

GENIUS ALL THE TIME

The Beats, Spontaneous Presence, and Primordial Ground

Marc Olmsted

The Beat literary movement cannot be understood in the fullest sense without some examination of Buddhism, particularly in the forms that were available to these mystinauts: explorers of mind and beyond mind to the nature of awareness itself. The poet Anne Waldman, commenting on what constitutes “Beat,” perceives “an as-yet unacknowledged body of uniquely articulated and salutary ‘dharma poetics’—that derives from Buddhist psychology and philosophy” (Waldman 2009, 164–65). Following Waldman’s thinking, one can conclude that the Beat literary movement involved a sacred worldview linked with the aspiration to actualize compassionate and empathetic conduct, an intuitive Tantric Buddhism. While it is Zen Buddhism that is most frequently, and legitimately, associated with the Beat movement prior to the 1960s and 1970s, both Zen and Tantric Buddhism share many philosophical parallels. Simply stated, their highest views regard “enlightenment” as already completely and unshakably present (if obscured), to be realized, rather than polished into existence.

Grasping the connections between Tantric Buddhism and Beat practices can help one understand why the Beat movement continues to draw individuals interested in answering life’s Big Questions. The attraction of the philosophy and practice of Tantric Buddhism to many of the Beats lies in Buddhism’s exploration of the nature of awareness. As just mentioned, Tantric Buddhism also presents a sacred view of the phenomenal world itself coupled with a deep empathy for all sentient beings that occupy it. Many in the Beat literary movement explored this sacred view with the same empathy or compassion that Tantric Buddhism embodies. But perhaps what is most significant is the light that the Tantric notion of enlightenment sheds on one of the Beat principles of creativity: spontaneity. Indeed, an interesting

parallel exists between Buddhist spiritual practice and Beat creative writing. “Mind is shapely, art is shapely” Kerouac said (Kerouac 1992, ii).¹ If the mind is mindful, the art will be mindful—or, in the highest philosophical context of Tantric Buddhism, one just needs to recognize that the mind is already “shapely”; in other words, unclouded awareness itself is naturally mindful, so art is spontaneously “accurate.”

There is within Buddhism, and certainly Tantric Buddhism, a place for discipline within spontaneity, or a training that allows spontaneity to surface in a naturally perfected and elegant fashion. Clear mind produces clear art, even if it is the clarity of witnessing the derangement of the senses that, for instance, Arthur Rimbaud pursued. Mind is clear because it is penetrating, not because it is logical or linear. To align oneself by meditation practice can increase awareness of the moment of inspiration. Allen Ginsberg called it “Surprise mind” (Ginsberg 1998, 197), or the mind’s ability to surprise the artist with sudden unexpected juxtapositions, such as the surprise of a phrase like “hydrogen jukebox” in “Howl.” Trungpa Rinpoche referred to the phenomenon as “magic” or “the total appreciation of chance” (Ginsberg 1998, 197). Expounding on the metaphor, Ginsberg defined magic as “the total delight in accident, the total pleasure of surprise mind, the appreciation of the fact that the mind changes, that one perception leads to another, and that it in itself is a great play of mind. You don’t have to go further in order to create a work of art” (Ginsberg 2000, 272). This philosophy of mind, as espoused by Tantric Buddhism, allows the writer to respect the freshness of a first draft and reconsider “mistakes” as *not* accidental.

The earliest origins of Tantric Buddhism, called Vajrayana or “Diamond Vehicle” (or today, often just “Tibetan”) are particularly sketchy, since virtually nothing about Tantric Buddhism was written down for hundreds of years from its appearance. According to Tibetan devotional history, Shakyamuni Buddha is said to have begun the teachings of Buddhist Tantra. Its first recorded example stands at the third century C.E. This same history records Buddha also prophesying that another would come and finish what he had barely started. This prophecy is believed only by adherents of Tantric Buddhism, most believing this “other” to be Padmasambhava, an Indian Tantric Buddhist master who established these practices in eighth-century C.E. Tibet. Again, according to devotional history, he is another form of Buddha himself. We know that Tantric Buddhism began in India. Some Buddhists say it influenced the rise of Hindu Tantrism, while Hindu Tantric scholars

say the opposite.² The word *tantra* itself means *continuity* and refers to the inseparability of the so-called secular world, or world of ignorance, with wisdom and enlightenment. In particular, the emotional poisons of grasping, aggression, and ignorance can actually be brought to the path. Unfortunately, Tantra is now often equated with sexual gymnastics and extended orgasm, but this is a degraded view.

