

Haiku and the Beatific Vision of Jack Kerouac

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In his 1958 autobiographical novel, *The Dharma Bums*, Jack Kerouac (through the voice of the narrator Ray Smith) details his quest to understand and master a Buddhist way of life. Living in suburban California in the mid-1950s, Kerouac (who would have been 92 years old this coming March) struggles to wrench himself free of Western ideology and embrace a way of living that seems not only foreign but almost impossible in the culture of his time. Still, Kerouac's narrator has a vision, a goal for his life and the lives of others. This vision, as described by a black Christian preacher in *The Dharma Bums*, is of a "new field," or as Smith describes it, "a new Buddha-field" and "Whole Buddha-fields in every direction for each one of us."¹ These fields are representations of the openness, expanse, and freedom that come from the awareness or "direct knowledge" of God.

In his twenties, Kerouac immersed himself in a "beat" environment—a lifestyle that values eastern religions and rejects the materiality and wealth of Western culture.² In her introduction to his most famous work, *On the Road*, Ann Charters writes that Kerouac's concept of "beat" is "linked in [his] mind to a Catholic beatific vision, the direct knowledge of God enjoyed by the blessed in heaven."³ Catholicism played an important role in Kerouac's life during his formative years and he would have been familiar with the concept of a relationship between God and humanity. Charters argues that this familiarity is what helped him to shape his beatific/beat vision.

The further Kerouac delved into a Buddhist, beat lifestyle, the more he struggled to make sense of his Catholic upbringing. This struggle is manifest in his haiku.

Shall I heed God's commandment?
—wave breaking
On the rocks—⁴

Shall I break God's commandment?
Little fly
Rubbing its back legs.

These haiku are reflections of Kerouac's internal tumult over the roles of Buddhism and Christianity in his life. The first, "Shall I heed" channels the inner storm raging within the poet. The second, "Shall I break," includes an overt reference to both Buddhist ontology and the early haiku poetry of Issa, who wrote:

Do not hit the fly
It is praying with its hands
and with its feet.⁵

Issa's haiku reflects the Buddhist theory of transmigration of the soul that exists within both human and nonhuman entities, a belief that haiku scholar R.H. Blyth claims "gives value (gives equal value) to the most trivial objects, and lays a foundation for a spiritual and practical democracy that Christianity as such could never afford."⁶ This inner religious conflict was a barrier between Kerouac and his beatific vision, which had been so influenced by the Catholicism of his childhood. Kerouac's beatific vision could only be achieved by reconciling the differences between Christianity and Buddhism.

Suppression and Schism

To understand Kerouac's beatific vision, it is necessary first to examine how he developed his desire for this vision of a perfect, new field. One must turn to a particular scene in *The Dharma Bums* where Kerouac expresses his frustration with the separateness of Christianity and Buddhism. This scene in turn informs how Kerouac tries to work through the issue of separateness by exploring themes and images of unity in his haiku.

Blyth argues that Buddhism stems from "a strong desire to find a way of escape from the world of suffering."⁷ Kerouac, a

student of Blyth's work, would have been very familiar with this idea, for he saw suffering everywhere and even experienced it himself. At one point in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's character, Ray Smith, discusses with Japhy Ryder (a substitute for Kerouac's good friend, Gary Snyder), the difficulty he is having as a Christian trying to embrace Buddhism. This discussion takes place immediately following the suicide of their mutual friend, Rosie, an instance that caused great suffering for both of them. The problem, Kerouac argues, is not inherent within the religions, but stems from widespread belief that they cannot exist alongside one another. Smith explains, "What's wrong with Jesus? Didn't Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn't Heaven Buddha's nirvana?"⁸ He goes on to say "Japhy, there were things I wanted to tell Rosie and I felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make? We're all in Heaven now ain't we?" Smith wanted to invoke Christian ideas while talking to Rosie before she killed herself, but felt as though he wasn't able to because of this "schism." Like his narrator Kerouac, too, strove to break Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, free of the "dogma and sentimentality" of its typical, religious practice.⁹

At the same time, Buddhism alone wasn't fulfilling all of Kerouac's desires for his beatific vision. Blyth describes Buddhism as being neither "personal nor impersonal."¹⁰ Kerouac hesitated to subscribe to this Buddhist concept. Towards the ending of *The Dharma Bums*, Smith, sitting at the top of Mt. Desolation, claims that he would "go out and sit in the grass and meditate facing west, wishing there were a Personal God in all this impersonal matter."¹¹ Smith's longing for a personal God reflects Kerouac's strong connection to his Catholic roots and the Christian emphasis on viewing God or Jesus as a personal Lord and Savior, or even a friend. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism alone could help Kerouac realize his beatific vision. He needed to bring them together in order to achieve this realization. The schism and suppression, however, were preventing him from being able to do so.

