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**"Buddhism in Allen Ginsberg's Poetry. A Reaction towards Consumerism"**

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**Abstract:** This essay is an analysis of Allen Ginsberg's poetry in relation to Buddhism as a reaction towards the world of consumerism. The main point of this study is to see the contrast between the two discourses that are joined in Ginsberg's poetical work: the Western and the Eastern, analysing Buddhist philosophy as a way of understanding some of Ginsberg's poems. To explore this, the following poems will be analysed: "Angkor Wat", "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express", "Thoughts Sitting Breathing" and "Gospel Noble Truths", which can be found in Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Poems 1947-1980*.

**Keywords:** Allen Ginsberg, Beat Generation, Theravada, Buddhism, consumerism, capitalism.

**Alberto CRESPO POBLETE**

**Buddhism in Allen Ginsberg's Poetry. A Reaction towards Consumerism**

#### **0. Introduction**

This essay is an analysis that concerns the poetic work of Allen Ginsberg in relation to Buddhism as a reaction towards the world of consumerism. This topic can serve as an example to better understand the world in which we are nowadays living, a society that has evolved into a consumerist and globalized system that has reduced life to economic values. This poet is a good example to enquire into this subject due to the historical conditions he had to face, which placed him as a spokesperson for his entire generation. America was living an age which did not allow people to express themselves freely and was condemning a great proportion of society to be out of the accepted social system. The common conception

of life was based on getting a job, getting married and spending one's life without any expectations of cultural or intellectual development. This situation, which was deeply conjoined with consumerism (buying a house, a television, a car...) left too little space for people and for the artist to grow as an individual. This led to an unbalanced situation marked by anxiety, even paranoia, as we are able to see in the first lines of "Howl":

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical  
naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry  
dynamo in the machinery of night,...(Ginsberg "Collected" 126)

Also important political changes and decisions took place in the national panorama, such as the Vietnam War, which put the United States on the military spotlight and will influence Allen Ginsberg in some of his poems such as "Hum Bomb" (Ginsberg "Collected" 568). It is not casual that the counterculture movement started in this specific moment and it is well known to have caused different changes in both the social and artistic spheres. Even poetry was taken out of the academic circle, making it closer to people and practising it as a way of celebration, mixing it with the use of drugs and alcohol.

The main point in this work is to see the contrast between two very different discourses that are joined in Ginsberg's poetical work: the Western and the Eastern ones, analysing Buddhist philosophy as a way of understanding some of Ginsberg's poems. This philosophy became a kind of refuge from this social system for our poet, as we can notice in "Angkor Wat":

Buddha I take my refuge  
bowing in the black bower  
before the openhanded lotus-man  
sat crosslegged (Ginsberg "Collected" 306)

To sum up, this study focuses on some of Ginsberg's poems to revise the influence of Buddhism and the Eastern discourse as a reaction against the accepted consumerist system. To explore this, the following poems will be analysed: "Angkor Wat", "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express", "Thoughts Sitting Breathing" and "Gospel Noble Truths", which can be found in Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Poems 1947-1980*.

The work will try to keep the distance from doing a mere analysis of the person of Allen Ginsberg or from a re-interpretation of his essence as the mythical Beat figure. The aim is to establish a contrast between some of his poems to show the evolution of the poetic voice in Ginsberg's work and to understand how his poetry serves as a connector between the Western and Eastern traditions. By doing this analysis, we will be able to see the importance of Buddhism in his poetry as a reaction against the established system of values.

However, we know that we cannot escape from subjectivity and when we have to approach a work of art like a poem, we have to accept that it was written and published

under certain circumstances. We will see the poet deconstructing himself in poems such as "Angkor Wat" and "The Change" where the poetic voice questions his or her identity as a human being and tries to establish a relationship with the world. Allen Ginsberg commented about the problem of being able to write poetry without the influence of the ego:

It's simply what is happening already and what you notice is happening. What you notice most intensely happening, or what you see most clearly happening, is the natural thing for you to write about. In other words, you just write about what you already know, in a sense. Or, not what you already know, but just write about what naturally takes place. (Ginsberg "Meditation")

We will see how writing about the moment interacts with the problem of being restricted to a personal experience, creating a paradox in the process, which will mark the evolution of the poetic voice through the poems. The influence of Buddhist and meditative practices in the process of poetic creation is crucial to approach the poems we are to study, due to it proposes a different point of view towards poetry.