An in-depth discussion of Hindu and Buddhist expressions of Tantra are beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief examination of some significant differences between Hindu and Buddhist thought will facilitate our discussion of Beat Buddhist poetics. Most of these differences can be traced directly to the Pali Canon, a collection of the historical Buddha's teachings recognized by all Buddhists internationally. First, Buddha radically proclaimed *anatta*, which means no *atman* (soul) or fixed reference of any kind. Second, a creator god was at the very least not a significant issue to entertain. In later written texts from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition (although still attributed to oral teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha in devotional history), such a god was not even regarded as a source of phenomena, for not only was the self regarded as empty, but everything else was as well. Mahayana refers to the "Greater Vehicle" expanding on the Pali Canon, referred to in context as "Lesser Vehicle," or Hinayana, of which Theravada is now the major historical survivor. Both Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist traditions regard the world as like a dream, but drastically depart on who is dreaming it: Hindu deity or one's own mind? Buddhism is unequivocally nontheist. Tantric Buddhism went even further and said the world of form is as sacred as the formless clear open space of the emptiness that is its essence (Dudjom 2009). Appearance is the empty display or "luminosity" of this formless essence.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher central to Ginsberg's post-1970 work, emphasized being present in one's body, and not attempting to stay high in some psychedelic heaven.³ Being nontheistic, Trungpa did not so much deny God as deny the individual ego as perceiver of God. In short, the entire issue was moot as long as there was an ego or self attempting to find God.

This nontheist, non-fixed-referential view by its very nature "cuts through spiritual materialism," that is, pursuit of a high as a spiritual antidote that is doomed because this pursuit stems from and reinforces the very craving that has created the illusion of a separate self in the first place. *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* is, in fact, the title of a series of published talks given by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (who invented this phrase).

The poetry of the mature and spiritually trained Ginsberg shows this influence, exemplified by this passage from the poem “Why I Meditate,” dated July 10, 1981:

I sit because No because
 I sit because I was unable to trace the Unborn back to the womb

 I sit because I had a vision also dropped LSD
 I sit because I don't know what else to do like Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg
 2006, 851)

These lines reveal Ginsberg taking an objectivist perspective—not trying to describe the ineffable but focused instead on the immediate physical reality.

Trungpa Rinpoche suggested the standard breath meditation practice of “calm abiding” as a method to eventually slow down the strobing of thoughts to the point that the gap between them spontaneously stood out and revealed that there were “thoughts without a thinker,” as Mark Epstein titled his book on the practice, that is, that there is no solid entity having these thoughts: The belief in a solid thinking entity is the core illusion that causes suffering, the First Noble Truth of Buddhism. In Ginsberg’s poetry, the formal training of “calm abiding” breath awareness that he would later undertake with Trungpa Rinpoche is presaged in the following passage from “From Haiku” written in 1955: “Lying on my side / in the void: / the breath in my nose (Ginsberg 2006, 137). It’s likely that Ginsberg may have recalled this expression from a December 1954 letter he received from Kerouac, which he quotes in “Kerouac, Catholicism, Buddhism”: “Then you think, ‘there is breathing in, there is breathing out,’ and soon essential mind will begin to shine.” Ginsberg further remarks that when he later reexamined this letter, “I hadn’t realized but he [Kerouac] apparently has some idea of sitting, probably from reading” (Corso, Ginsberg, and Holmes 2009, 94).

