

Zen Boom

Summary: In the 1950s a new generation of Buddhists, poets, and intellectuals brought their enthusiasm for Zen Buddhism to their work. Advocates like Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg placed Zen Buddhism at the cutting edge of the American literary and cultural scene.

In the 1950s another stream of Japanese Buddhism—Zen—began to have a strong presence. D.T. Suzuki, a Zen Buddhist layman, was particularly influential. He taught at Claremont College in California and then, from 1950-58, gave lectures at Columbia University in New York. His students included the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and the composer John Cage. Suzuki was interviewed by such popular magazines as *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*. His books, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* and *Zen and Japanese Culture*, contributed to a growing “Zen boom” in intellectual circles.

At the same time, a number of Americans, such as Ruth Fuller Sasaki and Gary Snyder, went to Japan and began to seriously study Zen Buddhism. Snyder, a Beat poet, stimulated an interest in Zen among leaders of the growing countercultural movement, including Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Philip Whalen. Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, a novel depicting the lives of these poets, suggests the growing number of people attracted to what has been characterized as “Beat Zen.” Alan Watts, an Episcopal priest turned Zen practitioner, in his now classic book *The Way of Zen*, portrayed Zen as a way of spiritual liberation accessible to those whose intellectual and spiritual world had been shaped by the West. The Zen Buddhism of this period, while lacking institutional structure, was a powerful literary and cultural force.