### **1. Historical Background**

Before immersing ourselves in these issues, we should start by explaining the historical background Ginsberg lived in. The United States was undergoing a situation where communism was seen as the worst threat for the security of the world. Politicians were under continuous criticism for being communist or being weak in the fight against the USSR menace. Examples of this were the figures of Eisenhower or Kennedy that conservatives believed to be under the influence of the communists, as Philip Jenkins explains us in his book, *A History of the United States* (193). This situation, stressed by the atomic race that threatened the survivability of humankind, led to a social situation where everyone could be the enemy inside the United States.

Due to this situation, American artists searched for a way to explore their limits and to show society that there was more than one way to live. The Beat generation was the result of this search. Poets such as Michael McClure or Lawrence Ferlinghetti started to experiment in their art with different ways to express reality. However, if we have to talk about Buddhism, we cannot ignore the work of Gary Snyder, who was also interested in Buddhism as a reaction towards society and had a personal relationship with Allen Ginsberg.

We know that the Beats grouped together in San Francisco, triggering the movement that will be known as the San Francisco Renaissance. It is also well known the famous assembly in the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in San Francisco where Allen Ginsberg read "Howl", which became the 'shout' of the age. And it is from this point that the analysis of the poetic works begins, firstly by making a brief introduction to the "Crazy Wisdom" that Ginsberg practised from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

### **2. Buddhism**

Chögyam Trungpa was one of the most influential Buddhist thinkers that taught in the United States and Europe through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. According to Ann Hunter in *The Legacy of*

*Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche at Naropa University. An Overview and Resource Guide*, Trungpa was interested in bringing the knowledge of the Tibet to a Western world that was growing into a kind of materialism that was menacing the spiritual side of people. In the following quote we see how Chögyam Trungpa contributed to present Buddhist philosophy as a possibility to people who searched for a different perspective:

He received what he later described as "a jolting awareness of the need to develop more openness and greater energy." He realized that he must take "daring steps" in his life to expose "the materialism which seemed to pervade spirituality in the modern world" so that the integrity of spiritual practice traditions could be rediscovered. (Hunter 17)

What is important for us in this study is to know the influence Trungpa had on Allen Ginsberg. Furthermore, Trungpa is also a good example of the way the Eastern and the Western discourses mixed up. He even adopted a Western way of living in order to bring his teachings closer to his students despite being Tibetan. We have his way of expressing and practicing his spirituality in the *Sadhana of Mahamudra*, which can be considered a text of self-analysis, returning to the roots of the self, analysing the mind in its pure state, unaltered by thought and focused on experience and in the here and now.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Contrastive Analysis

We are trying to approach Ginsberg's poetry from these Buddhist-based ideas. However, even if these notions seem to be completely different from Western thought, Allen Ginsberg himself noticed a connection between them. In the comment *Negative Capability: Kerouac's Buddhist Ethic*, Ginsberg explains how these ideas can be related to John Keats' literary theory, based on the idea of understanding the literary work as separated from the author, as an individual reality capable of evolving and being independent. This idea is closely linked to contemplation in Buddhism. Buddhism claims that the only thing we can know from reality is instances of experience. Both points of view agree on the base of literary crafting. Allen Ginsberg explained his poetical method based on the conception of contemplating the world from sensation, trying to forget the ego, in the same way John Keats claimed to regard the world's "Mysteries", "uncertainties", "doubts" in his letter "To George and Thomas Keats on December 22, 1817 (276-277)". Both authors understood the difficulty of writing about the other, what is strange to us and what we cannot know, a discussion that has been present through the history of art and literature: the problem of knowing reality if we can only perceive it from our point of view. Actually, we have one example in *Negative Capability: Kerouac's Buddhist Ethic* essay of how this problem has been discussed in different parts of the world at different times in history:

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<sup>1</sup> *Sadhana of Mahamudra* can be found in a series of videos uploaded in Youtube that were recorded by the Naropa University on April 4, 2007.

What Kerouac was discovering was not some strange Oriental notion alien to the Western mind. He was exploring the basis of mind itself as it's known in the West as in the East, except that he saw the Buddhist formulations as being perhaps more sophisticated than the monotheistic formulation of the West. Nevertheless there were non-theistic formulations of the same thing in writers that he read like Lucretius and Montaigne. (Ginsberg "Negative")

This quote can be very useful to our research due to its brief but powerful description of the system of ideas we are dealing with. Another comparison that is established in this article is Heraclitus' conception of becoming, which claims that nothing in this world is completely hieratic. Everything is in a state of continuous change or development. The famous quote we have from Heraclitus is: "You cannot step on the same river once".<sup>2</sup> This quote can be easily linked to the Buddhist conception of the world, not only due to its meaning but also to the way it deals with metaphor, something very common in Buddhist teachings and that takes us closely to the field of poetry.