Kerouac tried to work out the “suppression” he felt in his haiku. The following haiku appear early in his *Book of Haikus* and are indicators of the initial issues he had with the separateness of his two religions.

Juju beads on
Zen manual—
My knees are cold¹²

Prayer beads
on the Holy Book
—My knees are cold¹³

With these two haiku, Kerouac is making a statement about the role of religion in his life. These haiku are almost the exact same. Kerouac simply exchanges words, retaining the structure and context of the haiku. He is clearly interested in Christianity and Buddhism and practices the forms of prayer unique to both. These haiku show that Kerouac was not elevating one religion over the other, but saw them as equally important in shaping his life and potentially the lives of others, like Rosie in *The Dharma Bums*.

Unity

The sense of religious separateness pervaded Kerouac’s life. His Buddhist friends could not understand his Catholic roots, and his Catholic family did not support his desire for a Buddhist lifestyle. Feeling incomplete, or split between the two, he was on a near constant search to unite these contrasting elements. When examining Kerouac’s haiku, it becomes apparent that he was interested in uniting disparate elements of Buddhism and Christianity.

2 traveling salesman
passing each other
On a Western road¹⁴

A black bull
and a white bird
Standing together on the shore¹⁵

In the first of these examples, two men traveling east and west represent the eastern/western conflict within Kerouac himself. By having them pass each other, Kerouac eliminates the competition aspect and paints them as simply two men traveling. He focuses on their similarities rather than their differences (or, what they are trying to sell).

The second haiku is a more obvious scene of unity. The contrasting elements of black and white, bull and bird, big and small, are neutralized by the harmonious act of standing together by the shore. These two animals share the view of the sea, an invocation of nature purposefully included by Kerouac as a place of unity or togetherness.

Aesthetic Principles

How Kerouac used haiku to express themes of unity, nature, and religion has much to do with how he utilized certain aesthetic principles of the form. While there are several aesthetic principles in haiku, for the purposes of this argument discussion will center on his use of the principles of *yugen* and *mu*.

Yugen is a Japanese aesthetic principle that exudes an aura of mystery or uncertainty. *Yugen* is primarily used to accentuate the profundity of a work, or, in Kerouac's case, haiku. It can be most easily identified in haiku by shrouded images. This is often accomplished through cloudiness or mist, making the full intention of the work unclear, but alluding to a powerful image just beyond the shroud. The following are examples of *yugen* in Kerouac's haiku:

Dusk—The blizzard
hides everything,
Even the night¹⁶

The mist in front
of the morning mountains
—late Autumn¹⁷

Arguably the most important aesthetic principle (more of a life principle, really) that Kerouac engaged in his haiku is *mu*. At its core, *mu* is nothingness, emptiness, or complete lack of thinking. It is a spiritual, aesthetic principle centered on the idea of simply existing in the universe. *Mu* is not just a haiku aesthetic, but can be found in many forms of eastern and Buddhist art. Kerouac, having studied Blyth, would have been well informed on the role of *mu* in art and life.

There's no Buddha
because
There's no me¹⁸

In this haiku Kerouac equates himself with Buddha in that, through *mu*, they are both reduced to the self-less state of nothingness. This isn't to imply that Kerouac sees himself as dead or no longer existing in the world, but to suggest that the presupposed ideas, prejudices, and intellectual learning that he has gained in life are wiped away and he is now free of all worldly, subjective influence. He exists as a mountain or a tree or God or Buddha would exist.

Religious Imagery in Nature

The aesthetic principles of haiku are pervasive in Kerouac's work and are particularly relevant to his use of Christian and Buddhist imagery. In essence, he defines beatific vision by linking nature with spiritual awareness and images.