The practice of sitting leads to realization, and what interested a number of Beat writers is the fact that there is a specific model of Tantric Buddhist realization or enlightenment, similar to Zen, that can be glimpsed again and again, and stabilized with formal practice, a training undertaken in various degrees by Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. An intuited understanding of such practice can also be found in the work of Kerouac and Burroughs. In his praise of Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues*, for instance, Trungpa called Kerouac’s spontaneous notations a

“great exposition of mind” (Ginsberg 1994, 14). Whalen, both a Zen master and a poet, used similar language to describe the philosophical foundation of his poetics: “My writing is a picture of the mind moving” (Ginsberg 1998, 197). This exposition of mind is a critical concept when examining the Beat fusion of life and art. Ginsberg, for instance, credited a conversation with Trungpa Rinpoche for his now-famous maxim “First thought, best thought.” However, the idea was suggested earlier by Jack Kerouac and even earlier by William Blake, giving credence to the literary lineage of a core Tantric Buddhism principle. Consider, for example, the following declarations:

First thought is best in Art, second in other matters.—William Blake (Ginsberg 1998, 197)

If you don't stick with what you first thought, and to the words the thoughts brought, what's the sense of bothering with it anyway, what's the sense of foisting your little lies on others?—Jack Kerouac (Kerouac 2009, 1)

If you stick with the first flashes, then you're all right. But the problem is, how do you get to that first thought—that's always the problem. The first thought is always the great elevated, cosmic, noncosmic shunyata [emptiness] thought. And then, at least according to the Buddhist formulation, after that you begin imposing names and forms and all that. So it's a question of catching yourself at your first open thought.—Allen Ginsberg (Ginsberg 1980, 117)

Richard Modiano, in “First Thought, Best Thought,” a March 2008 editorial that he wrote for *poetix.net*, lucidly explicates the expression: “This expression is often misunderstood to mean first word, best word by people who believe that thoughts and words are one and the same. Behind first thought, best thought stands a particular epistemology. It's based on a specific practice of observing the rise and fall of thoughts as they occur moment by moment, called by Buddhists *shamatha-vipashyana* in some traditions and *zazen* in others. . . . Practice will reveal that thoughts are not simply words but images and emotions, so to capture that first thought is to be aware of the image/emotion in all its starkness.” Ginsberg's own thinking on the approach echoes this epistemological view: He said that it was acceptable to cut, even tinker slightly, in cases where a more specific image, e.g., “blue

jay” rather than “bird,” might strengthen the writing, but the point was to preserve the organic quality (unpublished transcript). So, the “first thought, best thought” summation of spontaneous composition that Kerouac and Ginsberg popularized rests on a down-to-earth, immediate element, but it also points to a Tantric Buddhist view, shared with Zen, that enlightenment already exists. To some extent, there is also a parallel with the Christian maxim “Be still and know” (New Testament, King James, Psalm 46:10), in the sense of surrendering to a primordial power beyond ego, a beyond within that is here now.

Another Tantric Buddhism principle that was both intuited and embraced by the Beats—and, again, shared with Zen Buddhism—is the notion of the Divine Madman. The drunken saint and the sensuous, earthy Zorba the Greek yogi repeatedly occur in both Buddhist historical canons, where “zen lunatic” and “crazy wisdom”⁴ are recurrent phrases. However, what distinguishes them from a hedonistic view is their appreciation without grasping, their lack of attachment that allows sex, alcohol, and passion itself to actually become vehicles for realization. Both Zen and Tantric Buddhist traditions also have their austere monks, but sometimes austerity and wildness find themselves in the same historical personage. Notably, we have multiple accounts of Kerouac’s attempts at self-denial as well as his formal embracing of the long, rigorous, and boring practice of sitting, which Ginsberg, Snyder, Whalen, di Prima, and Waldman all practiced under Suzuki Roshi and/or Trungpa Rinpoche, the practice in direct defiance of the need for entertainment or concept-driven revelation.

Even William S. Burroughs pursued the larger intellectual examination of addiction beyond merely heroin, the “algebra of need” itself, a regimen that Ginsberg often called Burroughs’s “homemade yankee tantra.” Burroughs’s approach to Buddhism was complicated, if not seemingly ambivalent, but his letters reveal that he studied Tibetan Buddhism, and in 1954 he recommended to Kerouac that he do the same (Burroughs 1993, 222). In a later letter dated August 18 of that year, while not disavowing Buddhism entirely, he concluded that “Buddhism is only for the West to *study* as *history*, that is, it is a subject for *understanding*, and yoga can profitably be practiced to that end. But it is not, for the West, *An Answer*, not *A Solution*” (Burroughs 1993, 226). His later friendship with Trungpa Rinpoche, even undertaking a solitary retreat in 1975, without his typewriter per Trungpa’s instructions, does, however, show a willingness to investigate this further (Burroughs 1976), and his literary practices functioned to effect detach-

ment. For instance, at the end of the 1950s, Burroughs began experimenting with the cut-up method, razoring his and others' texts and rearranging the sections to get phrases like "dead fingers talk" (Burroughs 2000, 179), and in the process, Burroughs began to believe that he was cutting through his own conditioning. In a 1961 letter that he wrote to Ginsberg, Burroughs explained his process of detachment from the notion of a self:

