

Spiritual Quest of the Protagonist in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*

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Abstract

This article deals about the spiritual journey of Ray Smith to attain enlightenment with which he aims to bring salvation to all beings. As the guidelines of the journey is from Mahayana Buddhism, the seeker devotes his time in the activities apparently following the scripture. On his way ahead the seeker achieves the mental solace, arrives in the state of detachment. But as the seeker makes many appropriations to the religion, takes an alternative path to the corporate culture with the hope where individuals can live and grow free of sufferings. As a result, the journey does not yield the fruit as the seeker intends. The article focuses on ways the seeker strives and the outcome of the effort.

Introduction

Jack Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958) depicts a spiritual journey of Ray Smith as a way to resist the corporate culture that developed in U S after 1950s. For the spiritual quest, Ray Smith adopts a life of a religious bum or a wanderer and sets out on the journey for attaining *Moksha* or spiritual freedom "in order to turn the wheel of True Meaning, or Dharma" (*The Dharma Bums* 8). He wishes to "gain merit" for himself "as a future Buddha (Awakener) and a future Hero in Paradise" (*DB* 8). Placing himself as "an old-time bhikku in modern clothes", Ray Smith sets out from his mother's home in North Carolina and decides to rucksack up and down. He moves to Washington state via Northern California and several places in-between, stopping for meditation and prayer in the open places. He maintained his rucksack life with minimal materials of daily uses, wandered hitch-hiking from place to place as a practice of keeping himself detach from material hoarding. He believes that the industrial and corporate culture has imprisoned people "in a system of work, produce and consume" (*DB* 83). He takes this journey as a means to free himself from the pressure of the mundane world and hopes to reach in a state of permanent freedom where he would be free of all physical desire. As he sets out on his journey, he feels the need of basic foundation of spatiality – "The Six Perfections" – the perfection in charity (*dana*), proper conduct (*sila*), patience (*ksanti*), vigor (*virya*), *dana* the practice of charity as an act of kindness (Conze, 67)"- to be a perfect religious bum. He is aware of the fact that "so long as passions ... were not subdued, and the mind still remained enshrouded in ignorance, no Buddhist could ever dream of obtaining *Moksha* which is *Nirvana*, and this deliverance from ignorance and passions was the work of Enlightenment (Suzuki, 63)". With this awareness, Ray Smith sets out from his mother's home in North Carolina, marches to Mt Matterhorn and moves to New York to Mexico to San Francisco and finally climbs on the Desolation Peak, where he works as a fire lookout for sixty days. His secluded living in the solitary Desolation peak yields some form of ecstasy in which he realizes that he is "alone and had nothing to do but feed (himself) and rest and amuse (himself) and nobody to criticize" (*DB* 196). He feels that he has yielded the state of mental freedom from all forms of criticism, desires. In other word, he is able to cast off his sufferings for sometimes, too.

On his journey, Ray Smith meets a Zen scholar, Japhy Rider, who guides and supports with the journey map. With Japhy's guideline, Ray Smith carries his journey to different parts of the

country and he is also able to experience the spiritual solace in the Desolation Peak finally. His secluded living in different parts of the country and his solitary living in the Desolation peak for sixties days yields some form of ecstasy in which he realizes that “he was truly alone and had nothing to do but feed (himself) and rest and amuse (himself) and nobody to criticize” (DB 196). He feels that he is able to cast off his sufferings for sometimes, too. But he can’t live there for long and he “turned and went on down the trail back to the world” (DB 204) with the heavy feeling of sadness of coming back to cities. Ray Smith tries his best to attain enlightenment, but his attainment is only momentary. It is because his adoption of bikkhu life mainly comes as his revolt to corporate culture. He lacks the spirit of a bikkhu and less concerned for the inner transformation. Yet his search sketches an alternative way to corporate culture.