Beautiful summer night
gorgeous as the robes
of Jesus¹⁹

Using words like "beautiful" and "gorgeous," Kerouac relates the celestial beauty of nature to Christianity, as he does in yet another one of his haiku:

The new moon
is the toe nail
of God²⁰

This image suggests that the beauty of the moon is only equal to a toenail compared to the full beauty of God represented in nature. It also serves to humanize God by giving him physically human features, like a toenail. This haiku is a prime example of Kerouac using the natural world as a means of finding his beatific vision in the direct knowledge of God.

Loneliness

Kerouac also engaged God and nature through loneliness, often separating himself from society and spending long periods of time alone. Blyth describes the loneliness of haiku as “not that of the poet as a recluse, not that of desolate places and forgotten men . . . it is above all in a nameless realm where the human and the non-human, love and law, meet and are one.”²¹ Kerouac seems to engage both ideas of loneliness. Not only does he separate himself from society for long periods of time, but in his haiku he often reflects on beauty, loss, joy, sorrow, and humanity, examples of a more mindful loneliness not reliant on physical separateness. The following are a few examples of some of Kerouac’s more lonely haiku:

The fly, just as
lonesome as I am
In this empty house²²

The other man, just as
lonesome as I am
In this empty universe.

In both these haiku, there is an apparent connection between *mu* and loneliness. Kerouac’s use of the word “empty” implies a freedom or nothingness that he is experiencing. Western lifestyles tend to view loneliness as a negative experience, often conflating loneliness with unpopularity or notions of undesirability. In eastern philosophy, and haiku in particular, loneliness is a neutral state, neither positive nor negative, allowing one to simply exist in the universe without comment or influence from outside parties, or as Blyth puts it, “the individual is not swamped, but still stands clear and distinct.”²³

Loneliness is an objective act, free of the subjective qualities of societal interaction. It is in this state of loneliness that Kerouac is able to free himself of his friends who are hostile toward Christianity and his family who don't understand Buddhism. In loneliness, Kerouac can engage one or both religions without reservation.

Prayer and Meditation in Nature

Kerouac's intentional loneliness often led him to remove himself from the influence of society and to immerse himself wholly within nature, where he was able to more effectively ponder concepts of Buddhism, Christianity, and the direct knowledge of God. Woods and mountains provided him with an atmosphere conducive to private prayer, and became holy places for him to engage God directly. Again, these ideas show themselves throughout Kerouac's haiku.

Dusk in the holy
woods—
Dust on my window²⁴

In this haiku Kerouac describes the woods as a mysterious, maybe even mythical place of worship, a temple of sorts. His use of *yugen* is essential in establishing the atmosphere and aura of the setting. The dust on his window suggests that he is unable to see clearly the woods beyond his room, but he knows that they are holy and he can "see" that holiness even through the dust.

I went into the woods
to meditate—
It was too cold²⁵

This haiku, more straightforward than "Dusk in the holy," tells of Kerouac's inability to pray and meditate effectively, an issue that is evidenced many times in both his haiku poetry and prose. Kerouac couldn't properly engage in meditation because he was unable to move beyond his own comfort.

The frustration this created is apparent in the following haiku, perhaps the most direct evidence of his struggle to pray:

Praying all the time
talking
To myself²⁶

The poem suggests that Kerouac isn't sure who he is praying to, and simply ends up talking to himself. Or perhaps he is just not very good at praying. Either way, prayer is a theme that recurs many times in Kerouac's haiku and *The Dharma Bums* and is a crucial element in the realization of his beatific vision.

Answers in Silence

Kerouac eventually overcomes this struggle to pray through a revelation apparent in his haiku.

The sound of silence
is all the instruction
You'll get²⁷

Kerouac sees the silence as instruction and he learns to wait for answers. Significantly, his use of silence implies a nothingness or *mu*. Given that *mu* is a goal of Buddhism, recognizing that *mu* in the silence would indicate an answer to his prayer.

