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*Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation.* Edited by Carole Tonkinson, with Introduction by Stephen Prothero. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995, 387 pages, ISBN: 1–5732–2501–0, US \$15.00.

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The question of the Beat poets' contribution to the literature, life, and spirit of the United States is a complex one. From their appearance on the scene down to today, they have had many serious critics and harsh detractors, even though major figures such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder have a home in the literary canon. A new cohort of young people is now said to be keeping their anti-authoritarian spirit alive, albeit mediated by print ads for commercial operations like the Gap, which have been mining the Beat-hip strand in popular culture for bankable "attitude" for decades. Evaluating the Beats' impact on the formation of the dharma in this country is particularly difficult. They helped create the Buddhist movement among Euro-Americans, and both their writing and their example informed the lives of many of the current generation of practitioners now in their prime. But the hedonism many of them celebrated, amplified by the cultural revolutions of the sixties, set the stage for the alcohol-, drug-, and sex-related scandals in convert Buddhist communities during the 1980s. As a result, it is hard to assess right now whether the most important contributions the Beats made to the dharma rests in their non-conformity or in their helping to create a situation that fostered a powerful reaction. More fundamentally, the Beat poets were a very mixed lot from the start, and they often embraced Buddhism in ambiguous ways and shifted their take on it over the course of several decades.

*Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* is an anthology of dharma-related material written from about 1945 into the 1990s. It includes work from seventeen authors divided into four parts to underscore major differences among them. The first section, "The Beats," is devoted to figures that surfaced on the east coast: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, and Harold Norse. "The San Francisco Poets" picks up Bay area writers Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Joanna Kyger, Albert Saijo, Lenore Kandel, Will Petersen, and Bob Kaufman. "Echoes" highlights William Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Michael McClure, non-Buddhists inspired by selective aspects of the dharma, while "Like Minds" includes material from Kenneth Rexroth and Anne Waldman, identified as Buddhists affiliated with the Beats but not directly a part of the movement. The material was collected in part with an eye to new readers, so the collection contains much of what an older audience would expect and a new one will enjoy — Snyder's "Riprap," Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra," selected translations by Rexroth, and the like. But there is also a great deal of other material — letters, travel writing, interviews, excerpts from novels — that forces a reader to think seriously about the impact of the Beats on the shape on the dharma in this country. The material is heavily weighted in Kerouac's favor, with sixty-five pages for him versus twenty for Snyder.

This may reflect an effort to unearth the depth of Kerouac's interest in Buddhism, a topic obscured for decades first by his own recantation of the Beats and then by the attempts of his family to underscore his return to Catholicism. Two years after *Big Sky Mind* was released, the story of Kerouac's Buddhism was more fully disclosed with the publication of *Some of the Dharma*, a rangy if fascinating collection of his Buddhist notebooks.

*Big Sky Mind* is not an academic book, has few notations, and is shot through with an affectionate, pro-Beat/hip point of view. What distinguishes it from other popular anthologies covering similar ground is the editor's decision to highlight the Beats as religious thinkers and to give attention to the how, why, and to what end they became interested in Buddhism. Carole Tonkinson provides introductions to the work of each author that run from two to three pages. These often provide readers with useful information, such as an outline of Ginsberg's journey from the reading room of the New York Public Library, through the Neal Cassady / Kerouac era, to his meeting with Dudjom Rinpoche in India and, in 1971, with Chogyam Trungpa, and finally to Jewel Heart, the Gelugpa center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where some of his ashes now rest. She also lets us know that Burroughs's preoccupation with psychic addiction reflects a Buddhist perspective on craving, but that he thought dharma practice unsuitable for the West and was critical of Kerouac's Catholic-Buddhist synthesis. As far as I am aware, no other source is readily available to inform readers that di Prima met Shunryu Suzuki in 1962, or that Waldman first "watched her mind" in a comparative religion course in a Quaker high school, or that Albert Saijo, a Japanese American, was a son of a Christian minister, took no part in Buddhism in the wartime internment camps as a teen, and warmed to the dharma only after a friend introduced him to Nyogen Senzaki in post-War Los Angeles. Straight facts such as these are often hard to come by, so historians and others with more than a passing interest may find this collection both handy and valuable.