Even if Eastern and Western cultures seem to have developed separated as previously mentioned, there are common grounds where both converge. Following this reasoning, we can conclude that poetry such as Kerouac's or Ginsberg's is a reminder for us of these ideas that may feel so far away from the Western conception of the world, but that, in fact, are inside this culture as part of the Greek legacy. Furthermore, Kerouac's Buddhist ethic is identified with Keats' ideal of Negative Capability which is a crucial concept in the whole panorama of Western literature and, consequently, in the present study. But there is something very important to be clarified. Ginsberg is the Beat author that is going to delve deeper into Buddhism, focusing in a detailed analysis, as Kerouac did not follow a complete Buddhist philosophy. However, he is important for us because he was the one introducing Allen Ginsberg into oriental philosophy, among other influences like the mentioned Gary Snyder.

If we want to approach in more depth Ginsberg's synthesis of Western and Eastern discourses we have to address some of the conceptual developments of both cultures, showing why Buddhism can still be a reliable philosophical source that can be applied to literary criticism. When we deal with Western literary theory, we cannot forget the concept of Negative Capability. This idea triggered avant-garde movements such as Symbolism, which started to question the idea of reality in relation to the artistic work.

We can find an example of this in the evolution of literary movements such as Symbolism, as it has been mentioned before. Departing from the idea of Negative Capability, symbolist poets constructed their poetics around the idea of suggestion. Actually, what they were doing can be considered a simulation of reality through their poems. For instance, Baudelaire's "L' Albatros" enlarges the conceptual meaning of the animal in the sense that the natural animal becomes a symbol for greatness. From this point, it is very difficult to see the albatross without the meaning the poem has shaped in our minds. The symbol stands for

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<sup>2</sup> This quote, linked to Heraclitus' Doctrine of Flux, can be found in Plato's exposition of this doctrine in *Cratylus* (402a).

reality. We know that Allen Ginsberg himself noticed this and we know that he esteemed highly French symbolist poets thanks to his poetics, written in *Spiritual Quests, The Art and Craft of Religious Writing*, specifically in the "Meditation and Poetics" section. Buddhism notices this way of perceiving too and criticizes establishing our vision of reality in such terms, just considering what we think as a universal truth. That way of living, based on systems of ideas, concepts and values considered to be universal truths, can only end up in dependence on objects that causes suffering. To illustrate these ideas I would like to quote from the *Majjhima Nikaya: The Middle-length Discourses*, specifically from "Cula-Saccaka Sutta: The Shorter Discourse to Saccaka":

Suppose a man — in need of heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood — were to enter a forest taking a sharp ax. There he would see a large plantain trunk: straight, young, immature. He would cut it at the root and, having cut it at the root, cut off the crown. Having cut off the crown, he would unfurl the leaf sheaths. Unfurling the leaf sheaths, he wouldn't even find sapwood there, to say nothing of heartwood ("Cula-Saccaka Sutta")

The man in the Buddhist sutta (a discourse of the Buddha) will never get the wood he is obsessed with, he ends believing in a fiction of control. Buddhist philosophy also deals with the problem of reality shaped by fiction. Following the Theravada school of Buddhism, conceptions are eliminated. The only resource we have to relate ourselves with the world is experience. Furthermore, the only thing we can know about the world is that there are moments of experience. Buddhism distinguishes two different ways of conceiving Reality. It is important to notice that both ways include the vision of moments of experience, but they mean completely different things.

Firstly, Buddhism claims that we can perceive each instance in Saṃsāra, which is our usual way of conceiving the world that is making relationships between those moments of experience, creating a history and an identity. However, this way of seeing life can be a problem if it is dominated by attachment to the objects we are surrounded by. The other way of conceiving Reality is called Nirvana, which is a term that has been long discussed by the different schools of Buddhism, some of which have conceived Nirvana as a kind of afterlife. Others, such as the Zen school, do not differentiate Saṃsāra and Nirvana as different physical and metaphysical levels and this is the vision we are dealing with in this study. The concept of Nirvana can be linked to something that we, literary scholars, are familiar with. One of the descriptions that Buddhism provides of Nirvana is that it is a moment of pure experience where one gets a total impression of the moment. This can be linked to the concepts of Epiphany by James Joyce, of Moments of Being by Virginia Woolf or even of Moments of Perception by Thomas Hardy. It is crucial to understand that this moment of enlightenment is also present in Ginsberg's poetry and it is going to be one of the main aspects that will be addressed when studying the work of this artist. We will see how this moment of Nirvana develops into a better knowledge of the self and the world that surrounds it in the poems. However, we have to notice that once we are writing, we are just trying to

reconstruct that Nirvana, which is impossible to recreate because it is a very specific moment of experience of the subject.