I am not talking mystical "greater awareness." I mean complete alert awareness at all times of what is in front of you. LOOK OUT NOT IN. No talking to SO CALLED SELF. NO "INTROSPECTION." Eyes off that navel. LOOK OUT TO SPACE. This means kicking ALL HABITS. Word HABIT. SELF HABIT. BODY HABIT. Kicking junk [a] breeze in comparison. Total awareness = Total pain = CUT. (Miles 2000, 240)

Ginsberg later remarked about Burroughs that "he emptied his soul out and entered at last the open blue space of 'Benevolent indifferent attentiveness' characteristic of later phases of his art" (Burroughs 1982, 7).

As with every mystical tradition, Tantric Buddhism is no stranger to the vision and the revelation, but the practice recognizes these as having no inherent external existence separate from awareness itself. With respect to Beat writers, one of the more interesting accounts of the visionary experience is Ginsberg's well-known Blakean visions, which John Clellon Holmes recorded in the first Beat novel, *Go!*, in 1952. In brief, Ginsberg, after masturbating and drowsing off one leisurely afternoon, suddenly heard Blake's voice reading "Ah Sunflower." Ginsberg himself explained the Blake vision at length in a 1966 *Paris Review* interview: "and simultaneous to the voice there was also an emotion, risen in my soul in response to the voice, and a sudden *visual* realization of the same awesome phenomena. That is to say, looking out at the window, through the window at the sky, suddenly it seemed that I saw into the depths of the universe, by looking simply into the ancient sky. The sky suddenly seemed very *ancient*" (Ginsberg 2001, 17). How did he know it was Blake? It seemed like Blake and was followed by an epiphany, a non-drug-induced psychedelic experience in which the cityscape of Harlem lit up with a vibrant and near-microscopic detail. The experience reoccurred two more times in the same week, once in a bookstore with the same sudden psychedelic brilliance and later on the Columbia University campus, where the Creator-God seemed to be present as a sinis-

ter, even alien, being who threatened to devour the young poet. After that, Ginsberg turned away from his expanded awareness in a kind of recoiling horror: “And I had a sense of the black sky coming down to eat me. It was like meeting Yamantaka without preparation, meeting one of the horrific or wrathful deities without any realization that it was a projection of myself, or my nature, and I tried to shut off the experience because it was too frightening” (Ginsberg 1994, 15).

Despite the horrific nature of this visionary experience, he continued his pilgrimage over the years, reading D. T. Suzuki in the early and mid-1950s—he would later visit Suzuki with Kerouac and Peter Orlovsky in 1958 (Fields 1992, 223)—and studying Chinese and Japanese Buddhist painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. He exchanged many letters with Kerouac about Buddhism from 1954 on, his interest at this point appearing largely intellectual, as the following dialogue between the fictionalized Ray Smith (Kerouac) and Alvah Goldbrook (Ginsberg) in *The Dharma Bums* suggests:

“Well” (sigh), “as for me, I’m just going to go on being Alvah Goldbrook and to hell with all this Buddhist bullshit.”

“You’ll be sorry some day. . . . There is no me, no airplane, no mind, no Princess, no nothing, you for krissakes do you want to go on being fooled every damn minute of your life?”

“Yes, that’s all I want, I thank God that something has come out of nothing.”