Jack Kerouac’s novel throws light on Buddhism and its aspects to the westerners. This writing gives glimpse that even during the rise of corporate culture a new thrust of searching life style against materialistic notions exists and people involve in the study and practice Buddhism. Regardless of what "really" was the nature of Kerouac's Buddhism, the fact remains that he became an important interpreter of the Asian Buddhist tradition, making Buddhism accessible for many Americans at a time in which Asian culture was considered antithetical to American values. (Swartz 101). This search and practices were not of a perfect bikkhu, but it is a search to end the suffering brought by materialistic culture with adopting a religious means.

Discussion

The novel, *The Dharma Bums*, is a portrayal of the Westerners interest to observe and follow Buddhist religious tradition, which has long been practiced in the eastern world for ending the sufferings that come from attachment to sensual pleasure and greed of possession. With the aim of ending the sufferings comes from material greed and attachment to possession, the protagonist, Ray Smith, sets out a spiritual journey. As a preparation for it, he adopts a life of bikkhu, sets out from his mother’s home in North to open places to meditate and pray. The dissatisfaction comes from the US corporate culture of 1950s that pressurized the youth to involve “in a system of work, produce and consume” (DB 83), pushes him to search an alternative path. He believes that “when the mind is pure of all these defilements or pollutants (also referred to as “obscurations”) and the consciousness becomes pure and aware, then one is able to realize the nature of things; and this is the same as the attainment of Buddhahood” (Kyabgon, 14). He hopes that the suffering will end when one can purify the mind from all defilement of attachment, greed or desire to be free from painful experiences.

For the purpose of ending the sufferings, Ray Smith aspires like bodhisattva, a saint like individual “who thinks more of others than of himself; to be sweet as well as acceptable, it must be highly favored with loving kindness which embraces all his fellow-beings as his own children” (Suzuki, 363). Like a bodhisattva, Ray Smith renounces the ills within – infatuation, folly, greed, attachment etc. and cultivates compassion, tolerance, charity, wisdom so that he can help all the sentient beings from misery and awake in them the buddha intelligence. Thus, his moves with inward and outward preparations not simply for the ending of his sufferings, but for the salvation of all sentient beings.

Ray Smith realizes that the “Truth of suffering” he is experiencing at that moment arises out of the material attachment created by US industrial and corporate culture of 1950s. As he sets out to come out of “the industrial jungle of Los Angeles” (DB 101), he adopts a homeless life, like a bikkhu, wanders around the lap of nature and meditates and prays in the open places. His preference to the solitude of nature and open places gives space to sit and meditate and hope to experience the impermanence and emptiness of things in a way the Chinese call “doing