Art's final aim is to create a reality. When a person constructs a work of art, she or he is depicting certain vision of the world, full of emotions. Ultimately, that work of art starts to be part of tradition, adding its perspective of the world to other works of art that existed previously, an idea that T. S. Eliot supported in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (14-15). Allen Ginsberg was aware of this paradox the artist has to face, being part of a universal discourse that depends to a great extent on the individual circumstances of the artist. In the following poems, we are going to see the evolution of the poetic voice, departing from chaos and the incapability to know himself or herself in "Angkor Wat", to an enlightened poetic voice in "The Change", which is able to interact with the world, having a better knowledge of his or her inner self. Notice the first stanza of "Angkor Wat", which is the beginning of the whole atmosphere of tension and doubt through the poem:

Angkor-on top of the terrace  
 in a stone nook in the rain  
 Avalokitesvara faces everywhere  
 high in their stoniness  
 in white rainmist (Ginsberg "Collected" 306)

The figure of Avalokitesvara, which is the one of the bodhisattva of compassion, does not bring peace and tranquillity throughout the poem. The figure seems to trigger a process of anxiety and uneasiness in the poetic voice that mixes both, the situation in Cambodia and the internal situation of the speaker. The figure seems to remind the reader of the Christian Pantocrator more than the tranquilizing figure that it actually is. Furthermore, not only Avalokitesvara, but the gesture of abhaya mudra suffers this transfiguration too. Tony Trigilio noticed this in his book, *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*.

Yet, as I have discussed earlier, Ginsberg's incorporation in "Angkor Wat" of the abhaya mudra, a Buddhist sacred hand-gesture of calm abiding, leads only to more anxiety- to his speaker's self-representation as a "a false Buddha afraid of/ my own annihilation" (Trigilio 81)

In the end, what we have in "Angkor Wat" more than an escape from anxieties is a revision of these, making a collage of incredibly chaotic images. Also, the poem becomes a revision of the poetic voice itself, questioning the perception of the world it has:

I am afraid where I am  
 "I am inert"... "I'm just doing my  
 Professional duty"... "I'm scheming  
 murders"... "I'm chasing a story"  
 I'm not going to eat meat anymore  
 I'm talking refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha

Hare Krishna Hare Krishna  
 Krishna Krishna Hare Hare  
 Hare Rama Hare Rama  
 Rama Rama Hare Hare (Ginsberg "Collected" 309)

The statement of not "eating meat anymore" has triggered different opinions. Meat is not forbidden in Buddhism, so we can think this statement develops a metaphorical sense. Trigilio commented that this idea can be linked to the problem of Ginsberg being a homosexual in an Eastern practice that opts for asceticism: "In 'Angkor Wat', the authenticity of the speaker's prayer—and his conception of sacred language—is at stake as the poet questions whether homosexual desire is compatible with Eastern spiritual practice." (Trigilio 31).

However, "not eating meat" can have more meanings and a possible interpretation is to relate it to the Buddhist school we are treating here. It is important to know that the main goal and the base of Buddhist thought and philosophy is to search for a solution to the problem of suffering. When Buddhism speaks of suffering, it refers to every experience that may seem unpleasant for us. Buddhism claims that in order to escape from suffering, we have to stop searching for pleasure in objects, just contemplate the experience and try to deconstruct the conceptions of good or bad in order to interact with the experience purely.

