

THE BUDDHIST POETRY OF ALLEN GINSBERG

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Allen Ginsberg has identified himself as 'a Buddhist Jew / who worships the Sacred Heart of Christ the blue body of Krishna the straight back of Ram / the beads of Chango the Nigerian singing Shiva Shiva in a manner which I have invented, / and the King of May' ('Kral Majales'; Ginsberg, 354). His indiscriminate spiritual eclecticism resembles Walt Whitman's 'Buying Drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha' (Whitman, 131). The visionary personae and messianic missions of these two prophetic American poets have obvious similarities as well. In fact, Whitman was Ginsberg's 'dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher' ('A Supermarket in California', 136). Ginsberg has wandered on Whitman's 'open road', and beyond it to Asia, which Whitman had imagined as the 'all-mother' of civilization but about which he knew very little (Whitman, 25). Unlike Whitman, who had never left the United States, Ginsberg has travelled all over the world, seeking wisdom from diverse cultures, and in his poetry transmitting a syncretic world-view that joins Asian and Western thought in an effort to save humanity from destruction.

Ginsberg has explored Buddhism, as a source of compassionate wisdom, more seriously than any other religion, and much more deeply than did Whitman, who made only a few sympathetic allusions to Shakyamuni in *Leaves of Grass* (Gibson, *Among Buddhas*, 24-9). Ginsberg is a committed Buddhist, having taken the Refuge Vows and the Bodhisattvah Vow, and having been devoted to the late Tibetan lama, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, at whose Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, Ginsberg created 'The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics'. Ginsberg has probably done more than any American writer, even more than Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Alan Watts, to transplant Buddhism to American soil, transforming it into a radical spiritual movement. American Buddhism has indeed become startlingly different in outlook from that of the conservative Buddhist establishment in most of Asia; and Ginsberg has been denounced for twisting the teachings of Shakyamuni into an apologia for nihilism, anarchism, unrestrained sexuality, filthy language, spontaneous poetry, and generally bizarre behavior.

These attacks on Ginsberg have been accompanied by attacks on the Beat Generation generally, which from the mid-1950s on he personified even more dramatically than his friends Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and others. Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1926, Ginsberg received literary encouragement from William Carlos Williams, who wrote the Preface to *Howl*, published by Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books in 1956. This long poem

catapulted Ginsberg into international fame that has expanded with the publication of book after book. Thanks to his innumerable performances to audiences as huge and as enthusiastic as those at rock concerts, he has undoubtedly been heard and seen by more people around the world than any other poet in history. He has shattered stereotypes about insanity, homosexuality, drugs, poetry, love, and Buddhism. His many poems and demonstrations against America's war in South East Asia were not political in a narrow sense: they were prophetic warnings to a nation that was betraying its original commitment to freedom, justice, and peace. His relentless acts of revolutionary imagination, inspiring many, alienated many others, so criticism of him and his work has been fierce. Winning a Guggenheim Fellowship and becoming a member of the exclusive National Institute of Arts and Letters, he was attacked by some of his former enthusiasts for selling out to the Establishment, while the National Institute was condemned for inviting him in. But there is no indication that Ginsberg is simmering down; and the debate continues.

His poetry can neither be explained easily nor explained away. His aesthetic principles are few but not as simple as they appear: 'Spontaneous bop poetry' (from jazz rhythms), 'No ideas but in things' (from the imagism of William Carlos Williams), 'First thought, best thought' (from Buddhist meditation), 'Mind is shapely, Art is shapely' (Ginsberg, xix-xx). Exceptions to these principles abound in his poetry, where many ideas are not rendered in things: 'Universe', 'Eternity', 'Emptiness', 'Ecstasy', 'Soul', 'Mankind',

'Democracy', and other religious and political abstractions sprinkle his work. His first thought does not always seem to be the best possible thought, or the first word the best possible word, though it is folly to subject Ginsberg's poetry to the kind of workshop critique offered by M. L. Rosenthal for *Kaddish* (Rosenthal, 422-8). Furthermore, mind and art are not always shapely, especially when hallucinogens are substituted for the muse. And 'spontaneous bop poetry', effective when performed by Ginsberg, may lie on the page dormant when his living voice is unknown to the reader. In various public readings, some recorded, Ginsberg has varied the tone and meaning of his poems, for example sometimes reading *Howl* seriously, at times comically, as a parody of itself, mocking it and those who took it seriously. The texts of his poetry are like musical scores, subject to many interpretations in performance, even more so than those of most poetry. Performances of his poetry deserve another study, another approach to determine how much of his poetry depends upon his delivering it in person, or on recordings, or upon memory of his voice.

