the Buddha to Jesus, writing, "BUDDHA AND JESUS BOTH FREED THEMSELVES OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS DREAM FLOOD..."<sup>11</sup> However, the fact that Kerouac uses English is not sufficient to charge him with specifically Americanizing Buddhism, because Buddhism has always been translated into local languages. Similarly, the use of Christian concepts is not enough to charge Kerouac of specifically Christianizing Buddhism, in that Buddhism has always incorporated local religious figures into its pantheon. Understanding the dynamics at work in Kerouac's Buddhist teachings requires an analysis of two things: first, the context in which they were written, and second a more specific look at how they blend with Christianity.

### ***Kerouac as a Buddhist Teacher***

Because Kerouac composed his Buddhist writings as a teacher, they must be understood in a pedagogical context. It follows from being a teacher that one be an authoritative voice, yet Kerouac had no formal or primary teacher himself. His knowledge of Buddhism consisted mostly of reading secondary texts by other American and European Buddhists of his time, reading translated Buddhist *sūtras*, and conversing with other men of (more often than not) about equal knowledge.

Kerouac first discovered Buddhism when he found a reference to Hindu Philosophy while studying Thoreau. Pursuing this reference, he stumbled upon Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after, he found Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, whose modified Surangama Sutra, Lankavatara Sutra, and Diamond Sutra constituted a central importance to him. Kerouac makes his sources explicit eight pages into *Dharma*, where he includes a bibliography, containing Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, Paul Carus's *The Gospel of the Buddha*, and Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* along with several other works.<sup>13</sup> Amongst his contemporaries, Kerouac probably learned the most from Gary Snyder, and it is likely that Kerouac, intimidated by Snyder's acumen in Buddhist discourse, did very little teaching and most of the listening. In short, Kerouac learned Buddhism from the few sources available to someone who did not know an Asian

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<sup>9</sup> Such as *Tristessa* (1960), *Visions of Gerard* (1963), *Satori in Paris* (1966), and others.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma* (New York: Viking, 1997), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Clark, *Jack Kerouac: a Biography* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 131.

<sup>13</sup> Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 8.

language or travel to Asia; he read available Buddhist texts, and conversed with those who had more access to Buddhist traditions.

From the time Kerouac discovered Buddhism, he sought to share it with others. Almost immediately after his discovery, he tried passionately to convert his friends Neal and Carolyn Cassady, who were adamant followers of Edgar Cayce, a California mystic of their time.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Kerouac was quick in his attempt to persuade his other Beatnik friends, his family, and even acquaintances in the writing world. In teaching Buddhism, Kerouac came to identify with other prominent teachers in American culture. For example, in a 1954 letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac tells Ginsberg that since he is Ginsberg's Buddhist guide, Ginsberg ought to listen to him as if he were Einstein teaching relativity.<sup>15</sup> Kerouac would also place himself within the same context as the most prolific Buddhist teachers of his day. In 1955, Kerouac wrote to Ginsberg, "I dug Suzuki in NY public library, and I guarantee you I can do everything he does and better, in intrinsic Dharma teaching by words."<sup>16</sup>

It follows from being a teacher that the texts have an authoritative voice. But Kerouac, in being so new to Buddhism and at the same time being an expert, greatly condensed the complexity of Buddhism, making it easier to practice. Since Kerouac was new to Buddhism and a teacher, in his thought, the teacher and the student quite literally became one. Kerouac and his friends, from the time they started practicing Buddhism, always thought of themselves as very far along the religious path it provided. In fact, the very night that Kerouac discovered Buddhism, he went home to meditate and decided that he achieved enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> Kerouac also referred to himself, his friends, and his acquaintances as "Bodhisattvas" throughout *The Dharma Bums*. Eventually, as Rehn Kovacic points out, Kerouac came to identify himself with the historical Buddha, and *Wake Up* is, in fact, Kerouac's conflation of their two lives.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Kerouac understood Buddhism not as it had commonly been construed (especially in non-Vajrayana traditions) as a long process of spiritual development, but rather, as something that someone could grasp and teach with relative speed and ease.