The Theravāda claims that if you live searching for pleasure in mere objects this will create a habit for that object, so the moment you lose it, the suffering will be greater. Notice that with objects, Buddhism refers to everything outside the individual self, including the body. We have to be careful understanding this conception. Buddhism does not deny the existence of the body, as well as it does not deny either our incapability of escaping from samsaric perception. But it criticises their acceptance. When someone lives in this way of finding pleasure in different objects, Buddhism speaks of hunger. We can find an example in an ancient sutta, the "Magandiya Sutta" where master Gotama picks sexual pleasures as an example of hunger:

"Now suppose that there was a leper covered with sores & infections, devoured by worms, picking the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a pit of glowing embers. The more he cauterized his body over the pit of glowing embers, the more disgusting, foul-smelling, & putrid the openings of his wounds would become, and yet he would feel a modicum of enjoyment & satisfaction because of the itchiness of his wounds. In the same way, beings not free from passion for sensual pleasures — devoured by sensual craving, burning with sensual fever — indulge in sensual pleasures. The more they indulge in sensual pleasures, the more their sensual craving increases and the more they burn with sensual fever, and yet they feel a modicum of enjoyment & satisfaction dependent on the five strings of sensuality. ("Magandiya Sutta")

We can understand the claim of "not eating meat" not only referred to sex, but to every object that has provided the poetic voice in "Angkor Wat" with illusionary pleasure:



Leroi I been done you wrong  
 I'm just an old Uncle Tom in disguise all along  
 afraid of physical tanks.  
 And those buzzing headphones in my skull.  
 And many a butterfly committed suicide  
 its wings to the motheaten flame-  
 Argh! I vomited in fear of the forest of ganja meats-  
 Eternal Death silliness-Cowards die many times  
 Not even afraid to be a Coward-Ashamed only by  
 metal voices declaring war on Darkness. (Ginsberg "Collected" 310)

Fear is mixed with sickness, turning the stanza into an image of guilt. I would like to underline more this idea of guilt, which is linked to the self-criticism of the poetic voice. The character in the poem wonders about his/her religious practice because it can be the result of a self-invented dogma that could have led to a misconception of the world:

You have no right being a Hitler repeating that  
 Abhaya mudra reassurance  
 Palm out flat, patting the airhide  
 Of earth-

Nothing but a false Buddha afraid of  
 my own annihilation, Leroi Moi-  
 afraid to fail you yet terror those Men  
 their tiger pictures and uniforms  
 dream to see that Kerouac tiger too-  
 Helikopter to- Sh, spies with telescopes  
 For seeing the bullets that shoot- (Ginsberg "Collected" 310)

It is very difficult not to identify the poetic voice directly with the author in these stanzas. The allusion to Kerouac leads us to think of Allen Ginsberg himself being the poetic voice. It is important to draw the attention to the personal evolution of Buddhist thought when we speak of Ginsberg and Kerouac. They were self-taught Buddhists in the beginning. Tony Trigilio noticed this in his book that "Beat Buddhism can be seen as "eccentric, inconsistent, and most of all eclectic" (33). Based on Ginsberg's comments on Kerouac's lack of proper Buddhist tuition, whether classical or Zen (Ginsberg "Negative"), Trigilio comments that Ginsberg was suggesting "that Kerouac's intuitive mastery of dharma strengthened his abilities as a Buddhist teacher but simultaneously limited him" (34). This problem of autodidactic teaching can be connected with the stanza we have already seen. However, the condition of becoming a Buddhist novice was the beginning for Allen Ginsberg to start learning more about the philosophical-religious doctrine that will influence his conception of poetry writing.

This early state of Buddhist knowledge also serves as a base to introduce certain problems that are intrinsically linked to human nature, which are studied by Buddhist doctrine too. The human problem of existence can be found in "Angkor Wat" and it is one of the main concerns in Buddhist thinking:

I never wanted to be "human" being and  
 this is what I got-a Himalayan  
 striped umbrella I don't use  
 in the jungle rain-my eyes  
 Lid-heavy-my mind skips  
 back to the overweight knapsack I carry  
 all these years' scribbles bound in  
 Ganges towels (Ginsberg "Collected" 318)

We can argue that this stanza is marked with a real problem of existence. We can even say it is a problem of identity of the poetic voice. The human being is not the centre of the stanza. He or she is subdued by the different objects: the umbrella, the knapsack and the towels. This can be understood as an effort to establish oneself as an identity in the world. The problem arises in what we have already commented, the fact that it would be a false identity because the speaker is pictured as a mere compilation of objects. The poetic voice seems to reinforce this sense of suffering by convincing himself or herself of his or her own uselessness, something that Buddhism criticized as we are able to see in the following quote:

The pursuit of self-mortification – painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial – is a state beset by suffering, vexation, despair, and fever, and it is the wrong way. Disengagement from the pursuit of self-mortification – painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial – is a state without suffering, vexation, despair, and fever, and it is the right way. (Aranavibhanga 1081)