Moreover, how much of his poetry depends upon the reader's direct experience of actual historical crises of the last four decades, the Cold War, America's war in Southeast Asia, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the psychedelic craze, and the counter-culture? Will our grandchildren respond at all to Ginsberg's poetry, even with the help of footnotes in anthologies; or will it seem as old-fashioned as Longfellow's is to us? Has Ginsberg's work already deteriorated to the point where he can be 'dismissed

as a buffoon' (Perkins, 552)? The Yeats scholar Thomas Parkinson, Ginsberg's former professor at Berkeley, while championing his poetry, has concluded that its chief value is 'in the area of religious and spiritual exploration rather than of aesthetic accomplishment': '[Ginsberg] embodies in his work a profoundly meaningful spiritual quest that is compelling and clarifying to any reasonably sympathetic reader' (Parkinson, 310-11). Without debating the aesthetic question, which I think Parkinson has not fully answered, I fully agree with him about the complex value of Ginsberg's 'spiritual quest'. Inspired by Biblical prophecy and William Blake, Ginsberg sought out Indian and Tibetan gurus, practiced yoga, Zen, and Tantric meditation, chanted mantras, absorbed African rhythms, and tried countless drugs to 'turn on' visions. In this essay I shall concentrate on the Buddhist dimension of his poetry, without trying to offer an aesthetic evaluation of his work. A thematic analysis seems especially appropriate for such didactic poetry.

Ginsberg claims to have had a mystical experience upon hearing, in 1948, William Blake reciting his 'Ah! Sun-Flower weary of time...'. A quarter of a century later Ginsberg wrote a quatrain that might, one day, serve as his epitaph (595):

Who

From Great Consciousness vision Harlem 1948
 (buildings standing in Eternity)
 I realized entire Universe was manifestation of

One Mind—

My teacher was William Blake—my life work Poesy,
transmitting that spontaneous awareness to
Mankind.

'One Mind' is a Buddhist term, Ginsberg's retrospective interpretation of the Blakean sense of universal harmony, which convinced him that he was a visionary, prophetic poet. He henceforth had the courage to communicate in poetry his experiences—homosexual, drug-induced, insane, revolutionary, whatever they might be—without disguising them as in the past. A transformative process has carried him through madness to realization, though the madness may remain. Curiously, the 1948 vision, though Blakean, does not involve Jesus Christ, the center of Blake's visionary system; and though Jesus is alluded to briefly from time to time in Ginsberg's *Collected Poems*, Blake and not Jesus seems to be Ginsberg's Messiah. It is curious also, that though the prophetic rhythms of the Old Testament echo in much of Ginsberg's poetry, he almost never refers explicitly in his poetry to Jewish history and ideas, with the great exception of Moloch, the ancient god to whom children were sacrificed, in part II of *Howl* (131-2), and the lament for his mother, *Kaddish* (209-27). His quest proceeds beyond Jewish-Christian ideas, as if they had little to offer in comparison with Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Ginsberg's Blakean vision was surely a conversion, as William James has defined it (177):

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases

which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.

And yet, Ginsberg's conversion seems to have been incomplete. His 'divided self', to use James's term, was not united in the Blakean 'photism' (as James called 'hallucinatory or pseudo-hallucinatory luminous phenomena', 231); rather, a long process was begun. Far from bringing the poet an enduring sense of peace in himself and in the universe, the 1948 experience seems to have initiated a frantic quest for full salvation or enlightenment. Such a quest is not unusual among those who have mystical experiences, which according to James are nearly always 'transient'—so brief that the mystic searches for ways to repeat, revive, extend, and deepen the experience (343). James's other descriptive terms for mystical experiences also apply to those in Ginsberg's poetry: 'ineffible' (always beyond the grasp of language), 'noetic' (convincing the mystic of real knowledge), and 'passive': the subject may be 'grasped and held by a superior power', which produces 'prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance' (343–4). Ginsberg's prophetic poetry seems to have been usually written spontaneously, if not automatically, in a kind of trance (though not strictly mediumistic). Moreover, Buddhist mantras, allusions, and refrains in Ginsberg's poetry raise consciousness, just as James noted: 'The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which

occasionally sweeps over one' (344). And Ginsberg might well have written James's statement, 'We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility' (345).