The twenty-page general introduction by Stephen Prothero is also valuable for a number of reasons. For those new to the topic, he lays out the growth of the movement, the origins and meaning of the term "Beat," and other basic information. More importantly, he sets the Beat generation into historical perspective as a religious movement. Prothero sets the pace for his discussion by casting much of it in terms of a comparison between the Transcendentalists and Beats, an important question due to the widespread notion, largely attributable to Rick Fields' *When the Swans Came to the Lake*, that the two movements form the basis for an American indigenous lineage.

Prothero hints at ways that this idea of a lineage is historically prob-

lematic, even as he lends support to some of its more essentialist characteristics. The two movements arose in radically different settings. The Transcendentalists revolted against the rationality of New England Unitarianism in the ante-bellum period, when Protestantism was the undisputed spiritual force behind American culture and evangelicalism, its rambunctious heart, was beginning to perfect its modern expression on the expanding frontier. In contrast, the Beats rebelled against the religious platitudes of a post-World War II suburban revival among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the north. There is a century and a half of European immigration, a civil war and two world wars, and the rise and triumph of American industrialism between them, which makes the idea of a lineage a bit dicey. But despite these important differences, Prothero quite rightly sees broad similarities in the two movements. Both emphasized seeking over finding and “tilted East” for inspiration. Both were essentially romantic insofar as their adherents straddled tradition and modernity, emphasized creativity, and placed a premium on the transformation of consciousness. Prothero recalls the question once put to Ginsberg: “Were the Beats first and foremost artists, or first and foremost spiritual seekers?” To which Ginsberg replied, citing Tibetan Buddhist precedents, “The life of the poet is sacramental life on earth.” Much the same answer (minus allusions to Milarepa, of course) could have come from Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman.

Like the Beats, the Transcendentalist generation had its interest in Asian religions piqued by reading, although by today’s standard it never ran very deep. Like some Beats in the early years, they tended to confuse Hinduism and Buddhism. More importantly, the Transcendentalists’ fascination with Asia was never heightened, honed, and disciplined by coming into contact with Asian Buddhist teachers, as was the case for many in the Beat generation and those inspired by their movement. Prothero suggests that the Beats were transitional figures between an early era of “armchair Buddhism” and the current one, when it is generally thought that the dharma is best pursued with a teacher, whether Asian or American, in a face-to-face practice setting. But on that transition hangs the tale of much of convert Buddhism in the late twentieth century, and although it is outside the scope of his task, I wish Prothero could have spent more time developing the impact of this important difference on the idea of an indigenous lineage.

General and critical readers alike will find much to enjoy and reflect upon in the material anthologized in *Big Sky Mind*, whose publication is both provocative and timely for at least two reasons. First of all, its release came at a time when many converts had put the Beat-hip era safely behind

them and American Buddhist leaders, quite legitimately to my mind, had grown concerned about getting the dharma established in this country on a sound footing. But much of the verse material in the collection serves as a reminder of what the movement was like at the beginning, before the scandals occurred and middle age set in among baby boomers. With the knowledge currently available about Buddhism, it is easy to say that the Beats were often far afield of serious dharma practice. But they were poets after all, not lineage holders, and I found it a curiously refreshing experience to revisit their dharma-inspired use of language.

For those who lived through “the revolution,” a few lines from Harold Norse’s “The House is On Fire” from his collection *The Hotel Nirvana* are, at the very least, a blast from the past. At most, they are great verses for which future exegetes might write learned glosses in an effort to help readers comprehend a key era in American Buddhist history. “Flowerchildren I’m with you,” Norse writes. “Diggers I’m with you too / I’m with your frame of reference I’m with your Dharma.” In a few words, Kerouac calls up the often twisted aspirations of much of a generation that did not quite know what it was getting into, as with the phrase, “the true morphine of the Buddha: REPOSE BEYOND FATE.” Or he can give a cosmic and comic Mahayana twist to American domesticity:

Tathata is Essence Isness  
And I see it Akshobying  
like innumerable moth lights  
In the lavender plaster wall  
behind the television forest of wires  
in my sister’s cool living room.

Anne Waldman captures deep ambiguities in the lives of many women in her generation and some haunting and quite orthodox (I think) philosophy with “I am putting makeup on empty space / all patinas convening on empty space / rouge blushing on empty space. . . piling creams on empty space / painting the phenomenal world.”

Secondly, the longer prose pieces in *Big Sky Mind* suggest the great degree to which the creative appropriation of Buddhism by the Beats and those affiliated with them had a varied impact through the end of the twentieth century. A 1980 Rexroth interview on the idea of the interdependence of all being, which can be read together with related excerpts of his own poetry like “On Flower Wreath Hill,” calls to mind the individualism and experientialism of the Suzuki/Watts emphasis on self-styled Zen, a still-potent force in American convert Buddhism. The earnestness in

Snyder's "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution" recalls the visionary optimism with which one generation sought out the dharma, but it also sheds light on the idealism about Buddhism and social reform that continues to play an important role in groups like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. When reading these and other pieces against the popular Buddhism coming from writers like Joanna Macy, Robert Thurman, Bernard Glassman, and others, one wonders if the time is not right for a sustained study of the formation of one strand of convert Buddhism out of the creative interplay between Asian philosophy and plain old American idealism. One wonders anew about the continuity between the Transcendentalists and the Beats, not historically but ideologically, imaginatively, and, for lack of a clearer term, spiritually.

New readers might come away from *Big Sky Mind* with a fairly sunny sense of the contribution of the Beats to American Buddhism, which is perhaps a result of their work being reflected through the upbeat mood found in big swaths of convert Buddhism in the bullish, bourgeois nineties. But to do justice to the Beats' generational experience as a whole, to the kind of movement and reactions they set in motion, and to their overall legacy, attention does need to be given to the complex roles played by alcohol, drugs, and sexuality in the whole thing. In this regard, it is worth recalling that there was often a dark assessment of America running through the work of the Beats. One of di Prima's "Revolutionary Letters" excerpted here could be mistaken, quite understandably, for the writings of a militia man, but Ginsberg's prophetic wailings about America are left out. There is a good bit of reflection on social criticism, and every now and then the gritty existential humanism that formed the background for much of the intellectual life of the mid-century comes through. But the overall impression one gets is that the Beats and company were very spiritual, which indeed they were, but not in the medium cool mode favored in many quarters today, where ideas about the dharma are often infused by a visionary streak that owes something to the boom in high technology. In contrast, Kerouac, who thought it was tramps, not software jockeys, who were Beatific, sounds like a noble primitive at the dawn of society when he writes, "Self be your lantern / Self be your guide--"

Thus Spake Tathagata  
 Warning of radios  
 That would come  
 Some day  
 And make people  
 Listen to automatic  
 Words of others.

But all in all, *Big Sky Mind* is an important addition to the growing literature on American Buddhism because it gathers in one place a good deal of dharma-related material drawn from the lives and work of people who were often all over the map, whether one is speaking emotionally, spiritually, or geographically. It is in many respects a tonic to read the words of people whose contribution to Buddhism in America cannot be doubted, especially when one holds in check the assumption that we all know how to evaluate it properly. Back in the late 1970s or so, many people thought the Beats and their buddies were the quintessence of American Buddhism. By the mid 1990s, if one was really looking at the full spectrum of Buddhists busy practicing in this country, the answer to the question “What is America Buddhism?” was up for grabs. Whether one loves them, hates them, or is indifferent to whole phenomena of the Beats, their work is likely to be a touchstone in the interpretation of one important strand of American Buddhism for some time to come. I think that the editor of *Big Sky Mind* wanted us to know that and, if that is the case, she has successfully done her job.