In *The Dharma Bums*, Smith, while visiting his family one evening, has a breakthrough in prayer. He prays, "Tonight . . . I sleep tight and long and pray under the stars for the Lord to bring me Buddhahood after my Buddhawork is done, amen."²⁸ Smith's prayer suggests that he is coming to a realization that, for him, the beatific vision cannot be achieved without Buddhahood, and Buddhahood cannot be achieved without help from God. This is supported by another revelation that Kerouac's narrator experiences immediately following the prayer. He says, "Everything is possible. I am God, I am Buddha, I am imperfect Ray Smith, all at the same time, I am

empty space, I am all things. I have all the time in the world from life to life to do what is to do, to do what is done, to do the timeless doing, infinitely perfect within, why cry, why worry, perfect like mind essence and the minds of banana peels.”²⁹

Through these prayers and meditations, Smith (and Kerouac) recognizes that he is both God and Buddha in himself. He is spiritually revitalized after this realization and determines to engage himself in more prayer and meditation. This leads him to Mt. Desolation, the place where he comes the closest to achieving his beatific vision. It’s on the lonely mountaintop that Smith finally receives an answer as to how to achieve direct knowledge of God and instill it within others. He recalls, “One night in a meditation vision, Avalokitesvara the Hearer and Answerer of Prayer said to me ‘You are empowered to remind people that they are utterly free.’”³⁰

Conclusion

What is a rainbow, Lord?
A hoop
For the lowly³¹

This haiku is unique in that readers are given a special look at its birth. Towards the end of *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac details the origins of this haiku by describing the moment when he (as Smith) wrote it. “It hooped right into Lighting Creek, rain and snow fell simultaneously, the lake was milkwhite a mile below, it was just too crazy. I went outside and suddenly my shadow was ringed by the rainbow as I walked on the hilltop, a lovely-haloed mystery making me want to pray.”³² For Smith/Kerouac, this rainbow is a sign or message from God harmonizing Buddhism and Christianity. All the lowly people, regardless of religious practice, see the rainbow.

High in the Sky
the Fathers Send Messages
From on High³³

Inspired by his newfound knowledge, Smith prays, “God, I love you” and looks up to the sky and really means it. “I have fallen in love with you, God. Take care of us all, one way or the other.”³⁴ Smith, by removing himself in loneliness, recognizes that God is found in nature and that Buddhism and Christianity, while entirely separate, can work together in nature through prayer and meditation. Nature becomes Kerouac’s holy place, his temple of worship, where the direct knowledge of God is not held captive by any one religion, but is found in the harmony of the natural world as explored and expressed in his haiku.

Notes

1. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Viking, 1958), 114.
2. It is well known that Kerouac struggled with alcoholism, excessive drug use, and sexual repression. Rather than retread these issues, this essay focuses on Kerouac’s spiritual struggles and how he creatively works through them in his haiku.
3. Ann Charters, “Introduction.” In Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin, 1957), viii.
4. Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*. Ed. Regina Weinreich (New York: Penguin, 2003), 109.
5. Translation by Yoshinobu Hakutani, Kent State University.
6. R.H. Blyth, *Haiku: Eastern Culture* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1981), 21.
7. Blyth, *Haiku: EC*, 18.
8. Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 114.
9. Blyth, *Haiku: EC*, 21.
10. Ibid.
11. Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 237.
12. Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, 7.
13. Ibid., 13.
14. Ibid., 6.
15. Ibid., 20.
16. Ibid., 38.
17. Ibid., 67.
18. Ibid., 75.
19. Ibid., 30.
20. Ibid., 52.
21. Blyth, *Haiku: EC*, 166–67.

22. Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, 181.
23. Blyth, *Haiku: EC*, 164.
24. Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, 69.
25. *Ibid.*, 72.
26. *Ibid.*, 67.
27. *Ibid.*, 97.
28. Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 122.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 239.
31. Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, 89.
32. Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 241.
33. Kerouac, *Book of Haikus*, 169.
34. Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 244.



Albert Battistelli received his bachelor's degree in English from Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, OH, and is currently working on his master's degree in literature from Kent State University. His primary research areas include 20th and 21st century American literature, Midwestern literature, eco-critical theory, and narrative identity. He is currently applying to PhD programs in order to dive even further into his research. He wishes to extend many thanks to Dr. Yoshinobu Hakutani for all of his guidance, and to his parents, Julie and Al, and the rest of his family and friends for all of their support.