Regardless, Kerouac looked for textual support for his view. In *Some of the Dharma* he writes, "'It is said in the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA that as soon as novice Bodhisattvas begin their practice of Dhyana Meditation that they have already accomplished their full Enlightenment...'"<sup>19</sup> In additional support of this view, Kerouac often referred to Chinese Tao masters and those who he dubbed "Zen lunatics," the most prominent among these being Han Shan, whose work Snyder—as Japhy Ryder—translated in *The Dharma Bums*. The image Kerouac paints of these figures is that they transcended the rigidity of the monastic order through leaving it. These figures immediately become master on their own. Simply put, Kerouac, in becoming a teacher, drastically compressed the continuum of Buddhist practice from novice to master that has existed in most places at most times.

### ***Religious Inclusivity and Non-Sectarianism in Kerouac's Buddhism***

Kerouac's Buddhist teachings, along with his other poems and semi-autobiographical writings, specifically *The Dharma Bums*, contain explicit references to Christianity. Kerouac was born and died a Catholic, but scholars debate the actual way in

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<sup>14</sup> Charters, *Kerouac*, 200-201.

<sup>15</sup> Carole Tonkinson, "Jack Kerouac," in *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tonkinson (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 41.

<sup>16</sup> David Stanford, "About the Manuscript."

<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, 131.

<sup>18</sup> Kovacic, "'Buddha's Me'," 146-187.

<sup>19</sup> Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 396.

which Catholicism and Buddhism converged in Kerouac's life and thought. Thus, the task at hand is deciphering exactly how the two converged.

Many influential biographers argue that Kerouac's interest in Buddhism was minimal. In one of the earliest and most definitive Biographies on Kerouac, Ann Charters writes, "Kerouac was born a Catholic, raised a Catholic and died a Catholic. His interest in Buddhism was a discovery of different religious images for his fundamentally constant religious feelings."<sup>20</sup> Thirty years later, greatly influenced by Charters, the scholar Matt Theado wrote, "Kerouac augmented rather than replaced his childhood religious beliefs."<sup>21</sup> In this analysis, scholars argue that Buddhism was merely a literary device for conveying Kerouac's fundamental Catholic beliefs. In other words, these scholars argue that Buddhism took a subsequent, instrumental and expressive role in Kerouac's life and writing, always subordinate to Catholicism.

Such analysis, however, inevitably ignores some of Kerouac's writing, specifically his diaries and letters, and the fact that for a period of time, Kerouac identified himself as a Buddhist.<sup>22</sup> Kerouac, in *Some of the Dharma*, not only repeatedly proclaims to be a Buddhist, but also critiques Catholicism. For example, one section of the book is "A Refutation of Catholic Dualism."<sup>23</sup> In this passage, Kerouac starts with a strictly philosophical criticism. After quoting a passage from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, in which Aquinas writes of the goodness of fire, Kerouac responds, "The assumption that the fire is good is based on a previous assumption arguing that To Be, or Being, is good. But Being is neither good nor bad, it's just a dream." Kerouac then extends this criticism from philosophical grounds to cultural. He writes, "Catholic Dualism is behind the error of Western Civilization with its war of machines..." In short, Kerouac's formulated his refutation of Christianity through criticizing its philosophy and its cultural ramifications, two things in which he clearly thought Buddhism prevailed.