This just gives us an illusion of identity and of control of the environment in which we live. This is one of the main reasons for the poetic voice in "Angkor Wat" to do a revision of him or herself in order to find his or her 'real' identity as a human being. We will find the result in the next poem we are going to comment: "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express" where we can find an evolved poetic voice which is familiarized with Buddhist conceptions of the self. The following stanzas allow us to see the contrast between the poems concerning the topic of the self:

Allen Ginsberg says this: I am  
 a mass of sores and worms  
 & baldness & belly & smell  
 I am false Name the prey  
 Of Yamantaka Devourer of  
 Strange dreams, the prey of

radiation & Police Hells of Law

I am that I am I am the  
 man & the Adam of hair in  
 my loins This is my spirit and  
 physical shape I inhabit  
 this Universe Oh weeping  
 against what is my  
 own nature for now. (Ginsberg "Collected" 327)

We have seen in the last stanza of "Angkor Wat" how the speaker suffered incredibly with no capability of identifying him or herself as a being. The opposite view can be seen in "The Change", especially in these stanzas where there is a sense of contemplation of the world, more than a necessity of control. The poetic voice accepts his name and separates his essence from the whole identity he has formed throughout the years. Furthermore, in the last line we have the remark, "against what is my/own nature for now," which introduces the topic of impermanence, one of the most salient topics regarding Buddhist philosophy:

"Aggivessana, I discipline my disciples in this way; this part of my instruction is generally presented to my disciples: 'Form is inconstant. Feeling is inconstant. Perception is inconstant. Fabrications are inconstant. Consciousness is inconstant. Form is not-self. Feeling is not-self. Perception is not-self. Fabrications are not-self. Consciousness is not-self. All fabrications are inconstant. All phenomena are not-self.' This, Aggivessana, is the way in which I discipline my disciples; this part of my instruction is generally presented to my disciples." ("Cula-Saccaka")

The poem we are dealing with marks the evolution from fear and the stress of not understanding present in "Angkor Wat", to knowledge and tranquillity. "The Change", as the proper name of the poem suggests, is an evolution of the poetic voice. Notice that tranquillity is not a feeling we get from the beginning of the poem. We still have images that remind us a lot of those in "Angkor Wat" characterized by violence and stress:

Shit! Intestines boiling in sand fire  
 creep yellow brain cold sweat  
     earth unbalanced vomit thru  
 tears, snot ganglia buzzing  
 the Electric Snake rising hypnotic  
 shuffling metal-eyed coils  
 whirling rings within wheels  
 from asshole up the spine  
 Acid in the throat the chest  
 a knot trembling Swallow back  
 the black furry ball of the great

## Fear (Ginsberg "Collected" 325)

Chaos still exists at the beginning of the poem. Also, it is interesting to note the presence of images linked to industry and metal. However, as it has been said, the difference comes by the poetic voice acceptance of these images as part of him or herself:

Come, sweet lonely Spirit, back  
 to your bodies, come great God  
 back to your only image, come  
 to your many eyes & breasts,  
 come thru thought and  
 motion up all your  
 arms the great gesture of  
 Peace & acceptance Abhaya  
 Mudra Mudra of fearlessness  
 Mudra of Elephant Calmed &  
 War-fear ended forever! (Ginsberg "Collected" 328)

Now the Abhaya Mudra gets its original meaning back, instead of being an object of doubt as we saw in "Angkor Wat". Even the form in both poems is exemplary to see the contrast between chaos and tranquillity. In the first poem we have a random use of free verse, playing with the spaces between words, even with the spaces between letters.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhism is a reaction towards capitalism and militarism, as well as an emotional problem in Ginsberg's poetry. We can even say that it transforms his way of conceiving poetry. It is true that we can link some characteristics of religious practice in some of his poems before 1963. The most salient could be the radical use of repetition in "Howl" that reminds us of a religious practice, even recalling the sermons of Buddha. However, Buddhism emerges as a fit discourse that supports Ginsberg's criticism towards American society. In the poem "Thoughts Sitting Breathing" we see how the Buddhist discourse clashes with the inner values of the poetic voice.