If Ginsberg's Blakean conversion was instantaneous, his Buddhist conversion has been gradual (James's terminology, 210-11), growing out of an eclectic involvement in yoga, mythology, art, and philosophy. Just as in India, Ginsberg's Buddhism is mixed with Hinduism, though of course Shakyamuni distinguished his teachings, based on anatman (the denial of an eternal soul or self), from other religious views. Buddhist allusions, ideas, and attitudes are strewn through much of the *Collected Poems*, but no single poem marks a drastic, total change in Ginsberg's viewpoint, the attainment of full enlightenment. After allusions to Zen, tantric deities appear, probably because of the influence of Trungpa. Ginsberg's meditation practice has ranged from silent zazen to chanting mantras, and from solitary contemplation to the worship of gurus and deities. The writing and performance of poetry, especially its mantric passages, are essential aspects of his Buddhist practice.

Because I am focussing here on Buddhism in Ginsberg's poetry, I shall be referring to Ginsberg's persona, which may or may not conform to the actual person. I shall not rely upon his many prose writings nor upon biographies nor Jack Kerouac's treatment of him as Carlo Marx in *On the Road* or Alvah Goldbook in *The Dharma Bums*, for example. Going through the poems chronologically, I shall attempt to interpret explicit Buddhist meanings, dwelling more on the

relatively few poems that are wholly Buddhist than on those in which Buddhist allusions are not central. Of course dharma manifests itself in many ways that are not explicitly doctrinal; so in conclusion I shall suggest attitudes and feelings in the poetry that seem to be associated with Buddhist meditation and outlook. Many poems concerning such universal subjects as suffering, compassion, and the search for wisdom and salvation may or may not be considered Buddhist.

* * *

None of the poems in *Empty Mirror: Gates of Wrath*, written between 1947 and 1952 but not published until 1961, is explicitly Buddhist, though the title contains a Zen image of no self or substance followed by a pun on the Biblical and Steinbeckian 'Grapes of Wrath'. In fact, much of the visionary imagery and terminology in this collection are, like Blake's, Biblical: God and Jesus, eternity and salvation, soul and love, holy and sacred, heaven and hell, for instance. But the philosophy of 'The Terms in which I Think of Reality' may foreshadow the Buddhist idea that samsara, the ordinary world of illusion generated by desire, is not distinct from nirvana, especially in the lines 'Time is Eternity, / Ultimate and immovable' and 'absolutely Eternity / changes!' Moreover, the idea that 'everyone's an angel' (50) can easily be transformed into the Zen idea that everyone is a Buddha without knowing it.

'Shakyamuni Coming Out from the Mountain', in *The Green Automobile (1953-1954)*, the second section of the

Collected Poems, was Ginsberg's first explicitly Buddhist poem. Based on Liang Kai's famous painting during the Sung Dynasty, the poem is written in triadic lines resembling those of William Carlos Williams:

He drags his bare feet
 out of a cave
 under a tree,
 eyebrows
 grown long with weeping
 and hooknosed woe

The refrain 'humility is beatness' emphasizes the exhausting detachment of enlightenment, rather than the kind of ecstasy that Ginsberg seems to seek in many other poems. The Buddha, 'a bitter wreck of a sage', a 'shaken meek wretch', has just realized that nirvana,

 the land of blessedness exists
 in the imagination—
 the flash come:
 empty mirror—
 how painful to be born again
 wearing a fine beard,
 reentering the world
 a bitter wreck of a sage:
 earth before him his only path.

Shakyamuni cannot escape to heaven, like a god: he lives in the samsaric world of suffering and illusion before the 'absolute world' of nirvana. Many Buddhists would disagree with this unusual interpretation of nirvana, which is traditionally not thought to be imaginable; but the poem is a

memorable, compassionate, philosophical portrayal of the Buddha that marks Ginsberg's entry to the Path (Ginsberg, 90-1, and notes 756-7).

The visionary qualities of *Howl* (1955-1956) are primarily Blakean, not Buddhist. There are a few allusions to Buddhism—in the dedication to Jack Kerouac, 'new Buddha of American prose', and Neal Cassady, whose autobiography 'enlightened Buddha' (802); and in the poem itself people vanish 'into nowhere Zen New Jersey' (127) and seek a 'tender Buddha' on Rocky Mount (130). But Ginsberg's 'best minds... destroyed by madness' (126) seek ecstasy, not the compassionate equanimity of enlightenment. The surrealistic transformation of Moloch (from the ancient god), resembling Blake's Urizen, might be said to be a personification of Samsara, but Ginsberg did not say so. The 'Footnote to Howl' springs from Blake's 'Everything that lives is holy!' (134), whereas Bodhidharma said that in enlightenment there is 'vast emptiness, and nothing holy'.