In the sense that Kerouac both identified as a Buddhist personally and refuted Catholicism, there is no way that he could have remained Catholic throughout his life, as some biographers suggest. Such analysis downplays the degree that Buddhism shaped Kerouac's thought and his intermittent apostasy. Therefore, Kovacic attributes more power to Buddhism's influence on Kerouac. He writes, "Religion is a framework of meaning that orients adherents in the world. Kerouac's acceptance of Buddhism, contrary to these scholars' interpretation, changed the way that Kerouac saw the world around him."<sup>24</sup>

The claims that Kerouac was born and died a Catholic and the claim that he embraced Buddhism at some point of his life are not contradictory, in that he adhered to each at a different point of time. However, it is exceedingly difficult to decipher when he was Christian and used Buddhist terms from when he was Buddhist and used Christian terms. Kerouac made it clear in *Some of the Dharma* that when he wrote as a Buddhist teacher he merely used Christian metaphors to convey Buddhist concepts as *skillful means* (Sanskrit: *upāya*).<sup>25</sup> In this way, the explicit references and parallels to Christian ideas when explaining Buddhism may not reflect Kerouac's own understanding. Rather, Kerouac may be using Christian ideas to explain Buddhist concepts merely because he thinks they might better convey the idea to the student. Thus, it is hard to know when Kerouac actually believed the two religions to be the same, or when he just used the

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac*, 199.

<sup>21</sup> Matt Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 123.

<sup>22</sup> Kovacic, "'Buddha's Me'," 66.

<sup>23</sup> Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Kovacic, "'Buddha's Me'," 65.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

similarities as a pedagogical tool. Nevertheless, Kerouac's use of Christian terms invariably shows his awareness for his own and his audience's religious needs.

Although the specific details of when and how Christianity shaped Kerouac's Buddhism are difficult to answer, the simple fact that both religions existed in light of each other reveals certain things about Kerouac's Buddhism. His Buddhism always existed in relation to other religious traditions, like his Catholicism or his friend Allen Ginsberg's Judaism. Thus, as a teacher, Kerouac was forced to assert Buddhism as either superior to, or at least coterminous with, other religions. In doing this, Kerouac always focused on the more "logical" and deemphasized the "mythical" aspects of Buddhism.<sup>26</sup> This influence undoubtedly came from sources like Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, Paul Carus's *The Gospel of the Buddha*, which Kerouac often referenced explicitly.

Kovacic delineates Kerouac's main Buddhist concepts as, "compassion, the illusion of reality, arbitrary conceptions, no-self, emptiness, and universal mind."<sup>27</sup> All of these, no doubt are either ethical, like compassion, or philosophical, like emptiness. Emphasizing Buddhism in such a way leaves out other integral parts of the religion, such as rituals or rebirth, which tends to be seen as "mythic." In this way, Kerouac reduces or compartmentalizes Buddhism into something ethical and philosophical but not cultural or mythical, which in turn, allows it to compete with other religions in its universality. In saying that the heart of Buddhism is compassion, Buddhism remains consistent with Catholicism and Judaism.

Kerouac not only found Buddhism consistent with other religions, he found each school of Buddhism consistent with others. Contemporary scholars generally attempt to categorize Kerouac's Buddhism into one doctrinal school with a referent in Asia. For example, Donald Lopez, in *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, refers to Kerouac as mostly interested in Zen Buddhism, influenced by Gary Snyder, though he acknowledges Kerouac's mentions of Tibetan Buddhism as well.<sup>28</sup> However, Kerouac often clearly objected to Zen Buddhism. In *The Dharma Bums*, he, as Ray Smith, explained to Snyder, as Japhy Ryder, "It's *mean*... All those Zen masters throwing young kids in the mud because they can't answer their silly word questions."<sup>29</sup> In the introduction to *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, Stephen Prothero, proposes that instead of Zen, Kerouac was drawn to "a diffuse Mahayana Buddhism."<sup>30</sup> However, even this broad understanding is too specific. At another point in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac writes that he is an "an old fashioned dreamy [Theravadan] coward of later Mahayanism."<sup>31</sup> Later in the same book, he claims to engage in Tibetan Buddhist practice.<sup>32</sup> So, in one book alone, Kerouac identifies with what he terms [Theravada], Mahayana, and Vajrayana, and at the same time objects to one specific Mahayana school, Zen.

