

The Zen Already in Anarchism

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The combination of anarchism with spiritual or religious beliefs is almost always controversial, even in the pages of *Fifth Estate*. Opposition to church, state, and capital is the holy trinity of the “classical” anarchist tradition, and the movement’s anti-clericism was one of its appeals to the Spanish in the 30s. But there is also a long history of spiritual anarchism—which is not to say that those in this tradition always accepted being categorized this way. The most common hybrids are with the European religious traditions, such as Christianity (Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, Jacques Ellul, and Ivan Illich immediately come to mind) or Paganism (Starhawk in particular).

But there is also a long-established connection with the Asian spiritual traditions, particularly Taoism. As early as Peter Kropotkin, the anarchist features of Laozi’s *Daodejing* were recognized. Ursula K. LeGuin, author of the anarchist sci-fi novel *The Dispossessed*, identifies as a Taoist-anarchist and made her own translation of the *Daodejing*. The influential punk band Crass—who promoted an innovative blend of pacifist, feminist, and individualist anarchism—cite Laozi multiple times in their booklet “A Series of Shock Slogans and Mindless Token Tantrums.” And Fredy Perlman in *Against His-story, Against Leviathan* invokes the Dao multiple times as a way of thinking which runs counter to Leviathan.

But not so readily acknowledged is the conjunction of anarchism and Buddhism, especially Zen. However, there is a good reason that should not be controversial: when Mahayana Buddhism spread from India to China, it seems to have fused with the existing Taoist traditions to create a new kind of Buddhism, called Ch’an—or, in Japanese, Zen.

The first wave of interest in Buddhism in the West was in the 1890s, when D.T. Suzuki and others came from Japan to explain and popularize it. He famously said in 1937 (in *Zen and Japanese Culture*) that Zen can be “wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy...” Art historian Allan Antliff, in *Anarchist Modernism*, mentions two anarchists of the pre-WWI period who were influenced by Buddhism: sexual liberationist Edward Carpenter and art critic and anti-imperialist Ananda Coomaraswamy. Historian Arif Dirlik notes that the Chinese anarchist Liu Shipei was influenced by Daoism and Buddhism.

The river of anarchism dried up following the Spanish Civil War and was revived after the sixties, but in between, two small streams kept it alive. The first was the pacifist movement, and it’s through this tributary that both avant-garde composer John Cage and poet Kenneth Rexroth became involved in anarchism. Cage was interested in Zen, while Rexroth’s work shows an affinity for it even while he identified more with other forms of Buddhism.

The other carrier was the Beat movement. Sympathetic to anarchism (Allen Ginsberg eulogizes the IWW in “Howl”) but also Zen, the Beats helped set the stage for the sudden expansion of Buddhism in the West in the 1960s. The original epicenter was the San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC), whose abbot was Shunryu Suzuki, the author of the influential *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*.

Beat poet Diane di Prima was one of many who studied there; her grandfather, to whom she dedicated her sixties classic *Revolutionary Letters*, was an Italian anarchist and friend of Carlo Tresca. Another was Gary Snyder, who wrote the essay “Buddhist Anarchism” in 1961. Ken Knabb, translator and editor of the *Situationist International Anthology*, also started practicing there in the 1960s. (Ginsberg himself later became involved in Tibetan Buddhism

and helped establish Naropa, the Buddhist university in Colorado where Peter Lamborn Wilson has taught on occasion). Another Beat generation writer, Kerry Thornley, co-author of *Principia Discordia*, wrote the beautiful short book *Zenarchy*.

It's harder to find contemporary Zen anarchists, although writers such as Wilson, Max Cafard, and the late John Moore—all of whose work has appeared in this publication—do mention Zen and Daoism in their works. However, it is not uncommon to meet individual anarchists or other anti-authoritarian activists who identify with Buddhism.

But proposing a look at these potential affinities should not be taken as a call for anarchists to unreflectively join Zen Buddhist temples. Although Thich Nhat Hanh's "Socially Engaged Buddhism" constitutes the political wing of Buddhism, most anarchists will probably find his Buddhist Peace Fellowship (as well as other groups like the Zen Peacemaker Family) to be a disappointingly weak tonic.

And we want to be the first to admit that Zen offers a message that can be read in many ways: as another cult to follow; as an apolitical spiritual practice; or as an exceedingly radical wake-up call to a consciousness that is as old as humanity and incompatible with our present way of life—one which dovetails very closely with anarchism. It is in the spirit of the latter that we wish to present the results of Max Cafard's investigations.

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For additional reading refer to:

Anarchy and Ecstasy, John Moore (section on Zen) <http://lemming.mahost.org/johnmoore/ecstasy-ecology.htm>

"Buddhist Anarchism", Gary Snyder <http://bopsecrets.org/CF/garysnyder.htm> (also in *Fifth Estate* #359, Winter 2002/03)

Buddhist Peace Fellowship: <http://www.bpf.org/html/home.html>

"Evading the Transformation of Reality—Engaged Buddhism at an Impasse", Ken Knabb: <http://bopsecrets.org/recent/buddhists.htm>

"Strong Lessons for Engaged Buddhists", Ken Knabb: <http://bopsecrets.org/PS/buddhists.htm>

Zenarchy, Kerry Thornley: <http://www.mindcontrolforums.com/hambone/zenarchy.html>



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/368-369-spring-summer-2005/zen-already-anarchism>
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