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REL 101

**Essay #1**

The Dharma Bums is a 1958 novel by author [Jack Kerouac](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Kerouac). The semi-fictional accounts in the novel are based upon events that occurred years after the events of the novel written by the same author On the Road. The main characters are the narrator Ray Smith, based on Kerouac, and Japhy Ryder, based on the poet [Gary Snyder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gary_Snyder), who was important in Kerouac's introduction to Buddhism in the mid-1950s. The book largely concerns parallels in Kerouac's life and ideals, examining the relationship that the outdoors, bicycling, mountaineering, and hitchhiking through the west had with his city life of jazz, poetry, and parties.

The novel's protagonist is a man who narrates The DharmaBums with an almost childlike tone of honesty and curiosity. Ray's adventures cover the large range of human experiences. The stories he tells are explorations of friendship, freedom and meaningful existence.

Ray Smith is eager to understand Buddhism in order to apply its principles to his own life. What drives this journey is his natural uneasiness with being surrounded by others. Though it isn’t clear as to whether or not Smith is aware of this fear, his desire to escape society is compatible with what he interprets to be the teachings of Buddha. Ray manages to evade society through his consumption of alcohol and also a negative view of law enforcement, which aids him in excusing his behavior. Buddhism, for Ray, also functions as a way of avoiding social interaction and helps him to justify his behavior, despite his true interest in the religion. The story of Ray Smith enables Jack Kerouac to lessen his belief that Buddhism relies on discovering one's own individuality.

Ray's abuse of alcohol stems from his apprehension about being a part of society. Alcohol makes a person looser and makes conversation easier for a person who is an introvert and has trouble conversing with others. This function of alcohol for Ray becomes obvious early on in the story, when he consumes a bottle of wine with another bum on a freight train in California. He turns to alcohol to make social situations more bearable. While this may seem like an innocent solution, it actually serves to push him further to the margins of society, and even interferes on his ability to practice Buddhism. For example, Cacoethes offers his opinion that "'[Smith is] too drrronk all the time,'" which undermines Ray's status as bodhisattva, or an enlightened one who teaches others (147). The ability to relate to others is crucial to being a teacher; Ray loses this ability when he relies on alcohol to ease his nerves. Japhy also expresses concern about Ray's alcoholism, "'You're just drinking too much all the time, I don't see how you're even going to gain enlightenment and manage to stay out in the mountains'" (145). Yet Ray never seems to give these opinions much thought, and the reader cannot help but think that Ray will continue to abuse the substance once he descends from Mount Desolation. Smith will never reach his potential as a teacher nor as a student as long as he relies o alcohol to become less introverted.

Ray exhibits considerable hostility toward authority figures, such as police officers and border patrol, which originates from his uneasiness in society. Policemen enforce the law and, in doing so, help to maintain the existing social structure with which Ray is uncomfortable with. For instance, Ray is angered when "three unpleasant American guards" search his bag upon his return from Mexico, but adds rather smugly that "they couldn't figure [him] out" (96). His status as a hobo puts him at odds with society, and as the enforcers of society, policemen constitute his opposition. By establishing authority figures that act in a seemingly unjust manner, Smith justifies his retreat from society. Had Ray recognized policemen and other authority figures as men simply trying to do their job, his anxiety about society would seem unfounded, and he would feel silly for posturing himself as an outlaw. But he continues to describe policemen in a negative tone, portraying them as enemies of the Dharma bum lifestyle. Such a viewpoint only hurts Ray in society, as his seemingly unjustified loathing of police leads him further away from society.

Ray Smith's devotion to Buddhism is undoubtedly sincere. The genuineness with which he attempts to introduce the religion to others, such as his family in North Carolina, conveys to the reader Ray's enthusiasm for the teachings of Buddha. However, this religion complements the fears of society that Smith already harbors. For instance, when Japhy and Princess begin to engage in "yabyum," Smith immediately notes that his Buddhist studies have led him to believe that "lust [is] the direct cause of birth which [is] the direct cause of suffering" (21). Although he eventually overcomes his initial hesitancy, the incident shows how his ideas about society and Buddhism connect. Ray excuses his reluctance to participate by reasoning that to do so would go against his religious views that require him to recieve such pleasure. This is not to say that all Buddhists or people of faith are weakly willed and hide their faults behind religion, it merely suggests that Ray's adherence to Buddhism is correlated with his aversion to society.

Ray holds a specific view of Buddhism and how it is to be followed that differs from the views of his friends. For Ray, the mitigation of suffering means withdrawing from the world and relying on self-discovery to answer many of his questions ("I learned it was better for me...[to] make a ragged dance of my own") (48). Japhy's Buddhism is drastically different, he has no qualms about engaging in sexual activity and says that his "Buddhism is activity," valuing exploration over isolation (133). When asked by Ray what Buddhism is, Arthur Whane says that, "Buddhism is getting to know as many people as possible," which also sharply contrasts with Ray's own interpretation (149). Sean Monahan even has a bank account, a family, a job, and a nice home while also practicing as a Buddhist-a far cry from Ray's notion of a Dharma bum. Kerouac provides the reader with all of these different interpretations of Buddhism to suggest that there is no single path to enlightenment. Rather, Buddhism allows for an expression of individuality-different personalities and lifestyles lend themselves to different interpretations of Buddha's teachings. Ray Smith's misgivings about society lead him to limit his social interactions as part of his Buddhist education.

Alcoholism, contempt for authority, and even Buddhism help Ray to excuse his uneasiness in society. Though this discomfort hinders his progress toward enlightenment, he does achieve some degree of success if he is judged by his own definition of what is commitment to Buddhism. He lives in isolation on Mount Desolation for an extended period of time, remains celibate, and does not consume large quantities of alcohol. While his personal flaws may keep him from reaching enlightenment, this last challenge at Mount Desolation shows his commitment to following what he views as his path to enlightenment. Such a commitment to one's beliefs, Kerouac would argue, will ultimately be rewarded.