The 'Four Haiku', on the other hand, are Zen in their gentle suggestiveness and theme: 'Lying on my side, / in the void: the breath in my nose' (137). And in 'Afternoon Seattle', among mandala, Basho's frog, and a Ghost Trap from Sikkim, Gary Snyder has a 'bristling Buddha mind' that is often associated with Ginsberg's dharma poems (150, and note 762).

In *Reality Sandwiches: Europe!* (1957-1959) there are incidental allusions to the Sixth Zen Patriarch (168), the Buddha (175 and 181), and the Void (180 and 189); but only in the long 'Laughing Gas' (dedicated to Snyder) is a

Buddhist theme sustained. In this poem, Ginsberg imagines himself leaving the 'funny horrible / dirty joke' of existence for the 'beginningless perfection' of nirvana, while anesthetised by a dentist: 'That's why Satori's accompanied by laughter / and the Zenmaster rips up the Sutras in fury' (190). In *Varieties of Religious Experience* William James had written that laughing gas (nitrous oxide) and ether

stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation. (349)

James would have gladly added Ginsberg to his list of those 'persuaded'. However, instead of babbling nonsense, Ginsberg renders his return to the world in terms of Basho's imagery, but reverses it so the frog leaps out of the pond in the most famous haiku: 'that first frog / thought leaping out of / the void' (192). 'The Great void remains / ... a glass / in the dust reflecting the sun' (196-97), and a Zen monk laughs at the moon (199).

Whether drug-highs are compatible with the Buddhist Way has been debated endlessly by many practitioners, the Japanese generally arguing the negative, and Southeast Asians often arguing the affirmative; but in any case a drug-high is a temporary ecstasy, rather than permanent

enlightenment. Ginsberg's drug-poetry might be said to express 'anaesthetic revelation', which Benjamin Paul Blood claimed 'is the Initiation of Man into the Immemorial Mystery of the Open Secret of Being, revealed as the Inevitable Vortex of Continuity'. This remarkable definition, sounding like something by Ginsberg, is from Blood's pamphlet on Tennyson, issued shortly after Blood's *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* appeared in 1874. James quotes from both Blood and his friend, the philosopher Xenos Clark, who wrote eloquently: 'The real secret would be the formula by which the "now" keeps exfoliating out of itself, yet never escapes. What is it, indeed, that keeps existence exfoliating?... You walk, as it were, round yourself in the revelation. Ordinary philosophy is like a hound hunting his own trail' (James, 350-1). This passage, though written a century before Ginsberg's poetry, perfectly describes its present-centeredness, 'exfoliating out of itself'.

In *Kaddish and Related Poems (1959-1960)*, there is, first, in the title poem and in the 'Hymmn' that follows, mourning for Ginsberg's mother that is Jewish rather than Buddhist, with appeals to God for solace. And in the psychedelic meanderings of 'Lysergic Acid' the poet wants to be God (231-4). But in another drug poem, 'Aether', he finds the Buddha more reassuring than Christ and indeed briefly thinks of himself as a Buddha (242-4), though God is his central concern.

In *Planet News: to Europe and Asia (1961-1963)*, among apocalyptic Judaeo-Christian terminology and Hindu mythology, two distinctly Buddhist poems emerge. In

'Vulture Peak: Gridhakuta Hill', the poet commemorates Shakyamuni, whose wisdom put down empires. With Snyder chanting, Ginsberg ecstatically sings and spins around, loses his senses, then returns to the world, thirsty—suggesting the universal desire that the Buddha showed humankind how to overcome (298–9). In 'Angkor Wat', the long poem written in Cambodia during the war there, Ginsberg takes refuge in the Buddha, Dharma (the teachings), and Sangha (the community) among sculptures of the Bodhisattvah of Compassion (Japanese Kannon), but he confesses to being too cowardly to speak openly against the war to those fighting it; so he laments being 'a false Buddha afraid of / my own annihilation'. He lusts and prays, 'Buddha save me, what am / I doing here?' (306–14). He is 'confused with this blue sky cloud drift / "illusion" over the treetops / dwelling in my mind "frightened aging nagging flesh" / To step *out* of —? Who, Me?' (315). But he finds 'reassurance from Buddha's / two arms, palms out' (319). The note on the Refuge Vows (771) compounds the confusion, for the Buddha is identified with 'my Self', whereas Shakyamuni explicitly denied the existence of a Self, although some Mahayanists speak of the Buddha-nature in everyone as the 'True Self'. The poet seems to have had a change of mind between 1963, when the poem was written, and 1984, when a new note ('Non-Self interpretation') was added to the old one.

