



Allen Ginsberg And Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

The noted 20th century American poet Allen Ginsberg suffered from some inner as well as outer conflicts on many accounts. During his days i.e. the latter part of the 20th century America had turned completely into an artificial and parochial society. Ginsberg along with other poets led a movement which later on came to be known as the Beat movement. It was a counterculture and antifoundational in nature. Through poetry and philosophy, they had liberating effect on the American society. While exploring true religion and philosophy they came in contact with Buddhism, especially to Zen and Tibetan traditions. Allen Ginsberg also went to Japan and India where he came in contact with many of our Hindu gurus. He along with other Beat poets propagated his philosophy through his poetry. In this proposed paper we can see how Buddhism has cast a great influence on the life and message of Allen Ginsberg.

Keywords: Beat poets, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, Vajrayana, Hinduism, Mantra

Allen Ginsberg a leading twentieth century American poet has been suffering from some spiritual crisis and ran from religion to religion to fill up his spiritual void. Attached to Zen in his early fifties, to Hinduism in the sixties and then to Tibetan Buddhism in the late sixties, the enigmatic poet finally found solace in the Vajrayana in the seventies. His open-mindedness indeed has been the most striking fact about his religiosity. Not adopting blindly to any particular religion, he has adopted whatever he thinks as positive from not only Zen, Hinduism. Tibetan Buddhism and Vajrayana but also from Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

When asked what exactly his religion was, Ginsberg answered that he was probably a Buddhist Jew with attachment to Krishna, Shiva, Allah and the Sacred Heart. (Allen Ginsberg in America 121) Modifying his opinion he further said that he was more of a



Buddhist Jewish 'Panttheist. Talking about Ginsberg, T.F. Merrill rightly pointed out that the "Essential religious matrix of the beat was in the orient" (Allen Ginsberg, 4-5).

Ginsberg, Jack Keruac, William S. Burrows, and Neal Cassady, along with a number of other individuals, had joined together in New York in the 1940s to form the core of a group that would eventually be known as the Beatniks. They were Ginsberg's closest friends, and a decade later, each of them emerged as a crucial player in the 'beat' movement. The beat writers were essentially questers who were always "on the read." They were looking for a philosophy that would rehabilitate man as an integral part of the cosmos and provide a satisfactory explanation for the slow withering away of the modern social environment. In spite of the fact that all of them, including Ginsberg, were highly spiritual and unstoppable rebels, they generally rejected both Christianity and Marxism for the simple reason that both of these ideologies probably only give a partial explanation of the things that occur in life and in the world. Their interest in developing an all-encompassing worldview draws them closer to the philosophies and religious practises of eastern cultures. Ginsberg was profoundly impacted by his exposure to several religious traditions, in particular Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Vajrayana, and Vedanta.

The earliest influence on the poet has been that of Buddhism. In his long poem "Angkor Wat" he seeks refuge in Buddhism :

"Buddha I take my refuge
bowing in the black bower
before the open-handed lotus-man
sat cross-legged."

Ginsberg was first influenced by the Japanese version of Buddhism called Zen. Over and over again he makes reference to this religions in his poetry. Zen is liberal religious philosophy. The following lines adopted from a poem entitled "Hsin - hsin Marg" or "Treaties on the faith in the mind" Strikes the very keynote of the philosophy :

" If you want to get the plain truths

Be not concerned with right and wrong.



The conflict between right and wrong

Is the sickness of the Mind.” (Allen Ginsberg 5)

According to Zen evil is not regarded as the enemy of goodness. On the contrary, the two are complimentary to each other. Thus a right person mustn't pursue only one side but accept the claims of both. A human being is neither absolutely good nor absolutely bad but there is a curious blend of the two in his nature. In other words, the denial of the negative aspect of human nature means the denial of one's own nature.

Its aesthetic corollary is that the conflict between good and bad is in vain. Hence Ginsberg regarded every impulse of the soul and heart as holy. For him everything in this world is holy including the parts of the body. He expressed this sense in his "Footnote to Howl

“Holy; Holy; Holy.....

The world is holy : The Soul is holy.

The Skin is holy : The nose is holy. (Collected poems 134)

The emphasis is on holiness. But if everything in the universe is holy, then why should the society classify it into good and bad the right and the wrong? According to the Zen philosophy, the society has an artificial ideal" which leads us away from what may be called "natural humanity". Again the two terms "artificial ideal" and "natural humanity" are dialectical. Zen believes that the ideal is artificial because it goes against the natural inclination of man. it produces a contradiction in the personality that usually reveals itself in guilt or psychoneurosis. This contradiction is responsible for the dual nature of man. He does one thing and talks of another. He hides many such things he commits because they are bad in the eyes of society. ***“Zen intends to eliminate artificiality and to remove the psycho-ethical tensions that have marked the course of most western philosophies.”*** (Allen Ginsberg 6) Zen denounces restraint of any kind. To quote Linchi, the T'ang master:

“In Buddhism, there is no place for using effort. Just be ordinary and nothing special. Eat your food, move your bowels, pass water and when you are tired, go and lie down. The ignorant will laugh but the wise will understand you.” (Allen Ginsberg 6)



Ginsberg like the other Beats writers was strongly influenced by Zen. He did what he liked. He believed that the basic corruption of the square world was its compulsion to look right. In one of his touching article entitled “Poetry, Violence and the Trembling Lambs” Ginsberg asks:

“How many hypocrites are there in America? How many trembling lambs are fearful of discovery? What authority have we set up over ourselves, that we see not as we are. Who shall prohibit an art from being published to the world? What conspirators have power to determine our mode of consciousness, our sexual enjoyment, our different labours and love?” (A case Book on the Beats 27)

Zen philosophy had a liberating effect on the poet in the sense that it demolished the artificial moral barricade erected by Christianity and Puritanism. Yet it would not satisfy all of Ginsberg’s spiritual needs. The fever of the bone’. (Mind Breath 34) to quote T.S. Eliot, still remained. Ginsberg always felt that he was missing something or that he had been drifting away from the right path. Zen could not satisfy all his quest and his attention veered towards Vedanta. He came to India in 1962 with Peter Orlovsky. The purpose of his travel, as Carl Jackson remarks, was to seek Eastern Spirituality at its source. (American Studies 61). When Ginsberg reached India, he was in low spirit rather depressed as he had a feeling of personal drift. He remarked:

“What’s to be done with my life which has lost its idea? I don’t even have a good theory of vegetarianism.” (Indian Journal 11)

Like other western travelers including Aldous Huxley, Ginsberg also had expectations regarding his own Journey to India, the land of ‘Jugglers’ On the occasion of his arrival. Ginsberg exclaimed “I am deliriously happy, it is my promised land.”! (Indian Journal 5)

Ginsberg stayed in this country particularly in Banaras and Calcutta and traveled through different parts of the country. In fact his spiritual Journey begins with meeting of some of his Indian teachers when he was on Indian trip. In his Journey of spiritual quest he had worked with Swami Muktananda popularly known as “Kundalini Swami”. He has sat for a year and half with a **mantra** that had given him, as Carl Jackson informs, “Ginsberg revealed particular interest in Hindu **mantra** chanting”. (American Studies, 62) It was to make a lasting impact on Ginsberg, as he later described ‘**mantra**’ as the seed of poetics :



“So the characteristics of mantra, than or poetics (the seed of poetics is mantra) are attention to rhythm, connection with the breath, with the breath, with the actual breathing and effect and so connection with the body.” (Paris Review 47)

Ginsberg explains that a mantra is a brief magic phrase that typically involves some facet of the Divine and has inherent power tied to its repetition. (Daniel Berrigan and Contemporary Protest poetry 67) Ginsberg’s poetry refers over and over again to different mantras, both Hindu and Zen including the popular Gayatri mantra and Hare Krishna mantra. It was really pleasant to see Ginsberg participating in kirtans with a number of beatniks and hippies. To quote a mantra chanting incidence from his biography:

“Ginsberg closed his eyes. He rocked for a while to the high clattering counterpoints of the cymbals, and they began a mantra to Shiva.....The words of the mantra were “Hari Om namo Shivaya”. and he chanted them slowly at first, in a kind of low plaintive. Ginsberg chanted faster and faster until he was sobbing, singing and laughing at the sometime. He seemed at the edge of consciousness and part of the strange hypnotic rhythm of the chant”. (Allen Ginsberg in America 101)

Thus the mantra chanting becomes a means towards getting beyond one’s consciousness or attaining the state of oblivion. When he was asked whether his experiment with mantra chanting had influenced his confession, his instant reply was:

“Yeah, a now.”

(Composed upon the tongue, 36)

Though Swami Shivanand of Rishikesh, like Buddha, had already advised him to regard his own heart as his guru, he simply could not persuade his spiritual guest without guru. He has been having a series of Gurus Swami Shivananda, Swami Satchidananda, A.C. Bhaktivedant, only to mention a few of them. He always remembered one of the most useful teachings of Dudjom Rinpoche, the head of the Tibetan Nyingma Pa sect. It goes: “If you see something horrible don’t cling to it; and if you see something beautiful don’t cling to it.” In 1971 he came across another Guru Chogyal Trungpa, a Tibetan teacher who now onwards become Ginsberg’s spiritual adviser. After Chinese invasion on Tibet in 1959. Trungpa had settled in Boulder, Colorado in the 1970’s where he started Naropa Institute. This institute, Jackson remarks. “the charismatic Lama must have



seemed the Tibetan incarnation of the “Zen lunataic” originally celebrated by Kerouac and Ginsberg years before” (America Studies 63)

In fact, Chogyal Trungpa’s impact on Ginsberg was so remarkable that he composed a poem based on his Guru ‘s lecture on “ego lessness”

“Born in the world

You got to suffer.

Everything changes

You got no soul,”

representing suffering, change, transience and anatman or nonselfism. It describes of the nature of things by their very nature.

Chogyal Trungpa advised Ginsberg to write poetry trusting his own mind, like Milarepa. In fact, Trungpa was a major influence on him. He advised Ginsberg improvisation to divest himself of ego, eventually, kidding him about “Ginsberg resentment,” as a national hippie characteristic. Trungpa provided him a situation in which he sat sometimes for a week in retreat cabins and suggested him not to write when he was in retreat. Ginsberg confesses that this resulted in a lot of post – sitting meditative Haiku-like writings. He also suggested him to be more aware of the elements of resentments, aggression and dead-end anger which he used in his earlier poetry and behaviour. Ginsberg thereafter, was able to handle the theme in a more graceful manner.

On superficial level it appears that Ginsberg’s Buddhist practice has not changed his political perception as is evident from his acute political views on CIA and other issues. But when examined on subtle level it appears that it had effected a change in his attitude. When he composed “the fall of America” as a dead-end-issue-the creation of his resentment – his attitude was different. But later on he comes to appreciate the fatal Karmic flaws in himself and the Nation. He come to realise that in order to work with flaws, one should be aware of them without animosity or guilt and should find some basis for reconstruction of a humanly useful society.

Trungpa’s movement is a very rational and classical approach to Buddhism. Trungpa’s advise to Ginsberg was remarkable:” Go Sit, weeks and weeks, ten hours a day.” (New

Age Journal 8) Ginsberg, while describing Trungpa's method of meditation, notes that his fundamental approach was to start with shamatha, which is a Sanskrit term that means calm mindedness and creates mental tranquilly. It entails concentrating solely on the breath that is exhaled and allowed to dissipate into the surrounding air, known as the out-breath. Even though there are many different ways to practise Vipassana, it always starts with focusing one's attention on the in and out movement of one's breath. only at the very end of the nose, or through a Zen practise that entails tracking the breath all the way down to the abdomen.

In one of his interviews Ginsberg gratefully confesses that practising Tibetan Buddhism has resulted in his expanded awareness and “widening of the area of his consciousness.” Based on the strength of Samatha Ginsberg has come to improvise poetry or song on the stage, trusting his own mind rather than is manuscript. Meditation helped him clarify his own views on language and poetry. He says, “Meditation is not merely examining the definition of words, it means examining the mind stuff of which the consciousness is made,” (Paris Review 31)

A growing emphasis on the importance of breath in his poetry also reflects Hindu and Buddhist influences. (American Studies 64). In 1971 he remarked that the function of poetry is to catalyse the visionary states of being and that he regarded writing “as a form of meditation or introspective yoga.” (New York Quarterly 31)

At a time when poetry was chiefly craftsman's written art, Ginsberg took it out of the study and on to the podium. He became a skilled public performer of historical and oratorical poems, preceding his readings with lengthy chanting of Buddhist prayers (Howard Guide to American 521). His public reading of poems made wider impact on the audience than one made on then through reading of his poems. But usually climax of his show used to be not his poems but a chant, if one calls it that. Ginsberg simply came on the stage and pronounced the syllable Om over and again : OM OM OM OM....This communicated, or enacted, the annihilation of mind, of intellect, which is the heart of his Buddhism and the meaning of his poetry.(*The American Spectators 3*)

Ginsberg also came in contact with a number of saints and Tantriks during his stay in India particularly with Swami Shivanand of Rishikesh. He spent a good deal of time



visiting burning ghats'. He would get high with the Tantriks by taking bhang and gangja and participating in chanting certain mantra like :

Om Ah Hum Soham Tara Ma

Om Phat Svaha Padma Sambhava

Marpa Mila Bom Bom :

Shivaye : Ram Nam Satya Hey :

Om Ganapati

(Mind Breaths 12)

The Tantric philosophy also seems to have made a notable influence on the poet as it emphasizes the importance of the body. It takes the body as the centre of all worldly and spiritual activities. Like the Zen philosophy, the cult to Tantra exalts pleasures. Nothing in this world according to this philosophy, is possible without the body. Even devotion to God is possible only through the body. Ginsberg's final acceptance of the body is akin to the idea of the Tantric cult. The Tantric Philosophy defines the human body as "mix body" capable of both 'Karma' (action) and bhog (enjoyment). The cult believes like Zen Buddhism in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures and maintains that Karma (action) Jnana (Knowledge) and Bhakti Yoga (devotions) are possible only in the human body. Since the sense of enslavement lies in the body. the liberation is also possible only through the body. Ginsberg accepts the dialectical relationship between the living and the dead forms of human body.

To quote the famous Hindi poet H.S.V. Ajnyeya who wrote the following lines in consolation to another Hindi poet of the sixties when the latter was also obsessed with the idea of embracing death:

".....the acceptance of death, I believe, is a deep need of the soul or that of consciousness. But after, acceptance, death can be kept aside and one can live.....This acceptance does not defeat, it provides strength to live" (Mukti – Prasanga 19)

To conclude the poet's search of a Philosophy that would rehabilitate man as an integral part of the cosmos was over and his spiritual void fulfilled. His Journey to India to seek Eastern spirituality at its source proved richly rewarding. His knowledge and experience especially of Zen, Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism changed his life, his



philosophy of life; consequent upon those his poetic compositions showed a paradigm shift.

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