(Kerouac 1959, 28–29)

By the 1960s, however, he pursued the same experience of expanded awareness with a variety of psychedelic drugs. In 1960, on yagé (ayahuasca) in the Amazon, that same sinister God seemed present again: “I began to get high—then the whole fucking Cosmos broke loose around me, I think the strongest and worst I ever had it nearly—(I still reserve the Harlem experience, being Natural, in abeyance)” (Burroughs and Ginsberg 2006, 60). Two years later, a holy man in India told him, “Take Blake for your guru” (Ginsberg 1996, 3). But it wasn’t until that same year in India when he met His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, head of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, and asked him what to do about the bad drug trips that he kept having that he received sustainable wisdom: “If you see something horrible, don’t cling to it. If you see something beautiful, don’t cling to it,” was

Dudjom Rinpoche's nonjudgmental advice (Ginsberg 1994, 54). Ginsberg remembered this advice all his life as extremely significant, that is, beyond drugs to an application to phenomena and thought itself. In his poem "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express," written as he returned from India in 1963, he declared his need to return to his own body rather than transcend it: "Come, sweet lonely Spirit, back / to your bodies . . . / . . . Till my turn comes and I / enter that maw" (Ginsberg 2006, 336). This foreshadowed his formal Buddhist sitting practice begun under Trungpa's mentoring in the early 1970s.

Ginsberg's pilgrimage to India⁵ was echoed by those of many backpacking youths in the years to come. The endless Kerouacian road now circled the globe, although it must be noted that Kerouac never traveled to India. Still, it was a "rucksack revolution" that both *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* helped to ignite. As a result of easily rubbing shoulders with Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist masters, many spiritual seekers, like Ginsberg, would soon expand the alternative Beat culture's philosophical paradigm far beyond the influence of a mostly book-learned Japanese Zen. The increasing use of LSD also made the counterculture zeitgeist of the Beats morph into the hippies, and by the beginning of the 1970s, Tibetan Buddhist teachers were exploring America with the help of some of its world-traveling prodigal students. Ginsberg and Snyder did a benefit for Tharthang Tulku's Nyingma Institute in Berkeley, and Ginsberg himself became involved in formal study with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, as did di Prima and Waldman. Zen students found great parallels and insights in the highest philosophical view of Tibet's Maha-Ati and Mahamudra teaching, and Tibetan Buddhism itself soon was a major influence on American Buddhist students, even if they did not directly embrace it.

Allen Ginsberg's immersion in Tibetan Buddhism led him to create a thesis that combined literary history with Buddhist philosophy to make a case for a lineage of aesthetic and philosophical choices. Ginsberg saw this aesthetic as a writing heritage that includes Beat writers such as Kerouac, Snyder, Whalen, di Prima, and Burroughs, predating them to the objectivist concerns of William Carlos Williams, the visionary romanticism of Blake, all the way back through the spontaneous song-poems of the Tibetan saint Milarepa in the eleventh century C.E. to the cave shaman origins of language and expression itself. In short, it was his own unified field theory that combined everything that made him the poet he finally became.

Critical to this field are the Tantric terms Ground, Path, and Fruition,

which Ginsberg used to examine and teach the process of writing, noted particularly in his “Mind Writing Slogans,” a collection of quotations already cited here that not only includes the Beat and Buddhist sources, such as Zen koans, Trungpa, and Gelek Rinpoche, but also Frank Lloyd Wright and Plotinus.⁶ These slogans essentially align the Tantric terms and composition processes as follows:

Ground / Inspiration
 Path / Writing Process
 Fruition / Manuscript (including its impact on or perception by the reader).

Ground can be understood as the foundation or source of inspiration, but here one must recognize that Ground is beyond any notion of conceptual or rational mind. It is *Big Sky Mind*, as the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* chose to call its collection of Beat and Buddhist poems published in 1995. This origin of inspiration, primordial in nature, is without beginning: It is not only before the first dot on paper, but it is also before the paper itself. *Awareness* is probably a less confusing term than *mind* for an analogue of Ground.

The following classical Tibetan poem by Longchenpa may best present the concept of Ground with which Ginsberg worked. Note that the “I” of the text refers to Primordial Awareness itself, Kuntazangpo, a device used in contrast to sentient beings, not a giant Self or God:

All that is has me—universal creativity, pure and total
 presence—as its root.
 How things appear is my being.
 How things arise is my manifestation. (Longchenpa 2000, 32)

Not only is the self an illusion, but perception of an outside world as real is also an illusion. In fact, it is empty of any actual substance, apparent but nonexistent, like a mirage. There is no ghost in the machine running the show. There is no creator God. Instead, we created the world, we dreamt it, and are dreaming it in karmic agreement. Kerouac expressed this understanding in a short poem: “Mind alone / Introduced the bone” (Kerouac 1997, 229), and in philosophical concert, a fourteenth-century C.E. Tibetan, Rigdzin Godemchen (literally “Vulture Quilled Awareness Holder”), rendered no solid self and no independently existing world as follows: “May

grasping at what seems outer—appearance—be purified. / May fixation on what seems inner—mind’s nature—be liberated. / May what lies in the gap—Clear Light—be self-aware” (Zangpo 2002, 237).⁷ Rigdzin Godemchen said this came to him as *terma*, that is, from a visionary Padmasambhava.