In *King of May: America to Europe (1963–1965)*, there is no explicitly Buddhist poem; but in *The Fall of America (1965–1971)* Buddhist allusions enter the stream of invective against the war, racial discrimination, and other injustices. In

'Wichita Vortex Sutra', after contemplating 'EMPTINESS' in the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* (The Highest Perfect Wisdom Sutra, 395), Ginsberg calls upon the Tathagata (Buddha) and other spiritual masters in declaring the end of the war in Southeast Asia (407). In a long note Ginsberg exemplifies karma by reference to environmental pollution and militarism, assuring us that

Such karmic patterns may be altered and their energy made wholesome through meditative mindfulness, conscious awareness, the practice of appreciation, which burns up karma on the spot. Traditionally, attentive appreciation of an enlightened teacher who has transcended his / her own karma may inspire the student / seeker / citizen to work from 'black' through 'white' situations toward holistic primordial experience, or unconditioned states of mind and activity, exchanging self for others, liberated from karma as may be Mahatma Gandhi or certain Buddhist folk or Native American elders (782).

'Holy Ghost on the Nod over the Body of Bliss' is a psychedelic montage, an interfaith orgy in which 'Buddha sits in Mary's belly waving Kuan / Yin's white hand at the Yang-tze that Mao sees, / tongue of Kali licking Krishna's soft lips', and 'Bodhidharma forgot to bring Nothing' (467). 'Pentagon Exorcism' includes Snyder's famous tantric exorcism of the Pentagon during a massive anti-war demonstration (483). 'Guru Om' mixes Hindu and Buddhist motifs (554-5). 'Milarepa Taste' (557), alluding to Tibet's great composer of 100,000 songs, opens with a fundamental koan about the self, understood as nothing but a temporary

compound in perpetual flux:

Who am I? Saliva,
vegetable soup,
empty mouth?

Hot roach, breathe smoke
suck in, hold, exhale—
light as ashes.

Smoking marihuana may lighten the poet, even if it does not enlighten him, for satori is uncaused. 'Hum Bom!' is a serio-comic anti-war mantra (568–9). Helen Vendler has charged that 'the Eastern mantras get in the way' (201), but for some Buddhists they are the Way. In any case, ignoring Vendler, Ginsberg used even more mantras in his next book.

On the back cover of the original *Mind Breaths All Over the Place* (1972–1977), the collection of Ginsberg's most consistently Buddhist poems, is a summary of the book's contents: 'Broken leg meditations march thru Six Worlds singing Crazy Wisdom's hopeless suffering, the First Noble Truth' of the Buddha (quoted in *Collected Poems*, 816)—that Truth being the inevitability of suffering in samsara; and there follows a description of Ginsberg's meditation-practice, from which the poetry sprang: 'Ah cross-legged thoughts sitting straight-spine paying attention to empty breath flowing round the globe; then Dharma elegy & sharp eyed haiku... ' and 'Buddhist country western chord changes' (816). *Mind Breaths* is dedicated to Trungpa in lines from 'Father Death Blues': 'Guru Death your words are true / Teacher Death I do thank you / For inspiring me to sing this

Blues' (note, 803). In the whole poem (655), part of the sequence 'Don't Grow Old', in which Ginsberg mourns the death of his father and faces his own death, and perhaps before that the death of ego, the lines to Trungpa are sandwiched between

Genius Death your art is done
 Lover Death your body's gone
 Father Death I'm coming home

and

Buddha Death, I wake with you
 Dharma Death, your mind is new
 Sangha Death, we'll work it through

Suffering is what was born
 Ignorance made me forlorn
 Tearful truths I cannot scorn

Father Breath once more farewell
 Birth you gave was no thing ill
 My heart is still, as time will tell.

In 'These States: to Miami Presidential Convention' (1972) the mantra 'Ah!' is chanted to strip samsara, especially its political dimensions, of illusions that have generated so much suffering, through wars and other injustices (582-6). 'Ah', the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, is thought by tantrists to embody all possible languages, meanings, and the Buddha-nature itself (Gibson, *Tantric Poetry of Kūkai*, 13; and 'The True Word of Kukai', 107-14). In 'Thoughts Sitting Breathing' each syllable of the Tibetan mantra 'Om mani padme hum' (Hail jewel in the lotus) generates a stream of

troubled consciousness with the refrain, 'free space for causeless bliss' (589-91).