In this sense, it seems that Scholars inevitably fail in trying to fit Kerouac into one doctrinal or sectarian school of Buddhism, in that Kerouac consciously tried to transcend these boundaries. He called his non-sectarian Buddhism "Pure Essence Buddhism," writing, "Pure Essence Buddhism is what I think I want, and lay aside all the arbitrary rest of it, [Theravada], Shuinayana, etc., Mahayana, Zen, Shmen."<sup>33</sup> Clearly, just

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<sup>26</sup> The words "mythical" and "logical" are written in quotations not because they are Kerouac's own words, but because scholars commonly use them referring to American Buddhism.

<sup>27</sup> Kovacic, "'Buddha's Me'," 110.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Lopez, "Jack Kerouac," in *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, ed. Donald Lopez (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 172-181.

<sup>29</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Prothero, introduction to *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tonkinson (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 17

<sup>31</sup> Kovacic, "'Buddha's Me'," page 134

<sup>32</sup> Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> David Stanford, "About the Manuscript."

as Kerouac thought that Buddhism transcended all of its mythical elements, he thought that Buddhism transcended cultural or institutional boundaries. He exemplified this thought, writing that he “didn’t give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavors of Buddhism.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Viewing Buddhism as transcendent of cultural and sectarian manifestations, like Kerouac’s “Pure Essence Buddhism” is a common theme in American Buddhism.<sup>35</sup> Donald Lopez notes that many Buddhists, American and non-American alike, think that historically, various cultural influences distorted the original teachings of the Buddha.<sup>36</sup> He also notes that there is a doctrinal justification to this view, the doctrine of the “decline of the Dharma,” which states that from the time of the historical Buddha, the Dharma will be degraded.<sup>37</sup> However, American Buddhism differs in that it has, as Lopez puts it, “the conviction that centuries of cultural and clerical ossification could be stripped from the teachings of the Buddha to reveal a Buddhism that was neither Sinhalese, Japanese, Chinese, or Thai.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, American Buddhism and more traditional forms of Buddhism agree that the Dharma gets culturally and historically degraded, but American Buddhism, such as Kerouac’s, differs in that it thinks it can overcome this degradation and recover the actual teaching of the Buddha.

Kerouac’s reduction of Buddhism from the cultural to either the ethical or philosophical is one instance of general American Buddhist trend in which Buddhism is reduced into only one of its aspects. American Buddhists have collapsed the essence of Buddhism into an “experience,” a “spirituality” or even in some cases, a “science.” Each of these reductions makes Buddhism more compatible with other facets of American life through ignoring the parts of each that do not coincide. Thus, the coexistence of Buddhism and other religions, as Kerouac demonstrates, invariably leads to restricted definitions of both religions.

Jack Kerouac, in being both a novice and a teacher, represents one general trend in American Buddhism. A large number of American Buddhist authoritative figures, are only minimally accomplished by the standards of the traditions from which they come. For example, Lopez explains that with D.T. Suzuki, a teacher who informed and conversed with Kerouac and his friends, “a relatively marginal Zen teacher in Japan [Suzuki] established what would become mainstream Zen practice in America.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, Kerouac as a teacher is reflective of a trend for teachers of American Buddhism.

Kerouac shaped his understanding of Buddhism as a teacher through reformulating the difference between novice and master. He shaped his Buddhism in light of other competing religions through restricting his definition of Buddhism and emphasizing aspects he found important. And finally, Kerouac shaped his understanding of Buddhism as non-sectarian, transcending the referents of culturally lived Buddhism across the globe. Moreover, Kerouac’s interpretations of Buddhism are constantly cogent with other American Buddhist ideals, such as religious inclusivity, the disregard of sectarian boundaries, and the demythologization of Buddhist ideas. Many American Buddhist teachers are new to Buddhism, condense Buddhism into the “essentials,” and think that these essentials transcend the differences between historically distinct Buddhist

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<sup>34</sup> Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Kovacic, “Buddha’s Me, 109.”

<sup>36</sup> Donald Lopez, introduction to *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, ed. Donald Lopez (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xxxv.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

schools. Since Kerouac was, above all, both a teacher and an icon, understanding how Kerouac understood Buddhism helps to understand American Buddhism itself.

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