The first step in this realization is mindfulness, known in Sanskrit as *shamatha*, which means “calm abiding.” Buddha pointed out that thoughts strobe so quickly that the sense of a solid self is created much like the spinning spokes of a wagon wheel appear like a solid surface. *Shamatha* slows down the wheel, and the awareness of gaps between thoughts eventually leads to the insight that even the seeming “one who watches” is also without solidity, the insight known as *vipashyana*. The point is not the silence between thoughts, but the awareness of that silence. The goal is not to achieve a blank state, for nonconceptual awareness is present whether there is thought or not. The trick, so to speak, is waking to that awareness, that “essence self-known.” The terms *shamatha* and *vipashyana* exist in all three vehicles, or *yanas*, of Buddhism, with corresponding shifts of emphasis on self and perception of phenomena. In the highest view of Tantric Buddhism, waking to the Ground is the Path itself.

In Ginsberg’s poetics, the second term, Path, is the process of poetic composition. There are guidelines to this “path” or process, and most revolve around recording the specifics of what is seen, heard, or felt. In a 1999 interview with *Poetry Flash*, Philip Whalen expressed this process through a recollection of hanging out with Kerouac in San Francisco:

So we would go off into the wild sweet bop neon American Night, run around North Beach, and hang out in Chinatown. And, we’d be out running around, and he’d be writing in his notebook. He was very perceptive. He saw lots of things. His eyes were real good, which mine are not.

But he told me, he said it was out walking with [William Carlos] Williams in Rutherford, and Williams pointed out to him that there was moss growing on the underside of the railroad tracks. And he thought that was kind of wonderful. (Meltzer 1999, 2)

This moment of literary history is a sort of objectivist transmission from Williams to Kerouac, which leads to Ginsberg. It’s a process of recognition that can really be the marrow of a great poem, a kind of snapshot precision that recognizes and foregrounds that which to others remains invisible or

is erased through editing. Referencing Kerouac as his teacher, Ginsberg remarked in the *Paris Review* article “The Craft of Poetry: A Semester with Allen Ginsberg” by Elissa Schapell that “if the poem, the original skeleton of the poem, retains its integrity, that’s it” (Schapell 1995, 135). He acknowledged that he didn’t feel as sure of himself as did Kerouac, who came to eschew major revisions, but added that while he didn’t “feel the same absoluteness, or courage,” he liked that quality in Kerouac: “And what *is* the first thought? The first thought isn’t necessarily the first thought you notice. It’s the first thought you sub-notice. People edit their awareness of what is underneath their minds,” he explained (Schapell 1995, 135). The poet attempts to describe in words the thought in all its vivid particulars, which may involve rewriting in order to retain the originating insight. The point is trust, or confidence that something greater than ego is in operation.

In this process, ordinary moments contain infinity because they are so profoundly and perfectly what is—like a Blakean visionary moment,⁸ or as Ginsberg noted by quoting Gustave Flaubert to explain the context of William Carlos Williams’s “red wheel barrow,” “The ordinary is the extraordinary” (Ginsberg 2000, 269). In other words, everything depends on Williams’s “red wheel barrow” because nothing depends on it. Ginsberg tried to honor that picture of the moving mind by not rewriting a text into Apollonian extinction.

The final component of Ginsberg’s Tantric Buddhist approach to poetics, Fruition, can be understood as the unobstructed energy of Ground’s Realization, often corresponded with Compassion, Conduct, or Action. Ginsberg himself spoke indirectly of this third element in an unpublished letter written to me in June 1994. Referring to Gelek Rinpoche, who had become his teacher after Trungpa’s death in 1987, he candidly remarked: “My own practice very lax tho I see Gelek Rinpoche & trust in him—he tells me keep public, keep writing & giving readings—I seem to be causing some lucidity or joy, but don’t know how or karmic why, so I do as I’m told by Rinpoche.” Ginsberg wondered why he was going to such effort to archive his own work and statements when the possibility of there even being an intact civilization to receive them in one hundred years was hardly guaranteed. Gelek Rinpoche, who had become his teacher after Trungpa’s death in 1987, was telling him that the main point was the benefit he brought, however long that would last, in the grand scheme of things.