Taking Trungpa's advice to prepare for death, in 'What would you do if you lost it?' Ginsberg lists his most cherished possessions, including Buddhist teachings, bodhisatvahs, and nirvana itself, in a grand farewell of detachment that ends with a medley of mantras (592-4). The hopelessness of 'Yes and It's Hopeless' is Buddhist, for enlightenment is either here and now or never and nowhere: hope for future enlightenment is considered a delusion generated by desire: 'Hopeless, hopeless, Jesus on the Cross or Buddha voided passing through' (596). In 'What I'd Like to Do' the poet wants to compose 'Tibetan mantra Blues' (602): and he does write and perform 'Sickness Blues' (639), 'Father Death Blues' (655), 'Gospel Noble Truths' (641), and other dharma songs, though they are not strictly mantras. 'On Illness' is a prayer for health and peace to Lord Heart, the androgynous Bodhisattvah of Compassion (Japanese Kannon) with 1008 arms (603). In keeping with Buddhist anatman, the doctrine of no-self, the enlightened heart personified here is not the 'bag of shit' heart of egoistic romantic poetry, such as Shelley's and others, that he rejects in 'Manifesto' (617), though in fact many of his poems are more romantic than Buddhist. Meditating in 'Mind Breaths', the poet breathes calmly and silently over the whole world (609-11). In the 'Flying Elegy' for Alan Watts, the dead are 'perfect meditators without thought, accomplished in Sunyata' (Emptiness, 612). 'Sad Dust Glories' resembles the poetry of Gary Snyder, whom Ginsberg was visiting in his

mountain home at the time: the imagery is natural, the tone is softer than in most of Ginsberg's poems, and he rests in calm contemplation of Buddhahood in all things (619):

KENJI MIYAZAWA

'All is Buddhahood
to who has cried even once
Glory be?
So I said glory be
 looking down at a pine
 feather
risen beside a dead leaf
on brown duff
where a fly wavers an inch
 above ground
midsummer.

But ego returns in the title poem of *Ego Confessions* (1974-1977), where Ginsberg shows off (623-4)

his extraordinary ego, at service of
 dharma and completely empty ...
—All empty all for show,
 all for the sake of Poesy
to set surpassing example of sanity
 as measure for late generations
Exemplify Muse Power to the young avert
 future suicide
accepting his own lie & the gaps
 between lies with equal good humor
Solitary in worlds full of insects &
 singing birds all solitary

—who had no subject but himself
 in many disguises
 some outside his own body including
 empty air-filled space forests & cities—

Here is a self-referential paradox of the kind 'This statement is false' that Bertrand Russell wrestled with and that Nagarjuna made the center of Madyamika philosophy, a statement that can neither be true (for then it would be false) nor false (for then it would be true). Ginsberg's 'sanity' lies in the paradox of the wise fool, the self-confessed liar whose lies are true, the empty egoist who serves humanity.

Visiting an American Indian reservation, Ginsberg offers a Zen prayer for a transformation of suffering into friendly song and dance (644). In poems written during spiritual retreats Ginsberg despairs of becoming enlightened (645, 661, 662); and in 'For Creeley's Ear' he feels the weight of existence as he goes to see the great Tibetan lama, the Karmapa (663). In 'Mugging', Ginsberg chants a mantra as he is robbed and threatened with death—'Shut up or we'll murder you'—'Om Ah Hum take it easy' (625-7). 'Thoughts on a Breath' details the poet's stream of consciousness during meditation as he experiences 'energy hymning itself in emptiness'. He remains trapped in the body/mind dualism: 'How pay rent & stay in our bodies / if we don't sell our minds to Samsara' (630). The poem ends with 'Homage to the Gurus, Guru om!':

Thanks to the teachers
 who taught us to breathe,
 to watch our minds revolve in emptiness,

to follow the rise & fall of thoughts,
Illusions big as empires flowering &
Vanishing on a breath!
Thanks to aged teachers whose wrinkles
read our minds' newspapers &
taught us not to Cling to yesterday's
thoughts,
nor thoughts split seconds ago, but
let cities vanish on a breath—
Thanks to teachers who showed us behold
dust motes in our own eye,
anger our own hearts,
emptiness of Dallases where we
sit thinking knitted brows—

There follows the Bodhisattvah Vow, which requires a major commitment for any Buddhist:

Sentient beings are numberless I vow
to liberate all
Passions unfathomable I vow to
release them all
Thought forms limitless I vow to
master all
Awakened space is endless I vow to
enter it forever (631).