nothing". Ray Smith is attentive to the fact that "To attain Enlightenment instantly, all one needs is to understand comprehensively the dharma of Emptiness as the essence of reality." (Lok To, 96). Only he will understand the transient cycle of birth, old age, sickness and death, which will help him experience Moksha or enlightenment as coded in Buddhist sutras. For this purpose- the attaining of the enlightenment- the state of cessation of suffering and extinction of desire, he keeps himself from all economic activities and solely focus the life as a religious bum. On his journey, he meets Japhy Rider, a spiritual saint who supports and guides Ray Smith by sketching his journey maps. With this map, he moves to Mt Matterhorn and to New York to Mexico to San Francisco and finally climbs on the Desolation Peak, as a religious bum living in the open places as a bikkhu. As he climbs up the peak, a symbol of his spiritual climb. he feels like he has control over his body and desires. He resides on the peak for sixties days with the feeling of possessing his mind and body- a symbol of spiritual freedom. He has finally achieved the solitude he is seeking. Ray Smith's remarks, "Poor gentle flesh, I realized, 'there is no answer.' I didn't know anything anymore, I didn't care, and it didn't matter, and suddenly I felt really free" (DB, 201) refers that he has transcended his doubt or his care of anything. He is "indifference to any kind of personal attainment, and through his having relied on the perfection of wisdom, he dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, in the end sustained by Nirvana" (Conze,152). As he hears no answer, he has realized that his search has ended and he is free from the craving. This spiritual insight he has experienced in the Desolation peak makes him feel that he can achieve "the vision of the freedom of eternity which was (his) forever" (DB, 203). He feels his favorite bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, tells him in a meditative vision " You are empowered to remind people that you are utterly free" (DB 203). This vision of freedom helps him realize that he is free from all material bondage. With the belief of achieving freedom in the solitude of Desolation Peak, Ray Smith, eventually ready to return to the world which he left behind. Ray Smith begins a spiritual journey, grounded in Buddhism to be as an alternative lifestyle to the industrial culture of the 1950s in America. He adopted a simple and homeless life of bhikkhu to carry out the spiritual quest. Since it is his self-will journey to be a future Buddha, he has not been trained from any school or any institution. He has not any experience and training of bhikkhu life. Moreover, his Christian bringing up does not help much in internalizing Buddhist codes to carry out in the life of a bhikkhu. Miller notes "while he was immersed in the practice of his own peculiar appropriation of Buddhism learned from books, he never had experienced it as an exclusive practice: he was experiencing and practicing the Truth, a reality in which all religion participated (44). This intuitive move of spiritual quest seems to cover only the fundamental aspects of all religion rather than carrying out the spirit of Buddhist religion. Ray Smith's use of Buddhism without internalizing the codes in life does not help him fully in the progress of spiritual awareness. Without proper awareness of the spiritual growth and rigorous practices of codes, one finds it difficult to move in the path for the cessation of suffering. The the cessation of suffering can be achieved only when one can follow the Noble Eightfold Path which emphasizes the three essential categories of Buddhist training: ethical conduct, mental discipline (aided by meditation), and perfecting wisdom. Ray Smith's adherence to the Path without strong adaptation of Buddhist codes in everyday practices hampers the development of ethical conduct, mental discipline, and perfecting wisdom which ultimately hampers the attainment of enlightenment. Since Ray Smith moves with rebellious spirit to the industrial corporate culture, he is less prepared for his spiritual transformation. Moreover, his advocacy for rucksack revolution in which all people would involve rather than perusing the enlightenment as depicted in Buddhist strictures. Buddhist world for Ray Smith is "the authentic world, where people do not need automobiles for mobility,

where people think different and original thoughts, and where the iridescent, luminous, eerie and ghoulish glow of the television is replaced by crisp moonlight and the intoxications of the mountain air that Kerouac describes in his novel” (Swartz 112). He does not take his journey much difference from a great rucksack revolution in which “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” (DB 83). This vision of gaining pleasure from the journey shows that he has not moved to reduce his craving for sensual pleasure. In Giomo’s words “What ruins the awakening, however, is Smith's insistence on wearing his Buddhism on his sleeve. Ironically, he is too self-conscious about his attainments, his own egolessness” (187). His consciousness of achieving enlightenment itself ironically turns out a craving of desire rather than eliminating it. As he carries the journey Ray Smith needs to cultivate five precepts – refraining from taking life, refraining from stealing, refraining from wrong speech, refraining from sensual pleasure, and refraining from intoxication. He maintains these precepts partially, failing in time. He tries to maintain celibacy with the belief that “pretty girls make grave”. But with his company, he cannot separate the sensual act of sex with the spiritual act of “yabum,” realizing only later that he finds Princess physically attractive (DB 94). His lust will eventually get the better of him and he will participate in yabum with Princess not for the meditative exercise, but out of a desire to satisfy his lust. After coming down off Mt. Matterhorn, Smith rejoins the company where he involves in intellectual-poetic activities, artistic yabum in Berkeley and San Francisco. This allurements to live with his friends, seeking and enjoying the sensual pleasure contradict his spiritual journey. Jack Cornfield opines that “when Eastern spirituality began to be popular in America in the 1960s and 1970s, its practice was initially idealistic and romantic. People tried to use spirituality to “get high” and to experience extraordinary states of consciousness. (146). Ray’s involvement in the sensual pleasure contradict to his spirit of attaining enlightenment and hinders his achievement. Moreover, he “not only lacked community in the religious sense of a cultic, life-shaping commitment to a defined group, but he also felt this lack profoundly... this self-absorbed willfulness of the unreconstructed worldling (make him) confuses mere self-indulgence with the disciplined spontaneity of the true Zen” (Miller 45). This self-observed and willful move does not help to move in the right way. He has set out to reach the state of realizing ‘emptiness’ or ‘void’ of existence so that he would not have any desire of things. A person reaches that state when he understands that a thing does not have its existence. He should understand that all that exists is produced by causes and conditions and the self is a false self without self. Ray Smith is allured to joy even while he is meditating on the nature. This allurements can’t lead him to experience of void or impermanence of existence. Similarly, Ray Smith who moves out to reject the worldly community as the practice of detachment to the world kept attached towards them. Miller notes that “However much Ray was attracted to the companionship and stimulation of like-minded poets in the San Francisco renaissance movement, here labeled the “Zen lunatics,” he tends to burn up or burn out in their presence. Somehow his vision of the spiritual quest is threatened by this immersion in community (45). This attachment and repelling to community and like-minded people weaken his aim.