The poem is built from the mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum", a Tibetan mantra that serves as purification for the mind. Actually, the poem becomes a recreation of the experience of meditation. The mantra is repeated three times and with each repetition there is a change in the poetic voice. This repetition is not casual and it is an example of the complexity of the poem. The "Om Mani Padme Hum" mantra can be recited as one long mantra with the interest of tranquilizing the mind but each of its syllables has its own meaning: Om (generosity) Ma (ethic values) Ni (patience) Pad (diligence) Me (concentration) Hum (wisdom). The poem evolves based on the repetition. It starts with a gathering of images related to vices, which suggest poverty and instability, while each repetition places the poetic voice gradually into a state of transcendence and peacefulness. We can see this if we analyse the evolution of the syllable Om, for example:

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<sup>3</sup> To see the form of these stanzas, see Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Works 1947-80*.

OM-the pride of perfumed money, music from China, a place to sit quiet  
 OM-Give it all away, poetry bliss & ready cash for taxicabs, walk Central Park alone &  
 cook your beans in empty silence watching the Worm crawl thru meat walls-  
 OM-the Crown of Emptiness, relax the skullcap wove of formal thought, let light  
 escape to Heaven, floating up from heart thru cranium, free space for Causeless Bliss-  
 (Ginsberg "Collected" 589-591).

This "Causeless Bliss" can be identified with the state of Nirvana where the subject that experiments it lives a pure experience of tranquillity. We can understand this poem as an evidence of meditation and how the poetic voice uses it to evade herself or himself from the situation she or he is in. The poem ends with two stanzas that leave us with a strange feeling of confusion. These stanzas return to include political and military images: "United States armies march thru the past/ The Chinese legions rage...White House filled with fuel gas bombs/ Slums with rats' faeces & teeth" (Ginsberg "Collected" 589-591). These images can be understood as the end of meditation and taking conscience again of the situation the poetic voice finds itself. This poem is an example of the evolution of the poetic work of Allen Ginsberg. The Western and the Eastern cultural discourses are mixed in "Thoughts Sitting Breathing". However, this is not the only poem that turns out to be a mixture of cultures.

We should also draw attention to the use of music that Ginsberg took advantage of when writing poetry. We have seen that "Thoughts Sitting Breathing" was supported rhythmically by a mantra. A mantra is a kind of musical construction based on language, very linked to Buddhism philosophy as we have just seen. Nevertheless, Ginsberg was really interested in American music too and we know he performed some of his poems accompanied by electric guitars imitating rock or soul music. In "Thoughts Sitting Breathing" the Western images were supported by the mantra as I have said, but we have another example where the poet does exactly the contrary.

In "Gospel Noble Truths" we have the opposite example. We find a poem closer to American tradition in terms of the music but that supports a Buddhist discourse of the world:

Born in this world  
 You got to suffer  
 Everything changes  
 You got no soul (Ginsberg "Collected" 641)

In this first stanza some of the most important Buddhist concepts are already present. First, the very basis of the Buddhist problem which is the centre of the whole Buddhist discourse, suffering. Second, the conception of suffering linked to the one of impermanence, something that we have seen in "Angkor Wat". Finally we can understand having "no soul" as the deconstruction of identity, forgetting everything related to one's cultural identity, as we have seen in "The Change": "Allen Ginsberg says this: I am/ a mass of sores and worms" (Ginsberg "Change" 327). Furthermore, in "Gospel Noble Truths" we have another example of meditative practice in the following stanza:

Sit you sit down  
 Breathe when you breathe  
 Lie down you lie down  
 Walk where you walk (Ginsberg "Gospel" 641)

These lines exemplify the Buddhist conception of contemplating the world with attention. Putting attention towards what is around us is a way of re-establishing ourselves in Nature. I would like to establish a connection between these lines and the poem "Thursday" by William Carlos Williams, based on the similar relation drawn by Ginsberg himself:

That is to say not that he's a Buddhist, but that Buddhism should be so natural, or that meditation could finally come down to just some basic place in nature and that Williams also should have come down to that same basic place in Rutherford, New Jersey nature. So that actually it was like one world, discovering one world, and a door between what I thought were separate intellectual categories – the world of Buddhism and the world of poetry. ("Meditation" 5)

In "Thursday", Allen Ginsberg finds in Williams this state of recognition of the world, very similar to the meditative practice:

I HAVE had my dream—like others—  
 And it has come to nothing, so that  
 I remain now carelessly  
 With feet planted on the ground,  
 And look up at the sky—  
 Feeling my clothes about me,  
 The weight of my body in my shoes,  
 The rim of my hat, air passing in and out  
 At my nose—and decide to dream no more. (Williams 304-305)