On the back cover of the original collection called *Plutonian Ode (1977-1980)* Ginsberg had written another summary-blurb: 'Adamantine Truth of ordinary mind inspiration... mantric rhymes... Zen bluegrass raunch... national flashes in the Buddhafields...' (817). He wrote the

title poem ironically to 'celebrate a matter that renders Self oblivion!'—the matter being plutonium, the deadly radioactive element that could, even in small quantities, destroy all life on earth; and 'Self oblivion' being the Buddhist annihilation of self, or more accurately, the realization of no substantial, permanent self in the perpetual flux of the universe, in which everything is dependent on everything else and nothing is self-subsistent. Turning the 'Wheel of Mind', Ginsberg cries to Plutonium that he will 'embody your ultimate powers!' as if the element is a deity that can be overcome through the compassionate 'Diamond Truth' of the mantra concluding the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*: 'gone out, gone out, gone beyond, gone beyond me, Wake space, so Ah!' (702-4).

In Ginsberg's 'Old Pond', Basho's haiku—translated as 'Th'old pond—a frog jumps in, kerplunk!'—serves as the refrain in a ballad about a junkie who may have had satori. 'One hand I gave myself the clap' means that he gave himself gonorrhoea by masturbating, a blackly humorous impossibility that is offered as a kind of Zen koan, mixed with the famous koan about the sound of one hand clapping that is heard only in enlightenment, suggested also by the junkie being 'unborn'. But because enlightenment is the realization of nirvana as samsara, void as form, the protagonist descends from the empty mind to ordinary life on earth: 'I ride down the blue sky / Sit down with worms until I die / Farewell!'—and chants the tantric mantra 'Hum!' as he farms and swats flies, like any ordinary person, rather than a saint (708).

In 'Blame the Thought, Cling to the Bummer' Ginsberg admits being a 'Fake Saint', but even Trungpa and other eminent Buddhists, along with the Pope and even the sky itself, are all 'Fake Saints' too—illusions of grasping consciousness, according to Buddhist teachings. They generate the title itself, which means that if we blame thought for our suffering, instead of recognizing that thought is harm-lessly empty (insubstantial), we will cling to the suffering (a 'bummer' being a bad drug experience, but here generalized). In 'Don't Grow Old', the poet's father, also a poet, has a sadly humorous encounter with Trungpa (711). In 'Brooklyn College Brain' Ginsberg teaches Buddhmind (Bodhicitta) in poetry workshops (717). In a poem about Las Vegas, even the Buddha loses his shirt gambling because he hasn't the instinct of wild horses and lizards (720). In 'Verses Written for Student Antidraft Registration Rally 1980' (730) the spiritual warrior is a pacifist:

The warrior never goes to War
War runs away from the warrior's mouth
War falls apart in the warrior's mind
The Conquered go to War, drafted into
 shadow armies, navy'd on shadow oceans,
 flying in shadow fire
only helpless Draftees fight afraid,
 big meaty negroes trying not to die—
The Warrior knows his own sad & tender heart,
 which is not the heart of most newspapers
Which is not the heart of most Television—
 This kind of sadness doesn't sell popcorn

This kind of sadness never goes to war,
 never spends \$100 Billion on MX Missile
 systems, never fights shadows in Utah,
 never hides inside a hollow mountain near
 Colorado Springs with North American
 Aerospace Defense Command
 waiting orders that he press the Secret button
 to Blow up the Great Cities of Earth

In 'Reflections at Lake Louise', a sequence about a Tibetan Buddhist retreat led by Trungpa Rinpoche, Ginsberg reveals his frustrations and doubts about being 'destined to study the Higher Tantras and be a slave of Enlightenment' (734); and in 'Ode to Failure' he admits that he never got to nirvana (737). But even Birdbrain, who insanely runs the world in the poem named for him, 'realized he was Buddha by meditating' (739); so anyone can be enlightened and in a sense already is. The last lines in *Collected Poems* (before the Appendix) state a Buddhist moral in a polemical jingle against politics, left, right, and center, none of which can save the world and indeed only muddles the mind (746):

Aware Aware wherever you are No Fear
 Trust your heart Don't ride your Paranoia dear
 Breathe together with an ordinary mind
 Armed with Humor Feed & Help Enlighten
 Woe Mankind.