Conclusion

The spiritual journey that aims to achieve nibbana or enlightenment journey is a good attraction to those who observe and study the religious scriptures. Enchanted with this notion of enlightenment state in which all our sorrow and suffering ends, Ray Smith carries out the journey to achieve it. As for its preparation, he adopts the homeless life starts wandering in different places and involves in meditation. As for inward preparation, he develops the six perfections - generosity, ethical discipline, patience, enthusiastic effort, concentration, and wisdom. Along

with this preparation, he also takes a guidance from a Zen master, Japhy Rider. With the preparation and guidance, he moves and practices the detachment. His spiritual climb that literary begins from North Carolina to Mt Matterhorn and then to New York to Mexico to San Francisco and finally climbs on the Desolation Peak, where he works as a fire lookout for sixty days. His secluded living in the solitary Desolation peak yields some form of ecstasy in which he realizes that his passion and greed for sensual pleasure have eroded to some extent. His preference to the solitude of nature and open places gives space to sit and meditate and hope to experience the impermanence and emptiness of things in a way the Chinese call “doing nothing” or non-attachment even to own desire. This desolation helps him to understand the transient cycle of birth, old age, sickness and death, which will help him experience Moksha or enlightenment.

This spiritual insight he has experienced in the Desolation peak makes him feel that he can achieve freedom of eternity forever. This vision of freedom helps him realize that he is free from all material bondage. With the belief of achieving freedom in the solitude of Desolation Peak, Ray Smith, eventually ready to return to the world which he left behind.

It is true that the novel is not a religious testimony and the characters involved in the text are not the people fully devoted to religious institution aiming for the inner transformation. The protagonist adopts the Buddhist principle, searching for the way to cessation of suffering created by the attachment to material greed. His adopting to homeless life, prayer and the meditation practices could catch the basic spirit of Buddhism. Ray's path of seeking and indulging on the quest of spiritual attainment is uncommon in his time when the people were running after gathering materials and their identities rest on the number of materials. The journey is more inclined to an escape or a way of coping from the economic pressure than an honest quest. Ray's notion to adopt and involve in the enlightenment journey for the cessation of suffering develops from reading of Buddhist texts and philosophical discussion with nonconformist group. This idealistic vision leads Ray towards the journey without having the real spirit and experiences of a religious devotee. This shallow visioning of enlightening quest indicates that the protagonist has limited understanding of Buddhism and he has just seen the explicit sides to attain the goal. He takes Buddhism from hedonistic perspective to joy even while he is moving for the detachment of all worldly affairs.

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