Ginsberg supports that ideas like: "I remain now carelessly/ With feet planted on the ground" are similar to the idea of being an observer of the world, with no intention of controlling it or establishing your ego upon it. Actually, Ginsberg's Buddhist interpretation of the poem is very accurate, since we have even the topic of feeling the different sensations culminating with breathing in the last lines of "Thursday". "Gospel Noble Truth" and "Thursday" can be interpreted as very similar poems with respect to theme. The contemplation of sensations can be found in both poems and can be identified with self-recognition as these stanzas suggest:

Feeling my clothes about me,  
 The weight of my body in my shoes,

The rim of my hat, air passing in and out  
At my nose—and decide to dream no more. (Williams 305)

Touch what you touch  
Think what you think  
Let go Let it go Slow  
Earth Heaven & Hell (Ginsberg "Collected" 641)

#### 4. Conclusion

We have commented a great variety of topics throughout this study, starting from a brief description of the American political panorama, to dealing with Ginsberg's poetry. However, the central concern of this analysis has been to underline the necessity for the poet to search for an alternative way of life and thought in order to develop himself as an artist. Buddhism was crucial for Ginsberg to escape from a consumerist society that was hindering the creativity of the artist. We have also seen how Buddhism, a philosophical doctrine that has been practised since the 6th century, includes a way of thinking that can be applied to the contemporary globalized system. Buddhism has served us as tool for poetic interpretation too and it has allowed us to understand more about the complexity in Allen Ginsberg's work.

Before ending this work, I would like to make a comment over the use of poetry as a medium to transmit a message. Ginsberg has been identified as a poet-prophet. Tony Trigilio explores this topic throughout his book *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*, and this is something we are able to appreciate throughout the poems we have commented. Ginsberg not only is able to create beauty out of poetry but his poetic style hooks the reader. We have already noticed the recurrent use of repetition in his poems, which allows him to create rhythm but also becomes a tool that makes easier the memorization of the messages in the poem, just as a mantra repeats itself. We know that Ginsberg took the bodhisattva vows that, following the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, consists in living according to Buddhist ideology. Furthermore, these vows also imply transmitting the message of Buddhism to other people. Following this reasoning, we cannot stop thinking the possibility of Ginsberg using his poetry as a way to act as a missionary or guru of the Buddhist way of thinking, linking Ginsberg to a tradition of poets that became spokespeople for their respective societies, such as Walt Whitman, or William Blake, who similarly included the subjective material derived from his own perception of the world in his poetry, thanks in part to the creation of a prophetic mood.

The analysis of "Angkor Wat" revealed a more confessional poetic voice with doubts and problems, who seems lost and incapable of stopping suffering. "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express" supposes an evolution of the poetic voice into a more self-convinced Buddhist entity in an organized world with control over the different sensations. In addition, we have analysed a poetic voice capable of adapting different elements of Western and Eastern culture not only to create beauty, but also to express a message of values.

Ginsberg has been able to see the relationship between both discourses and to transform them into a unique discourse. We can say that his poetry is a consequence of the process of globalization. Actually, he is able to construct a kind of poetic religious discourse

that is even combined with music and mantras that enchants the reader. Examples of this are "Thoughts Sitting Breathing" and "Gospel Noble Truth", which represent a new discourse that includes Western and Eastern ideas, bringing elements of both traditions and finally creating a link between them that enables the reader to explore new perspectives of life.

We can find in Ginsberg's work the first ideas that will question the contemporary system that is continuously shaping our lives in an economic circle based on buying. The media focuses on projecting the idea that money will supply every need you have. We have seen thanks to these poems that our necessities go beyond the material and that money is an insufficient tool when it comes to our emotional complexity. To conclude, I would like to suggest a reflection about how mankind has established, thanks to the capacity of imagination and thought, a reality that seems to transcend the natural elements of the world. Ideas such as time itself or economic value have shaped our world, making us forget that we are temporarily here and that we are always losing experiences because our imaginative necessity of being part of a socio-cultural system.

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Alberto Crespo Poblete was born in Ciudad Real in 1994 and grew up in Aranjuez. He started his education in San José de Calasanz primary school and continued his secondary education studies in I.E.S. Alpajés. He holds a degree in English Studies from the Complutense University of Madrid and a master's degree in Teacher Training for Secondary Education from Isabel I University. Due to his interest in mythology and philosophy, he focused his degree on the fields of literary studies and philosophy. His work drove him to pay special attention to the Eastern philosophical perception of the world, studying Buddhism at the Complutense University with Professor Teresa Gaztelu. Currently, he is continuing his studies of Eastern philosophy as a yoga practitioner in order to expand his knowledge.

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