In other words, as Gelek Rinpoche stated, “to diminish the mass of human and sentient sufferings” (Ginsberg 1998, 201), or as Ginsberg put it:

“The only thing that can save the world is the reclaiming of the awareness of the world. That’s what poetry does” (Ginsberg 2001, 173). In 1986, he maintained this belief in slightly different language: “The purpose of art is to provide relief from your own paranoia and the paranoia of others. You write to relieve the pain of others, to free them from the self-doubt generated by a society where everyone is conniving and manipulating” (Raskin 2004, xvi).

As for the manuscript, the chapbook, the webzine, that which is the physical product of the composition process, Ginsberg believed that “poetry can stand out as the one beacon of sanity: a beacon of individual clarity, and lucidity in every direction—whether on the Internet or in coffee houses or university forums or classrooms. Poetry, along with its old companion, music, becomes one mean of communication that is not controlled by the establishment” (Brame 1996).

This is a sentiment that Ginsberg had already summed up in his poem “Memory Gardens,” written on the occasion of Kerouac’s funeral in 1969:

Well while I’m here I’ll
do the work—
and what’s the Work?
To ease the pain of living.
Everything else, drunken
dumbshow. (Ginsberg 2006, 542)

The Ground, Path, and Fruit are themselves concisely summed up at the end of a *terma* from H. H. Dudjom Rinpoche: “The essence is original purity beyond rational mind. / The inherent nature is spontaneously self-existing supreme awareness. / Compassionate responsiveness arises as manifold clouds. / May there be the auspiciousness of supreme bliss (Dudjom 1994, 29–30). The Tibetan word translated as “spontaneously” here, *lhundrup*, is sometimes defined as “spontaneous presence,” the nature of the Ground.

Thus, in the end, the poet fulfills the efforts to communicate simply by either sending out the manuscript or self-publishing, the compassionate fruit of inspiration, risen from the ground of primordial awareness and its path of mindfully recorded spontaneity.

Notes

Nancy M. Grace, Virginia Myers Professor of English at the College of Wooster in

Wooster, Ohio, contributed invaluable editorial services to this essay. A deep Buddhist bow of respect.

1. Ginsberg also used the phrase “Art is shapely, Mind is shapely,” uncredited as a title of a flyer for San Francisco Poetry Center in 1959 (“Poetics: Mind Is Shapely, Art Is Shapely” [1959], in *Deliberate Prose*.) But more often, he attributes to it to Kerouac (both in the introduction cited and in other interviews, as noted by Peter Hale of the Allen Ginsberg Trust), and in 1974, he describes it as something they both “cooked up” (“Towards a New American Poetics,” Michael Goodwin et al., in *Spontaneous Poetics*).

2. Herbert Guenther points out that Vedanta, which some say was a response to Tantric Buddhism, still refers to “One,” rather than the nondual “zero” language of Buddhism (Guenther and Trungpa 1975, 76).

3. *Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics*, by Tony Trigilio, also examines Ginsberg’s relation with Trungpa Rinpoche and Tantric Buddhism. This essay takes a different approach.

4. *Crazy Wisdom* is a published title of lectures given by Trungpa Rinpoche, who popularized this particular translation of the Tibetan phrase *yeshe cholwa*.

5. Besides the aforementioned *Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics* by Trigilio, Deborah Baker’s *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India* has also examined Tantric Buddhism and the Beats, but it is not a source text for this essay.

6. The slogans first appeared in *What Book!?*, edited by Gary Gach, and not in any primary text of Ginsberg’s.

7. This verse has been slightly retranslated from the Tibetan root text here to follow points made by Longchenpa and Dudjom Rinpoche. Ngawang Zangpo has approved our retranslation.

8. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the notion of Sacred View is in many ways similar to Blake’s proclamation that if man cleansed “the doors of perception,” he would perceive things as infinite (Blake 1958, 101). Again, though, the notion of Sacred View does not include an independent Viewer or an independent object of that View.

References

- Blake, William. 1958. *William Blake*. London: Penguin.
- Brame, Gloria G. 1996. “An Interview with Poet Allen Ginsberg.” *ELF: Eclectic Literary Forum* (Summer). <http://gloria-brame.com/glory/ginsberg.htm#elf.html>.
- Burroughs, William. 1976. *Retreat Diaries*, New York: City Moon.
- . 1982. *Letters to Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Full Court.
- . 1993. *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1945–1959*. Edited by Oliver Harris. New York: Viking.
- . 2000. *Word Virus: The William Burroughs Reader*. Edited by James Grauerholz. New York: Grove.

- Burroughs, William, and Allen Ginsberg. 2006. *Yage Letters Redux*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- Corso, G., A. Ginsberg, and J. C. Holmes. 2009. "Kerouac, Catholicism, Buddhism." In *Beats at Naropa*, edited by Anne Waldman and Laura Wright. Minneapolis: Coffee House.
- Dogen, Eihei. 1995. *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*. San Francisco: North Point.
- Dudjom, Jigral Yeshe. 1992. *Dudjom Tersar Ngondro*. New York: Yeshe Melong.
- . 1994. *Heart-Essence of the Lake-Born*. Corralitos: Vajrayana Foundation.
- . 2009. "Dzogchen View of Ngondro." jnanasukha.org.
- Epstein, Mark. 2004. *Thoughts without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*. New York: Basic.
- Fields, Rick. 1992. *When the Swans Came to the Lake*. Boulder: Shambhala.
- Ginsberg, Allen. 1976. "This Is Allen Ginsberg?" *New Age Journal*, April 22–28.
- . 1980. *Composed on the Tongue*. Bolinas: Grey Fox.
- . 1994. Letter to Marc Olmsted, June 22.
- . 1994. "Vomit of a Mad Tyger." *Shambhala Sun*, July, 14–23, 54–55.
- . 1996. *Indian Journals*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- . 1996. Unpublished transcript, tape recording, November 17, 1996, Grant Plaza Hotel, San Francisco.
- . 1998. "Mind Writing Slogans." In *What Book!? Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop*. Edited by Gary Gach. Berkeley: Parallax.
- . 2000. *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952–1995*. New York: HarperCollins.
- . 2001. *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958–1996*. New York: HarperCollins.
- . 2006. *Collected Poems*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Guenther, Herbert, and ChögyamTrungpa. 1975. *Dawn of Tantra*. Boulder: Shambhala.
- Holmes, John Clellon. 2002. *Go: A Novel*. New York: Thunder's Mouth.
- Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *Dharma Bums*. New York: Signet.
- . 1977. *Heaven & Other Poems*. San Francisco: Grey Fox.
- . 1992. *Pomes All Sizes*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- . 1997. *Some of the Dharma*. New York: Viking.
- . 2001. *Old Angel Midnight*. San Francisco: Grey Fox.
- . 2009. *You're a Genius All the Time*. San Francisco: Chronicle.
- Lao Tzu. 2003. *Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Tarcher.
- Longchenpa. 2000. *You Are the Eyes of the World*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Meltzer, David. 1999. "Whatnot: A Talk with Philip Whalen." *Poetry Flash* 282 (August–September), 1–5.
- Miles, Barry. 2000. *The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso in Paris, 1958–1963*. New York: Grove.
- Modiano, Richard. 2008. "First Thought, Best Thought." <http://whisperdownthewritealley.wordpress.com>.

- Morgan, Bill. 2007. *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Penguin.
- Raskin, Jonah. 2004. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Schapell, Elissa. 1995. "The Craft of Poetry: A Semester with Allen Ginsberg." *Paris Review* 135 (Summer): 212–57.
- Schumacher, Michael. 1992. *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Trungpa, Chögyam. 1992. *Transcending Madness*. Boulder: Shambhala.
- Waldman, Anne. 2009. "Tendrel: A Meeting of Minds." In *Beats at Naropa*, edited by Anne Waldman and Laura Wright. Minneapolis: Coffee House.
- Zangpo, Ngawang. 2002. *Guru Rinpoche: His Life & Times*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion.