The Dharma Bums

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JACK KEROUAC

Jack Kerouac was born and raised in a French Canadian family in the Boston suburbs. His older brother's sudden death at age nine, as well as his intense early experiences in the Catholic Church, left a mark on his life and work. A star football player in high school, Kerouac won an athletic scholarship to Columbia University but broke his leg in his first year and dropped out in his second. He met the other pioneering writers of the Beat Generation during this time, including Allen Ginsberg (who appears in *The Dharma Bums* as Alvah Goldbrook) and Neal Cassady (the central figure of Kerouac's most well-known novel, *On the Road*). Kerouac then spent a year in the Merchant Marine, during which he wrote his first book, *The Sea Is My Brother* (which was not published until 2011). During World War II, he joined the Navy but was quickly discharged for psychiatric reasons. Kerouac lived on and off in New York for the next decade. In the process, he took several cross-country trips, married and divorced twice, and wrote more than 10 books, including *On the Road*. The events he recounts in *The Dharma Bums* occurred in the two years before he published *On the Road* in 1957. The book was an instant success, and Kerouac was soon identified as "the king of the beat generation." He published *The Dharma Bums* the next year but was widely criticized for his interpretation of Buddhism. Over the next five years, he sold almost a dozen of the manuscripts he had written in the previous decade, and he became a fixture of American popular culture by the mid-1960s. However, during this period, Kerouac's mother, sister, and close friend Neal Cassady all passed away. Kerouac himself followed in 1969, dying of an internal hemorrhage related to his lifelong alcoholism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Dharma Bums is set in the mid-1950s, a period of sustained economic expansion when Americans increasingly began living in car-dependent suburbs, and television increasingly became the basis of American popular culture. Kerouac and his friends famously viewed Buddhism as a way to put spirituality, human interconnection, and nature above the mainstream culture's values of consumerism, conformity, and suburban isolation. Still, Buddhism has a long history in the United States, starting with the arrival of immigrants from Asia the early 1800s. They primarily settled in California, where *The Dharma Bums* is set. This helps explain why established Buddhist institutions frequently appear in the book—although Kerouac generally rejects and ignores them. American scholars and writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson also took a sustained interest in Buddhism in the mid-19th century. But the Buddhism of protagonists Kerouac and Gary Snyder (or Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder) can be specifically traced to the travels of Buddhist monks and masters in the first half of the 20th century. Specifically, the strain of Zen Buddhism that Kerouac describes in *The Dharma Bums* became popular in the 1950s, after the Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher D.T. Suzuki took a professorship in New York. Many of the real-life writers whom Kerouac represents with pseudonyms in *The Dharma Bums* studied with Suzuki. Of course, Kerouac and his friends' writing further amplified the tradition's popularity in the United States, and there are numerous active Buddhist communities all across the country today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Among his dozen or so books of fiction, autobiography, and poetry, Jack Kerouac's best-known work by far is *On the Road* (1957), which catapulted him to literary stardom. Along with Allen Ginsberg's poetry collection *Howl* (1956) and William S. Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch* (1959), *On the Road* is considered the most emblematic literary work of the Beat generation. Kerouac's other most commonly read books are *The Desolation Angels* (1965), which picks up roughly where *The Dharma Bums* leaves off, and *Big Sur* (1962), which recounts his difficulty coping with fame and worsening alcoholism. However, Kerouac himself reportedly considered his masterpiece to be *Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education 1935-46* (1968), a memoir of his childhood and the last book he published during his lifetime. *The Dharma Bums* is arguably less about Jack Kerouac (Ray Smith) than his friend Gary Snyder (Japhy Ryder), who is also a prolific poet and writer. Snyder has published several essay collections, including *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), and books of poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Turtle Island* (1974). His first book of poetry, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1959), includes the translation of Han Shan's "Cold Mountain" that he reads to Kerouac in *The Dharma Bums*. His work is also collected in *The Gary Snyder Reader* (2000).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Dharma Bums
- **When Written:** November–December 1957
- **Where Written:** Orlando, Florida
- **When Published:** October 1958
- **Literary Period:** Beat Generation
- **Genre:** Semiautobiographical Novel

- **Setting:** California; North Carolina; highways and trains throughout the United States; the US-Mexico border region; Washington State
- **Climax:** Ray has a vision of Japhy at the end of two months meditating and working as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak
- **Antagonist:** Mainstream U.S. culture
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Mother Tongue. Kerouac's first language was French, not English—in fact, he did not master English or lose his accent until age 16. While he wrote extensively in French during his life, he only published in English. Some of his French poetry was finally published posthumously in 2016 as *La vie est d'hommage*.

Dharma Bum U. The vision of a Buddhist intellectual community that Kerouac advances in *The Dharma Bums* lives on in institutional form at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, which was founded by the Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa. Trungpa asked a group of Beat poets to develop the university's writing school, which they called the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

PLOT SUMMARY

Ray Smith travels up the California coast toward San Francisco by hopping a freight train. He camps out on the beach and explains his philosophy, which is based in Buddhism: Ray is a modern-day bhikku (Buddhist monk), traveling around North America like a wandering pilgrim on the path of dharma (the order of the universe). He fully embraces this lifestyle when he meets Japhy, an outdoorsman, poet, tea aficionado, and Zen Buddhist who grew up in the Oregon woods and now lives near San Francisco. At a poetry reading, Ray listens in wonder as Japhy speaks brilliantly about American Indian mythology, the American middle class, and Buddhist monks.

Across the Bay in Berkeley, Ray moves in with his friend Alvah Goldbrook in a modest one-room shack. Japhy lives in a similar shack nearby and spends his days hiking alone in the **mountains**, meditating, and reading Chinese and Japanese poetry. Japhy shows Ray "Cold Mountain," a poem he's translating by the reclusive Chinese ascetic Han Shan, who believed that a life of solitary contemplation in nature is vastly superior to an ordinary, social life in the city. Ray and Japhy try to have it both ways: they throw wild parties with friends like Alvah, Warren Coughlin, and Japhy's girlfriend Princess, who calls herself a Bodhisattva and has sex with everyone.

To give Ray a taste of Mother Nature's inspiring beauty, Japhy takes him out east to climb Mount Matterhorn, near the Nevada border. They go with Henry Morley, who brings way too much stuff, rants nonsensically for hours on end, and yodels at random. A few miles into the hike, Henry declares that he needs to fix his car's engine and turns around, leaving Ray and Japhy to chat about Buddhism and the beauty of unspoiled nature as they make their way up the trail. They climb a challenging section full of boulders, then pass through a beautiful mountain meadow before setting up camp under a huge rock. They exchange prayers, eat dinner, and meditate on the fundamental nothingness of all existence. Japhy gives Ray a string of **prayer beads** and inspires him to live as a "Dharma Bum," backpacking around the U.S. while pursuing enlightenment.

Once Henry catches up in the morning, the men continue climbing. They swim in a mountain lake, run up loose scree rocks, and marvel at the spectacular views. Just before the summit, however, Ray starts to feel sick and panics—but he sees Japhy run downhill and follows him, realizing that "you can't fall off a mountain." They make it back down to camp for dinner, and then they continue downhill under the full moon. When they reach Henry's car, they're exhausted and hungry—but to Ray's amusement, Japhy is initially afraid to go into a nice restaurant in his cheap clothes.

The guys return to Berkeley, where they continue to alternate between meditating and partying. But in December, Ray decides to take off for himself and try to make it to his mother's home in North Carolina for Christmas. Japhy helps him buy a backpack and camping gear, and then Ray spends a fateful night in San Francisco with his friend Cody and his girlfriend Rosie, who has a nervous breakdown and commits suicide. Ray is shaken, but he decides to continue with his trip. He catches a train down to Los Angeles and then a bus east to Riverside, where he camps out in a riverbed and prays for Rosie. He then hitchhikes to the border town of Calexico, visits the Mexican side, and then catches a ride all the way to Ohio with a truck driver named Beaudry. From here, Ray catches buses from Ohio to snowy North Carolina, where his family is waiting for him.

In North Carolina, Ray passes a serene Christmas with his family and then starts meditating in the woods and writing poetry full-time. He goes through a brief depression before having an epiphany: everything in the universe survives change and suffering, because it's all made from the same fundamental *nothingness*. His family doesn't really understand his long speeches about Buddhism, but he knows that he's on track to enlightenment. He starts having amazing dreams about Buddhas and even has a miraculous vision of the medicine that ends up curing his mother's cough.

But soon enough, it's time for Ray to return to California. For one, he wants to see Japhy, who's leaving soon to study Zen Buddhism in Japan. And Japhy has also helped Ray line up a summer job as a fire lookout in the Washington Cascades. So, Ray hitchhikes his way down to Atlanta and takes buses to El Paso, where he camps out in the stunningly beautiful desert

and visits Ciudad Juárez across the border. He then hitchhikes up to New Mexico and then to Los Angeles, where he jumps on the train to San Francisco.

Ray moves in with Japhy in his new shack, which is up on a hill behind their friends Sean and Christine Monahan's house, north of San Francisco. After their joyous reunion, Japhy tells Ray about the Cascades but refuses to let Ray tell him about his epiphanies in North Carolina. Confused, Ray realizes that Japhy seems harrowed and depressed. But it doesn't last long: by morning, Japhy is his old energetic self again, and he spends the next day teaching Ray to chop firewood and telling wild stories about Buddhist monks. The parties resume too: in addition to all the Buddhists, poets, and bums from the previous year, Ray meets several new people, like Japhy's new love interests Polly and Psyche and the eccentric former physicist Bud Diefendorf. But even at these parties, Ray spends most of his time in nature, watching animals and meditating. He has no luck with women, but he has more and more holy visions. This might have something to do with his heavy drinking, which causes a brief argument with Japhy.

Before Japhy ships out to Japan, Sean Monahan throws him a big going-away party. Everyone Ray knows is in attendance, and even Japhy's father comes and dances like a maniac. But the party goes on for three days, and Ray and Japhy get tired of it, so they decide to get away by hiking up to the beach. During their hike, they debate whether Buddhists can believe in God, compose poetry, and talk about their plans for the summer. At night, Ray dreams that Japhy is a Chinese hobo showing up at a dirty market. They spend the morning on the beach and then retrace their steps back to Sean's house, where Ray lays on the ground, exhausted, while Japhy cooks. And then it's time to say goodbye: Japhy sets off for Japan on his cargo ship the next morning.

A month later, it's time for Ray to start his fire lookout job, so he hitchhikes up to Seattle and over into the mountains to the Ranger Station. He meets all the forest service men who used to work with Japhy and spends his training week meditating by the beautiful Skagit River. After training, the mule-driver Happy and the assistant ranger Wally help him up the long and treacherous path to his post at Desolation Peak. Up on the mountaintop, it's freezing cold, it's too foggy to see anything, and the shack where Ray is supposed to spend the summer is old and filthy. But Happy and Wally leave, Ray cleans the shack, and then the fog starts to clear. Ray is astonished at the endless landscape of rugged mountains, valleys, and lakes—he feels like he's living in a dream. For the next 55 days, he meditates endlessly, reads as much as possible, and starts understanding the natural patterns in the weather and the nearby animals' behavior. At the end of the novel, on Ray's last day at Desolation Peak, an enormous rainbow forms right in front of him, like a sign from the divine. He has a vision of Japhy, whom he thanks for teaching him so much about life, nature, and Buddhism. Then, he thanks God and the mountain itself before returning downhill toward civilization.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ray Smith – Ray is the narrator and protagonist of *The Dharma Bums*; he's a stand-in for author Jack Kerouac. Driven by his strong interest in Buddhist teachings and intense affection for his friend Japhy Ryder, Ray views himself as a bhikku (Buddhist monk) who travels around North America in order to meditate, pursue enlightenment, and spread Buddhist teachings to others. Over the course of the book, he hikes, hitchhikes, and train-hops his way from California to North Carolina and back again. Along the way, Ray alternates between meditating and **drinking** heavily at parties. He befriends other young men like Japhy and Alvah, most of whom share a love of poetry, a countercultural value system, and an interest in Buddhism. Finally, Ray heads up to the Cascade Range in Washington, where he spends a summer working as a fire lookout and meditating in nature. Ray cherishes this summer, because it allows him to fulfill his dream of spending his life in solitary prayer and meditation. In fact, although Ray frequently interacts with his wide circle of friends and acquaintances throughout the book, he is constantly trying to get away to meditate. The only person Ray truly wants to spend time around is Japhy, whom he views as a wise and influential teacher. Japhy shows Ray that the wilderness (especially the **mountains**) is the ideal place to practice meditation, and this inspires Ray to start traveling around with hiking gear and camping out in nature to meditate. His meditation brings him a series of epiphanies about himself and the universe throughout the book—for instance, he comes to terms with his own death and realizes that everything in the world is fundamentally united because it's "empty and awake." In turn, these epiphanies bring Ray a sense of inner peace and fulfillment because they help him let go of his troubles and suffering.

Japhy Ryder – Japhy is an alias for Gary Snyder, the poet, **mountaineer**, and scholar of Buddhism whose relationship with narrator Ray Smith (Jack Kerouac's alias) is arguably the novel's central focus. In fact, even when Japhy isn't physically present, he's almost always in Ray's thoughts. Raised in a remote corner of the Oregon woods, Japhy studied Zen Buddhist philosophy and American Indian mythology in college. Then, he started writing poetry and living as a Dharma Bum, wandering around the vast open spaces of the American West and living off the land while studying and practicing Buddhism. Whereas Ray really only cares about Buddhism as a spiritual practice, Japhy is far more interested in its historical and literary traditions, especially in China and Japan. He reads and translates Chinese and Japanese poetry, including the works of Han Shan, and he dreams of going to Japan. In fact, near the

end of the book, his dream comes true: he leaves to go study Buddhism in a Japanese monastery. Similarly, whereas Ray views Buddhism in strictly individual terms, Japhy is interested in how it can change the world: he disdains American culture's consumerism and dreams of launching a "rucksack revolution" against it by getting thousands of young men to live as Dharma Bums, traveling around and meditating. In fact, because of this vision, Japhy's friends (especially Ray and Alvah) view him as a kind of heroic messiah figure capable of transforming the world. In particular, they look up to his physical fitness, survival skills, and masculine self-confidence. Women also fawn over him, although he arguably mistreats his girlfriends Princess, Polly, and Psyche. Ray fawns over him as well—he frequently expresses his deep admiration and almost romantic love for Japhy, who teaches him about the history of Buddhism and the spiritual value of spending time in the wilderness. Their relationship shows how friendship can help people learn, grow, and define their values.

Alvah Goldbrook – Alvah is an alias for the famous Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, one of Jack Kerouac's closest friends. Although he hosts Ray in Berkeley at the beginning of *The Dharma Bums*, he does not play a significant role in the novel's plot. He attends all of the book's most important parties and is somewhat interested in Buddhism, although not nearly as much as Ray or Japhy. In fact, Alvah frequently criticizes Ray and Japhy for taking themselves too seriously and obsessively organizing their entire lives around Buddhism. Whereas Ray wants to meditate as much as possible and Japhy is interested in building an alternative society of Dharma Bums, Alvah believes in living life to the fullest, which he takes to mean partying, **drinking**, and having sex. Nevertheless, like Ray, Alvah also looks up to Japhy and views him as a heroic figure. Curiously, although Ginsberg was gay in real life, Kerouac mostly portrays him as heterosexual (or perhaps bisexual) in *The Dharma Bums*—although he does appear with his partner Peter Orlovsky (George) once in the book.

Henry Morley – Henry is an alias for the eccentric writer John Montgomery. Henry is the librarian, occasional **mountaineer**, and "actual madman" who accompanies Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder on their trip to Mount Matterhorn early in the book. In reality, Japhy and Ray just invite Henry along because he has a car and is willing to drive them. Like his close friend Rheinhold Cacoethes, Henry talks in a very peculiar and extremely annoying way: he rambles nonsensically about unrelated topics, like transforming into a gnome, the medieval city-state of Ragusa, and California's high-quality milk. He also yodels at inappropriate times, brings a lot of unnecessary mountaineering equipment on their trip, and inexplicably disappears after just a few minutes of hiking to go do unnecessary maintenance on his car. He eventually catches back up with Ray and Japhy but fades into the background for the rest of the book. Beyond serving as comic relief, Henry highlights the way Ray sees most people and relationships as useless annoyances. Indeed, Ray's confused indifference to Henry is most notable because it contrasts so strongly with his intense love for Japhy.

Princess – Princess is the first of Japhy's girlfriends; she first appears in the book when she visits Alvah's cottage and abruptly takes her clothes off with no explanation. She then proceeds to have sex with Japhy, Ray, Alvah, in the position traditionally called *yabyum* in the Tibetan Buddhist artistic tradition. Ray explains that he met and fell in love with Princess the year before, and she returns to have sex with him again later, before reappearing late in the novel at Japhy's going-away party (where she has to compete with Polly and Psyche for Japhy's attention). While Ray enjoys having sex with Princess, the fact that her sights are truly set on Japhy seems to prove Ray's suspicion that Japhy is more of a man than he'll ever be. Princess, on the other hand, seemingly has no personality besides a kind of childish, infectious joy while she's having sex with the men, and a sad jealousy when Japhy goes off with Psyche at his going-away party. The men look down on her intellectually, while humoring her analysis of Buddhism because she's willing to have sex with them. Unlike all the novel's men, Ray never takes her seriously as a thinker, or as the Bodhisattva (enlightened figure) she claims to be.

Psyche – Psyche is one of Japhy's girlfriends, a beautiful but shy young woman who has strong feelings with Japhy but doesn't want to have sex with him. Knowing that Psyche has trouble controlling her **drinking**, Japhy intentionally gets her drunk until she stops resisting his sexual advances—and disturbingly, nobody in the novel seems to think that there's anything wrong with this. Although Japhy chooses to spend the night with Psyche over Princess and Polly at his going-away party, they get into a fight, which leads Psyche to try to drunk-drive away. (She backs into a ditch by accident and spends the night sleeping on Christine Monahan's floor.) A few days later, she professes her love for Japhy and finally consents to have sex with him, in the cabin on his ship before he sails to Japan. But after they do the deed, she insists on going to Japan with him, and Japhy literally picks her up and throws her off the side of the boat in order to get her to leave. Like the other women in the novel, Psyche essentially portrayed as an irrational, sex-crazed child who has no personality or discernible purpose in life besides her intense love for Japhy. Kerouac portrays this as evidence of Japhy's masculinity and intellectual excellence, but to a modern-day reader, Kerouac's portrayal of Psyche might look very misogynistic.

Warren Coughlin – Warren is an alias for the Buddhist poet Philip Whalen. Warren is Japhy's friend from college who frequently attests to Japhy's brilliance and attends most of the parties that Ray recounts throughout the book. He mostly appears in the background of the novel, serving to reinforce Japhy's mythic status in Ray's eyes. But while meditating in

North Carolina, Ray also remembers Warren as a characteristically thoughtful and gentle soul, whose serene personality embodies the teachings and highest values of Zen Buddhism.

Sean Monahan – Sean is an alias for Locke McCorkle, a Buddhist carpenter who lives in rural Marin County. He lets Japhy and Ray live in a cabin behind his house for several months in the spring of 1956, and he pays them to chop firewood for him. Halfway between a Dharma Bum and an ordinary family man, Sean lives frugally and in harmony with nature, while also working to support his family. His wife, Christine, does all the housework and raises their children. Sean also frequently throws parties attended by Bay Area Buddhists, ranging from Ray's friends Alvah Goldbrook and Warren Coughlin to more distant acquaintances like Bud Diefendorf. Ray constantly emphasizes Sean's kindness and generosity, but he's mostly significant in the novel because of the physical spaces he provides for Ray and his friends to get together.

Christine Monahan – Christine is Sean Monahan's dedicated, hardworking wife who cooks, cleans, and cares for their two children while Sean works in nearby Sausalito. She also feeds and takes care of Ray Smith when Sean isn't around, and she enthusiastically attends the numerous parties that Sean throws on their property. Happy at home and willing to make do with very little money, Christine represents an idealized version of a 1950s American housewife, at the same time as she participates in the Beat Generation's Buddhist counterculture. This suggests that, in all his rebelliousness, Kerouac might have failed to move beyond the rigid gender roles that limited women's prospects in his time. Christine's real name is Valerie McCorkle, and she was Locke McCorkle (Sean Monahan)'s real first wife.

Cody Pomeray – Cody is an alias for Neal Cassady, the famously intense and unstable central character of Kerouac's famous earlier novel *On the Road* (in which Kerouac called him Dean Moriarty). He only appears briefly in *The Dharma Bums*, first briefly at a poetry reading, and then when he asks Ray Smith to look after his suicidal girlfriend Rosie Buchanan while he's at work. Rosie ends up killing herself, which devastates Cody.

Rosie Buchanan – Rosie is a neurotic but talented writer who is dating Cody Pomeray and kills herself during a psychotic fit, just before Ray leaves San Francisco for North Carolina. She is terrified about the police, cuts her wrists on the building's roof, and then jumps off when the police come to try and help her. Ray continues to think about her after her death, and she comes to represent the miserable and morally deficient U.S., which Ray and his Buddhist buddies are trying to flee. But she also represents Kerouac and his friends' misogyny and troubled relationships with women. Her real name is Natalie Jackson, and she really did date Neal Cassidy (Cody Pomeray) and die on November 30, 1955. However, Kerouac does not fully explore Rosie's character beyond her relationship with Cody or the real circumstances of her death, which was never truly confirmed as a suicide (rather than an accident). In real life, Natalie was frightened of the police because she and Neal had robbed $10,000 from Neal's wife, Carolyn, and lost all the money betting on horses.

Beaudry – Beaudry is a truck driver who picks Ray up in Calexico, California, on his way to North Carolina. They spend an evening partying across the border in Mexicali, and then they go to Tucson, Arizona, where Ray makes Beaudry a steak over a campfire in the desert. Beaudry is so impressed by Ray's lifestyle that he decides to take him all the way to Ohio (where he lives) out of gratitude.

Bud Diefendorf – Bud is a physically imposing, overly serious man who quit a career in physics and philosophy in order to become a Buddhist. He takes the religion to heart and, along with Ray, is the only other single member of Sean and Japhy's friend group. As a result, Bud and Ray often end up hanging out or trying to meet girls together. His real name is Claude Dalenberg.

Han Shan Han San was a mysterious Chinese poet from the Tang Dynasty (618–907 C.E.) who carved his works into rocks in the remote **mountains** where he lived. Generally viewed as a bodhisattva (Buddhist monk), Han Shan is Japhy's idol and embodies the ideal lifestyle he aspires to live: one of solitary reflection and meditation in nature. At one point, Japhy shows Ray his translation of the poem "Cold Mountain" (which is also what "Han Shan" means). In the novel's closing chapters, Ray compares himself to Han Shan while working as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascades.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Polly Whitmore – Polly is a divorced **mountain**-climber who briefly dates Japhy but is forced to compete with Princess and Psyche for his attention at his going-away party.

The little Santa Teresa Bum – The "little Santa Teresa bum" is a shy homeless man who rides the rails with Ray Smith in the first chapter and recites a prayer by Santa Teresa, which he carries around with him on a little slip of paper.

Rol Sturlason – Rol is a friend of Japhy's, who is also a devout Buddhist obsessed with Japan. He tells Ray about his plans to visit the famous Ryoanji Zen rock garden in Kyoto, and Japhy later indicates that Rol has made it to Japan.

Ray's mother – Ray's mother lives in North Carolina; she worries when Ray arrives for his visit later than promised. She later gets a bad cough, which Ray treats after having a vision of a bottle of medicine while meditating.

Ray's brother-in-law – Ray's brother-in-law lives in North Carolina with Ray's mother, sister, and nephew Lou. Frustrated

that Ray spends all his time lazing around the house and meditating, he repeatedly insists that Ray get a job.

Lou – Lou is Ray's beloved nephew, whom he teaches a little about Buddhism in North Carolina.

Rhoda – Rhoda is Japhy's sister; she's an alias for Thea Snyder Lowry. Japhy loves Rhoda dearly—and possibly as more than just siblings, as Japhy suggests that she should marry him instead of her fiancé, a rich man from Chicago whom Japhy loathes.

Rheinhold Cacoethes – Rheinhold is a pretentious poet and literary critic who is a close friend of Henry Morley and, much like his friend, has a habit of talking nonstop for hours. He's an alias for Kenneth Rexroth.

George – George is an alias for Peter Orlovsky, Allen Ginsberg (Alvah Goldbrook)'s longtime partner.

Wally – Wally is the strict assistant ranger at Marblemount Ranger Station in the Cascades who, along with Happy, helps Ray make it up to **Desolation Peak**

Happy – Happy is a wise old mule driver in the Cascades who, along with Wally, helps Ray reach **Desolation Peak**. He remembers Japhy Ryder as an unusually capable and intelligent young mountaineer.

Bob – Bob is Ray Smith's loyal dog in North Carolina.

TERMS

Buddha – In Buddhism, a Buddha is anyone who has reached *nirvana* (enlightenment, or liberation from the cycle of reincarnation). There are several Buddhas, but the best-known is the Gautama Buddha (often just called "the Buddha"), who formally founded Buddhism as an organized religion.

Sūtra – Sūtras are the ancient canonical Buddhist scriptures. Throughout the book, **Ray** frequently reads the *Diamond Sūtra*, one of the oldest and most influential sutras. Dating to 868 C.E., the *Diamond Sūtra* is also the oldest known printed book in history.

Bhikku – A *bhikku* is a Buddhist monk. The term literally means "beggar" and refers to the way the Gautama Buddha's original students gave up all material pursuits to wander from place to place, study full-time, and live off the charity of others. **Ray** and **Japhy** base their own lives on this monastic model and think of themselves as modern-day *bhikkus*.

Bodhisattva – Depending on the context, a *bodhisattva* is either anyone who has committed themselves to the path of enlightenment, or someone who has perfected their spirit and is ready for enlightenment but has chosen to stay in the world and help other beings instead.

Dharma – *Dharma* is a central concept in Buddhism that refers to the true order of the universe, as taught by the Gautama Buddha. All Buddhists strive to perceive and understand *dharma*, and to eventually unite their consciousness with this fundamental order. When **Ray** calls himself and his friends "Dharma Bums," what he means is that they view their wandering, unconventional lifestyles as a way to follow the path of *dharma* toward enlightenment.

Zen Buddhism – Zen Buddhism is a school of East Asian Buddhism that emphasizes personal meditation practices (often under the oversight of a teacher) over study and knowledge of scripture. **Japhy** specifically reveres and follows Zen Buddhism, while **Ray** spends more time reading the sūtras and studying the broader Mahayana Buddhism tradition, of which Zen forms just one part.

Fire Lookout – A fire lookout is a forest worker stationed in remote areas at high elevation who looks for smoke in the surrounding forest, in order to proactively identify and help stop wildfires. In the novel's closing chapters, **Ray** follows in **Japhy**'s footsteps by working as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascades.

Skid Row – Skid row is a term for a rundown neighborhood where homeless and socially marginalized people live and congregate. The most well-known of these areas is the Skid Row neighborhood in Downtown Los Angeles. Whenever **Ray** and **Japhy** visit a different city, they spend their time in that city's Skid Row, where the cheapest hotels, restaurants, and secondhand stores are located.

The Cascade Range – The Cascades are a chain of rugged mountains that run through Northern California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. In the novel's closing chapters, **Ray** goes to work as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the northern Cascades, near the Canadian border.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ENLIGHTENMENT AND NATURE

In the semi-autobiographical novel *The Dharma Bums*, Jack Kerouac recounts his travels around North America in 1955–1956, focusing particularly on his friendship with the eccentric Buddhist environmentalist Gary Snyder. At his publisher's request, Kerouac changed everyone's names in the book, so he calls Snyder Japhy Ryder and he refers to himself as Ray Smith. Even though Ray spends much of the book hitchhiking around and getting **drunk**, he is really on a dedicated quest for mental liberation and spiritual

enlightenment. He pursues this enlightenment by practicing Buddhism and immersing himself in nature. Through Ray's journey, Kerouac suggests that people can achieve true happiness by meditating and connecting with the natural world, as this allows them to accept certain fundamental truths about their place in the universe.

Ray Smith views his life through the lens of Buddhism, which promises that humans can achieve enlightenment through insight, self-discipline, and meditation. At the beginning of the book, Ray describes himself as a modern-day bhikku—or Buddhist monk—wandering around North America on a kind of endless pilgrimage. Like a monk, Ray's main goal in the book is to find enlightenment and help others do the same. He explains this quest in terms of the Buddhist belief that life is full of suffering, but it's possible to overcome that suffering by achieving philosophical insight, becoming virtuous, and practicing meditation. Ray orients all of his relationships, travels, and internal monologues around his desire to follow this path and eventually reach enlightenment.

About halfway through the book, Ray realizes that his quest for enlightenment will require him to spend time in the wilderness. He views nature as an uncorrupted place where people can more directly perceive the underlying reality of the universe and achieve spiritual well-being through meditation. He prefers it to the city for a number of reasons. For instance, in the city, he feels distracted and drawn to vices like drinking, while he feels no pressure to drink—or do anything besides meditate—when he's isolated in nature. Of course, hiking or camping alone also gives him all the all the time in the world to meditate, allowing him to focus on spiritual matters rather than worldly ones. And nature's breathtaking beauty also gives Ray spiritual insight by reminding him of his own insignificance and impermanence. When gazing out at impossibly vast million-year-old **mountains**, for example, Ray sees physical proof that he is miniscule and will soon cease to exist, while the world will go on. By recognizing his own insignificance, Ray hopes to shed his fear of death, which Buddhists consider a main cause of human suffering. Finally, Ray deepens his spiritual understanding by connecting with other beings in nature: at different points in the book, he befriends a hummingbird, a eucalyptus tree with dancing branches, and a herd of deer. Together, these encounters remind him of his interconnectivity with all living beings, as everything and everyone is part of the same universe and made of the same basic elements. This fundamental Buddhist teaching helps Ray cope with conflicts and setbacks, as he realizes that he and his problems are small and fleeting relative to the universe as a whole.

Over the course of the book, Ray has several epiphanies and visions while meditating in nature, and these episodes affirm his faith that Buddhism can lead people to pure happiness (or enlightenment). Ray's first set of realizations comes while hiking Mount Matterhorn with Japhy. This trip illuminates many of the Buddhist principles that Ray knew about theoretically but never fully understood or applied to his life. For instance, he had often heard the Buddhist proverb "When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing." But until he's literally on top of the mountain, he doesn't really understand what it means: that people can constantly improve and will always face more suffering, so their spiritual work is never done. This trip sparks Ray's interest in living in nature because it shows him that Buddhism's fundamental truths about the universe are far easier to directly perceive in the wilderness. Later, Ray has another series of profound epiphanies while meditating in the woods next to his mother's house in North Carolina. These realizations help him apply Buddhist principles to his life. For instance, while he meditates on the silence of nature and then hears a lone frog croak, he remembers that the universe is really made of empty space, but that this emptiness is awake in the form of conscious beings. This epiphany leads to another, as he realizes that his inevitable death will just be part of the natural cycle of change in the universe. Accordingly, he comes to terms with his death, finds a new sense of peace, and moves one step closer to enlightenment. Finally, at the very end of the book, Ray spends several months working as a fire lookout and living alone atop Desolation Peak in the Cascade Range. Between the stunning view and the animals that surround him, Ray feels immersed in nature and at one with the universe for the first time. He spends his days meditating, dancing and singing in ecstasy, and thinking about Japhy. In fact, on his last day at the mountain, a rainbow forms all around him, which he calls a "vision of the freedom of eternity." Although Ray certainly hasn't reached enlightenment, this vision suggests that he's approaching it, and the sense of peace and joy he feels is clearly the reward for his spiritual journey.

At the very end of the book, Ray sends the universe a message of his own: he says the word "Blah" aloud, a seemingly meaningless syllable that he thinks represents how human existence is both pointless and also still part of the universe's larger, interconnected whole. Ray's journey to enlightenment is never totally complete, but the universe clearly rewards his efforts. This convinces him that meditation and connecting with the natural world are the best ways to understand human nature and achieve inner peace.

COUNTERCULTURE AND FREEDOM

Jack Kerouac is often remembered less for his actual work than for the bohemian counterculture he came to represent. Despite its focus on Buddhism, *The Dharma Bums* is also full of the sex, drunken poetry readings, and spontaneous cross-country journeys that are commonly associated with Kerouac's name and the Beat Generation movement to which he belonged. Indeed, Kerouac's self-indulgence, wanderings, and commitment to Buddhism shared a common root. Namely, they're based on his critique of

mainstream American culture, which he saw as materialistic, status-obsessed, spiritually isolating, anti-intellectual, and needlessly conformist. Writing in the 1950s, Kerouac argues that mainstream culture produces misery because it values wealth, reputation, and stability—which tie people down rather than freeing them. However, through his alter ego Ray Smith's journey, he shows how pursuing the opposite of these mainstream values—poverty, humility, and transience—*can* lead to true freedom.

Kerouac thoroughly critiques the mainstream culture of white suburban America in the 1950s, which he viewed as materialistic and unenlightened. After one of his first parties with Japhy Ryder, Alvah Goldbrook, and Warren Coughlin, Ray looks around and decides, "The rooftops of Berkeley looked like pitiful living meat sheltering grieving phantoms from the eternality of the heavens which they feared to face." What he means is that people who live ordinary American lives in ordinary American homes and workplaces are entirely focused on material things that don't really matter. This distracts them from the true reality of the universe and makes them unhappy. In fact, Ray and Japhy profoundly distrust modern technology in general. For instance, Ray considers cars abominable because they prevent people from using their natural mode of locomotion: walking. Similarly, Japhy says he distrusts people who use toilets because they just flush things away, rather than taking responsibility for disposing of the waste they create. This shows that they both view technology as people's foolish attempt to distance themselves from human nature.

Kerouac also argues that American culture's obsession with work and wealth makes people unhappy. When Ray visits his mother, sister, and brother-in-law in North Carolina, he is amused to see the local farmers pretend to work all day. In reality, it's December, everything is frozen, and they have nothing to do. But American culture values work, and the farmers want to get away from their wives, so they walk around their farms and look for something to do. Meanwhile, they criticize Ray for not having a job. Ray considers this amusingly ironic and points out that the men are deceiving themselves. As an avowed Buddhist, Ray believes that there's really nothing for people to do in the world except change, suffer, and pass in and out of existence. The farmers are merely inventing meaningless tasks in order to escape their anxieties about doing nothing and their fear that their wives will bother them. This suggests that their whole lives are driven by a sense of obligation, while they have no clear idea about what they really want in life or how to get it. For Ray, this is a clear example of what American culture does to people: it asks them to perform meaningless tasks in order to accumulate meaningless objects that don't make them any happier.

Instead, Kerouac presents the so-called "Dharma Bum" lifestyle as a freer and more humane alternative to mainstream culture. Ray and his friends refuse mainstream culture by choosing to live as "bums," or unemployed homeless travelers. They move around rather than settle in one place, own as few possessions as possible, and work temporary jobs rather than stable ones. As bums, they spend their time writing and meditating on the nature of the universe, which is called *dharma* in Buddhism. That's why he uses the term "Dharma Bums" to refer to himself, his friends, and his book.

Ray chooses homelessness because it allows him to be completely spontaneous, which he equates with absolute freedom. When hopping a train, meeting strangers hitchhiking, or camping in the woods, Ray feels totally liberated and alive in a way that he thinks settled people never can. Similarly, he decides to live out of a rucksack, relying only on essential gear and his own ingenuity, because this limits his expenses, makes it easier to move around, and proves that happiness doesn't come from material things. Ray also rejects conventional work and instead only takes on temporary jobs when he absolutely needs the money. For instance, he helps Sean Monahan chop wood and works as a fire lookout in the Cascades because he thinks this will give him an opportunity to meditate in nature. But neither of these jobs defines his identity in the way an office worker's might. While American culture presents work as the cornerstone of identity, Ray insists that it is nothing more than a means to an end. And Ray also tries to teach others about the virtues of voluntary poverty and homelessness. For instance, while hitchhiking with a truck driver named Beaudry, Ray makes them dinner by cooking a steak over a campfire in the desert. Beaudry is astonished and realizes that, even though he has a stable job and a loving family at home, he's nowhere near as happy or free as Ray. He thanks Ray for opening his eyes to true happiness. When Beaudry recognizes that the Dharma Bum lifestyle is superior to his own, this validates Ray's decision to live unconventionally and prioritize spiritual goals over material ones.

Ultimately, Ray sees his lifestyle choices as breeding thoughtfulness, humility, and (above all) freedom. Because Dharma Bums do not tie themselves down to physical places or things, they do not mistake their possessions for their identity. Instead, Ray believes that they are free to wander and explore, change and develop, and spread happiness and enlightenment wherever they go.

FRIENDSHIP

Ray Smith, Jack Kerouac's protagonist and alter-ego in *The Dharma Bums*, spends much of the novel suspicious of other people and trying to get as far away from them as possible. Nevertheless, his drunken adventures and forays into Buddhism wouldn't be the same without his eccentric friends. Most of all, Ray idolizes his friend Japhy Ryder: he talks about Japhy with an almost romantic love that contrasts with his indifference to almost everyone else. This suggests that Kerouac draws a clear distinction between

authentic friendship, which helps people learn and grow, and inauthentic or surface-level friendship, which actually distracts people from their true needs and leaves them spiritually empty.

Ray's relationship with Japhy shows how friendship can help people improve themselves and discover totally new ways of living. Japhy serves as a kind of mentor figure to Ray, who's impressed by Japhy's masterful poetry, Buddhist self-discipline, knowledge of Chinese and Japanese, and rugged masculinity. Throughout the book, Ray and Japhy hike, party, and read poetry together. Most of all, they frequently meditate side by side and tell each other stories about different Buddhas and Zen masters. Ray reveres Japhy largely because Japhy has more experience with Buddhism, hiking, and women—he hopes that some of this expertise will rub off on him. Essentially, Ray becomes friends with Japhy because he wants to be more like him. In fact, Ray's love for Japhy is practically romantic—there's a homoerotic undertone to Kerouac's detailed descriptions of Japhy's body, for instance, and Ray is devastated when Japhy leaves California to go study in Japan. Even when Japhy isn't physically present, Ray is constantly dreaming and thinking about him, which shows his extreme dedication to their friendship. Japhy arguably becomes the book's central figure because he helps Ray focus his general interest in Buddhism into a specific kind of religious life as a traveling Dharma Bum. All the major decisions Ray takes in the novel—from living out of a rucksack to working as a fire lookout in the Cascade Range—are really just attempts to imitate Japhy, because Ray deeply appreciates Japhy's influence and role in his life. Therefore, *The Dharma Bums* testifies to friendship's capacity to shape people's lives by showing them aspects of human experience that they would never encounter otherwise.

Nevertheless, Ray also turns his back on friendships that he considers less authentic, which shows that he values friendship because of how it helps him grow, not merely because he wants companionship. On their trip to **Mount Matterhorn**, Ray and Japhy are accompanied by Henry Morley, a bizarre, talkative, and extremely annoying librarian. Henry talks nonsense for hours on end, which makes it impossible for Ray and Japhy to hold an interesting conversation. Actually, Ray is relieved when Henry disappears in the middle of his hike to go do maintenance on his car. In fact, Ray generally sees most people as similar to Henry—they talk just for the sake of talking, have no authentic insight into themselves or the world, and add nothing of value to Ray's life. Accordingly, Ray's suspicion of Henry reflects his underlying belief that it's better for people to be alone than to be surrounded by others who neither share their values nor contribute meaningfully to transforming those values. Similarly, after returning to California from North Carolina, Ray moves into a cabin with Japhy. The Buddhist couple who owns the house in front of the cabin, Sean and Christine Monahan, throw parties every weekend. But Ray quickly gets bored of partying because he it as a distraction from his Buddhist practice, so he starts meditating or napping under a tree instead of going to the parties. In fact, even during Japhy's going-away party, Ray and Japhy get so fed up with other people that they decide to run away and go for a hike. Their decision to run away together proves that their friendship is uniquely valuable to both of them, while their surface-level friendships with others do not contribute anything meaningful to their happiness or personal growth.

The Dharma Bums is in many ways an ode to friendship, which Kerouac values because it helps people grow. However, it's worth asking whether this is a fundamentally self-serving conception: does Kerouac want to give anything back to his friends, or just want them to enrich *his* life? Arguably, Ray risks viewing Japhy as just one more step along the path to enlightenment. Meanwhile, Ray views himself as an isolated, self-sufficient individual who doesn't need to worry about others. That said, Kerouac does emphasize that friendship is a reciprocal, meaning that both sides need to contribute. For instance, he differentiates between Ray's parties with Japhy, Alvah, and Warren (where everyone gets **drunk**, reads poetry together, and ends up feeling like they understand the universe) and the boring parties at the Monahans' house (which are full of empty banter). The first parties represent authentic friendship because *everyone* contributes to the group, and *everyone* grows by participating. In other words, Kerouac suggests that authentic friendship requires giving as well as receiving, and this can make it the basis for forming an authentic (or truly free) *community*. After all, this is why Japhy envisions forming a community of roaming Dharma Bums who live in shacks, write poetry, and work together to help enlighten one another and the world as a whole.

LITERATURE AND AUTHENTICITY

When Ray Smith and his buddies are not hitchhiking, drinking, or spending time in the woods, they're usually hanging out in their wooden shacks in Berkeley, reading and writing. In fact, meditation and literature are practically the only things they take seriously, and their greatest aspiration is to write poetry that captures the beauty of the world as they see it. In *The Dharma Bums*, Ray (who's a stand-in for author Jack Kerouac) turns to books not for pleasure or information, but rather as a model for how to live. Accordingly, for Kerouac, literature does not belong to a world of art and ideas separated off from real life—rather, it's the truest expression of a writer's identity, and it is meaningful when it gives readers a model for structuring their own lives.

Ray and Japhy don't just read for entertainment—rather, they avidly study literature in an attempt to model their own lives on it. Ray spends much of his time reading religious scriptures, like the Diamond Sūtra and the Bible, and contemplating their teachings and their consequences for his life. When he reads poetry, he approaches it in much the same way: as scripture to

study and fully absorb, not just verse to consume and appreciate. This shows that he views literature as a guide to the world, not a distraction from it. Similarly, Japhy spends his days in Berkeley reading and translating Chinese and Japanese poetry. Most notably, he introduces Ray to the Buddhist poet Han Shan, who lived on a remote **mountaintop** and wrote about the beauty of nature and isolation. But Ray and Japhy don't just appreciate Han Shan's writings because they're beautiful: rather, they use them as a model for their own lives. In fact, at the very end of the book, Ray goes to spend a summer on a remote mountaintop in the Cascade Range. There, he compares himself to Han Shan—which suggests that he has fulfilled his dream of living an ascetic, solitary life. This supports his theory that literature is a guide to life, and indeed, he presents this more directly earlier in the book. When Ray attends a poetry reading in San Francisco, he contrasts the formal, academic view of literature as political art—represented by the critic Rheinhold Cacoethes's endless monologues about the state of American poetry—with Japhy's practical, working-class view of literature as a window into life. This makes it clear that Kerouac values authenticity above originality and creativity in literature: he wants to read and write books that will help him immerse himself in the real world of individual experience, not bring him into an alternate world of fantasy.

Because Ray and Japhy view literature as a representation of authentic experience, they also write in order to give expression to their lives and philosophies. From the beginning of the book, Ray specifically admires Japhy for his writing—at the poetry reading where they meet, Ray is struck by Japhy's clear, direct poems about Native American religion, Buddhist monks, and the American middle class. Throughout the whole book, Japhy writes far more often than Ray does, and he presents his poems as expressions of his love for nature. For instance, just before he ships out for Japan to study Buddhism, he announces to Ray that he wants to write a long poem about the beauty of the Pacific Northwest woods where he grew up. He doesn't see this poem as a way to explore new ideas, communicate a message to others, or prove his creativity—rather, it's a kind of testimonial, a way to capture his feelings and beliefs on the page. Ray also spends much of his time writing poetry, especially during and after his trip to visit his family in North Carolina. For instance, before he leaves for the Cascades, he writes a poem about saints because he views himself as a "crazy saint." These poems are also part of a search for authentic self-expression: he wants to find his voice, describe his reality, and define his identity for himself in the process.

Of course, Ray (Kerouac) is also busy at work writing *The Dharma Bums* itself during the book's events: it's really his stream-of-consciousness journal, an attempt to record his reality as closely and authentically as possible. If "Cold Mountain" is Han Shan's masterwork because it gives his readers a window into his unique life and mind, then *The Dharma Bums* is Kerouac's attempt to capture and preserve his own eccentric view of the world through writing.

INCLUSION, EXCLUSION, AND COMMUNITY

In addition to searching for truths about the universe through meditation, Ray Smith and his friends also dream of changing the world. They believe that their values could form the basis of a religious community, and Japhy Ryder even talks about starting a countercultural "rucksack revolution" to transform society as a whole. Nevertheless, when they talk about this free and inclusive society, Ray, Japhy, and their friends ironically imagine that everyone in it is a white man, just like them. So, while Kerouac suggests that happiness is best found in an open community of likeminded people, he also shows how people with privilege—like the white men at the center of his book—can mistakenly think their communities are open and free when they're really deeply exclusionary. This suggests that, while homogeneous communities can be comfortable and freeing for those who build them, they are just as often dangerous, oppressive, or exclusionary to those who don't.

Japhy views Buddhism as a collective project and thinks it's his calling to transform the world through by building Buddhist communities. He dreams of getting "millions of guys all over the world" to join his revolution and start "bringing the word down to everybody." He thinks that they will build a new kind of society, in which everyone lives like he does: they will reject consumerism, wander the **mountains**, drink tea, and read poetry. And, not surprisingly, Japhy thinks that his likeminded Buddhist friends are the chosen people who must start building this new society on a small scale. As a result, he views his friend group's homogeneity as an advantage: they all love Buddhism and poetry, and they have a great time partying together. By extension, Ray and Japhy think that if everyone in the world followed their value system, everyone would be better off. As they bring others into their friend group and share their thoughts and writings, they believe that they are starting to build the inclusive, utopian Buddhist community that they've dreamt about.

Ray and Japhy intend to save the world from its own folly, but Kerouac shows that their vision of spiritual community is limiting because it relies on homogeneity. Namely, they want everyone to believe the same things and live the same lifestyle, and they imagine a society built for middle-class white American men. Their privilege leads them to falsely assume that their individual experiences are universal, which then blinds them to others' needs, experiences, and humanity. Accordingly, even though they theoretically want to include everyone in their friend group and future religious utopia, they actually end up *excluding* most people from it.

First, Ray and Japhy view white men like themselves as the ultimate authority on Buddhism, while ignoring the actual Asian Buddhists who surround them. When they pass a Buddhist temple in San Francisco, for instance, Japhy refuses to visit because he considers his own version of Zen Buddhism purer than Chinese immigrants' traditional Buddhism. Similarly, he reveres many Buddhist monks and poets from China and Japan, but they're are dead or mythical—he doesn't know any living Buddhist leaders. Thus, when Japhy actually goes to Japan to study Buddhism, he imagines that he'll bring its secrets back to the U.S.—even though many Japanese Buddhists are already living and teaching in the U.S. Rather than joining the existing Buddhist community, Japhy insists on forming a new community by and for white men. In his utopia, these white men get to learn from Asian cultures and religions, but actual Asian people are never involved in this process. In this way, the like-mindedness in Ray and Japhy's community is actually based on racial exclusivity.

Similarly, even as Ray and Japhy preach openness and inclusivity, they also refuse to see women as their equals. Japhy's girlfriends Princess, Polly, and Psyche all take an interest in Buddhism, but Ray and Japhy treat them more like sex objects than intellectual equals. For instance, Ray comments that Princess "wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy" but that she can't, because she's a woman—the most she can do is have sex with "big Buddhist" men and become a "holy concubine." When Princess calls herself a bodhisattva, the men start laughing, yet when Japhy calls Ray a *bodhisattva*, he takes this as a serious compliment. This shows the men's double standard: even though Princess's beliefs about Buddhism are just as sophisticated as Ray and Japhy's, the men don't view her as an equal. This isn't accidental: it's built into Japhy's vision of a spiritual community. He imagines a network of white Buddhist men living in shacks and meditating across North America—or even colonizing the rest of the world. But he promises that the "pure holy men" won't have to be alone: they'll "have women, too, wives, small huts with religious families." Not only does Japhy talk about women and children as men's property, then, but he thinks that women should be forced to live isolated lives in the woods, take care of their absent husbands' houses, and raise their children so that their husbands can freely wander around the world, party, and pray. In other words, the community of Buddhist men he wants to create relies on those men being able to control women and treat them as property, rather than admitting them to the community as equals.

Despite their well-intentioned desire to build a free, inclusive community, the Dharma Bums end up creating a community that's neither free nor inclusive for people who don't happen to be white men. Perhaps they're blinded by their privilege and imagine the lives *they* want to live and the world *they* want to live in, rather than the lives and worlds that would be best for *everyone*. Regardless, by ignoring diversity and imagining that it's possible for large communities to be totally homogeneous, they undermine their own plans. While homogeneity can help build communities, Kerouac's novel shows, it can also be dangerous and exclusionary.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MOUNTAINS

From Ray Smith's perspective as a Buddhist, mountains represent the unchanging natural order of the universe (dharma), and climbing mountains becomes a metaphor for the tough, constant battle of improving oneself in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment. As a result, spending time in the mountains becomes a way for Ray to get closer to nature, understand his place in it, and make progress toward enlightenment.

The book is punctuated by spiritually significant trips to mountains: Ray first falls in love with nature when he, Japhy, and Henry Morley climb Mount Matterhorn. During this trip, Japhy compares the mountains to peaceful Buddhas who have been patiently meditating for hundreds of thousands of years. Because mountains are vast and unchanging, they can help people understand that they really just play a miniscule part in a vast and unchanging universe. Similarly, climbing Mount Matterhorn helps Ray understand various Buddhist teachings, like the proverb, "When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing." This means that there's always more suffering in the world and more work to be done in the effort for enlightenment.

At the end of the book, Ray spends a summer working as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Range in order to fulfill his vision of living self-reliantly in the wilderness and seeking the truth through meditation. For Ray and Japhy, the mountains are the ideal place to challenge and improve themselves with this lifestyle. This explains why they revere figures like the Chinese Buddhist poet Han Shan, who lived alone in a mountain cave. On Desolation Peak, Ray meditates on the endless landscape of mountains before him and sees how his own existence as a human being is miniscule and insignificant.

ALCOHOL

For Ray Smith, alcohol represents the emptiness and vice of human civilization, which he contrasts with the apparent purity and virtue of the life he creates when he goes off to live alone in the wilderness. Although Ray drinks frequently and compulsively throughout the book, his times of

greatest enlightenment are generally his soberest. For instance, when Ray goes to hike **Mount Matterhorn** with Japhy and Henry, he initially worries that he won't have access to alcohol—but then, after taking in the fresh mountain air and meditating on the natural world that surrounds him, Ray realizes that he no longer feels any compulsion to drink. His indifference to alcohol suggests that nature has a purifying effect on him.

While alcohol doesn't always detract from Ray's search for enlightenment, it's only necessary when he's surrounded by other people (rather than alone in nature). Namely, when Ray parties with his closest friends—Japhy, Alvah Goldbrook, and Warren Coughlin—they get drunk, write poetry, and talk about Buddhism together. Alcohol helps them heighten their senses and unleash their creativity so that they can better understand the universe. Similarly, Ray sometimes gets drunk at parties so that he can go meditate in a corner—when he's surrounded by people, he needs to heighten his senses through alcohol in order to focus on the truths of nature and the universe. But when he's out in the wilderness, he can do this sober. These examples suggest that alcohol is Ray's response to the evil or impurity of human civilization. That said, it's also a vice in itself—arguably, Ray's compulsive drinking is his fatal flaw as a character, as it signifies that he's never fully able to abandon human vices and reach the spiritual enlightenment he seeks.

JAPHY'S PRAYER BEADS

While Japhy and Ray are climbing **Mount Matterhorn**, Japhy gifts Ray a string of prayer beads as a token of their friendship. The beads come to represent Japhy's wisdom and the way friendship, knowledge, and spiritual practice are linked for Ray. Namely, Japhy is a kind of spiritual master for Ray: he is far more knowledgeable about Buddhism, and Ray constantly turns to him for advice. He gives Ray the prayer beads during the trip that shows Ray the spiritual value of camping and hiking, so the beads become a symbol of the way their friendship is based on Japhy's wisdom and the specific spiritual practices they share (meditation in the wilderness). Accordingly, when Ray later says a prayer with Japhy's beads, this represents his appreciation for everything that Japhy has taught him and his attempts to put Japhy's spiritual beliefs into practice.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Dharma Bums* published in 1976.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquillity and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world (usually the immense triangular arc of New York to Mexico City to San Francisco) in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) and as a future Hero in Paradise. I had not met Japhy Ryder yet, I was about to the next week, or heard anything about "Dharma Bums" although at this time I was a perfect Dharma Bum myself and considered myself a religious wanderer.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening chapter of *The Dharma Bums*, protagonist Ray Smith (who's a stand-in for author Jack Kerouac) explains his view of the world and his place in it. Even though his faith in Buddhist principles has since lapsed, at the time of the book's events, he saw his purpose in life as making pilgrimages across North America to pursue enlightenment and spread Buddhism. And even though he hadn't yet met Japhy Ryder (an alias for Kerouac's friend Gary Snyder), his close friend who arguably becomes the book's central character, Ray still fit the definition of a "Dharma Bum." He was obsessed with perceiving the fundamental order of the universe, or Dharma, through meditation, and he chose to live as a homeless Bum in order to make his spiritual pursuits possible.

Ray's view of himself as a "religious wanderer" chasing after enlightenment shapes everything he does in *The Dharma Bums*—from the friendship he forms with Japhy Ryder, to the cross-country trips he undertakes, to the lengthy periods of time he spends meditating in the woods. In fact, his spiritual transformation is the book's overarching plotline: Ray learns to overcome his suffering and gains a deeper understanding of Buddhist teachings by meeting Japhy, learning about the power of living meditatively and self-sufficiently in nature from him, and then trying it out for himself. Accordingly, while it's possible to read *The Dharma Bums* as many things—an autobiography, an ode to Gary Snyder, or a portrait of the Beat Generation—Ray's religious commitments and desires are the driving force behind its plot.

Chapter 3 Quotes

I wondered why Han Shan was Japhy's hero.

"Because," said he, "he was a poet, a mountain man, a Buddhist dedicated to the principle of meditation on the essence of all things, a vegetarian too by the way though I haven't got on that kick from figuring maybe in this modern world to be a vegetarian is to split hairs a little since all sentient beings eat what they can. And he was a man of solitude who could take off by himself and live purely and true to himself."

"That sounds like you too."

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder, Ray Smith (speaker), Han Shan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Ray and Japhy meet at a San Francisco poetry reading, Japhy shows Ray a poem he's translating: "Cold Mountain" by the reclusive Chinese poet Han Shan. Even though the poem is just a description of the mountain where Han Shan lived, Japhy goes on to tell Ray that Han Shan is one of his personal role models. This is because Han Shan chose to live in a remote mountain cave all by himself and refused to follow anybody else's rules.

When Japhy praises Han Shan, he succinctly explains some of the things he most fundamentally values: self-expression through literature, understanding the universe through meditation, and self-reliance in nature. These sharply contrast with the ordinary values that people like Ray and Japhy are expected to follow: according to American social norms, they're supposed to get jobs, have families, and buy houses. They're supposed to value stability, material wealth, and their family bloodline—but Ray and Japhy want to pursue what they view as a more spiritually meaningful path.

Japhy's interest in Han Shan also shows how Kerouac and his friends envision the power of literature. Even though Han Shan was an anonymous recluse who carved poems into mountainsides more than 1,000 years ago in China, his writings somehow got to Japhy Ryder in the year 1955 and totally changed his life. Japhy's appreciation for Han Shan thus shows how literature can create a lasting intellectual legacy; specifically, it suggests that the most valuable kind of literature is that which shapes people's worldview and teaches them about the world. Rather than viewing literature as art or entertainment, Ray and Japhy see it as a way of capturing and transmitting human experience across space and time. This also informs Kerouac's writing, in which he values authenticity (being true to his experiences) above artistry, excitement, or coherency. In turn, he wrote in the hopes of getting others to learn about and take up Buddhism.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I'm telling you she was actually glad to do all this and told me "You know, I feel like I'm the mother of all things and I have to take care of my little children."

"You're such a young pretty thing yourself."

"But I'm the old mother of earth. I'm a Bodhisattva," She was just a little off her nut but when I heard her say "Bodhisattva" I realized she wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy and being a girl the only way she could express it was this way, which had its traditional roots in the yabyum ceremony of Tibetan Buddhism, so everything was fine.

Alvah was immensely pleased and was all for the idea of "every Thursday night" and so was I by now.

"Alvah, Princess says she's a Bodhisattva."

"Of course she is."

"She says she's the mother of all of us."

Related Characters: Alvah Goldbrook, Ray Smith, Princess (speaker), Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30-31

Explanation and Analysis

After Ray, Alvah, Japhy, and Princess have an orgy, they all chat about Buddhism. Ray is surprised that Princess was willing to have sex with all three men, even though she's primarily interested in Japhy. But in this passage, she explains her decision: because she's a *Bodhisattva* (an enlightened person who stays in the world to care for other beings), she views having sex with the men as part of her duty to love and care for life on Earth.

However, the men practically laugh this comment off. When Princess says that she feels a sense of obligation to care for them, Ray responds by calling her a "young pretty thing" and commenting to himself that, as a woman, she'll never "be a big Buddhist like Japhy." So, even though Princess is claiming to feel a sense of responsibility *over* the men, Ray instead

immediately asserts that the men are inherently superior to her. He concludes that she's just making things up in an attempt to impress them. As a result, when they ask why Princess had sex with them all and she tells them, the men prefer to ignore the explanation she gives (because she's a woman) and instead insist that there's no good explanation at all for her actions.

This points to a troubling tendency in Ray and Japhy's friend group: women simply aren't treated as equals. The men only view women as what Japhy calls "holy concubine[s]," but never as serious Buddhist thinkers or writers. Even as their group is supposedly about inclusion, liberation, and free love, in reality, it's based on excluding and objectifying women.

> "You know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values but and when I discovered Buddhism and all I suddenly felt that I had lived in a previous lifetime innumerable ages ago and now because of faults and sins in that lifetime I was being degraded to a more grievous domain of existence and my karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom. That's why I was always sympathetic to freedom movements, too, like anarchism in the Northwest, the oldtime heroes of Everett Massacre and all..."

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder (speaker), Ray Smith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

During one of their first parties in Berkeley, Japhy tells Ray and his friends why he feels so drawn to Buddhism and so apathetic about North American culture. In the process, he presents the book's main critique of mainstream society: it's based on a "suburban ideal" because it encourages people to get stable jobs, buy houses, and have families rather than living adventurously or freely. It's also sexually repressed, turning sex into a source of confusion and shame for people, rather than freedom and enjoyment. And when Japhy laments America's "general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values," he's referring to the Red Scare anti-communist purges of the 1950s, which effectively imposed widespread censorship on American media and public life. As a result, despite the U.S.'s stated values, Japhy concludes that "in America [...] nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom."

If Japhy views the United States as sickened by its attachment to the "suburban ideal" and repression of everything that doesn't conform to it, then he views his own Dharma Bum lifestyle as a meaningful alternative. It lets him have fun *and* believe in something—it equates to true freedom, as he sees it. But it does so by turning the "suburban ideal" on its head: Japhy chooses mobility, minimalism, and spiritual rigor over stability, wealth, and endless work. This also explains why his influences are so diverse: he borrows from American Indian and Buddhist cultures, labor movements, and the anarchists and "oldtime heroes" he cites here. What ties all these influences together is that they reject the mainstream status quo and present alternative visions of life, work, and society.

> He was always being bugged by my little lectures on Samadhi ecstasy, which is the state you reach when you stop everything and stop your mind and you actually with your eyes closed see a kind of eternal multiswarm of electrical Power of some kind ululating in place of just pitiful images and forms of objects, which are, after all, imaginary.
>
> [...]
>
> "Don't you think it's much more interesting just to be like Japhy and have girls and studies and good times and really be doing something, than all this silly sitting under trees?"
>
> "Nope," I said, and meant it, and I knew Japhy would agree with me. "All Japhy's doing is amusing himself in the void."
>
> "I don't think so."
>
> "I bet he is. I'm going mountainclimbing with him next week and find out and tell you."

Related Characters: Alvah Goldbrook, Ray Smith (speaker), Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Ray, Japhy, and Alvah discuss their competing visions of the good life. Ray reaffirms his dearly held belief that meditation is the best path to enlightenment, but Alvah totally disagrees: he thinks that meditation is a waste of time. He'd rather enjoy his limited time on earth by partying,

writing poems, doing drugs, or whatever else comes to mind. But Ray thinks *that* lifestyle is the true waste of time, since it distracts people from the reality of the universe, which is that everything is truly made of the "eternal multiswarm of electrical Power," whereas the objects that humans perceive are just "imaginary." Therefore, he thinks that partying just amounts to "amusing [one]self in the void" of reality, whereas a true Buddhist would spend their time and energy *understanding* the void in order to find peace within it.

However, the last part of this passage eventually proves to be ironic. Ray and Alvah both associate Japhy with the hedonistic party lifestyle, and Ray expects that Japhy goes to the mountains in order to enjoy himself, just like at the guys' parties in the city. In reality, when Ray *does* go to the mountains with Japhy, he learns that this setting provides his best chance to meditate and connect with the underlying reality of the universe. It turns out that Japhy isn't the party animal that Ray expects. Rather, he believes it's possible to balance focused spiritual pursuits—like meditation, study, and hiking in the wilderness—with a certain amount of hedonism.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Japhy and I were kind of outlandish-looking on the campus in our old clothes in fact Japhy was considered an eccentric around the campus, which is the usual thing for campuses and college people to think whenever a real man appears on the scene—colleges being nothing but grooming schools for the middle-class non-identity which usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time while the Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness to hear the voice crying in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of the stars, to find the dark mysterious secret of the origin of faceless wonderless crapulous civilization.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38-39

Explanation and Analysis

On their way to meet Henry Morley and start their trip to Mount Matterhorn, Ray and Japhy walk across the UC Berkeley campus, where Ray makes this comment about the difference between the "middle-class non-identity" of college-educated suburbanites and "the Japhies of the world," who live adventurous and exciting lives, trying to actually fulfill their ethical values.

This contrast represents two key conflicts in Kerouac's writing: the tension between mainstream and countercultural values and the two competing visions of intellectual life. The identical "well-to-do houses," whose residents watch identical television shows, represent the way mainstream culture eliminates diversity and free thought. In contrast, Japhy's adventurous lifestyle shows how much more exciting, interesting, and fulfilling life can be when people think for themselves and live according to values they choose, not the ones society imposes on them.

This lifestyle also leads him to more important truth about "the dark mysterious origin[s]" of the universe and human society, which shows how Kerouac also considers his lifestyle to be an intellectually superior way to live. Whereas he thinks that college students, and the professors who teach them, approach literature and philosophy primarily as an intellectual or artistic exercise (designed to stimulate the mind and imagination), Ray and Japhy take great books absolutely seriously as a guide for how to live. Academics think about their values while living ordinary mainstream lives; Kerouac thinks while abstaining from most things in life; while Japhy actually puts his ideas and values into practice. This makes him a "real man," because he's truly dedicated to his principles: he views literature and philosophy as a means to the end of changing the world, rather than just an intellectual game.

❝ Every time he said something he would turn and look at Japhy and deliver these rather brilliant inanities with a complete deadpan; I couldn't understand what kind of strange secret scholarly linguistic clown he really was under these California skies. Or Japhy would mention sleeping bags, and Morley would ramble in with "I'm going to be the possessor of a pale blue French sleeping bag, light weight, goose down, good buy I think, find 'em in Vancouver—good for Daisy Mae. Completely wrong type for Canada. Everyone wants to know if her grandfather was an explorer who met an Eskimo. I'm from the North Pole myself."

"What's he talking about?" I'd ask from the back seat, and Japhy: "He's just an interesting tape recorder."

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder, Ray Smith, Henry Morley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Ray and Japhy set off to climb Mount Matterhorn with the eccentric librarian Henry Morley, whom they bring along simply because he's the only Dharma Bum with a car. In fact, he's less a Dharma Bum than a literary enthusiast: he shares Ray and Japhy's interest in poetry, but he views it primarily as an intellectual exercise, and his personality reflects his preference for pure imagination and creativity, totally unrooted in the world. While Ray and Japhy certainly think imagination and creativity are important, they see Henry's version of them as obnoxious and pointless: he goes on nonsense monologues with nothing of substance, like "an interesting tape recorder." They quickly give up on trying to uncover whatever "secret scholarly linguistic" truth lies beneath Henry's "brilliant inanities," and they decide that his monologues exemplify the pointlessness of art that's disconnected from life.

In contrast, Ray and Japhy write, think, and converse in order to understand life and reveal the world's beauty. Henry uses his creativity to escape the world, while Ray and Japhy use theirs to immerse themselves in it. This is why Jack Kerouac's books are autobiographical, and Gary Snyder's poetry focuses on the beauty of the natural world: both are attempts to get at the authentic truths of human experience in the world. (Ray is Kerouac's pseudonym for himself, and Japhy is his name for his real-life friend Snyder.) This shared commitment to investigating the world, especially through Buddhism, is what draws them to each other and holds their friendship together. Meanwhile, because Henry is lost in his own fantasy world, Ray and Japhy can't form a meaningful friendship with him.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ The vision: it's pure morning in the high dry Sierras, far off clean firs can be seen shadowing the sides of rocky hills, further yet snowcapped pinpoints, nearer the big bushy forms of pines and there's Japhy in his little cap with a big rucksack on his back, clomping along, but with a flower in his left hand which is hooked to the strap of the rucksack at his breast; grass grows out between crowded rocks and boulders; distant sweeps of scree can be seen making gashes down the sides of morning, his eyes shine with joy, he's on his way, his heroes are John Muir and Han Shan and Shih-te and Li Po and John Burroughs and Paul Bunyan and Kropotkin; he's small and has a funny kind of belly [...] because his spine curves a bit, but that's offset by the vigorous long steps he takes [...] and his chest is deep and shoulders broad.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Han Shan, Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

When Ray and Japhy first set off on the trail up Mount Matterhorn, Ray watches Japhy hike and imagines this scene of him all alone in the California wilderness. This passage is a testament to Ray's intense admiration and love for his friend. In many ways, this love even hints at eroticism, as Ray fixates on Japhy's body. Similarly, by weaving together descriptions of the mountain scenery and Japhy's outfit and physique, Kerouac suggests that Japhy shares in the mountains' rugged beauty. He literally incorporates nature into his outfit by hooking a flower into his backpack strap, while the vast landscape appears to swallow him up, to the point where he barely stands out against it.

The wilderness becomes a metaphor for Japhy's wild personality, physical beauty, and masculine toughness. Harsh yet delicate, welcoming yet solitary, and patient yet full of energy, Japhy is like the mountains in human form. In turn, he shows Ray how it's possible to live in harmony with nature, which is a key element of the Buddhist practice they share. Similarly, he lives out a fantasy based on his poet, naturalist, and philosopher idols, which shows how it's possible to live in accordance with one's values—even when mainstream society rejects them.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ There was something inexpressibly broken in my heart as though I'd lived before and walked this trail, under similar circumstances with a fellow Bodhisattva, but maybe on a more important journey, I felt like lying down by the side of the trail and remembering it all. The woods do that to you, they always look familiar, long lost, like the face of a long-dead relative, like an old dream, like a piece of forgotten song drifting across the water, most of all like golden eternities of past childhood or past manhood and all the living and the dying and the heartbreak that went on a million years ago and the clouds as they pass overhead seem to testify (by their own lonesome familiarity) to this feeling.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

As Ray hikes up towards Mount Matterhorn with Japhy, he feels a sense of déjà vu. He interprets this feeling in terms of Buddhist scripture, as a sign that he's been to this trail (or one like it) in a past life. The woods are simultaneously new and familiar, just as any two stretches of wilderness are both similar and different in certain essential ways. For instance, water flows, animals move, and clouds go by in the same way, yet a region's specific mix of plants, animals, and terrain is always unique. This simultaneous similarity and difference—or constancy and change—reminds Ray of one of the fundamental principles of the universe in Buddhism. Namely, it reminds him that the world is both always the same and always changing: over long swaths of time, it's unchanging and its essence always remains the same, but from moment to moment, it constantly and visibly changes. For instance, the woods look the same as always, and yet it's possible to see animals moving, leaves falling, trees growing and dying, and so on.

This realization shows Ray for the first time how nature is a uniquely valuable place for his pursuit of self-knowledge and inner peace through Buddhism. Like most of his buddies—with the exception of Japhy—Ray grew up in the city and never realized how much more connected he'd feel to the universe out in the wilderness. But now, he sees that all the truths he's been reading about in the Buddhist scriptures are much more clearly visible in nature. As a result, it's easier for Ray to perceive and remember those truths when he's in the wild. By considering and meditating on those truths in nature, he can draw out their implications for his life—for instance, because everything changes, it doesn't make sense to get too attached to things that will inevitably pass out of existence. Perceiving the truths of Buddhism in nature allows Ray to engage these truths in a deeper way, fully digest them, and incorporate them into his character and everyday activities, so that they become his primary motivating beliefs.

❝ "I sit down and say, and I run all my friends and relatives and enemies one by one in this, without entertaining any angers or gratitudes or anything, and I say, like 'Japhy Ryder, equally empty, equally to be loved, equally a coming Buddha,' then I run on, say, to 'David O. Selznick, equally empty, equally to be loved, equally a coming Buddha' though I don't use names like David O. Selznick, just people I know because when I say the words 'equally a coming Buddha' I want to be thinking of their eyes, like you take Morley, his blue eyes behind those glasses, when you think 'equally a coming Buddha' you think of those eyes and you really do suddenly see the true secret serenity and the truth of his coming Buddhahood. Then you think of your enemy's eyes."

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Henry Morley, Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

During their hike up Mount Matterhorn, Ray and Japhy set up camp for the night and then have a long conversation about Buddhism. Specifically, they talk about the different spiritual practices and rituals they perform in their quest for self-realization (or enlightenment). Ray explains that he performs this prayer for everyone in his life. It's not a way to express his gratitude or appreciation, he says, but rather a way to remind himself that everything in the world has the same essence—it's "empty" (a concept in Buddhism which refers to the way nothing's existence is fully independent of everything else's). But Ray also thinks that all conscious beings have the potential to eventually reach enlightenment, which is why they're all "coming Buddha[s]."

However, since Ray also prays for his enemies, this prayer also relates to the Buddhist view of charity and mercy that he presents throughout the novel. In short, it's a way of creating goodwill and destroying evil. When Ray prays for his enemies, he puts them on the same standing as everyone else in his life, and he tries to overcome his grudges by

hoping that these enemies can reach enlightenment, like everyone else. After all, if they all become enlightened, Ray and his enemies will probably be able to easily resolve their conflicts and move forward harmoniously. Therefore, Ray's prayer is a way of showing that he's capable of loving everyone in the world, his friends and enemies alike.

❝ Once I opened my eyes and saw Japhy sitting there rigid as a rock and I felt like laughing he looked so funny. But the mountains were mighty solemn, and so was Japhy, and for that matter so was I, and in fact laughter is solemn.
It was beautiful. The pinkness vanished and then it was all purple dusk and the roar of the silence was like a wash of diamond waves going through the liquid porches of our ears, enough to soothe a man a thousand years. I prayed for Japhy, for his future safety and happiness and eventual Buddhahood. It was all completely serious, all completely hallucinated, all completely happy.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Ray and Japhy meditate on top of a cliff while gazing down at the valley below. When Ray sees Japhy "rigid as a rock," he's clearly comparing him to the mountains. This is significant in terms of his Buddhist worldview: both Japhy and the mountains represent the patience and constancy of the universe, with its unchanging essence and wisdom. The mountains represent this because they've been around for millions of years and remain even as the world around them changes; Japhy represents this constancy because of his peaceful stillness when he meditates. After all, meditation's goal is to help people perceive the simultaneous change and consistency in the universe, so it would be reasonable to say that Japhy's able to be still precisely because he's looking out on the mountains.

Ray's prayer for Japhy is a form of generosity: he wants to thank and repay his friend for showing him the glory of nature and helping him understand Buddhism. When he sees the stunning sunset and feels the valley's incredible silence, Ray directly experiences what it means to achieve happiness through spiritual goods rather than material ones. He sees that people need nothing more than this kind of beauty in order to make life worth living.

Finally, Ray concludes that "It was all completely serious, all completely hallucinated, all completely happy." Although seriousness, hallucination, and happiness might not conventionally seem to go together, in Buddhism, they do: the moment he's sharing with Japhy is serious because they're contemplating the secrets of the universe, and yet it's hallucinated in the sense that Buddhists see everything as a temporary arrangement of matter—the valley in front of Ray is therefore just an illusion, whereas the true underlying reality of the world lies beneath it. This brings them happiness because, in Buddhism, directly perceiving the true nature of reality is the key to overcoming suffering.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ I promised myself that I would begin a new life. "All over the West, and the mountains in the East, and the desert, I'll tramp with a rucksack and make it the pure way."

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

While climbing Mount Matterhorn, Ray is so struck by the wilderness's unparalleled beauty that he decides to emulate Japhy and embark upon "a new life" out in the wilderness as a spiritual wanderer. The first portion of *The Dharma Bums* is mainly about the spiritual awakening that Ray undergoes through his friendship with Japhy—and the rest of the book, from this point forward, is about his attempt to live "the pure way" as a Buddhist pilgrim.

Like Japhy, Ray chooses this lifestyle because he believes it's his best chance to actually put the values he's learned through Buddhism into practice. It will allow him to live unconventionally, traveling and taking odd jobs as necessary—although he was already living that way at the beginning of the book. And it will allow him to dedicate all his time to his three overriding goals: achieving enlightenment for himself, spreading Buddhism to others, and writing. He'll be able to advance on the path to enlightenment by spending as much time as he needs meditating in nature and studying the Buddhist sūtras, and whenever he meets other people, he can help them understand Buddhism's promise to relieve people of their

suffering. Finally, he'll be able to write as much as he wants and continue using these writings in order to better understand and represent the world around him.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ "I've been reading Whitman, know what he says, *Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*, he means that's the attitude for the Bard, the Zen Lunacy bard of old desert paths, see the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em."

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97-98

Explanation and Analysis

After Ray and Japhy return from Mount Matterhorn to Berkeley, they throw a party and start discussing their plans for the future. Ray wants to go live as a "rucksack wanderer" (as Japhy puts it), while Japhy hopes to spread this lifestyle around the globe. He thinks that the Dharma Bum lifestyle isn't only an individual choice—it can also be the basis for entire communities or societies. Therefore, he's clear about his intention to start a revolution and get people everywhere to reject modern capitalism and live like him and his friends.

Japhy views his rejection of mainstream values in terms of a grand historical conflict between nature and civilization, or between living in harmony with the world and dominating it. Whereas American society is largely structured around the drive to divide nature up, control it, and sell it off for profit, Japhy imagines that another society could prioritize spirituality, morality, and genuine happiness over profit. As a result of America's materialism, Japhy continues, people are constantly forced to "work for the privilege of consuming," and they lose track of what makes people truly happy.

❝ "Yessir, that's what, a series of monasteries for fellows to go and monastate and meditate in, we can have groups of shacks up in the Sierras or the High Cascades or even Ray says down in Mexico and have big wild gangs of pure holy men getting together to drink and talk and pray, think of the waves of salvation can flow out of nights like that, and finally have women, too, wives, small huts with religious families, like the old days of the Puritans. Who's to say the cops of America and the Republicans and Democrats are gonna tell everybody what to do?"

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder (speaker), Ray Smith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

As Japhy elaborates on his vision of a free society of Dharma Bums, he starts to specifically outline what he thinks people would do with their days. But notably, when he talks about people, he's really talking about men: "fellows" will become "pure holy men" and "have women" who live in tiny huts with their children. Curiously, then, although Japhy changes wage work out for meditation and hiking, in his utopia, people still live in male-dominated nuclear families. Women are still supposed to stay home and raise families, while their husbands get to party and write poetry.

The gender hierarchy in Japhy's utopian vision shows that his vision of liberation from work is actually not as inclusive as it claims to be: it's only available to men (and seemingly only white, heterosexual men, at that). He understands "work" to mean the kind of waged work men that do outside the house, so he does nothing to change the social expectation that women will work at home for no pay, under the watchful eye of their husbands. While this is no longer the norm today, it clearly was in the 1950s, and this might explain why Japhy can't look past it.

Ultimately, by forgetting that different people have different needs and desires, Japhy ends up assuming that everyone in his utopia will want to live the same way that he and his friends do. In this utopia, then, he would end up denying people freedom instead of giving it to them. In fact,

this poses even greater problems for his utopian society. For instance, Japhy suggests that it wouldn't need a government, because the men would all roughly agree on how to live, and they would have abundant resources and no concern for how to distribute them. While this looks coherent as a fantasy, it would easily fall apart as soon as was some significant disagreement. Therefore, even as Japhy claims that he's serious about starting a revolution, it should be clear to Kerouac's readers that he's really using his vision of a utopian society as a way of justifying why his values will lead people to happy, flourishing lives—even if this falls apart under logical scrutiny.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ I wanted to get me a full pack complete with everything necessary to sleep, shelter, eat, cook, in fact a regular kitchen and bedroom right on my back, and go off somewhere and find perfect solitude and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind and be completely neutral from any and all ideas. I intended to pray, too, as my only activity, pray for all living creatures; I saw it was the only decent activity left in the world. [...] I didn't want to have anything to do, really, either with Japhy's ideas about society (I figured it would be better just to avoid it altogether, walk around it) or with any of Alvah's ideas about grasping after life as much as you can because of its sweet sadness and because you would be dead some day.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Alvah Goldbrook, Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105-106

Explanation and Analysis

After briefly settling back into his life in Berkeley, Ray decides that it's time to try to fulfill the promise he made to himself on Mount Matterhorn: he's going to live out of a backpack in the wilderness, like Japhy, and dedicate his time to meditating and studying Buddhism. Ray's backpack represents his self-sufficiency because it's supposed to contain everything he needs to survive in nature. As Japhy pointed out, most people's possessions fill a house, which ties them down to one place—but Ray's can fit on his back, which makes him free and mobile. This means that Ray, like Japhy, can afford to spend his lives wandering around the woods precisely because he opts out of consumerism and refuses to spend money on accumulating material things.

Even though Ray is free because he refuses to participate in mainstream society, he's not choosing this lifestyle in order to rebel against it, unlike Japhy. In other words, his goal is individual and spiritual: he's not trying to make a political or cultural statement (even though *The Dharma Bums* certainly did end up doing that). He views prayer (or meditation) as "the only decent activity left in the world" because he's come to see the whole world through the lens of Buddhism, which holds that all life is suffering and that freedom from suffering comes through meditation. In this sense, he holds much more tightly to a conventional version of Buddhist practice than Japhy, who combines Buddhism with his ecological and anti-capitalist sensibilities.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Then suddenly one night after supper as I was pacing in the cold windy darkness of the yard I felt tremendously depressed and threw myself right on the ground and cried "I'm gonna die!" because there was nothing else to do in the cold loneliness of this harsh inhospitable earth, and instantly the tender bliss of enlightenment was like milk in my eyelids and I was warm. And I realized that this was the truth Rosie knew now, and all the dead, my dead father and dead brother and dead uncles and cousins and aunts, the truth that is realizable in a dead man's bones and is beyond the Tree of Buddha as well as the Cross of Jesus. Believe that the world is an ethereal flower, and ye live. I knew this!

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Ray's mother, Rosie Buchanan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136-137

Explanation and Analysis

One evening just after Christmastime, at his mother's house in North Carolina, Ray comes to this epiphany about his life and death. Slipping from despair into bliss, he first realizes that he's mortal—but then he recognizes that all living beings share this fate. "The world is an ethereal flower" because it briefly and beautifully exists before passing out of existence; things' death and decay is simply part of the universe's eternal fabric. And this recognition makes it easier to cope with pain and suffering by forcing Ray to accept them as inevitable.

When Ray immediately shifts from feeling despair to feeling a sense of serenity, this is evidence that his religious quest is succeeding. As he increasingly immerses himself in Buddhist teachings, he starts to automatically counter his negative thoughts and feelings with the truths he's learned from studying the sūtras and absorbed through meditation.

Accordingly, the goal of Buddhism—to help people overcome suffering—is manifesting in Ray's life.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ After a while my meditations and studies began to bear fruit. It really started late in January, one frosty night in the woods in the dead silence it seemed I almost heard the words said: "Everything is all right forever and forever and forever." I let out a big Hoo, one o'clock in the morning, the dogs leaped up and exulted. I felt like yelling it to the stars. I clasped my hands and prayed, "O wise and serene spirit of Awakenerhood, everything's all right forever and forever and forever and thank you thank you thank you amen." What'd I care about the tower of ghouls, and sperm and bones and dust, I felt free and therefore I *was* free.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Ray's mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137-138

Explanation and Analysis

About a month into his stay at his mother's house in North Carolina, Ray has another big epiphany about the nature of the universe: "Everything is all right forever and forever and forever." This is his way of saying that the world goes on despite people's pain and suffering. It follows consistent laws and principles, and these don't change even when individuals face personal tragedies. Through this realization, Ray sees that his own suffering won't so much as cause a hiccup in the universe—and means that he can choose to not let it impact him either.

The last sentence of this passage especially highlights how Buddhism works for Ray: when he remembers *Dharma*, or the nature of the universe, he stops caring about the things that ordinarily capture his attention and energy. This allows him to feel free—and *feeling* free is the same as *being* free, which is essentially a psychological state rather than a physical one.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ "Your mind makes out the orange by seeing it, hearing it, touching it, smelling it, tasting it and thinking about it but without this mind, you call it, the orange would not be seen or heard or smelled or tasted or even mentally noticed, it's actually, that orange, depending on your mind to exist! Don't you see that? By itself it's a no-thing, it's really mental, it's seen only of your mind. In other words it's empty and awake."

[...]

I went back to the woods that night and thought, "What does it mean that I am in this endless universe, thinking that I'm a man sitting under the stars on the terrace of the earth, but actually empty and awake throughout the emptiness and awakedness of everything? It means that I'm empty and awake, that I *know* I'm empty, awake, and that there's no difference between me and anything else. In other words it means that I've become the same as everything else. It means I've become a Buddha."

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Ray's period of meditation in North Carolina continues to bear fruits—in this passage, he has an epiphany about things' so-called *emptiness*. He does his best to share his thinking with his family—although instead of sharing in his fascination, they respond with confusion and concern.

Ray argues that things like an orange don't exist independently of our perceptions—an orange is just a collection of molecules, for example, with no inner essence or being holding it together. All other objects are similar, including people—even though we think of ourselves as individuals with distinct identities, according to Ray's Buddhist worldview, this self is an illusion. People are just a collection of forces, desires, capabilities, and so on, and they're just another empty part of the vast, interconnected universe. And yet everything is "awake" because it's animated by consciousness. So, when Ray sees the orange, one slice of the universe is really just becoming "awake" to another slice's existence.

This realization is important, because it concretely shows Ray why Buddhists say that things are "empty" and therefore that we shouldn't attach ourselves to them. But it also shows him why Buddhists think that people can understand their unity with the universe through their perception, or by being "awake" to it. When Ray returns outside, he applies this line of thinking to his own self and

asks what it means to realize that he is not truly himself—which is to say that there's nothing distinctive about him that separates him from anything or anyone else. He concludes that this is the characteristic feature of Buddhas: they lose their ego entirely and realize their unity with the universe. In fact, this epiphany suggests that Ray might have reached enlightenment, if only for a moment.

Chapter 25 Quotes

"It goes on and on, the disciples and the Masters go through the same thing, first they have to find and tame the ox of their mind essence, and then abandon that, then finally they attain to nothing, as represented by this empty panel, then having attained nothing they attain everything which is springtime blossoms in the trees so they end up coming down to the city to get drunk with the butchers like Li Po." That was a very wise cartoon, it reminded me of my own experience, trying to tame my mind in the woods, then realizing it was all empty and awake and I didn't have to do anything, and now I was getting drunk with the butcher Japhy. We played records and lounged around smoking then went out and cut more wood.

Related Characters: Ray Smith, Japhy Ryder (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

After Ray reunites with Japhy in California, they quickly start sharing Buddhist parables and epiphanies. Japhy shows Ray a painting that depicts a boy who tames an ox but then abandons it and then goes to meditate and achieve enlightenment in the wilderness. Finally, the boy goes to the city and gets drunk with a group of butchers, although there's an empty panel before this last scene. As Japhy explains in this passage, the painting represents a Buddha's life cycle: taming the ox is like controlling the mind. Reaching enlightenment means accepting one's fundamental emptiness and thereby uniting with the universe—but by uniting with the universe people get to enjoy its full abundance. And after a person reaches enlightenment and sheds their worldly attachments, they can live carefree lives, even if that means getting drunk with butchers.

While enlightenment is Buddhism's ultimate goal, Japhy's explication of the painting shows that it's really just one part of a longer, more complex process. For instance, this shows why Japhy considers partying and having sex is totally compatible with Buddhism: although they may ordinarily be sinful and reflect people's attachment to worldly pleasures, enlightened people can indulge in them without these attachments.

Of course, Ray then compares the painting to his own experience, which shows how he continues to view his life's purpose in terms of the prototypical Buddhist path to enlightenment. Similarly, by using the painting as a metaphor for his and Ray's journeys through Buddhism, Japhy also shows how he believes art can provide a model for people's lives. While this mostly occurs through poetry in the rest of the novel, it's really possible for all art, so long as its goal is to instruct and not merely to experiment or innovate.

Japhy said "Why do you sit on your ass all day?"

"I practice do-nothing."

"What's the difference? Burn it, my Buddhism is activity," said Japhy rushing off down the hill again. Then I could hear him sawing wood and whistling in the distance. He couldn't stop jiggling for a minute. His meditations were regular things, by the clock, he'd meditated first thing waking in the morning then he had his mid-afternoon meditation, only about three minutes long, then before going to bed and that was that. But I just ambled and dreamed around. We were two strange dissimilar monks on the same path.

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder, Ray Smith (speaker), Sean Monahan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175-176

Explanation and Analysis

As Ray and Japhy pass their time in Sean Monahan's cottage, they quickly remember that they approach Buddhism from two opposite angles: Ray prefers "do-nothing," which means he "sit[s] on [his] ass all day" and meditates, whereas Japhy likes to fill his day with meaningful activities that bring him pleasure. Although Buddhist monks and devotees tend to be stereotyped as meditating all day, in reality, Japhy's lifestyle is also fully compatible with Buddhism: he engages in other activities that give him joy, and his constant state of mindfulness is similar to Ray's constant trancelike meditation.

Beyond showing that there are multiple valid ways to live a Buddhist life, this passage also shows how Ray absorbs

Japhy's wisdom without imitating him exactly. Even though Japhy is arguably his most important mentor, Ray is not bound to see the world in the same way as Japhy does or worship in the same way. In other words, their friendship is mutually supportive: it contributes to their growth as individuals without boxing either of them in.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ "Alvah says that while guys like us are all excited about being real Orientals and wearing robes, actual Orientals over there are reading surrealism and Charles Darwin and mad about Western business suits."

"East'll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing. Think of millions of guys all over the world with rucksacks on their backs tramping around the back country and hitchhiking and bringing the word down to everybody."

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder, Ray Smith (speaker), Alvah Goldbrook

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

During a long hike to Stinson Beach just before Japhy's departure for Japan, Ray and Japhy have a final, lengthy conversation about Buddhism. Yet again, Japhy declares his intention to spread his "Dharma Bum" counterculture and start a revolution. But this time, he wants it to happen across the whole world, not just in the United States. He views such a revolution as an example of East meeting West: namely, Western men like him will launch this movement based on Eastern philosophy.

However, in the first quote of this passage, before Japhy proposes this revolution, Ray points out how people in Asia probably feel a similar kind of fasciation about the exotic United States, at least according to their mutual friend Alvah. In mentioning this, Ray shows that Japhy's view of Asia is overly simplistic. Japhy views himself as the ultimate authority on Japanese and Chinese philosophy and thinks that he'll be the one to start the "great world revolution," uniting East with West. But this utopian vision overlooks the fact that Asia is also modern and diverse, full of modern and diverse people with their own worldviews and philosophies. While Japhy's intentions are certainly noble, Ray points out that he's projecting his own Buddhist fantasies onto Asian people, rather than really reaching out to them and learning from them.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ It was all mine, not another human pair of eyes in the world were looking at this immense cycloramic universe of matter. I had a tremendous sensation of its dreamlikeness which never left me all that summer and in fact grew and grew, especially when I stood on my head to circulate my blood, right on top of the mountain, using a burlap bag for a head mat, and then the mountains looked like little bubbles hanging in the void upsidedown. In fact I realized they were upsidedown and I was upsidedown! There was nothing here to hide the fact of gravity holding us all intact upsidedown against a surface globe of earth in infinite empty space. And suddenly I realized I was truly alone and had nothing to do but feed myself and rest and amuse myself, and nobody could criticize.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

When Ray makes it to his fire lookout post on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Range, he's initially worried and confused. But once he gets comfortable, he begins to notice the spectacular wilderness around him, and he starts to feel deeply fulfilled on the mountaintop. As usual, being in nature gives him a particularly astute sense of the universe's harmonious beauty. Because he has an incredible bird's-eye view of the surrounding nature and can't see a person anywhere in the vicinity, he feels like he has a personal audience with the universe as a whole. All of its truths—its enormity, its unity, its cyclical changes with the days and seasons—are immediately clear to him.

When Ray stands on his head—a medical treatment he learned from a Dharma Bum in a Los Angeles trainyard—he gets a new perspective on this majestic stretch of wilderness. The sky comes into the foreground of his vision, which reminds him of the void—or the emptiness and interdependence of everything in the universe. This is also a metaphor for the way Ray has learned Buddhist truths about the world precisely by reorienting his perspective and finding a new vantage point from which to see everything around him.

Chapter 34 Quotes

Suddenly a green and rose rainbow shafted right down into Starvation Ridge not three hundred yards away from my door, like a bolt, like a pillar: it came among steaming clouds and orange sun turmoiling.

What is a rainbow, Lord?

A hoop

For the lowly.

It hooped right into Lightning Creek, rain and snow fell simultaneous, the lake was milkwhite a mile below, it was just too crazy. I went outside and suddenly my shadow was ringed by the rainbow as I walked on the hilltop, a lovely-haloed mystery making me want to pray. "O Ray, the career of your life is like a raindrop in the illimitable ocean which is eternal awakenerhood. Why worry ever any more? Write and tell Japhy that."

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

On one of Ray's last days atop Desolation Peak, a giant rainbow forms right next to him, engulfing a huge arc of sky stretching from the valley floor to the ridge a few yards away. It unites diverse landscapes and different weather zones, providing a visual metaphor for the Buddhist belief that everything in the universe is united. Ray sees this as a sign from God (although it's unclear whether he means this literally, in terms of the Christian God, or figuratively, as a sign from the universe).

When ray calls the rainbow "A hoop / For the lowly," what he seems to mean is that it's a route for "lowly" beings like him to access heaven (or *nirvana*) and move toward spiritual enlightenment. When he walks into it, he's literally surrounded by light, which makes it clear that the rainbow is indeed a metaphor for him reaching enlightenment, or at least making progress toward it.

In the prayer Ray composes for Japhy, he says this explicitly: he aspires to become "a raindrop" in the ocean of "eternal awakenerhood," which is his way of saying that he aspires to be one miniscule particle in the vast world of enlightened things. He will always be in awe of this vastness, which makes his life and work look miniscule by comparison. In dedicating his poem to Japhy, Ray also expresses his enduring respect for his friend, whom he partially credits for his spiritual awakening.

Finally, these lines show how Ray (and, by extension, Kerouac) chooses to capture his most significant thoughts and feelings in writing, in order to preserve them forever. Of course, this includes the thoughts and feelings that came to be *The Dharma Bums*.

And suddenly it seemed I saw that unimaginable little Chinese bum standing there, in the fog, with that expressionless humor on his seamed face. [...] It was the realer-than-life Japhy of my dreams, and he stood there saying nothing. "Go away, thieves of the mind!" he cried down the hollows of the unbelievable Cascades. [...] "Japhy," I said out loud, "I don't know when we'll meet again or what'll happen in the future, but Desolation, Desolation, I owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for guiding me to the place where I learned all. Now comes the sadness of coming back to cities and I've grown two months older and there's all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upsidedown in the void God bless them, but Japhy you and me forever we know, O ever youthful, O ever weeping."

Related Characters: Japhy Ryder, Ray Smith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 243-244

Explanation and Analysis

On his last day in the Cascades, just after the enormous rainbow engulfs him, Ray has another vision. This time, it's a vision of Japhy as a Chinese hobo—a figure he first saw in a dream many months before. This figure represents a wiser, self-actualized version of Japhy who has reached Asia and found enlightenment there. His appearance brings the book full circle, reminding Ray of the reason he went out into the woods in the first place.

When Japhy appears in this vision, he continues to serve as a spiritual guide for Ray. His quote—"Go away, thieves of the mind!"—is a reference to the concentration and clarity of thought required for successful meditation. "Thieves of the mind" would be anything that distracts people or steals their attention, forcing them to live lives that aren't fulfilling or don't align with their values.

Ray's effusive thank-you reflects how deeply indebted he

feels to Japhy by the end of his book. Indeed, the entirety of *The Dharma Bums* is about what Ray learns from Japhy, and by coming to Desolation Peak, Ray has quite literally followed in Japhy's footsteps. His deep gratitude for Japhy's guidance testifies to friendship's incredible and unrepayable power to shape people's lives—if they're willing to let it do so.

> And in keeping with Japhy's habit of always getting down on one knee and delivering a little prayer to the camp we left, to the one in the Sierra, and the others in Marin, and the little prayer of gratitude he had delivered to Sean's shack the day he sailed away, as I was hiking down the mountain with my pack I turned and knelt on the trail and said "Thank you, shack." Then I added "Blah," with a little grin, because I knew that shack and that mountain would understand what that meant, and turned and went on down the trail back to this world.

Related Characters: Ray Smith (speaker), Sean Monahan, Japhy Ryder

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

When it's time for him to depart Desolation Peak and descend back to the civilization, Ray bids the land and the cabin where he lived farewell. He borrows this practice from Japhy, like so many of his other rituals, and it allows him to play his part in spreading positive energy throughout the universe by acknowledging his debt and paying gratitude to places that have supported him. Although it may seem strange to thank inanimate objects, it's important to remember that Ray (and Buddhists like him) believe that everything in the universe shares the same essence and is interconnected, including both animate and inanimate objects. This means that the shack and campsite are as much agents in the world as people or animals are, and it makes sense to pay them one's gratitude.

After thanking his camp, Ray has one final message for the universe. "Blah" seems meaningless to human beings, but that's the point: the word represents an empty placeholder, which resembles the Buddhist view of matter and its interconnection. Namely, all things are imaginary from Ray's Buddhist point of view, and their underlying essence is their emptiness—or their lack of a distinct identity, independent from everything else in the universe. Because "Blah" is a word with no specific meaning, it represents this essence, and Ray uses it to show that he's fully accepted the Buddhist worldview.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

In September 1955, Ray Smith, the novel's narrator, rides a train from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, although his final destination is San Francisco. Another bum climbs on the train with him. For lunch, Ray buys **wine** and bread in a small town and eats it with some cheese that he bought on his way north from Mexico City to California. Ray shares with the other bum, who shyly but gratefully accepts.

In the novel's opening scene, Ray Smith—who is a stand-in for author Jack Kerouac—introduces his unconventional lifestyle, which would be familiar to readers of Kerouac's earlier semiautobiographical novel On the Road. *Train-hopping is a classic example of Kerouac's bohemian, wandering lifestyle: it's adventurous, illegal, and (most importantly) free of charge. By sharing his lunch with the other bum, he shows that he feels a sense of kinship with fellow homeless travelers, even if they might be living that lifestyle out of necessity rather than out of choice, as Kerouac is.*

Ray remembers Buddhist teachings about charity from the *Diamond* Sūtra, but he's become less devout over the years, since the wanderings that he narrates in this book. He thought of himself as a modern bhikku, traveling like a pilgrim around the U.S.—in other words, he was already a Dharma Bum, even though he hadn't yet learned the term from Japhy Ryder.

To explain his willingness to share his food, Ray introduces the Buddhist principles that guide him through life. He uses Buddhist scriptures like the Diamond Sūtra *as models for how to live a more fulfilling life—one focused on seeking spiritual enlightenment through wandering, meditation, and voluntary poverty—rather than conforming to the societal norm of seeking material wealth and stability. Clearly, his friendship with Japhy plays an important role in shaping Ray's lifestyle, even if he thinks that he's already part of the "Dharma Bum" community by virtue of his values and goals. Finally, Kerouac also emphasizes that he's narrating the past, and that things have changed since—in other words, he might not stay as absolutely committed to Buddhism as he appears to be in the book.*

Presently, the other bum on the train says a prayer from Santa Teresa and tells Ray a little about his life as a train-hopper. Ray says that he's planning to take the Zipper train, which he used to work on; most bums call it the Midnight Ghost, since it's the fastest way from LA to San Francisco overnight. The other bum has been riding it for years. Ray struggles to stay warm as the train barrels up the California coast to Santa Barbara, where he gets off and says goodbye to the bum.

Even though he's a Christian rather than a Buddhist, the other bum's prayer shows that he is focused on achieving spiritual goals rather than material ones, just like Ray. For travelers like Kerouac and the bum, train schedules are an important piece of inside knowledge—indeed, their conversation about the train's nickname shows that Kerouac is already part of a larger community of wandering bums.

In Santa Barbara, Ray goes to the beach and cooks on an open flame. Then he swims, dances around, drinks **wine**, and eats. He contemplates the meaning of life and the enormity of the universe, and then he goes to sleep. Ray dreams about his New England home and about his parents riding the trains. He wakes up at dawn but decides to go back to sleep.

Ray's night on the beach shows how he finds joy and freedom in his unconventional, unpredictable lifestyle. Although he's all alone, he's also totally self-sufficient. So, whereas most people weigh themselves down with possessions and obligations, Ray's lifestyle suggests that people don't need much to be happy (except maybe a campfire and some wine).

CHAPTER 2

After "the little Santa Teresa bum," the next Dharma Bum that Ray meets is Japhy Ryder, who coined the very phrase "Dharma Bum." Japhy grew up in the woods in Oregon, studied American Indian mythology and Zen Buddhist philosophy in college. At the same time, he was also interested in anarchism and learned to and play anarchist worker songs, along with Indian and American Indian folksongs, on the guitar. Presently, Ray gives a beautiful woman drugs in exchange for a ride from Santa Barbara to San Francisco, where he meets the gregarious Japhy. They get **beers**, and that evening Ray goes to Japhy's poetry reading. All the other poets are dressed up and pretentious, but Japhy is wearing hardy hiking clothes that fit his athleticism and good looks.

Ray clearly admires Japhy's unique upbringing and character, which fit nicely with the countercultural Dharma Bum lifestyle. Moreover, the fact that Japhy invented the phrase "Dharma Bum" suggests that he is an authority on that way of life. At the poetry reading, Ray draws a contrast between most of the poets, who treat their literature as art and seem preoccupied with the way others will evaluate it, and Japhy, who seems more interested in expressing himself than impressing others. Again, this makes it clear that Ray sees Japhy as a uniquely authentic or pure person.

Later, Japhy calls Ray a Bodhisattva and tells him about all the different schools of Buddhism and their mythologies. Ray is mostly interested in two of the Four Noble Truths, which are among Buddhism's most important teachings. Namely, he's drawn to the first ("All life is suffering") and the third ("The suppression of suffering can be achieved").

Although Ray and Japhy are united by an interest in Buddhism, Ray primarily views the religion as an individual spiritual practice, whereas Japhy is more interested in learning about its cultural, historical, and doctrinal diversity. Ray's comment that Japhy is a Bodhisattva, someone who's committed their life to the Buddhist path of enlightenment, reinforces the idea that Japhy is perhaps more serious about the Buddhist tradition that Ray is. However, Ray's understanding of the Four Noble Truths helps illustrate his mission: he wants to learn to overcome suffering by accepting that it's inevitable.

Ray notices Warren Coughlin, a college friend of Japhy's, among the poets. Japhy whispers to Ray that Warren is the reincarnation of a great Buddhist scholar, whereas Ray is just like a goat, or a "mudface." Ray says that he's more into Mahayana Buddhism than Zen Buddhism, which he considers a cruel intellectual game. But over the course of a long, provocative conversation, Japhy convinces him otherwise.

Japhy's nonsensical insult humorously underlines the contrast that Ray feels between himself, an everyday Buddhist hobo, and Japhy, who seems to everyone like an enlightened and holy figure. Nevertheless, Japhy and Ray also seem to share a special bond, as evidenced by Japhy's belief that Ray could be a Bodhisattva. When Japhy convinces Ray to take Zen Buddhism seriously, this reaffirms both Japhy's wisdom and the value that their budding friendship will bring to Ray's life.

The poetry reading is a lively celebration of fresh San Francisco talent. Ray collects change for the poets and serves **wine**. A poet named Alvah Goldbrook drunkenly and passionately recites one of his poems, inspiring the audience to chant along and brining another poet, Rheinhold Cacoethes, to tears. When it's Japhy's turn, he reads poems about different American Indian gods, wandering Buddhist monks, and American office workers. Ray appreciates Japhy's clear, heroic vision more than the other poets' refined intellectualism. He notes that Rosie Buchanan, a beautiful writer who's dating his friend Cody, is in the audience. After the event, everyone goes to dinner in Chinatown, and Japhy tells Ray stories about Chinese Buddhism. Enthralled, Ray randomly asks the restaurant's cook about Buddhism, but the cook doesn't care, which Japhy says is perfectly Zen.

The rowdy poetry reading exemplifies the way that Ray and Japhy's shared interests—so far, Buddhism and poetry—can become the basis for building a larger community of likeminded people. Indeed, most of the friends Ray visits throughout the book (including Cody and Rosie) are part of this network of writers and Buddhists. Ray's enthusiastic conversation with the Chinese cook reflects his thrill at finding people who share his interest in Buddhism. However, he also seems to assume that the cook must know about Buddhism just because he's Chinese, which hints that Ray struggles to separate his own specific interest in Buddhism from other people's much broader and more complex lives. In other words, because he's so obsessed with Buddhism, Ray turns the Chinese restaurant and cook into elements of his own fantasy—he struggles to view them on their own terms, or through any lens besides *Buddhism.*

CHAPTER 3

Ray is now living with Alvah Goldbrook in a cramped, one-room, book-filled cottage in someone's backyard in Berkeley. Every morning, he reads the *Diamond Sūtra*. Japhy lives in a similar, even smaller and more austere backyard shack up the road. He spends most of his time between reading classic Buddhist religious texts and poetry, but he also sometimes goes hiking in the **mountains** for weeks at a time. Outside his shack, Japhy keeps a small "Japanese tea garden" of rocks and trees that he's found on his hikes.

Ray, Alvah, and Japhy's living situation clearly represents their countercultural values: they prioritize simplicity, frugality, and spiritual pursuits over material possessions and comfort. Ray and Japhy's attentive study of Buddhist religious scriptures also demonstrates how literature can play a central role in shaping such a lifestyle. Japhy's long hikes in the mountains are his way of putting the lessons he learns in these texts into practice.

When Ray visits Japhy for the first time, Japhy is busy translating "**Cold Mountain**," a thousand-year-old poem carved into a mountainside by his idol, the mysterious Chinese poet Han Shan. He makes Ray take off his shoes and then offers him some tea and tells him about Han Shan, who wrote "Cold Mountain" about the path up to the remote mountain caves where he lived in ascetic solitude. Japhy and Ray debate how to translate the poem, since each of its lines has five Chinese characters, but this structure doesn't always work in English. Japhy proposes that the two of them climb Mount Matterhorn together, and Ray agrees.

Between making Ray remove his shoes, serving him tea, and translating Han Shan, Japhy clearly models his life after Chinese and Japanese cultural traditions, which he seems to think will help him realize his spiritual goals as a Buddhist. Nevertheless, it's impossible to literally translate Han Shan into English, which suggests that the act of translating Asian Buddhist cultures into a North American context might also be more complex than Japhy assumes. Han Shan's life in remote mountain caves seems to be the model for Japhy's life of wandering in the wilderness, which shows how literature can inspire people to live according to an unconventional set of values.

In the rest of "**Cold Mountain**," Han Shan writes about learning that his friends and family members have died, and he then contemplates the cold and the seasons on his mountain. Japhy explains that he admires Han Shan's dedication to meditation and solitude, and Ray feels like Japhy is bestowing some much-needed higher knowledge on him. Japhy explains that he spends much of the day meditating, unless friends visit. Sometimes, a girl visits him for *yabyum*—but he won't tell Ray what that is. Ray notices that Japhy seems sad about something.

"Cold Mountain" reflects key Buddhist values: being resilient in the face of suffering, accepting that change is inevitable, and appreciating the natural world. Ray's feeling of wonder around Japhy clearly indicates that their friendship will point Ray down the path to enlightenment. Specifically, it foreshadows the sense of fulfillment and peace that Ray finds through the Buddhist practices that Japhy teaches him. Meanwhile, however, Japhy reveals that a girl sometimes visits him for yabyum*—a reference to the Buddhist symbol of a male deity having sex with a female consort. The fact that he seems sad about this perhaps suggests that he feels guilty about this aspect of his life, or that his relationship with this girl is troubled.*

When Ray is getting ready to leave, Rol Sturlason, one of Japhy's friends, visits to report about an upcoming trip to a mystical rock garden in Japan that supposedly helps people who stare at it achieve internal peace. He shows Ray a picture of the garden and a diagram of how the rocks are laid out in a way that liberates people's minds.

The Japanese rock garden points to the way Ray, Japhy, and the Buddhists who influence them see connecting with nature as the best way to achieve enlightenment. Specifically, Rol Sturlason suggests that the rocks' organization somehow reflects—and helps people perceive—the fundamental order of the universe.

CHAPTER 4

The next evening, Warren Coughlin, Alvah Goldbrook, and Ray visit Japhy with a gallon of **wine**. On their way to Japhy's shack, Warren fondly remembers partying with Japhy in college, and Alvah marvels at Japhy's eccentricity. When they go inside, Japhy leaps across the whole room and lands with a dagger held right up against Ray's glass wine jug. Ray thinks that Japhy looks like a samurai, and he seems angry that the others are interrupting his evening (which he'd planned to spend reading) and trying to get him drunk. But Japhy immediately starts drinking with the others, and the four men catch up and argue about poetry. A few hours later, Ray, Warren, and Alvah dance and stumble up the street back toward Alvah's cottage.

Ray and his group of friends all enjoy themselves because they share the same values and interests (Buddhism and poetry). However, the group clearly centers around Japhy, whom they view as a role model as well as a friend. Ray is surprised that Japhy willingly drinks alcohol with the others, since he usually drinks tea. Ray associates tea with purity and virtue and alcohol with immorality and vice. So, when Japhy starts drinking and the guys end up getting drunk while *discussing Buddhism and poetry, this suggests that it's actually possible to use alcohol in a spiritually fulfilling way, without it being a vice.*

CHAPTER 5

The next day, a woman named Princess comes with Japhy to Alvah's cottage. She'd also visited Japhy's cottage the first time Ray was there—at the time, she asked to climb **Mount Matterhorn** with Ray and Japhy, and Japhy proposed that they all have sex on the summit. Presently, she and Japhy stride in, and Japhy tells Ray that they're going to teach Ray about *yabyum*. Ray first met Princess and developed feelings for her a year ago, but Princess met and fell in love with Japhy around this same time—now, she does anything he says.

Even though Princess appears to be a fellow bohemian Buddhist like the men in Ray's social circle, Ray and Japhy are primarily interested in her sexually. Ray's thought that Princess does anything Japhy says suggests that she shows up at Alvah's cottage and gets naked simply because Japhy wants to—her sexual openness and rapport with Japhy actually seems to be Kerouac's way of highlighting Japhy's *masculinity and bohemian lifestyle. This forces readers to question the status of women in Ray and Japhy's club of white male Buddhists: can they be full members, or will the men always consider them sexual conquests rather than spiritual equals?*

Ray goes to dim the light and fetch **wine**, and when he comes back, Princess, Japhy, and Alvah are naked. Japhy says it's time to do *yabyum*, and Princess gets on top of him while he sits in the lotus position. Japhy tells Ray to try it out. But Ray gets nervous—he used to have feelings for Princess, and he just spent a whole year celibate because he decided that lust was evil. He has been enjoying himself perfectly well without sex.

The group's yabyum *orgy is the clearest example of how their value system combines Buddhism, counterculture, community, and hedonism (or the pursuit of pleasure). Previously, Ray struggled to reconcile Japhy's drinking with his spirituality—and here, Ray's anxiety about sex similarly reflects his struggle to choose virtue over vice. However, it seems that his friendship with Japhy is showing him that he doesn't need to repress vice to choose virtue. Rather, their version of Buddhism creates a space for things conventionally seen as sinful, while also still providing a path toward enlightenment.*

While Princess takes a turn with Alvah, Ray starts kissing her, and Japhy rolls a cigarette while proclaiming that no legitimate philosophy can reject sexuality. Eventually, Ray also has sex with Princess, and the group decides to have a *yabyum* orgy every Thursday night. Princess calls herself a Bodhisattva, and Ray says that this is how she relates to Buddhism as a woman. Japhy then explains that Tibetan Bodhisattvas used to hang out in caves and meditate, have orgies, and party. He remarks that the U.S. is sexually repressed and suggests that growing up here is punishment for bad karma in a past life. The group discusses this idea for a long time, until Japhy and Princess eventually decide to go back home.

Japhy thinks that religion and physical pleasure should work together, not in opposition: whereas other religions reject sexuality as sinful, the Dharma Bums' Buddhism embraces it as part of a fulfilling life. Kerouac was a Catholic for much of his life (and Ray is a stand-in for Kerouac), so this period was perhaps his way of experimenting with a belief system that wasn't as strict about sex. However, it's still unclear if this vision of a fulfilling life is truly open to women, because the men don't take Princess seriously when she says that she's a Bodhisattva. Meanwhile, when Japhy talks about the U.S., he names the values of repression and consumerism that he wants to oppose. He seems to view Asian religion and culture as an enlightened alternative (even though he's never been there).

Alvah tells Ray that he sees Japhy as a brilliant thinker and potential national hero. They debate whether Japhy will end up living in solitude like Han Shan or becoming a movie star. At night, Alvah can't sleep, and Ray tries to tell him about Samadhi (a state of meditative trance or ecstasy) for the millionth time. Alvah prefers a hedonistic lifestyle full of reading, partying, and sex, but Ray thinks that it's better to just spend life meditating under a tree. When Alvah says he's tired of "all this Buddhist bullshit," Ray insists that his perceptions are illusions that distract him from Dharmakaya, or the underlying reality of the universe. Ray thinks that Alvah's hedonism will eventually lead him to unhappiness, but Alvah accuses Ray of being too serious and goes to sleep.

Alvah and Ray adore Japhy to the point that they believe he will save the world. The two versions of life they imagine—superstardom and asceticism—reflect the competing value systems of North American capitalism and Zen Buddhism, respectively. This suggests either that the other men are still stuck in their American assumptions about what counts as success, or that Japhy isn't totally sure of his commitment to Buddhism either. Meanwhile, Ray, Alvah, and Japhy also present three competing views of counterculture: Ray prioritizes meditation and introspection; Alvah seeks fun and pleasure; and Japhy focuses on rebelling against social norms and living an alternative lifestyle. Kerouac ascribes one of these outlooks to each of the men seemingly because he appreciates the value of all of three.

Ray meditates on the idea that the self is an illusion, and he thinks that he wants to become a better teacher to those around him. He looks out at the homes surrounding him in Berkeley and decides that their inhabitants are hiding away from the true reality of the heavens.

Ray reaffirms his commitment to achieving enlightenment through introspection, which is a way of trying to translate the teachings he reads about in Buddhist scriptures into his real life. His pity for the suburban residents surrounding him reflects his conclusion that North America's consumeristic culture leads people away from true happiness by making them focus on material goods instead of spiritual truths.

CHAPTER 6

Japhy and Ray set off to climb **Mount Matterhorn**. Ray makes do with tennis shoes and Japhy's thin backup sleeping bag. For provisions, Japhy just brings bacon and bulgur wheat, his ubiquitous tea, some chocolate pudding, and various dried fruits and vegetables. Ray is surprised to see the tiny food bag, but Japhy promises that it'll be enough once the food is rehydrated, and there's no need to drink **alcohol** at high altitudes.

Ray's amateurish outfit contrasts with Japhy's expert preparation for the hike. This parallels the way that Ray sees himself as a spiritual rookie, just starting on the path towards enlightenment through Buddhism, while Japhy is further along. Like his minimalistic lifestyle, Japhy's basic food provisions suggest that not much material sustenance is needed for spiritual fulfillment. And his promise that Ray won't need to drink alcohol reflects the way he sees nature as a pure alternative to boring, vulgar, and unenlightened human society. Ray might need alcohol to enjoy himself when he's around other people, but Japhy promises that being in nature will fill the same void.

As they walk across the UC Berkeley campus toward Japhy's shack, Japhy tells Ray about growing up on a farm in Oregon and working as a fire lookout, skiing, and climbing **mountains** during his summers off from college. Afterward, Japhy explains, he started logging, which he remembers just as fondly as Ray remembers railroading. Ray thinks that Japhy is "a real man," unlike the middle-class suburban flunkies that places like UC Berkeley are designed to produce. Japhy thinks that such people are irresponsible because they just flush the toilet and forget about what happens to their waste.

Ray views Japhy as "a real man" because he grew up and continues to live in close proximity to nature. Again, this shows that Kerouac considers the wilderness more "real" and authentic than human settlements—especially the suburbs, which are a totally artificial environment, built by and for consumer capitalism. Japhy's comment about flushing the toilet extends this contrast between the "real" world of nature and the phony, artificial world of human technology and society (which he argues deprive people of responsibility for their actions). Ray's disdain for universities like UC Berkeley shows that he considers Japhy's worldly kind of knowledge far superior to bookish academic knowledge. This also extends to the kind of art they produce, which explains why Ray praises Japhy's poetry. In turn, Kerouac follows the same artistic principle by writing autobiographically, in an effort to represent his real experience (rather than just engage his imagination).

By Japhy's shack, the eccentric librarian and mountaineer Henry Morley meets Ray and Japhy with his car. Henry also lives in a backyard shack, and Ray realizes that he's friends with Rheinhold Cacoethes, the literary critic who hosted the poetry reading in San Francisco. Henry and Rheinhold talk in the same sarcastic, rambling way, which Ray assumes that Henry probably invented. Unlike Japhy, Henry brings way too much equipment: he wants to sleep on an air mattress and has a bunch of canned food and unnecessary mountaineering equipment. The group takes Henry's car across California to the trailhead leading to **Mount Matterhorn**.

As a librarian and friend to literary critics, Henry Morley represents the academic, theoretical kind of knowledge that Ray looks down on, in contrast to Japhy's rugged, individualistic knowledge about human life and spirituality. Henry's extra equipment also reflects his conventionality when contrasted with Japhy: whereas Japhy is self-reliant and doesn't need all sorts of expensive technology, Henry weighs himself down with unnecessary baggage.

Henry is a "madman" who does erratic things, like bringing Ray along to help him seduce women without explaining his plans beforehand, randomly showing up at Alvah's cottage with furniture that doesn't fit inside, or getting Ray to spend hours emptying the mud out of his basement. The whole drive, Henry rants constantly and incomprehensibly on topics ranging from North Pole explorers and the medieval city-state of Ragusa to the danger of turning into a gnome after losing a bus ticket.

Besides providing comic relief, Henry's bizarre way of talking also demonstrates how he is fixated on a useless, theoretical kind of knowledge and art: his words are meaningless flights of fancy that have nothing to do with the reality that the men are experiencing. Meanwhile, for Japhy, words are precious precisely because they can portray and shape real life. So even though Henry and Japhy are in the same friend group of Buddhists and poets, they seem to value Buddhism and poetry for opposite reasons. As a result, Ray views Japhy as a valuable friend and learns a lot from him, whereas Henry is just annoying and contributes little to Ray or Japhy's life (besides transportation).

The guys drive up into the **mountains** and get a **drink** at a bar full of hunters who obsessively ask if they've seen any deer. In fact, they'd nearly hit one on the way. Japhy complains that Ray is drinking away all their money, but Ray says that he always drinks, no matter how much money he has. The bar is full of taxidermized moose and deer, and Japhy and Ray have port wine. Henry doesn't drink.

Even though the hunters are also visiting the mountains, they hunters represent the mindless, conventional worldview that Ray and Japhy are rebelling against. The hunters only go into the woods to shoot animals, and they don't seem to care about anything else. Ray and Japhy, however, are exploring the wilderness as part of a spiritual calling. Meanwhile, Ray's comment about his drinking hints that it's more of a problem than meets the eye.

Japhy starts talking about his home in the Oregon woods; his dream of wandering around Japan on foot, searching for Buddhist temples and monks; and his disapproval of the hunters, who will get bad karma for killing innocent animals. Henry says that he's neutral about Buddhism, but Japhy points out that Buddhism is all about neutrality. Henry goes on another long rant about the bar, contraception, the quality of California milk, and the idea of Japhy wearing an expensive suit. The hunters briefly chat with them, but they soon give up when they realize that the three men are just **mountain** climbers.

Henry and Japhy's dueling monologues again represent the contrast between their modes of engaging with the world: Japhy has lofty aspirations and commits to solid values, while Henry has no values and just makes meaningless observations about the world around him without participating in it. Of course, this is why Ray values Japhy's friendship so much more than Henry's: Ray and Japhy both aspire to live meaningful, interesting, and impactful lives.

After Ray and Japhy have two **drinks**, the guys get back in Henry's car. They have no chance of reaching the trailhead before dawn, so they decide to camp along the road. They find a beautiful grove of evergreen trees, but they realize that Henry forgot to bring his sleeping bag, so they have to lay two of them flat like blankets. Henry does have his air mattress, but he uncomfortably tosses and turns all night on it, which keeps Ray awake and frustrated until daybreak.

Even though the group hasn't reached Mount Matterhorn yet, Ray is already getting a taste of the wilderness's serene beauty. Henry, meanwhile, ends up struggling to sleep because he overcomplicated things for himself: he brought an enormous air mattress when he just needed a much smaller, simpler sleeping bag. This absurdity reflects Kerouac's broader critiques of mainstream U.S. culture, while Kerouac implies makes life miserable by overcomplicating it through technology and consumerism. It also speaks to the idea that academic intellectuals like Henry pointlessly choose complexity and sophistication over simplicity and reliability.

CHAPTER 7

Henry Morley has an annoying habit of randomly yodeling at inappropriate moments. This is how he starts the day. It's freezing, so Ray jumps around to warm up while Japhy builds a bonfire and yells out, "Hoo," (which he claims to be the American Indian equivalent of yodeling). In the car, Henry keeps talking incessantly, and the three men have some bread and cheese, which is a pretty unsatisfying breakfast. They pass a lodge on the road and decide to stop in for a heartier breakfast. They eat pancakes and drink the clean local water, and then they head off toward **Mount Matterhorn**, which looks beautiful and imposing in the distance.

Henry's silliness makes Japhy look even more impressive by contrast: whereas Henry yodels just because he can, for no reason at all, Japhy's yodel has real significance and reflects his deep practical knowledge of the American West. When he makes a bonfire, this also shows his expertise in nature—which, by this point, Ray clearly admires and hopes to emulate. As they drive away, Mount Matterhorn is on the horizon, representing the challenge that lies ahead for Ray. Of course, for Ray, climbing Mount Matterhorn is also a quest to improve himself and learn more about Buddhism through nature.

CHAPTER 8

In the sleepy town of Bridgeport, Henry tries to buy a sleeping bag while Japhy and Ray chat with an American Indian hitchhiker outside. Eventually, Henry gives up, and the guys decide to rent blankets from a nearby lake lodge instead. The last stretch of the road to **Mount Matterhorn** is being repaired, so the guys park early. Before they set off, Japhy draws a circular Buddhist mandala figure in the dirt, which will protect the group and help him foretell the future. Ray dons his beret and sneakers, Japhy his cap and hiking boots. Ray fantasizes about Japhy hiking alone in the same outfit, looking masculine in the rugged wilderness.

Once they finally get to the trailhead, Japhy's mandala marks the true beginning of their journey up the mountain. It represents his deep, seemingly mystical knowledge of both Buddhism and the wilderness. It's also a promise of protection, which reflects the deep trust that Ray puts in Japhy during their hike: Ray will be totally dependent on Japhy's knowledge and expertise in order to successfully summit the mountain. Ray's fantasies about Japhy reflect the way he idolizes this expertise and turns Japhy into an ideal model of masculinity, which he hopes to emulate.

As the men set off, Ray comments that this hike is a much better way to spend a Saturday morning than getting **drunk** in San Francisco—but Japhy quips that it's wrong to compare experiences because all of life is "the same old void." Ray realizes that Japhy is right and thanks him for showing the alternatives to civilization. They pass the men repairing the road and then, a few miles later, buy snacks at the log-cabin lodge at the beginning of the trailhead.

Ray's comment reflects his changing priorities. He now recognizes that, as Japhy promised, people can gain more happiness and spiritual insight from spending time in nature than they can in the city. Nevertheless, Japhy's response reframes the situation in terms of Buddhism and reminds Ray of their ultimate goal: understanding the "void" of the universe in order to become enlightened.

Suddenly, Henry freaks out and makes up a story about needing to drain his car's crankcase (part of the engine) so that the cold won't ruin it. He starts going back and promises to meet Ray and Japhy at their bonfire that night. Ray tries to talk him out of it, but Henry heads back toward his car.

While Ray starts having an epiphany about nature and civilization, Henry interrupts with an abrupt concern and then disappears. It's unclear if Henry is trying to get away from Ray and Japhy, or if he's genuinely worried about his car. If the latter is the case, this would again show that, while Ray and Japhy feel free because they've chosen to bring few things and live simply, Henry is weighed down by his physical possessions.

With Henry gone, Ray and Japhy have a much more interesting conversation on their way up the **mountain**. Ray admires how comfortable Japhy seems in nature—he even repairs the trail on the way, since that used to be one of his jobs. As Ray and Japhy look out on an enormous lake, they start coming up with haikus. Ray has trouble, but Japhy tries to help by naming different flowers and trees. Later, they come to a stream, where they drink and rest for awhile.

Henry's departure confirms that he primarily served to distract Ray and Japhy from their real goal (finding peace and meaning in nature). Again, this illustrates the contrast between Henry's empty companionship and Japhy's meaningful friendship. When Ray and Japhy compose poetry about nature, they're are attempting to capture and give form to the beauty they observe, which reflects their broader belief about what literature is for: authentically expressing one's experiences.

CHAPTER 9

Ray sees the eternal beauty of nature in the trail leading up to **Mount Matterhorn**. He and Japhy glance back down the road, looking for Henry, and see a dust cloud that may or may not be him. Ray feels like he might have hiked this path in a past life—it seems so familiar. He starts to feel dizzy and tired from the altitude, and he and Japhy fall silent as they walk. Japhy remarks that he feels like they're communicating telepathically.

Ray connects the mountains' beauty to Buddhist teachings about the nature of the universe. Specifically, he thinks of past lives when he notices the beauty of nature, because this beauty is eternal and unchanging. This is an important Buddhist teaching, which Ray is now able to perceive firsthand. Because nature's beauty is eternal, seeing it is a way to share an experience with other people in the past and future. This is also probably why Japhy and Ray feel like they can communicate without talking: they're sharing an experience of profound beauty that feels universal yet private, because nobody else is around.

Ray and Japhy clear the top of a hill, and the trail ends: they only see a meadow, a pond, and a field of boulders ahead. Japhy points out "ducks," small piles of rocks that other climbers have put up to signal the best path. Past the end of the boulders, Japhy tells Ray that before getting to the summit, they still have to reach a plateau; a section of "scree" (loose rocks); another bunch of boulders; and an almost vertical final section.

Japhy's seemingly comprehensive knowledge of the trail again illustrates his expertise in nature and shows what Ray stands to learn by following in his footsteps. Even though Ray and Japhy are all alone, the "ducks" show them that other people have made the climb before and indirectly reminds them that they are part of a broader community of mountaineers who understand the value of spending time in the wilderness.

Ray says that they should make camp right where they are, in the meadow, but Japhy insists on getting to the plateau, where it's less likely that anyone else will show up. They briefly rest and then start making their way up the boulders, jumping from one to the next for miles. Ray admires how gracefully Japhy moves, and Japhy tells Ray that climbing is just like Zen Buddhism: it should be automatic and subconscious. They make their way up, slowly exhausting themselves in the late afternoon.

When they climb the boulders, Japhy this to Buddhism through the idea that putting a philosophy into a practice means turning it into a bodily habit. In order to truly be enlightened, he says, people must learn to live in a constant state of peaceful grace—and this includes the way they move. Beyond explicitly showing how mountaineering can help people like Ray improve themselves as Buddhists, this also shows how Japhy is primarily interested in knowledge as it pertains to people's practical ability to act in the world.

Eventually, Japhy drops his backpack and says that he'll cover the last short section alone to scout for their campsite. Ray rests, and Japhy returns a half-hour later to lead him up. They pass through a snow-filled meadow and a little creek before reaching their campsite, under an enormous concave rock. Japhy shows Ray the direction to **Matterhorn**, which is still a few miles away.

When Japhy ascends to the campsite and then returns for Ray, this is a metaphor for the way Ray perceives their relationship in general. Namely, although Japhy has progressed a few steps ahead of Ray, in terms of his understanding of Buddhism and his experience in the wilderness, he returns to help Ray find his way and advance along the path—both literally toward the campsite and figuratively toward enlightenment.

Ray and Japhy they set up camp and chat about the silence and beauty of the **mountains**, which Japhy says are like patient, meditating Buddhas. They make tea and debate where the giant rock they're sleeping under could have come from. Japhy tells Ray that he loves to come out and spend weeks in this spot, wandering around naked and enjoying himself. And Ray tells Japhy about a special prayer he says for his friends, enemies, and relatives alike. He says the person's name, then "equally empty, equally to be loved, equally a coming Buddha," while thinking of the person's eyes. Japhy writes this down in his notebook and says that he'll show it to monks when he makes it to Japan. He says that Ray's only fault is that he doesn't spend enough time in nature, and then he starts making dinner out of his bulgur wheat and dried vegetables.

By comparing the mountains to Buddhas, Japhy extends the connection he's drawn between spending time in nature and Buddhist practices like meditation. Namely, the mountains are ancient, unchanging, and breathtaking—just like the state of wisdom and enlightenment that Buddhists hope to achieve through meditation. Ray's prayers also reflect important Buddhist values. For instance, emptiness is an important concept with multiple meanings, including the idea that nothing has any permanent essence and there is no true self. Similarly, Buddhists hope to be "a coming Buddha," or to be able to reach enlightenment in the future. By sharing this prayer, Ray shows that he wants his relationship with Japhy to be a mutual exchange (even if Japhy is more knowledgeable about Buddhism).

Ray and Japhy have seen no sign whatsoever of Henry Morley, and they start to worry that he might have gotten lost or injured. They wander around for awhile, but it gets dark. Then, they hear Henry yodeling in the distance, somewhere near the beginning of the boulders. They decide to sit on a cliff above the valley and wait.

Even though Ray and Japhy don't particularly like Henry—and even though Henry essentially abandoned them earlier on the trail—they're still worry about his well-being and try to accommodate him. Just like Ray prays even for his enemies, because of their Buddhist beliefs, Ray and Japhy strive to love everyone—even people who don't love them back.

Japhy prays with **prayer beads** and Ray meditates on the valley's silence and their utter solitude there. Henry yodels at them from time to time, but he doesn't seem to be getting any closer. Meanwhile, as Ray observes the stunning sunset, he realizes that "rocks are space […] and space is illusion." He contemplates Japhy's brilliance and compares him to a saint, then remembers that people are "born just to die." He nearly says all this to Japhy but decides to preserve the moment's holy silence instead. Henry yodels again in the distance, and Ray and Japhy figure he'll have to set up his own camp further down the **mountain**, which he does.

The mountains' otherworldly silence and incredible beauty make them an especially apt place for meditation. In fact, the spectacular setting directly leads Ray to truly understand the Buddhist teaching that "space is illusion" by directly perceiving that "rocks are space." Ray feels himself getting closer to enlightenment, and this realization proves to him that Japhy is right about the spiritual powers of nature.

CHAPTER 10

Ray gathers wood and starts a huge bonfire while Japhy makes bulgur wheat, chocolate pudding, and more tea. They eat with chopsticks under the endless stars and Ray realizes that, with the altitude and exercise, he doesn't crave a **drink** at all. Afterward, Japhy washes the dishes and pulls out a star map, which shows him that it's got to be 8:48 p.m. He tells Ray that he appreciates his feel for the language of the American working class, and Ray tells him about hitchhiking with a Cherokee trucker in Texas. Reading the star map, Japhy looks like a Chinese Zen Buddhist master. He and Ray eat chocolate pudding and then part ways for to meditate for a little while.

As Japhy predicted before their hike, Ray doesn't feel the need to drink in the mountains. This means that being in nature has cured whatever need or anxiety drove him to drink in the city. In other words, nature seems to have purified Ray's mind and saved him from self-destructive impulses. This is another reason why spending as much time as possible in nature would help him improve his self-awareness and better internalize the truths he's learned through studying Buddhist doctrines. Ray and Japhy's preference for working-class people and aesthetic styles is also part of their desire to get closer to nature and what they consider to be authenticity.

Ray writes that he admires Japhy's charitability—when they reunite, Japhy gives him **a string of wooden prayer beads**, and Japhy makes sure that Ray sleeps closer to the fire at night. (This starts a long tradition of gift-giving in their friendship.) After Japhy falls asleep, Ray gazes at the stars, marveling at Japhy's benevolent spirit and wisdom beyond his years. Thinking about his bohemian past, Ray resolves to live "the pure way," traveling around North America with nothing but a rucksack.

Japhy's charitability is what allows Ray to learn so much from their friendship. Indeed, the string of prayer beads he gifts Ray represents the way their friendship is based on a shared commitment to self-improvement through Buddhism—especially their desire to become more self-aware and charitable. When Ray decides that he will live "the pure way," he's choosing to follow in Japhy's footsteps, because he thinks that this is the best way to live a life in line with his Buddhist values.

In the morning, it's freezing cold, but Ray feels joyous and playful; he hears Henry Morley yodel from down below. Japhy invites Ray to a morning cup of tea, which he takes after getting dressed and drinking some water from the stream. Henry reaches them a couple hours later and immediately starts telling one of his nonsensical stories. The group is ready to really start climbing **Mount Matterhorn**.

Ray's sense of joy in the morning clearly comes from being around Japhy and in nature. So, when Henry finally catches up to Ray and Japhy, Ray has already completely transformed his thinking—but Henry is still exactly the same as he was before. Having passed through his first transformative experience in the wilderness, Ray is ready to actually finish the climb and see what else he learns about Buddhism along the way.

CHAPTER 11

Ray, Japhy, and Henry head up into the scree valley that's covered in loose rocks. For the rest of their climb, they only take the essentials: food and their first-aid kit. Although they make a late start, Henry is strong and steady, and Japhy runs ahead of them wearing nothing but a jockstrap. Ray starts out at the back, but eventually catches up to Japhy. They have incredible views of the surrounding peaks, but the steep drop-offs totally frighten him. He still feels like he's somehow done this here before. At the foot of **Mount Matterhorn**, the men swim in a beautiful mountain lake. They debate whether they can make it to the top of the mountain and back down again before nightfall, and Ray and Japhy decide to try.

The next section of the men's climb is more difficult and also more beautiful than the segments they trekked before. Japhy is comfortable enough to hike almost naked, which he seems to consider a more pure, natural, and authentic way to experience nature. Ray, however, is still anxious about the climb and afraid of falling off the mountain. This implies that he still needs to learn to manage his expectations and fears in nature, whereas Japhy has already mastered his own.

Ray and Japhy leave Henry down below, and they try to ascend as fast as possible, running over loose scree rocks and looking out on what seems like the entirety of California below. In the gusty wind, Ray starts to regret his decision and wish that he had stayed at the lake with Henry. Every time they get tired, Japhy and Ray snack on some peanuts and raisins and then start up again. The summit is close, but Ray starts to feel like he's not making any progress; he thinks that Japhy is too far out ahead.

Henry again stays behind, leaving Ray and Japhy alone for the more serious, challenging portion of the climb. In fact, this part of the climb is increasingly becoming a metaphor for Ray's engagement with Buddhism. As his fear and anxiety start to get the best of him, Ray feels lost and contemplates giving up. But by looking ahead and following in Japhy's footsteps, he manages to keep moving toward his goal. This is true of his Buddhist practices as well as the actual hike.

Ray starts screaming, "*This is too high!*" and worrying that he won't survive. He waits briefly on a ledge to contemplate the suffering of existence and the Zen Buddhist aphorism "When you get to the top of a **mountain**, keep climbing," which horrifies him in this context. Japhy yodels at him from the top of the mountain, but Ray is still too afraid. He jealously looks down at Henry, who is lying down in the valley, chewing on some grass, and daydreaming.

When Ray panics, Buddhism helps him center himself and calm back down. But in turn, his panic also helps him better understand Buddhism—the aphorism he remembers means that there's always more suffering in the world and more work to be done to free ourselves from it. When he looks up at Japhy and down at Henry, this is a metaphor for his choice between Buddhist wisdom and blissful ignorance. Buddhist wisdom (Japhy on the mountain) will elevate Ray's consciousness but expose him to harsh and unforgiving realities. Meanwhile, blissful ignorance (Henry daydreaming by the lake) accomplishes nothing but avoids the struggles associated with reaching wisdom.

CHAPTER 12

Japhy suddenly starts running down toward Ray from the summit, at times leaping several feet. Ray takes off after him, and in all of five minutes they run their way to the bottom, screaming and enjoying themselves. Ray remarks that he now understands why Japhy told him "you can't fall off a **mountain**," and Japhy says that this is what "when you get to the top of a mountain keep climbing" really means. They remark that "the people below" don't deserve to hear their triumphant yells. Ray is frustrated that he didn't make it to the top, because now he understands what it takes to go back downhill. But Japhy promises that they'll return the next year to try again. Japhy and Henry tell Ray that they're proud of his effort—it's his first time, after all—and call him a Tiger.

While Ray is overwhelmed by fear and shock, Japhy is playing and enjoying himself, which shows the difference between confronting a challenging situation blind and doing the same with wisdom derived from Buddhism. Again, the climb helps Ray fully understand the truth of Buddhist teachings that he previously only knew in a superficial, theoretical way. "You can't fall off a mountain," for instance, is not just literally true—it's also a metaphor for the way people's spiritual progress is stable over time. Once a person learns something, or scales a mountain, they "can't fall off," or lose the wisdom they've gained.

In the late afternoon, Ray, Japhy, and Henry start heading back toward their campground. They hope that they'll be able to navigate by moonlight later on. Each takes his own path: Ray follows droppings down a deer path, Japhy takes off his pants and slides around in the snow, and Henry keeps talking loudly. At camp, they make a bonfire and have dinner under the full moon. Ray realizes that he absolutely loves wandering around in solitude—he compares himself to native children living off the land.

When the men split up, each of them starts acting in a characteristic way that shows how they personally engage with nature: Japhy gets naked, Ray investigates other living beings, and Henry ignores his surroundings entirely, preferring to listen to himself speak. This shows how, while nature can help people better understand themselves and their place in the world, there's no specific formula for doing so. When Ray realizes that he loves being alone in nature, this confirms that he's spiritually connected to the rest of the world. However, although his comparison between himself and American Indian people is well-intentioned, he fails to recognize his own ignorance about American Indian culture.

The men continue down toward the base of the trail. In the moonlight, they dance their way down the long valley full of boulders. Ray's feet hurt, so he switches his tennis shoes for Japhy's hiking boots. Ray is exhausted and wants to rest, but Japhy and Henry insist that they have to make it back to Henry's car. They take a break in the meadow at the bottom of the boulders, and the rest of their way down is much easier. Now that they're at a much lower altitude, it's warmer, and they get back to the car in no time. In fact, it's so warm that Henry realizes he didn't really need to fix his engine.

The guys retrace their steps, but Ray struggles to find the energy he needs to make it all the way down the mountain. This functions as a kind of spiritual test, measuring his perseverance and resilience in the face of obstacles. Indeed, the physical difficulty of climbing mountains is another reason it helps build spiritual strength. To finish the hike smoothly, Ray borrows Japhy's boots, which symbolically represent Japhy's wisdom and mountaineering expertise. The act of switching shoes therefore represents how Ray's relationship with Japhy strengthens him and helps him to learn.

Ray, Japhy, and Henry are hungry. They find a decent-looking restaurant, but (to Ray's surprise) Japhy is afraid to go inside because he feels underdressed. They stop in a more casual place across the road, but it's dreary and depressing, so Ray convinces Japhy to return to the first place. After Japhy proclaims himself an anti-materialistic bhikku, he eats voraciously. After dinner, the guys buy a bottle of **wine** and smoke a cigar to celebrate. Henry drives all night to get them back home to Berkeley, and at dawn, Ray and Japhy stumble back to their respective shacks.

So far, Ray has presented Japhy as a flawless, masculine hero, so it's fitting that he finally reveals some weakness. In fact, his weakness isn't just his fear of looking underdressed—it's the contradiction between this fear and his self-image as an independent mountain man who doesn't care what others think. Similarly, there's a contradiction between eagerly digging into an expensive meal and claiming to be a minimalist who rejects material luxuries. But these contradictions between Japhy's values and his behavior don't necessarily make him a hypocrite—rather, they're natural human weaknesses that Buddhists strives to overcome. Ray also struggles with similar contradictions—for instance, when it comes to his drinking and his feelings about sex. Both Japhy and Ray know what they believe but continually struggle to live up to their values, and they use Buddhist practices like meditation to try to embody those values more fully.

CHAPTER 13

Ray wakes up in the afternoon and ponders Japhy's curious fear of entering the fancy restaurant. Later that evening, Princess pays Ray a visit, and they have wild Bodhisattvic sex. Alvah interrupts them when he gets home, so they go take a bath together, and then Princess goes home.

Back in Berkeley, Ray returns to his old routine. But now, he's armed with the wisdom he gained on the hike with Japhy. Having experienced the wilderness, he can see his life in society in a new light—but this doesn't prevent him from enjoying material things and physical pleasures.

Then, Japhy and Warren Coughlin show up to party with Ray and Alvah. They get wildly **drunk** and start wandering around town, carrying some enormous flowers and yelling out verses of poetry on their way to visit a local English professor Warren knows. Back at Alvah's cottage, Ray asks Japhy to help him spend some long-awaited fellowship money on hiking gear and then drop him out in the desert somewhere the next day. Naturally, Japhy agrees—but first, the men have more wine and tell stories.

Although the men are certainly indulging in worldly pleasures when they get drunk at their party, which Buddhism might ordinarily reject, they do so for the sake of what they see as a higher cause: literature and the knowledge it expresses. Ray's request to Japhy indicates that he's planning to start traveling to spend time in nature, not just to meet new people and visit his friends. In other words, Japhy has convinced him that the wilderness is the best place to find enlightenment, so he's finally going to take the leap and live as a Dharma Bum.

Japhy lectures the other men about how some Buddhists think that reality is only in the mind—but *he* thinks that people need to reconnect with the natural world, like frontiersmen who seek out "the realness of existence." The others agree and create a poem based on his words. Japhy then proclaims that true bards wander the world and speak the truth because they refuse to participate in the bloated, materialistic "system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume." He imagines a mass movement of "Dharma Bums" rejecting this lifestyle and living like Bodhisattvas, wandering around North America. Along the way, the Dharma Bums would stop at a network of *zendos* (meditation halls) where they could meditate; drink tea; live in shacks; and rule their wives and families according to their own law, like the Puritans did.

In this section, Japhy clearly presents his countercultural worldview: he explains how his Buddhist beliefs, his critique of American capitalism, and his lifestyle choices all fit together coherently. Namely, he considers American capitalism vile because it distances people from the truths about the universe that poetry, art, and nature can show them. This is why he and his friends value literature: it's not an intellectual or artistic game but rather a way to capture and spread the truth. By spreading this truth and showing that it's possible to live a morally coherent, countercultural lifestyle, Japhy offers a competing vision of human society. This is why he proposes starting a revolution: if it's possible to organize a society around capitalism's "system of work, produce, [and] consume," then it's certainly also possible to build a society around religious values. His friend group proves that this is true. However, Japhy's reference to Puritanism (a form of Protestantism that had strict rules of how to behave and worship) and comments about women might give some readers pause. This comparison suggests that his vision might really only liberate men, while forcing women to stay in the same domestic roles that most already occupied in the 1950s (when the story takes place).

Japhy recites a poem about wandering to Japan in search of the Zen master Hakuyu, who supposedly lives in a cave in the **mountains** and has special teachings about how to sleep, eat, and think well. Hakuyu is at least 300 years old, but Japhy thinks that he can track him down. He also wants to go hike Mount Tamalpais and "purify the atmosphere" with the Sūtras. Alvah has mixed feelings about this, and Japhy half-jokingly berates him, telling him to live his life in a hut and find a nice, anti-materialistic Buddhist girl to settle down with. Next, Japhy reads another stanza from Han Shan's "Cold Mountain"—again, Han Shan praises living in nature on the mountaintop, which he says is better than having a physical house.

Japhy's poetry demonstrates how sincerely he believes in his vision and values. Indeed, like Han Shan's poetry, the main purpose of Japhy's writing is to communicate this vision, which is based around his search for hidden wisdom in nature—specifically the mountains. In this case, the Zen master Hakuyu represents that wisdom. Meanwhile, Han Shan attests to how a life of solitary meditation is the surest way to achieve true inner peace.

Japhy and Ray play the guitar and sing, and all the men start free-associating nonsensically, yelling about "blueberry pies" and "blueberry spies," how "the rhododendron tree is only half enlightened," and so on. As they **drink** more and more, they're increasingly impressed by their own creativity. Eventually, Ray and Warren nearly knock down Alvah's cottage by wrestling around and kicking the walls in, and Henry Morley randomly shows up with some large containers of yogurt.

Even though the men's free association perhaps seems as meaningless as Henry Morley's bizarre monologues, it shows how their minds are all working on the same wavelength. They share the same energy because they essentially view the world in the same way, which allows them to flourish together creatively. If Japhy imagines building a new society populated by Buddhist artists, his friend group is a clear start to this, and a model for the future.

Before falling asleep, Ray reflects on his newfound buddies, the "Zen Lunatics," and ponders the absurdity of suburban American life: everybody spends all day glued to the television instead of spending time with their friends and family, and they all drive everywhere instead of walking. Everyone but the Zen Lunatics seems to live this way now. Remembering a song by the country singer Montana Slim, Ray decides that it's all a pointless trick.

Even though the "Zen Lunatics" live a decidedly absurd lifestyle, Ray points out that it's actually much more grounded and purposeful than the way most supposedly normal Americans live. He sees technology—like televisions and cars—as distancing people from their natural way of life, which is what really brings them happiness and inner peace. In fact, he seems to believe that all of North America's mainstream values—economic consumption, stable work, accumulating wealth, and so on—make people miserable. His sense of profound joy at pursuing the opposite of these values reinforces this view that they're pointless.

CHAPTER 14

Ray resolves to buy all the gear he needs to go off into the wilderness; he plans to live in complete solitude for as long as possible and spend all his time in prayer. He's not as committed to Japhy's plans to reform society or Alvah's belief in living his life to the fullest. The three men drive around the Bay Area in Henry's car and spend all day buying clothes and camping gear. Ray ends up with a sleeping bag and rucksack, a hooded poncho, and a bunch of cooking supplies. Japhy jokes that Ray is ready for the Apocalypse and gifts him some of his own gear.

Japhy's revolutionary plans, Alvah's parties, and Ray's solitary meditation offer three different visions of how Buddhists can resist mainstream culture. Of course, they all fit together, and all three men believe in all three things, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, Ray's focus on individual meditation shows that his priority is the traditional Buddhist quest for enlightenment through self-knowledge and self-discipline. Buying his gear is like a rite of passage to become a Dharma Bum. When it's done, he's finally ready to follow in Japhy's footsteps and explore the vast American wilderness.

CHAPTER 15

Dressed in his new flannel and jeans, Ray wanders around San Francisco to test out his new rucksack. Some Skid Row bums are convinced that he's going to go hunting for uranium and try to give him advice. Then, Ray visits his friend Cody and Cody's girlfriend Rosie, who's having a nervous breakdown. Rosie got in trouble at work for clogging the toilet with a huge piece of paper, on which she'd listed all her friends' sins. Then, she started trying to cut her wrists with a dull old knife. Now, she's convinced that the police are coming after all her friends, so Cody asks Ray to look after her while he's at work.

Although they only appear briefly in the novel, Cody and Rosie are a crucial turning point in Ray's journey. So far, Ray and his friends have largely been carefree. But now, precisely when Ray is planning to embark on his new life, his old friends' issues come back to haunt him. Rosie's obsession with sin, redemption, and persecution resembles Ray's concern about how to square his Buddhism with his vices. However, while Ray struggles with how to stop sinning in the future, Rosie is plagued with guilt over the past.

Ray jokes with Rosie and tells her about his "rucksack revolution." He feels a sense of moral righteousness, like when he argues with his friends and family about Dharma. He tells Rosie to relax, because "all this life is just a dream," but she insists that the police conspiracy is real. Ray gets some **wine** and brings some friends back to party in Cody and Rosie's apartment, but Rosie tells him that she plans to die tonight.

Ray continues trying to pass on the wisdom he's learned from Japhy, but there's a sharp contrast between his optimistic fantasy of starting a "rucksack revolution" and Rosie's intense despair. Seemingly blinded by his own good humor, Ray fails to see that Rosie is in a life-or-death situation, so he doesn't take her seriously or empathize with her.

After his friends leave, Ray goes to sleep. Unbeknownst to him, Rosie goes to the roof, breaks a skylight, and cuts herself with the glass. A neighbor calls the police, and Rosie leaps off the roof to get away from them. She falls six floors and dies on the sidewalk. When Ray learns this in the morning, he's astonished, and he wonders if his philosophy might be all wrong. But he decides to get moving anyway; he rides a freight train back to Los Angeles and hopes that Rosie made it to Heaven.

Rosie's suicide shocks Ray out of his trancelike optimism. While he believes that people can learn to overcome their suffering through introspection and self-discipline, Rosie's death reminds him that people's suffering is often far more complex and far-reaching than it might initially appear.

CHAPTER 16

Before leaving San Francisco, Ray has dinner with Japhy in Chinatown. Afterward, they see a group of Black preachers outside the restaurant and listen to one woman's sermon. Japhy says that Christianity and Buddhism are incompatible, but Ray disagrees—he thinks that Heaven and *nirvana* (enlightenment) are just two words for the same thing. In fact, there's a Buddhist temple under construction across the road; one day, Ray even went to help out the young men who were building it. But it's a traditional Chinese Buddhist temple, so Japhy is uninterested—he only cares about Zen Buddhism. The preacher tells them that God will reward their devotion, and they part ways.

Ray and Japhy's differing views on the compatibility of Christianity and Buddhism reflect their different visions of religion's purpose. Ray thinks that all religions ultimately lead to the same end point, and that people should decide what kind of practices they want to follow as individuals. Meanwhile, Japhy seems to thinks that Buddhism is superior to other belief systems, so it's important to him to fight for his belief system to reign supreme. This is also why he's disinterested in the traditional Chinese temple: he considers Asian immigrants' version of Buddhism less authentic than his own. Ironically enough, in his quest to find the most authentic version of Asian Buddhism, he ignores the actual Asian people around him.

Next, Ray visits Cody and his kids for a few days. Cody is devastated about Rosie's death, and he prays constantly for her soul. After this visit, Ray catches the Midnight Ghost in San Jose. A railyard worker tells him that someone is waiting at the crossing to report train hoppers, so Ray gets on way past this crossing. He sleeps all night and wakes up in muggy LA, where he spends the day on Skid Row drinking coffee.

If Ray's friendship with Japhy reminds him of the happiness and wisdom he stands to gain from pursuing a Buddhist lifestyle, his friendship with Cody reminds him of the other side of the coin: the agony of profound suffering, which Buddhists strive to overcome. Ray clearly aligns more with Ray's countercultural worldview, as he abruptly gives up the relative peace and quiet of his life in California for the activity, adventure, and danger of life on the road.

Back in the trainyard, Ray meets a Buddhist hobo who cured his arthritis by standing on his head every morning. Ray tries this for his thrombophlebitis (blood clots in his legs), and it works in a few months. No doctor ever believes him, but he thinks that this proves the hobo was an enlightened Dharma Bum. When the Zipper train to Arizona passes by in the early evening, Ray climbs on top and realizes that all the train's cars are totally enclosed, so there's nowhere for him to sleep. He drops off the speeding train and, fortunately, lands safely on his feet. He can barely sleep in the smoggy LA night, but he stands on his head and feels much better in the morning. Then, he catches a bus east to Riverside.

The fellow Dharma Bum's strange medical advice gives Ray more reason to think that Buddhism points the way to happiness and well-being. However, his mistake on the Zipper train also shows how dangerous and unpredictable his unconventional lifestyle can be. He is basically attaching himself to other people's trips, so he has very little control over how he travels and has to be extremely adaptable and resourceful in order to stay safe. LA's suffocating smog represents how cities (and perhaps modern civilization as a whole) are spiritually empty and full of vice in Ray's eyes—in other words, it reminds him of why he's leaving the city for nature.

CHAPTER 17

In Riverside, Ray plans to camp out in a beautiful riverbed, even though a local man warns him about the police. Ray buys snacks at a supermarket and then trudges down from the highway through the vegetation to the river bottom, where he sets up camp. After sunset, he makes a small fire and feels sorry for himself, realizing that he's just another homeless man. He eats, prays to become a Buddha, and then quickly prays to God, too, because it's almost Christmas. He realizes that he's one with the whole universe—God and Buddha, everything and nothing, time and consciousness itself. He prays for Rosie, too, and then he meditates and goes to sleep. In the morning, he says another prayer to all the life on Earth, drinks from a stream, and prepares to hitchhike all the way to North Carolina.

Profound doubts strike Ray as soon as he starts trying to live off the land like Japhy. In the past, adventuring in nature was something unusual or extraordinary for him—but now it's his everyday life, and he has no comfortable home to return to. When he notes that he's a homeless man like any other, he sees himself from an external perspective and briefly understands why, according to the mainstream culture, his lifestyle would be considered a failure. However, Buddhism helps him recenter his thinking and remember that he's not homeless because he's failed, but rather because he has a higher purpose that doesn't fit with the values that American capitalism wants him to live by.

CHAPTER 18

Ray hitchhikes his way to the border town of Calexico, mainly with a Mexican man named Jaimy, who promises to take him across the border to Mexicali but then abruptly disappears. Ray wanders around and gawks at women, then decides to cross the border alone. A security guard tells him off for peeing in public, and then a Chinese beggar warns him against camping out in public, because someone could easily rob him. Ray eats dinner at a local restaurant and marvels at people hanging out and listening to music on the street, and then he buys snacks and heads back across to Calexico. The border guards search his whole rucksack for drugs but find nothing, so they let him cross.

Ray's day on the border is full of random and unexpected adventures—his unconventional life on the road seems far more interesting than a conventional American life split between work and home. Still, when the border guards search Ray, this shows how others view him: they expect someone who looks like him and seems to be homeless to be involved in nefarious activities. Meanwhile, like Japhy, the Chinese beggar is a voice of wisdom and reason for Ray. It's no coincidence that this man is Chinese, since Ray and Japhy strongly associate Asian cultures with Buddhist wisdom.

Ray heads to Calexico's trainyard and asks around for the Zipper train, but he finds out that it doesn't stop there. He decides to hitchhike again, and a truck driver named Beaudry picks him up. Beaudry wants to spend the evening in Mexicali, and Ray lies that he used to live there. They cross back over the border, get **drunk** in a bar, and visit a brothel. The next day, they make it all the way to Tucson, Arizona, where Beaudry says that he's craving a steak. Ray cooks him one over a fire out in the desert, and Beaudry loves it. He realizes that Ray is much happier than he is, even though he makes good money and has a nice house and family back in Ohio. Out of gratitude, he offers to take Ray all the way to Ohio, even though the insurance company might catch him and get him fired.

Ray views his day with Beaudry as an opportunity to display his Dharma Bum lifestyle to someone who's still living in the mainstream culture. After Ray makes the steak in the desert, Beaudry's reaction validates his hopes: Beaudry agrees that the Dharma Bum lifestyle seems freer and more fulfilling than his own. But since he's already built a stable life for himself, he can't go back and start wandering like Ray. In fact, Ray and Japhy are able to choose their free-wheeling lifestyle only because they are young and have no dependents, debts, or commitments to their families. However, few people are able to take on the personal, professional, and financial risks that come with pursuing freedom through spiritual wandering.

Ray and Beaudry make it to Ohio in no time, barreling through New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. They listen to the radio the whole way, eat at various truck stops, and only stop once to sleep in a hotel. After getting off in freezing cold Springfield, Ohio, Ray gets a hotel room and buys a bus ticket for North Carolina. He changes his mind and decides to hitchhike, but the bus company doesn't refund his ticket, so he hitchhikes one town over before catching the next bus to Raleigh.

Beaudry's gratitude pays off, and the rest of Ray's journey is smooth and uneventful. In fact, as a hobo and hitchhiker, Ray primarily lives off other people's gratitude—but he also shares freely with others whenever he's able, so it goes both ways. As a result, he doesn't usually have to organize his life around getting money and paying for things he needs—instead, like a Buddhist monk, he lives on gratitude, mercy, and goodwill. Of course, occasionally he has to pay for a hotel room or a bus ticket, as in this passage; he's not able to completely divorce himself from mainstream society.

From Raleigh, Ray takes a local bus to the turnoff for his mother's house deep in the woods. He walks the last few miles in the snow. When he arrives, his mother is washing dishes, looking worried to death, because Ray is so late. Ray realizes that Japhy is hypocritical for hating modern technologies like "kitchen machinery," since Buddhism is really about having compassion for everyone, regardless of how they choose to live. Excited to be home for Christmas and spend the next several months meditating there, Ray visits his dog and greets his mother, sister, brother-in-law, and nephew inside.

Surprisingly, when Ray reaches his mother's house, he briefly steps out of his countercultural bohemian mode and becomes just another member of an ordinary American family. This shows that, even though he rejects mainstream American culture in general, he still understands some of the reasons that people become deeply attached to it. In fact, his empathy for his mother—who's forced to wash dishes by hand—shows that he understands how conventional ideas of gender end up forcing women into subservient roles. (This is something Japhy never realizes, even when he envisions a new society.) In turn, Ray critiques Japhy for putting ideals above practicality: while it's easy for him to reject "kitchen machinery" because he's a single man living in the woods, a dishwasher would make a significant difference in many women's lives. This reinforces Ray's sense that for most people, who are already living modern lives, it's simply impossible to give everything up and go frolic in the woods like Japhy. In other words, Ray and Japhy are privileged to be able to reject mainstream society wholesale; most people must simply decide what role they want to play in mainstream society.

CHAPTER 19

Ray insists on sleeping on the back porch in his sleeping bag, rather than on his mother's couch. At night, he dons winter clothes and heads into the woods with his dog, Bob, and a few other dogs from the neighborhood. They find the tree where Ray has left a straw bed for meditation. He meditates alongside the dogs, savoring the total silence, falling into a state of what feels like blessed calm. Thoughts about the universe's unity and ephemerality drift in and out of Ray's mind. He meditates for about an hour before returning home to his sleeping bag.

Ray intentionally chooses to live in sparser accommodations—the back porch rather than the couch—because it allows him to be in nature and test his ability to withstand suffering. In North Carolina, his plan is the same as everywhere else: he finds a spot in nature to meditate and then spends his time introspecting. In fact, by meditating everywhere he goes, Ray can better perceive the world's essential unity, because he can see what ties together all the places he visits.

The next day is Christmas Eve. Watching the midnight mass in New York City on television, Ray realizes that he'd rather be right where he is: at home with family. He reads them out a few Bible verses. He essentially has the rest of the week to himself, so he meditates in the woods, reads, plays basketball, cooks for the family, and writes poetry and prayers. He hears preachers giving sermons on the radio one Sunday, and another night, he feels a flash of depression and starts yelling, "I'm gonna die!" Suddenly, he understands how Rosie felt before she committed suicide and realizes that everyone knows they're mortal, no matter what their religion says.

Although Ray is planning to live a life of solitary Buddhist meditation, he still loves his family and appreciates the Christian tradition in which he was raised. Nevertheless, his unorthodox lifestyle—and his family members' jobs—mean that he generally spends his time alone, reflecting, introspecting, and transcribing his thoughts as poetry. In doing so, by recognizing and accepting his own mortality, Ray confronts what Buddhism suggests may be the greatest obstacle to overcoming his suffering: his attachment to life itself.

CHAPTER 20

After about a month of faithful meditation, Ray hears a revelation: "Everything is all right forever and forever and forever." He thanks the universe, feels an incredible sense of freedom, and remembers the quiet, thoughtful Warren Coughlin. February is warmer—Ray spends his nights contemplating the stars, looking for the significance in his dreams, and reminding himself that he is one with the emptiness of the universe. He understands that he's taking advantage of his family's generosity, and his brother-in-law suggests that he get a job. The local men also make fun of him, but Ray knows that they spend all day wandering around their farms, trying to look busy. Unlike them, Ray *embraces* doing nothing all day. He's not bothered: he knows that, fundamentally, everyone and everything is made of the same universal substance.

Ray's revelation is his way of understanding the Buddhist belief that the same unchanging laws always govern the universe. Whereas in the last chapter, he felt a sense of despair at his own mortality, now he sees how it's just part of the broader workings of the universe. This means that "everything is all right" in the universe, even when awful things happen to him or his loved ones. And by realizing this, he can save himself from unnecessary attachment to things or unnecessary suffering in the world. Meanwhile, his awkward conflicts with the local men reflect the tension between mainstream and countercultural values throughout the book. The men don't understand how Ray organizes his lives around something besides work—in other words, they're so locked into the mainstream that they can't imagine any other way of living. However, Ray points out that the men are just pretending *to work all day, which shows that their values are contrary to their happiness: they are pretending to do work that they don't want or need to be doing.*

CHAPTER 21

In the spring, Ray brings his nephew Lou to his new meditation spot in the woods. Examining a pinecone, Ray remembers from the Sūtras that "emptiness is discrimination." Lou has an epiphany and, to commemorate it, writes a poem honoring the trees and wind. Ray decides to call his spot "Twin Tree Grove," and he compares the path leading to it to the path of dharma. He spends his mornings joyfully contemplating nature and his evenings reminding himself that Heaven is really the world itself, which is all that there is. Sometimes, he falls asleep on his straw mat and has short, symbolic dreams.

Just as Japhy taught Ray about how meditation in nature could help him become more self-aware and enlightened, Ray tries to do the same by mentoring his young nephew. With his days organized around meditation, Ray seems to have finally achieved the Dharma Bum lifestyle that he's wanted since meeting Japhy. Crucially, his meditation all centers on nature, which allows him to more clearly see the world's sacred beauty and his own place in it.

Ray feels like a child again as he spends all his time with animals out in nature. He'll stay here until March; he'll work as a fire lookout in Washington in the summer, but he'll visit Japhy in California first. His family spends Sundays together, going for drives nearby, but Ray prefers to stay at home and meditate.

In taking the job as a fire lookout, Ray is both literally and figuratively following in Japhy's footsteps. As he realizes that solitary meditation in nature is helping him understand Buddhist scriptures and put them into practice, it's increasingly clear that the best way to live in line with his values is to go on a long retreat (like a summer alone on a mountaintop to work as a fire lookout).

Unfortunately, Ray's family opposes his Buddhism. One Sunday Ray's brother-in-law decides the family dog, Bob, can't follow Ray to the woods anymore. Furious, Ray spends all day in the woods and refuses to go home until little Lou begs him, and an unusually silent frog croaks just once, which he sees as a signal from the universe. He reminds himself that everything is emptiness, including his pride. Then, he realizes that things are *awake* despite their emptiness. Thrilled, he tries to explain everything to his family: not only does everything eventually fade out of existence, but the atoms that make everything up are also mostly empty space. So, objects don't *really* exist: the human mind just forms them by putting together a bunch of sensory information. Ray's family doesn't care or understand, but Ray is thrilled.

Ray's furious response to his brother-in-law's decision proves that he still has plenty to learn about regulating his own emotions and shedding his attachments (which Buddhists see as an important way to overcome suffering). However, his realization about his pride and the emptiness of the universe shows how Buddhism is also becoming a powerful tool for him: it's a coping mechanism and a source of inspiration. Even if his family doesn't understand him, what matters to Ray is that he *is fully understanding important Buddhist teachings for the first time. This shows that he makes a clear distinction between the kind of knowledge people get from reading books (including Buddhist scriptures) and the kind of firsthand knowledge that people can only get through firsthand experience. While Ray thinks that books can shape our worldview and help us decide what to do, he also clearly believes that the most valuable knowledge comes through experience.*

Contemplating his new epiphany in the woods, Ray wonders if he might be reaching enlightenment. He can't wait to tell Japhy. Over the following weeks, his dreams remind him that all human beings, including himself, are tiny and ephemeral. He starts getting *sampatti*, or visions of Buddha and "pure egolessness." He wants to return to Mexico and celebrate the emptiness and freedom of life. When his mother develops a severe cough, he has a vision of the medicine that ends up curing her, but he decides that it's too risky work miracles—righteousness is the greatest sin. The night before leaving for California, he realizes that Buddhism's goal is to awaken conscious beings to their inner nothingness. His mom buys him new thick boot soles, and he sets off for California. He'll return home for Christmas.

Ray's long period of dedicated meditation starts to yield even greater rewards. He can feel himself internalizing certain Buddhist teachings and moving on to more advanced ones, and he learns to approach life with a sense of joy and equanimity (mental stability even under negative or stressful conditions). When his visions help him cure his mother's cough, he seems to be gaining some kind of divine or supernatural insight, which suggests that he might truly be on the verge of the enlightenment he's been seeking. Nevertheless, he understands the enormous responsibilities that would come with this kind of power, and he is hesitant to fall back into the pride that led him to bicker with his brother-in-law. Instead, he determines that his mission as a Buddhist must be to change minds, not try to work miracles. Beyond showing how his thinking has evolved, this demonstrates his debt to Japhy—who helped change Ray's *mind—and Kerouac's reasons for writing this book (one of which was to help spread Buddhism in the United States).*

CHAPTER 22

Japhy invites Ray to stay with him in his shack in Corte Madera, north of San Francisco, behind Sean Monahan's cabin on top of a hill. In mid-May, Japhy will be sailing to Japan to study at a monastery. But in the meantime, he's helping Sean cut firewood in exchange for cash for groceries. He spent the winter back in the Pacific Northwest, climbing and visiting friends in the woods.

Back in California, Japhy continues to live the same outdoorsy lifestyle that he's convinced Ray to follow. Of course, he's only able to do so because of his work arrangement with Sean Monahan, but this shows how he and Ray view work: not as the purpose of life, but as a means to an end (buying time to focus on meditation and writing). His plans to visit Japan suggest that he's serious about taking his Buddhism to the next level and finally directly engaging with the cultures that have influenced his thinking.

Ray gets to California by hitchhiking. First, he hitches a ride down to sweltering South Carolina and over to rainy Georgia. Then, he catches a bus to Gainesville, Florida, where he plans to hop a train—but he sees that there are police officers at the railyard, so he rents a cheap hotel room instead. The next day, Ray hitchhikes up past Atlanta, but then he catches a ride with a reckless **drunk** driver and decides it's safer to stick to buses and trains. He then catches a series of buses to El Paso. When he arrives, he spends a blissful night out in the desert, like he always dreamed about doing. Ray sets up camp behind the railroad tracks at an overlook point, where he can see across the Rio Grande into Mexico. He sleeps soundly under the full moon.

Like all his hitchhiking trips, Ray's journey to California is unpredictable, and it forces him to constantly adapt to new circumstances. But that's part of why he prefers to travel this way: it's adventurous and exciting, and it shows him slices of American life that he'd never be able to see otherwise. Nevertheless, he always returns to nature: his night camping in the desert allows him to again spiritually center himself.

The next day, Ray cooks pork and beans over an open fire, then crosses the border to Ciudad Juárez. After visiting a church and market, he finds himself at a **bar**, yelling at some local men in Spanish about the vacuity of the desert and the universe. He ends up in their house, where they smoke marijuana and take some of his things—and one of them falls in love with Ray. After visiting a bar full of prostitutes with them, Ray crosses back over, leaving the "evil city" for the "virtuous desert." He returns to his campsite and ponders everything Japhy taught him. He meditates and enjoys the desert's utter silence, in which he hears the silent roar of wisdom, truth, and purity.

Ray's adventures in Ciudad Juárez exemplify his willingness to engage in both spiritual pursuits in nature and worldly pleasures in civilization. His contrast between the "evil city" and the "virtuous desert" highlights the way he combines the binary of nature and civilization with the moral values of good and evil. Following after Japhy, he views nature as pure, good, and spiritually fulfilling—whereas other people are spiritually misguided and full of vice. This is why Ray and Japhy spend as much time as possible in nature: it's the ideal place to pursue Buddhist wisdom.

CHAPTER 23

With $8 left in his pocket, Ray hitchhikes from El Paso to Las Cruces, New Mexico. He naps under a beautiful tree, helps a man move to make $4, and has a big dinner. He then spends the $4 hitching a ride to Los Angeles. The driver is a white man from Texas, and the other passengers are a Mexican couple and their baby. Ray tells everyone about Buddhism, and the white guy tells made-up stories about fighting. In LA, Ray dodges a policeman at the railyards and catches the local train to Santa Barbara, where he visits the beach and then catches the Midnight Ghost train. He falls asleep on a flatbed car, which is extremely dangerous, but he makes it safely to San Francisco with his last dollar.

Ray's adventures continue, and he does his best to combine the instability and excitement of adventurous travel with the stability, wisdom, and peacefulness of his Buddhism. In teaching others about it, he plays his part in spreading wisdom and peace. Meanwhile, the other man is seemingly lying about being a tough fighter, which suggests that he's desperately trying to prove his masculinity and justify his sense of pride. In other words, he's totally caught up in mainstream cultural values that Ray rejects, like power, dominance, and self-promotion. But the man also makes it clear why these values are absurd and don't lead to true happiness: he's so insecure and stubborn about them that he ends up telling obvious lies looking like a fool. Most importantly, his dishonesty, which represents the inauthenticity of mainstream culture, contrasts with Ray's authentic humility and wisdom.

CHAPTER 24

Sean Monahan is like a mainstream version of a Dharma Bum: he lives with his family in the countryside, where he works as a carpenter and meditates in the shack up the hill. Meanwhile, his wife, Christine, does housework and makes food from scratch, and their two young daughters wander around and play on their own. The house is full of straw mats, books, and records, and everyone eats sitting on the floor at a low Japanese table.

Sean Monahan's hybrid lifestyle shows that being a Dharma Bum isn't all-or-nothing: even if there is a tension between mainstream values and Buddhist ones, it's possible to be a dedicated Buddhist and still have a job, a family, and a house. In this same vein, Christine Monahan lives like a stereotypical 1950s housewife. But this raises important questions about Ray, Japhy, and Sean's Buddhism: is it really designed to liberate everyone, or just men? What kind of work do Ray and Japhy look down on, and where does domestic work fit into the picture? What would home and family look like in a liberated Buddhist society? If women would still be forced to do domestic work, whether they like it or not, then such a society wouldn't really be liberated—rather, it would liberate men at women's expense.

When Ray arrives, he meets Christine, who feeds him and explains that Sean and Japhy are working. Ray praises Sean as a model patriarch, because he gives all his visitors food and drinks but also makes them contribute for groceries. After eating, Ray heads for the cottage atop the hill. He passes evergreen trees and partially sawed firewood on the steep path up to the sturdy shack, which has three rooms and plenty of space, as well as a beautiful view of the whole county.

Because Sean and Christine have money and a house, they're a crucial lifeline for the other Dharma Bums. Ray and Japhy arguably wouldn't have a place to stay if it weren't for their generosity. This shows how their sense of freedom from work and conventional American life is really only possible because other *people who* do *work and live conventional lives are willing to support them. Moreover, Ray praises Sean for giving him food and drinks, even though* Christine *is actually the one who does so. In other words, Ray sees* Christine's *generosity as a reflection of* Sean's *benevolence, as though she were not acting out of her own free will. Perhaps he thinks that Sean forced her to help him, or he still believes that men hold all the responsibility and make all the decisions in a nuclear family. Buddhism clearly hasn't led Ray to rethink conventional gender norms, and this again raises the question of whether he views women as equals who can be liberated through meditation, just like men can.*

Japhy has organized his shack meticulously, filling it with flowers, crates of books, and the ubiquitous straw mats. Ray reads one of the poems that Japhy has nailed up on the burlap wall: it's about the birds he sees and the books he's reading. Ray decides to make dinner, so he leaves to buy groceries and then returns and cooks beans over a fire. He notes Japhy's spare ingredient shelf, which he uses to make "mysterious Chinese dishes." In the evening, Ray chops wood and waits for Japhy inside, by the fire. When Japhy arrives, he eats voraciously. He and Ray smoke and talk about their plans—Japhy promises to throw parties and bring girls. He also invites Ray to work with Sean and him in Sausalito.

Fittingly, Ray's initial communication with Japhy is indirect, through poetry. Japhy's poem is just a summary of his experiences, which shows how he views literature as a way of capturing and transmitting experience. Of course, this is why it's meaningful to Ray: literature allows them to share their most personal thoughts and feelings, even when the other is not present. Japhy's poem is, in part, about *literature—or the way other thinkers in the past have influenced him and allowed him to view the world in a new way. Japhy's "mysterious Chinese" cooking again shows how Ray has come to associate Asia with exotic Buddhist wisdom, and Ray's decision to cook for Japhy shows that he wants to pay back Japhy's generosity.*

Japhy shows Ray a drawing of Crater Peak in the Cascades, where he used to work as a fire lookout and where Ray is going in a few months to do the same. Japhy remembers hitchhiking there with a shaved head, like a bhikku, and teaching everyone he met about Dharma. The landscape was harsh before the snow melted, but beautiful in summer. After making it to the top of Crater Mountain, where he was stationed, he chatted with the other lookouts by radio. He talked with Jack Joseph, his friend and mentor, every day; Jack was stationed at **Desolation Peak**, the same place where Ray will work this summer. Japhy spent his free time wandering semi-naked around the forest.

Ray's upcoming gig as a fire lookout is another example of how he's following in Japhy's footsteps in order to pursue enlightenment. This is Japhy's intention: when he enthusiastically preaches about Buddhism, this shows that he's also dedicated to spreading wisdom and helping others follow in his footsteps. As Japhy explains it, the fire lookout job will enable Ray to spend a long period of time in solitary meditation in nature. After their hike up Mount Matterhorn and Ray's winter in the North Carolina woods, it's clear that Ray and Japhy both think this is the best way to make progress towards enlightenment.

Ray and Japhy read and meditate for awhile. But when Ray says he wants to share everything he learned during his season of meditation in North Carolina, Japhy rejects him, saying that he prefers actions to words. Ray notes that Japhy now seems harsh, disappointed, and tired of Buddhism. He even talks about marrying and getting rich after his trip to Japan. Really, he admits, he's just depressed—in part because his sister Rhoda is marrying an insufferable rich guy, and his dad and aunt are fighting.

The apparent changes in Japhy's personality show that even he's not perfect—rather, he still struggles to choose the virtues of Buddhism over the material rewards of a conventional life. This reaffirms the realization that Ray had on Mount Matterhorn: "When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing." In other words, a Buddhist's work is never done. They can always do more to improve themselves, and they can always fall back into misery, vice, or confusion.

Ray and Japhy decide to sleep. Ray goes outside, meditates to the sounds of the animals, and says a prayer for Japhy. But in the morning, Japhy is his old self again: he bangs on a frying pan, yells a Buddhist chant, and serves Ray pancakes.

Ray expresses his love for Japhy through prayer, and it seems to work: Japhy quickly bounces back from his self-proclaimed depression. Their mutually supportive friendship allows them both to balance out their highs and lows over time.

CHAPTER 25

Japhy explains his Buddhist chant over breakfast, then teaches Ray to sharpen an ax before they spend the day splitting logs down in Sean's yard, which Ray thoroughly enjoys. Japhy tells Buddhist stories about disciples reaching enlightenment when their masters told them that Buddha is dried-up excrement or pushed them into a puddle. He throws a flower at Ray and tells him about the famous "flower sermon" that one Buddhist leader used to choose his successor—Ray throws a banana peel back at him and calls it his "banana sermon."

Just like hiking, woodcutting is a way to immerse oneself in nature through a repetitive physical activity. Japhy's stories suggest that it's possible to reach enlightenment through filth, disgust, and beauty alike. In turn, this reflects the Buddhist belief that everything in the universe has the same fundamental essence, and so it's possible to understand the universe as a whole by understanding any particular thing. This is similar to how, in North Carolina, Ray realized that the universe is empty while thinking about oranges and frogs.

Japhy shows Ray a Chinese painting of a boy taming and abandoning an ox, then finding enlightenment in the wilderness and getting **drunk** in the city. This is a metaphor for Buddhism, and Ray realizes that it describes his life: he tamed his mind in North Carolina, had the epiphany that life is nothingness and started to unlearn his material attachments, and is now celebrating with Japhy.

The painting is a metaphor for how it's possible to combine nature and the city, virtue and vice, or asceticism and pleasure. Specifically, Buddhists achieve enlightenment by meditating, usually alone and usually in nature. But after they've done so, they can return to human society in order to help others *learn the same truths and enjoy certain worldly pleasures without becoming unhealthily attached to them. This is why Ray and Japhy enjoy a lively party once in awhile, even though they think that achieving wisdom through Buddhism requires living a peaceful life, free of material attachments.*

In the afternoon, after getting dressed for the evening party, Japhy runs around doing chores and scolds Ray for just sitting in the grass. Ray believes in do-nothing Buddhism, but Japhy insists that "Buddhism is activity." Japhy meditates a few minutes a day, on a rigid schedule, while Ray constantly lives a semi-meditative, dreaming state.

Ray and Japhy's contrasting views of Buddhism show that, even as they learn from each other, they differ in fundamental ways. Moreover, this contrast suggests that it's possible to become enlightened either *through pure meditation or through performing activities in a mindful way.*

That evening, the party's attendees are three couples: Japhy and Polly Whitmore, a beautiful, recently divorced **mountain**-climber; Sean and Christine; and Christine's brother Whitey Jones and Patsy, his fiancée. The odd men out are Ray and the burly, blond Buddhist Bud Diefendorf, a former physicist and philosopher. Ray notes that Sean is superstitious and kindhearted, and Whitey is young and naïve. Soon, the three **drunken** couples start dancing naked. Japhy and Sean briefly force Patsy into the bedroom, which they view as playing a joke on Whitey, and Bud and Ray imagine that they were Tibetan monks in a past life, served by dancing naked women. To avoid feeling lustful, Ray closes his eyes. But soon, everyone gets tired and goes to bed.

As in the painting Japhy showed Ray, the guys view a certain amount of debauchery as a healthy supplement to their dedicated routine of Buddhist meditation and study. But between Japhy and Sean's supposed joke and Bud and Ray's comment about naked women, it again becomes clear that the Dharma Bums' worldview and community are male-centered. When Ray closes his eyes to avoid feeling lustful, however, this shows that he's still struggling to accept Japhy's view that religion must embrace sexuality rather than repressing it.

The next day, Sean and Christine get plenty of visitors, including Princess, Alvah Goldbrook, and Warren Coughlin, who come to visit Ray and Japhy. One group plays folk songs and eats lunch in the yard, another listens to music and reads inside Sean and Christine's house, and a third drinks tea and talks about Buddhism in Japhy's shack on the hill. This repeats every weekend.

These parties are significant because they show Ray and Japhy's whole circle of poets, Buddhists, and bums getting together. Even if many of them are eccentric loners, they form a broader community based on their shared interests and values.

Atop the hill one day, Ray points out a kite that can't fly properly because of its short tail. Bud, who's overly serious, decides that this is a metaphor for his trouble meditating and obsesses over the idea all day. Later, he decides that he's a "Buddhafish," with wisdom as the fin that guides him. During the parties, Ray always naps under a eucalyptus tree. One day, he watches its branches jump and sway like human dancers, and on another, he dreams about Cody, Rosie, and a divine-looking throne.

Bud's serious commitment to finding the true Buddhist meaning behind everything ironically distracts him from the world around him all day. Much like Henry Morley and the other intellectual poets, he gets caught up in ideas, to the expense of the real world. Meanwhile, for Ray, Buddhism is really about accurately perceiving and connecting to the world. This is why he finds the eucalyptus tree so enchanting: when he sees it dance like a person, he's really seeing how all beings are connected through movement.

While Ray is staying with Japhy, he befriends a nosy hummingbird, tries to avoid the rat that lives under the shack, tempts ants with honey, and collects flowers to make bouquets. Meanwhile, Japhy makes fun of Ray for doing nothing all day, chops wood, and chases girls. Even Christine is in love with Japhy. Japhy is also seeing another beautiful girl named Psyche, but he always pressures her to **drink**, because otherwise she won't have sex with him. One weekend, she accompanies Ray and Japhy to the beach, where she tells Ray that he has an oral fixation, and Ray makes up Buddhist aphorisms throughout the day.

Even though Japhy initially convinced Ray to seek wisdom, purpose, and peace in nature, now Ray does so all day, while Japhy focuses on other pursuits. Ray sees Japhy's complicated love life as evidence of his masculinity—which, in turn, he sees as a testament to Japhy's wisdom and greatness. However, today's readers might see his behavior as manipulative and his attitude toward women as objectifying. Again, even though their Buddhism gives them a feeling of brotherhood and community with other men, it doesn't lead Ray and Japhy to treat women as their equals.

During the week, Ray and Japhy clean up after the weekend parties, and then Ray buys groceries with the remainder of his writing grant money. Several San Francisco bums start visiting them, often for days at a time. Ray loves cooking for them and tries to confuse them by making up contradictory aphorisms. When kids stumble upon the shack, Ray has philosophical discussions or scares them off by pretending to be a ghost.

By spending what little money he has on feeding fellow homeless people, Ray tries to act out his belief in the value of charity. In turn, he spreads Buddhism and creates something of a community around himself, just as Sean's generosity creates a community around his house.

CHAPTER 26

Sean plans to throw Japhy a huge party before he sails off to Japan. Tired of partying, Ray and Japhy decide that they'll go for a long walk afterward. In the meantime, Japhy's sister Rhoda and her fiancé show up to personally invite Japhy to their wedding. Japhy and Rhoda's banter makes Rhoda's fiancé uncomfortable, and after they leave, Japhy predicts that they won't last—Rhoda is too much of a free spirit. Strangely, Japhy thinks that Rhoda should marry *him* instead, even though they're brother and sister.

Ray and Japhy's itch to get back to the wilderness shows that they continue to see worldly pleasures like partying as less important than spiritual pursuits like meditating in nature. Even though they think a certain amount of partying is compatible *with living a true Buddhist life, they don't think it's actually the fulfilling part of such a lifestyle. It's unclear whether Japhy is joking when he makes the bizarre claim that his sister should marry* him. *Regardless, it again shows that Japhy generally views women primarily as possible sexual or romantic partners. It also suggests that, despite all the Buddhist teachings about humility, he has a rather high opinion of himself.*

Ray complains that, unlike all his friends, he has no luck with women. But while he often yearns for sex, he also remembers that lust is sinful. In fact, he has written a poem about the saints, and he considers himself a "crazy saint" because he believes in living a solitary life in the wilderness—but it's hard to do this when there are constantly parties to attend and women to chase. Ray blames his friends for his failures with women. For instance, one day, Sean and the bum Joe Mahoney purposefully interrupt Ray while he's with a girl, ruining his night—or maybe saving him from temptation.

Ray's contradictory feelings about sex reflect how, on the one hand, he sees sex as a worldly distraction from his spiritual goals. But on the other hand, he feels desire, wants to consummate it, and admires people (like Japhy) who have a lot of sex. He struggles both to let himself desire sex and to explain why he doesn't have any. When Ray calls himself a "crazy saint," he's suggesting that his Buddhism is not only about finding peace and happiness individually—it's also about making a difference in the world and leaving a lasting impression. Nevertheless, if his saintly life involves living alone in the forest, how can he reach other people? The obvious answer is that he'll do so through his writing.

Whenever Ray is **inebriated** at parties, he closes his eyes and has holy visions. His friends celebrate them, but Sean's young daughters find them scary. Meanwhile, Japhy cooks confusing yet delicious dinners of Chinese herbs and roots with boiled rice. After dinner, Japhy tends to read while Ray meditates outside, listening to the animals. Once, Ray keeps so still that mosquitos land on him and then fly away without biting him.

Like his wavering about sex, Ray's drunk meditation at parties reflects his struggle to reconcile spiritual and material pursuits (or religion and pleasure). While in nature he can easily meditate without drinking, around other people, he seemingly needs to drink to heighten his senses.

CHAPTER 27

Ray and Japhy get into a fight in San Francisco: Ray wants to get **drunk** in an alleyway, but Japhy thinks that Ray drinks too much. Japhy would rather go to the Buddhist Center for a lecture instead. When Japhy refuses to drink, Ray finishes his bottle and buys another. The two of them get haircuts and buy secondhand clothes on Skid Row, and then they take a ferry across the San Francisco Bay. Japhy drinks a little and then reads a poem he wrote about Ray's haircut and again criticizes his drinking, which Japhy thinks is at odds with Buddhism. In Berkeley, Ray decides to keep drinking in Alvah Goldbrook's cottage, while Japhy goes to the lecture. But when Japhy returns, he reveals that everyone there was getting drunk too. He and Ray never argue again.

Ray and Japhy's argument again suggests that, even though Ray never admits it in the book, his drinking is actually a serious problem. However, just like in the rest of the book, it's unclear how, exactly, sensory pleasures like drinking relate to the spiritual purity and concentration required for meditation. While Japhy voices the view that they're incompatible because Buddhism is about putting the spiritual first, he has also previously said that it's possible to combine them, or even that religion must *accept the value of sensory pleasures like drinking and sex. His experience at the lecture seems to support this second theory, but Ray's refusal to attend the lecture makes it clear that his drinking probably is negatively affecting him. Still, Ray and Japhy's friendship allows them to overcome this conflict.*

CHAPTER 28

On the evening of Japhy's big party, Ray dreads socializing until someone brings him **wine**. Sean sets up a huge bonfire, and the guests divide into three groups, like during all the other parties. Inside, Ray dances and plays bongo drums with Sean, Bud, Alvah, and his friend George. In the yard, Rheinhold Cacoethes rants about the state of American poetry while Warren Coughlin tries to get in a word edgewise. Henry Morley briefly visits as well; he reads some magazines and comics and makes a strange comment about hotdogs and "stray Mexicans" to Ray and Japhy before disappearing. Others party on top of the hill, and even Japhy's father visits. Just like Japhy, he's athletic and jumpy, and he dances energetically with girls all night.

Sean's party again brings together the Dharma Bums' whole community of friends, family, and acquaintances—whether Buddhists, bums, or poets. However, Ray doesn't find the convivial atmosphere all that interesting or fulfilling. For instance, he clearly doesn't care about what Rheinhold Cacoethes has to say about poetry or what Henry Morley thinks of "stray Mexicans." Rather, he presents these interactions as empty, pointless, and absurd because they're based on meaningless intellectual games, as opposed to Ray's serious reckoning with what it means to live a spiritually fulfilling life.

Japhy dances with Psyche, leaving Polly and Princess sad and confused. Japhy tells Ray he can "take whichever" of the girls he wants. Ray chats with Arthur Whane, the Buddhist Association's sociable director, and dances with a woman before realizing her husband is nearby. Alvah and George decide to get naked, then Japhy follows. He frightens Psyche, Polly, and Princess whenever he sees them by roaring and jumping at them. Japhy's father tells Ray that he has no issue with any of this. After years living in the Oregon wilderness, now he lives comfortably in the nearby town of Mill Valley; he's separated from Japhy's mother, who lives alone in the Northwest.

While Japhy is a generous and dedicated friend to Ray, he's cruel and manipulative to his three girlfriends. Still, Ray admires Japhy's luck with women, which again shows how their friend group is male-centered and unwelcoming and condescending to women. Of course, they aren't alone in this: as Japhy's father's attitude suggests, in many ways they're reflecting the generalized sexism of white American society in the 1950s. Even while they reject other aspects of mainstream culture that don't serve their needs, they embrace gender hierarchies that put them on top, which shows that their Buddhist ideas of generosity and love for everyone are limited by their own biases.

Japhy and Psyche get into a fight, so Psyche decides to leave. Ray follows her to her car and tries to convince her to stay, but she ends up backing into a ditch and having to stay with Christine and Sean anyway. Everyone sets up to sleep on various parts of the property, and Ray is just getting ready to tuck into his sleeping bag on the grass when Alvah comes outside to chat and read poetry. Then, Bud decides to go see if there are any girls still around Christine's house. In the morning twilight, Ray eats by the bonfire and yells out to everyone to get up. Then, remembers that human life is pointless because the truth of the universe is just "the sound of silence." He returns up the hill, contemplating the strangeness of human existence.

Ray presents Psyche as irrational and jealous, while considering himself noble for standing up for Japhy. However, this situation would look completely different from Psyche's perspective—and yet Ray doesn't consider this, which again shows how he unknowingly reinforces gender hierarchies, even though he thinks of Buddhism as a liberating religion. Later, when Ray yells out to everyone, he initially seems annoyed by other people but then starts to feel a sense of sympathy for them because of their insignificance. This thought process allows him to reconcile his feeling of love and sympathy for others with his preference for being alone: it's a way of reminding himself of life's meaninglessness and most people's lack of enlightenment.

CHAPTER 29

Two days later, the party is still going. Japhy and Ray are eager to start their hike, so they pack their things and sneak off toward the **mountains**. Japhy excitedly proclaims that they should take a trip to Alaska later, in the winter, and he talks about his plan to write a never-ending poem about the beauty of the Pacific Northwest. They hike up a steep road, past some houses, and then find a spectacular view of the whole Bay Area. Japhy starts dreaming about forming a tribe of roaming Dharma Bums and starting the Dharma Press to publish their poetry.

Fed up with material pleasures, Ray and Japhy go back out into the wilderness in order to refocus their energies on their spiritual growth and well-being. Japhy's aspiration to write a long poem about his native Pacific Northwest reflects his view of what art should do: faithfully capture the beauty of the world as people authentically see it, so that they can communicate that beauty to contemporary readers and future generations. He sees this as a collective movement, not just an individual project, which shows that he imagines his Buddhist and artistic values as a way of building a new kind of society.

Ray asks Japhy why God—or Tathagata, the Buddhist equivalent—would allow cruelty in the world. Japhy responds that Tathagata didn't *really* create the world and that asking *why* is meaningless: things just exist. In turn, he asks Ray what he believes about death. Ray says that it'll send them to "nirvana Heaven," and Japhy points out that Ray's worldview is still basically Christian. Ray agrees and suggests that Christ was one of the Buddhas.

Japhy sees that Ray is combining Buddhist teachings with the religious concepts and questions that he's inherited from Christianity—like the problem of evil and the concept of nirvana *(heaven) as an afterlife. This shows how Ray has adapted Buddhism to his own circumstances, and it suggests that all major religions grapple with the same fundamental issues in different ways.*

Japhy starts talking about Japan, where he recalls that Rol Sturlason is currently climbing a **mountain**. When Japhy arrives in Japan, he plans to wear traditional robes so that he can "feel real Oriental." Ray points out that, according to Alvah Goldbrook, Japanese people are obsessed with Western clothing and philosophy. Japhy thinks this is a sign that, soon, "East'll meet West." He hopes that everyone will be able to unite and roam around the world like Dharma Bums.

Just like Ray's belief in both Christian and Buddhist principles, Japhy's belief that "East'll meet West" and start a global revolution suggests that the geographical, cultural, and political divisions that people draw among ourselves are essentially artificial. Instead, Ray and Japhy see all people as fundamentally connected and united by their humanity. They also see themselves as uniquely capable of understanding and communicating this universal truth, in order to start the global revolution. However, Alvah's comment suggests that they're not the only ones who believe this—in fact, their beliefs are heavily shaped by their specific experiences as white American men who have never been to Asia.

Looking at **Mount Tamalpais** on the horizon, Japhy silently composes poetry. He and Ray follow a dirt road through idyllic, green fields that give way to a damp, fragrant forest of redwood trees. Japhy complains that the other Americans in Japan—the people who are funding his trip—don't appreciate the real America, or its poetry. They spend endless money imitating Japanese culture but don't read poetry or accept the modest, conscious lifestyle that Buddhism really teaches. But he's still excited to go, even if he'll probably miss California.

As Japhy and Ray absorb the natural beauty of the California woods, Japhy declares that he is the true authority on the "real" America and Japan. Ironically, he presents himself as wiser than the people who are supposed to teach him in Japan. He only thinks this way because he defines his particular areas of interest (poetry, Buddhism, minimalism, and survivalism) as more authentic or "real" than the elements of Japanese and American culture that these expatriates focus on. In other words, he believes that authentic culture is the culture he *likes, even in a country that is not his. Although this way of thinking might be common, it still shows that Japhy is in many ways more attracted to his* idea *of Japan than the actual place.*

Ray and Japhy follow a series of hidden trails into the endless wilderness of Muir Woods. Eventually, they come up to an amphitheater and rest for awhile. Once again, Japhy starts talking about working as a lookout in the magnificent Cascades, which was like a religious experience. He pities everyone who's still partying at Sean's house, and they set off again. After half an hour, they reach a meadow with a clear view of **Mount Tamalpais**. In the afternoon, Japhy observes wildlife, and Ray explores the area. For dinner, Japhy cooks a delicious pea and bacon soup with foraged mushrooms.

Ray's journey to the Cascades, which involves following in Japhy's footsteps, promises to elevate his knowledge and practice of Buddhism to the next level. In this sense, it's a close parallel to Japhy's trip to Japan: when they part ways after this hike, they will independently go off in search of enlightenment. Both of these trips are solitary pursuits, even if Ray and Japhy's friendship has taught them both how to better engage in their separate journeys.

That night, Ray dreams about a stoic hobo showing up at a vibrant, filthy market in China. He realizes that this person is Japhy, and he wonders if Japhy will ever come back from Asia. In the morning, Japhy is already making breakfast when Ray tells him about the dream. They eat salami and cheese, and Ray again praises Japhy's ingenuity, energy, and optimism.

In his dream, Ray equates Japhy's wisdom with his becoming *Chinese. By using ethnicity as a blanket metaphor for Buddhist wisdom, however, Ray imposes his own fantasy on an enormous and diverse group of people. He seems to view Asian people as examples of a wise and spiritual type, rather than as individuals with distinct experiences and beliefs. This suggests that, like Japhy, Ray thinks of "East meets West" as "Western" people adopting certain elements of "Eastern" cultures, but not necessarily forming any meaningful community with East Asian* people.

Late in the morning, Ray and Japhy reach an even more beautiful meadow, and then they turn down the treacherously steep two-mile trail toward Stinson Beach. When they arrive, they buy **wine** from a grocery store and drink it on the beach. They swim and have lunch—salami and cheese again. Relaxing on the beach, Japhy says that he feels like they're doing something powerful by rejecting materialistic mainstream culture and living a saintly life of prayer. Gazing out on the ocean toward Japan, he almost regrets his decision to leave.

This scene echoes the book's opening chapter, when Ray drank and swam in the ocean in Santa Barbara. But now, Ray and Japhy are together, which shows how important their friendship has become—and, in particular, how important Japhy's wisdom has become to Ray's sense of self over the course of the book. Once more, they proclaim that their lifestyle choices are a rebellion against the values of mainstream culture, which prioritizes work over prayer and accumulation over freedom. Meanwhile, Japhy's pang of regret about leaving for Japan reflects his worry that he won't be able to keep up the same lifestyle there—and, more importantly, that he won't have friends like Ray to share the experience with.

CHAPTER 30

Ray and Japhy return up the trail from Stinson Beach into the hills, where they can see San Francisco over the Golden Gate Bridge. Then, they pass back through the redwood forest. The trail is uncomfortably steep; Ray feels miserable and desperately wants a Hershey chocolate bar. When they make it back to the shack, Ray's feet hurt so badly that he swears off of hiking. Japhy goes down to the supermarket for food and returns with Hershey bars and **port wine** for Ray, and then he enthusiastically cooks dinner while Ray lays on the ground. He's devastated that Japhy is leaving for Japan in the morning. Ray asks which of them will die first, and over dinner, they marvel at how they can uncover the same wisdom and see the same stars as the first Buddhists, thousands of years ago.

Just like on Mount Matterhorn, the physical stress of hiking serves to test Ray and Japhy's character and willpower. Japhy has more stamina—and perhaps more inner fortitude—which is why's able to remain joyful even when they're both exhausted. As Japhy is about to leave, this affirms one last time that Japhy is Ray's rightful mentor because he's stronger and wiser. With Japhy set to leave, Ray assesses their friendship and fully realizes how much he's grown through it. When they talk about seeing the same stars and learning the same wisdom as past Buddhists, they're also implicitly talking about how they'll be able to see the same stars and share the same wisdom when Japhy is in Japan.

Later, Sean and Christine visit to say goodbye to Japhy, and Ray compares Japhy to the Gautama Buddha leaving his palace to find enlightenment in the forest. The next day, as a going-away present, Ray gives Japhy a piece of paper that says: "MAY YOU USE THE DIAMONDCUTTER OF MERCY." The last person to see Japhy is Psyche, who finally agrees to have sex with him—but only in the ship cabin right before he leaves. She says that she wants to stay and follow him to Japan, but Japhy literally throws her off the boat onto the pier, where Sean catches her. Ray admits that this wasn't merciful, but he considers it necessary. Everyone cries, and Warren Coughlin predicts that Japhy will stay in Asia forever.

Ray, Sean, and Christine send Japhy off like a hero, making their high hopes clear: they view his trip to Japan as the next step in his path toward enlightenment. When Ray writes to Japhy that mercy is like a "diamondcutter," he's essentially saying that mercy is extremely powerful because it breaks down conflicts through goodwill. Meanwhile, Japhy's last meeting with Psyche mostly serves as a comic interlude—but it also again shows how he views the women in his life mostly as a source of sex and entertainment, rather than taking them or their feelings seriously. Ray finally starts to see this, but he stops short of recognizing its implications: he and Japhy can't truly preach wisdom, mercy, and love for all living beings if they don't respect women.

CHAPTER 31

On June 18, 1956, Ray says goodbye to Christine and starts hitchhiking north. A teacher brings him to Cloverdale, where he buys food, and then a farmer and a gregarious trucker get him to Crescent City. A gold miner and avid fisherman brings him to a nondescript **mountain** town where he naps in the woods, and then a used-car salesman and morose young logger get him to Canyonville, Oregon. In Canyonville, an amicable glove distributer picks Ray up and takes him to Eugene, where he sleeps by the side of the road. In the morning, he gazes in wonder at the beautiful Cascade Range, bathes in a stream, and says a short prayer with Japhy's **prayer beads.**

As Ray hitchhikes north from San Francisco, he meets a vibrant array of working-class Americans. Their various occupations and personalities are a reminder of the diverse lifestyles that people live and the worldviews that they follow (even if all more or less participate in the mainstream culture that Kerouac rejects). However, Ray is clearly much less excited to meet these people than to reach the mountains, which shows that he continues to prize nature and solitude over civilization and companionship. Praying with Japhy's beads, meanwhile, is a kind of symbolic gesture that honors his friend, making it clear that Ray learned his core values from Japhy.

A **drunk** housepainter brings Ray to Portland, where he catches a bus into Washington, then a ride with some other wild hitchhikers, and finally a ferry to Seattle. Sipping from a bottle of vodka that he finds hidden on the boat, Ray realizes that the Northwest is even more beautiful and expansive than he imagined—and Seattle proves to be fascinating, just like Japhy promised. Ray sleeps in a cheap hotel on Skid Row; in the morning, he has coffee and buys cheap secondhand winter clothes before hitchhiking his way toward the stunning Cascades. A racecar driver and a lumberman bring him into the wilderness, and then various farmers and miners bring him across the Skagit River and up into **mountains** on a road flanked by steep cliffs.

Through these final steps in Ray's journey to the Cascades, the reader can get a new perspective on his life: it's possible to see him how any other city resident would, as a homeless man staying on Skid Row and drinking in public. But common assumptions about such people don't apply to Ray: he's not homeless because of character flaws or economic circumstances, but rather because he sees it as a more interesting and fulfilling way to live. In fact, there couldn't be a greater contrast between most people's expectations for him and the reality of why he's homeless. By seeing Ray in this new context, perhaps readers can reevaluate their assumptions about homeless people more broadly.

CHAPTER 32

Ray has a **drink** in a rundown tavern and hitchhikes up to the Marblemount Ranger Station. When he arrives, the assistant ranger, Wally, complains that the last man who drove him was speeding. Ray realizes that he won't have the freedom of a bhikku while working this job. He learns the ropes at Fire School and meets Burnie Byers, a 65-year-old lumberjack who remembers Japhy as a kind of brilliant prodigy. Ray spends his free time hiking or drinking by the Skagit River, while everyone else parties at carnivals. The river flows fast down from the cloud-covered **mountaintops**; Ray watches birds fish in it and logs float down it. The trees and leaves seem content, as though they're right where they're supposed to be, in perfect harmony with the eternal whole of the ecosystem and universe.

For the first time in the book, Ray gives up countercultural wandering to do ordinary paid work. His mental adjustment here shows how conventional jobs forces people to suppress their authentic selves and instead fit into someone else's mold. Nevertheless, that is a relatively insignificant part of the fire lookout job, which is like the culmination of everything Japhy has taught Ray: it requires him to spend a long period of time totally alone in nature. During the training, when Ray continues his meditation, he immediately reaches a state of serenity, which shows that his understanding of the universe is improving over time.

When it's time to head up the **mountain**, Ray buys groceries and drives up the Skagit River with a muleskinner named Happy. They pass two dams and reach Diablo Lake, where prospectors arrived in the 1890s to search for gold. An enormous fire devastated the area in 1919, largely destroying the trail and leaving Desolation Peak full of snags (dead or burnt-out trees). Happy remembers sending an overly naïve youngster up to Desolation one year and warns Ray that everyone who works there eventually goes crazy from isolation. While Happy drives the mules up what's left of the trail, Ray takes a boat up the river to the Ross Dam, where they spend the night sleeping on floats in the river and marveling at the enormous full moon.

The burnt-out trail and Happy's comment about loneliness serve as warnings: the lookout job is not as easy as it seems. In fact, both the psychological toll of being alone and the difficulties of surviving in a harsh environment present challenges for people who take the job. Of course, these are the precise challenges that Ray is seeking out—his ability to cope with them will show how resilient he has become through his Buddhist training and his relationship with Japhy.

In the morning, it's finally time for Ray to go to **Desolation Peak**,—but it's rainy, and Happy says that he hopes Ray brought some **brandy** to cope with the weather. In fact, it's still snowing on Desolation Peak, and Ray promises Happy that they'll share a bottle of scotch after the summer's over. Ray realizes that Happy and Japhy remember each other fondly, and all of a sudden, he starts to seriously miss Japhy.

This conversation between Ray and Happy recalls Ray and Japhy's conversation about alcohol before hiking Mount Matterhorn: Ray thought he'd need a drink, but Japhy promised him that it wouldn't be necessary. Now, even though Happy tells Ray he might need to drink to cope with the lookout job, Ray doesn't need alcohol to find inner peace when he's in the wilderness. This reflects how his Buddhist training has changed him over the last year (since the start of the book).

Ray, Happy, and Wally travel upriver for a couple hours, then take the trail on horseback with their mules. It's wet and slippery, but they make steady progress. When they reach a section of trail that's blocked off by a fallen tree, Happy builds a new shortcut around it. As they continue climbing, the shrubs give way to a meadow and then then snow-covered gray rocks. The snow and hail are intolerable by the time they reach the top, where the tiny wooden fire lookout cabin is located. Ray realizes that it's drearier than he expected, and he starts questioning his decision to come.

This climb up Desolation Peak has a lot in common with Ray and Japhy's climb up Mount Matterhorn. Notably, both can be seen as metaphors for Ray's quest for inner peace through Buddhism. Just like on Mount Matterhorn, Ray has to pass through a series of obstacles and difficult trail sections—but patience, resilience, and continual hard work are the keys to success. This resembles the way his meditation practice is about gradually learning to control the mind and perceive the truths of Buddhist scriptures, one step at a time. And just like when Ray faltered when he reached the summit of Mount Matterhorn, here, upon reaching the summit, he questions whether he's made the right decision. Both also represent his doubts about Buddhism—namely, his suspicion that it might not bring him to the state of joy and inner peace that he desires. However, this time, Ray's doubts are much weaker than they were at Mount Matterhorn. This suggests that he has gained confidence and comfort in his meditation practice over time.

Inside the fire lookout cabin, everything is old and filthy. Wally tells Ray to start cleaning immediately, while Happy makes coffee. Ray points out that it's too foggy to see anything—never mind a fire—but Happy explains that the fog should clear in a few days. Ray wonders whether it might stay forever, like on Han Shan's eternally foggy **Cold Mountain**. After having coffee, doing more chores, and eating spam and eggs for dinner, the three men go to sleep.

The reality of Desolation Peak doesn't quite match Ray's expectations, but his ability to cope with it suggests that he has become more adaptable through Buddhism. He then compares himself to Han Shan, his and Japhy's idol, whom he's trying to emulate by living and meditating on a remote mountaintop. This is significant because it shows literature's power to communicate across history and transform people's lives, even generations after a writer has died. Of course, Kerouac hopes to harness this power through his writing and inspire others to follow in his footsteps when they read The Dharma Bums.

Happy and Wally leave in the morning, leaving Ray alone and terrified. He spends the whole foggy day cleaning, and in the evening he meditates outside. That night, Ray wakes up terrified: there's "a huge black monster" right outside his window. Actually, it's just **Mount Hozomeen** in the distance—Ray can see it now because the fog has cleared. The mountain is spectacular: it looks just like the drawing Japhy made in California.

Ray's terror at the weather and his utter solitude reflect the psychological challenges of the job, which Happy warned him about. Of course, Ray's ability to manage these feelings will be a test of his Buddhism, and that's why he copes with the sense of terror through meditation, which reminds him that everything in the universe is the same, all negative feelings will pass, and so on. It's significant that Mount Hozomeen initially looks like a "monster" before Ray notices its majesty—he manages to change his perspective through Buddhism and see the beauty in what initially looks foreboding. Of course, it also reflects the broader transformation in the symbolism of mountains over the course of the novel: initially, they're foreign and foreboding. But as Ray gets used to being in the wilderness, they eventually come to represent the eternal beauty and resilience of nature.

CHAPTER 33

When Ray emerges from his cabin in the morning, he sees the endless landscape that Japhy promised him: stunning snow-capped **mountains** tower above forested, lake-filled valleys, which are covered with a layer of clouds far down below. After breakfast, Ray identifies all the mountains he sees and starts to feel like they're *his*, because there's nobody else in sight. All summer, it feels like he's dreaming, especially when he stands on his head and sees everything upside down. Blissfully alone, he dances, sings, and yells. He melts snow for drinking water and marvels at the incredible sunset, which gives him profound hope.

This stunning view is like a reward for all of Ray's hard work. Because he's so high up, his perspective seems impossibly vast—it's as though he left his own individual perspective and is instead seeing the natural world on its own terms. This helps him both perceive the truths about nature that Buddhism teaches and to feel like his own ego is shrinking into the void of the vast Cascade Range. So, when Ray starts to identify with the mountains, he's not thinking about possessing them—rather, he's seeing the unity in the universe and feeling like he's part of the natural world (and like the natural world is part of him).

Every day on **Desolation Peak** is a little bit different. Ray often sees fog, thunderstorms, and endless clouds, while he's swarmed by insects on the surprisingly hot and stuffy **mountaintop**. Every night, he meditates and marvels at the moon. Afterward, deer often visit in search of leftover food, and the Northern Lights are occasionally visible. Ray contemplates the "primordial essence" that unites all things in the universe, living or otherwise; he recognizes that any setbacks he faces are minor at worst. His job is just to look out for smoke, but he never sees any.

Ray sees both how constant changes occur in nature and how the system of nature as a whole is permanent, which comprises a key Buddhist teaching: the "primordial essence" of all things is always the same, because everything is constantly changing. Change and constancy are really two sides of the same coin. By focusing on the universe's primordial essence, which is particularly visible to him from his special vantage point, Ray again successfully moves out of his own individual perspective (or ego). This helps him cope with any struggles he faces in life by showing him that they're temporary and insignificant. And this whole process illustrates how Buddhist meditation allows people to perceive the truths of the universe, which in turn helps them improve themselves and overcome their suffering.

While meditating one night, Ray has a vision of the compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who asks him to remind others of their freedom. Ray yells out into the wilderness and then immediately sees a shooting star. From his vantage point, the world looks vast and unreal, but most humans forget about this endless natural beauty. Ray wonders if people's suffering is only a way of learning that everything is fundamentally just nothingness.

Like his epiphanies about Buddhist proverbs on Mount Matterhorn and his vision of his mother's medicine in North Carolina, Ray's vision of Avalokitesvara and the shooting star above him are signs that he is approaching enlightenment. Through his reflections on the beauty of nature, he combines his thinking about Buddhism with his countercultural rejection of mainstream North American culture. Now, he sees that most people aren't just blinded because of the way they live and work, but also because they haven't seen this kind of spectacular natural scenery.

CHAPTER 34

By August, the **mountains** sometimes look foreboding rather than beautiful, and Ray spends more time reading by the fire. Soon enough, it starts snowing again. One day, as Ray watches snow approaching from the north and rain from the south, an enormous rainbow forms right next to him. It seems like a sign from the divine, reminding him of his insignificance in relation to the beauty of the universe. Ray walks outside and finds the rainbow surrounding him; he can't wait to tell Japhy about it. The storm clears, but then it starts raining heavily in the afternoon. The next morning, Ray calls out for Han Shan in the impenetrable fog and watches birds in the distance.

Like his vision of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara in the previous chapter, Ray sees this rainbow as a clear sign that his Buddhist religious practice—meditation in nature—is bringing him one step closer to the enlightenment he seeks. In Buddhism, this doesn't mean becoming superior to other living beings, but rather getting rid of the individual ego and becoming one with the universe. Again, Ray interprets his experience by referring to the poet Han Shan. Ray feels he finally understands Han Shan, whose ascetic lifestyle he has finally replicated by living in meditation on a mountaintop.

When it's officially time to leave, Ray realizes that he'll never forget "the vision of the freedom of eternity" that the mountaintop gave him. He tours the property one last time and then has a stunning vision of a figure standing in the fog: it's Japhy, the version who appeared in his dreams. Japhy yells, "Go away, thieves of the mind!" Ray thanks Japhy for sending him to **Desolation Peak**. Then, he thanks God and professes his love for Him. And finally, he says a prayer to thank his cabin, just like Japhy always used to do at every campsite. After the prayer, Ray says "Blah"—which he's sure the universe will understand—and then sets off back down the trail, to the human world.

In the novel's closing passage, Ray pays homage to Japhy, the friend and mentor whom he credits for all his spiritual progress throughout the book. Indeed, this book is more about Japhy's influence on Ray than it is about Japhy or Ray alone. Therefore, it's a testament not only to how Buddhism can bring people peace and serenity in a difficult world, but also the way friendship can help them learn and grow. Ray thanks the campsite for similar reasons: it's made his spiritual realizations possible. To thank the universe, he says "Blah," because the word appears empty and meaningless to people yet contains the same underlying reality as everything else. Ray is pointing out how people often miss the deeper truth of the things they encounter in everyday life, so they wrongly see meaningful things as meaningless.

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