* * *

Just how Buddhist is the poetry of Allen Ginsberg? Many of his poems are an odd mix of many traditions, of contradictory attitudes towards enlightenment and how to

get there, so much so that at times he seems to affirm the Self like a Hindu, or Walt Whitman, and at other times to deny it. Most of his poetry lacks the natural clarity of Snyder's, as well as Rexroth's philosophical depth and historical breadth. It seems obvious that Rexroth's *Thou Shalt Not Kill* influenced *Howl*, and Rexroth's *The Dragon and the Unicorn* influenced Ginsberg's autobiographical travel-poems, in which political polemics are mixed with Buddhist insights. When asked whether Ginsberg was a spiritual seeker, Kenneth Rexroth facetiously replied, 'Well, he sure ain't no finder'. And David Perkins has argued that mystical experiences in Ginsberg's poetry 'turn on, galvanize the instant, and wink off, having no significance beyond the momentary 'kick' or 'trip' (549); but on the contrary, Ginsberg does in fact develop their significance through his general ideas, especially Buddhist thought. He realizes in many of the late poems, especially those influenced by Trungpa, that enlightenment is not merely the spontaneous, momentary 'high', popularized during the Beat era, but a steady state of contemplative experience in which all is compassionately detached and yet interacting. He confesses failure; he faces death. He never proclaims dharma as if from nirvana; but always as one still enmeshed in the illusions of samsara. He never overcomes his sense of being a lone self-conscious individual (Parkinson, 6-7). Sometimes he struggles to lose himself; sometimes he struggles to find himself; sometimes he tries to quit struggling, but cannot.

Ginsberg's vastly compassionate poetry expresses an heroic, painful, and endless quest for enlightenment—not

only for himself, but for humanity as a whole, which he strives to save from war, environmental destruction, wasted talents, political oppression, ignorance, and unnecessary suffering. Like a bodhisatvah he recognizes that the liberation of each depends on the liberation of all. Samsara consists of *social* and well as individual networks of illusion. Ginsberg's quest for *universal* enlightenment cannot be separated from the ordinary world in which we live—ecological, social, economic, political. There is no 'pie in the sky bye and bye' if the pie is full of carcinogenic chemicals and radiation, and the ozone layer is destroyed. And yet, in the face of this impossible future for our world, 'our only world' as Paul Goodman used to call it, Ginsberg keeps chanting, cutting through samsara with vigorous imagination, boistrous humor, and razor-like invective. Whatever Shakyamuni might have thought of Ginsberg, his poetry offers priceless flashes of dharma.

Ginsberg's persona in the poems has some curious aspects that seem to be Buddhist, quite apart from his explicit ideas. First, although he talks to and about many friends in his poetry, they remain flat, little more than names among anecdotes, without being characterized, so readers may have difficulty understanding why Ginsberg loved them so much. This kind of impersonality seems to be reinforced by the Buddhist denial of self. His mother is the only fully developed character in his work, in a poem that is Jewish rather than Buddhist, in outlook and form.

Secondly, sexual experiences in the poetry are surprisingly devoid of sensuousness. There is often affection, there is

often exuberance, there is physical detail, but there is little to awaken the reader's senses or to suggest that the poet enjoyed sensations during the sexual experience. D. H. Lawrence might have called much of it 'sex in the head', but a Buddhist might point out a kind of detachment of mind from body, a detachment paradoxically accompanying sexual compulsions that never seem to satisfy Ginsberg; so at one point he blurts out, 'don't want to fuck no more' ('Sickness Blues', 639) in what may be only a temporary loss of desire, or could it be a hint of enlightened detachment? Also surprising, considering Ginsberg's tantric experiments, is that sex does not seem to generate ecstatic, mystical experiences for him, at last in the poetry.

Thirdly, among Ginsberg's protests against so many kinds of injustices, the socio-political dimensions of samsara, where does his poetry concern the worldwide oppression of women and their struggle for liberation? *Kaddish* reveals with horrifying power the destruction of his mother by depersonalizing historical forces, but Ginsberg seems to have turned a deaf ear towards the women's movement when it has raised the consciousness of nearly everyone to the left of Ronald Reagan. He has courageously proclaimed his homosexuality and the rights of homosexuals, as well as human rights generally, but he has been oddly silent in his poetry about the rights of women. Perhaps as feminist consciousness develops among his friends at Naropa Institute and elsewhere in the American Buddhist movement, Ginsberg's imagination will respond. After all, the personification of prajnaparamita (Perfect Wisdom) is female.

Finally, in being preoccupied with Emptiness, often to the point of despair, Ginsberg seems to ignore in his poetry the corollary doctrine of dependent origination (Sanskrit *paticca-samuppada*): that is, things are empty (without substance or permanence) precisely because they are creatively interdependent—a philosophical ingredient of Rexorth's and Snyder's ecological worldviews. The creative interaction of all things is most convincingly shown in the *Avatamsaka (Kegon) Sutra*, in which, in the image of the Net of Indra, countless jewels reflect each other and infinite dharma-worlds.

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