

# Zen Anarchy

**Zen anarchy? What could that be? Some new variations on the koans, those classic proto-dadaist Zen “riddles”?**

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What is the Sound of One Hand making a Clenched Fist?  
If you see a Black Flag waving on the Flagpole, what moves?  
Does the flag move? Does the wind move?  
Does the revolutionary movement move?

What is your original nature—before May '68, before the Spanish Revolution, before the Paris Commune?

Somehow this doesn't seem quite right. And in fact, it's unnecessary. From the beginning, Zen was more anarchic than anarchism. We can take it on its own terms. Just so you don't think I'm making it all up, I'll cite some of the greatest and most highly-respected (and respectfully ridiculed) figures in the history of Zen, including Hui-Neng (638–713), the Sixth Patriarch, Lin-Chi (d. 867), the founder of the Rinzai school, Mumon (1183–1260), the Rinzai master who assembled one of the most famous collections of koans, Dogen (1200–1253), the founder of Soto, the second major school, and Hakuin (1685–1768), the great Zen master, poet and artist who revitalized Zen practice.

## **I. SMASHING STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

This is what all the great teachers show: Zen is the practice of anarchy (an-arche) in the strictest and most super-orthodox sense. It rejects all “arches” or principles—supposedly transcendent sources of truth and reality, which are really no more than fixed ideas, mental habits, and prejudices that help create the illusion of dominating reality. These “principles” are not mere innocuous ideas. They are Imperialistic Principalities that intrude their sovereign power into our very minds and spirits. As anti-statist as we may try to be, our efforts will come to little if our state of mind is a mind of state. Zen helps us dispose of the clutter of authoritarian ideological garbage that automatically collects in our normal, well-adjusted mind, so that we become free to experience and appreciate the world, nature, and the “Ten Thousand Things,” the myriad beings around us, rather than just using them as fuel for our ill-fated egoistic cravings.

Zen is also the strictest and most super-orthodox form of Buddhism—and at the same time the most iconoclastic, revolutionary, and anarchistic one. The roots of Zen go back to the beginnings of the Buddhist tradition—not to any founding sacred documents or to any succession of infallible authorities, but to the experience that started the tradition: the anarchic mind! Forget the “ism” of Buddhism. It's not ultimately about doctrines and beliefs. The “Buddha” that it's named after means simply the awakened mind or somebody, anybody, who happens to “have” that kind of mind. And Zen (or Ch'an in Chinese) means simply meditation, which is just allowing the mind to be free, wild, awake, and aware. It's not about the occasional or even regular practice of certain standardized forms of activity (sitting and walking meditation, koan practice, being inscrutable, trying to look enlightened, etc.). Equating meditation with silent sitting is something that Zen simply will not stand for! Zen is also intimately linked to the absurd, but it can't be reduced to doing and saying absurd things, as in the popular caricature of Zen. Zen is

not nihilism, but is (like all Buddhism) the Middle Way between hopeless nihilism and rigid dogmatism; (Does a dogmatist have a Buddha-nature?).

### **Original Minds**

Zen is also the practice of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) philosophy. In particular, the form called *prasangica*, the philosophical anti-philosophy of the great Indian sage Nagarjuna (c. 150–250). It's said that the king of the Nagas, a race of superhuman serpent people, appeared to Nagarjuna and gave him the *Prajnaparamita* (Perfection of Wisdom) sutras. Western supernatural snakes are sneaky and deceive us with dangerous knowledge, but Eastern ones are compassionate and help us poor deluded humans gain a little wisdom. Awakened by the wisdom he found in the sutras, Nagarjuna went on to demonstrate that all discourse about the nature of reality is nonsense. Actually, he showed that it is nonsense, it isn't nonsense, it both is and isn't nonsense, and it neither is nor isn't nonsense. Then he showed that everything he just showed isn't true. Actually, that it is true, it isn't true, it both is and isn't true, and it neither is nor isn't true. Then he showed that all this stuff he just showed about truth is nonsense, etc. etc. We could go on, but you get the point. Zen practitioners got it, and decided to create their own unique ways of using words and concepts to destroy our illusions about words and concepts.

Going even further back in history, Zen's origin can be traced back to the time that Shakyamuni Buddha went to Bodhgaya, sat down under the Bodhi Tree, and invented meditation. Of course he didn't really invent, it but that's as good a point as any to mark its beginning, and we have all those fantastic statues to remind us of him sitting there. You can almost hear the giant sucking sound as the void begins to swallow everything up! Anyway, Zen is the meditation school, so its very name points back to that experience.

Another event that's sometimes seen as the origin of Zen (can't something have several origins?) is Shakyamuni Buddha's famous Flower Sermon at Vulture Peak. A huge throng assembled to hear his profound words. Many of them must have been desperate for an infallible guru to save them from all that angry karma snapping at their asses. But all he did was silently hold up a flower before the teeming multitude. (If you think this lousy article is a disappointment, imagine what they thought!) But a single person, Kashyapa, smiled, showing that at least one person got it. That there's nothing to get! This could also be looked upon as the point at which irony entered the history of thought, a tradition carried on fiercely by Zen, but much neglected by later deadly serious spiritual and political tendencies, including the most radical and anarchistic ones.

### **How Empty Is It?**

Most of the time when the Buddha did sermons he did talk, but he tended to emphasize that all things—including his own words and concepts—are empty. What he meant by that is that like everything else they're empty of "inherent being" or substantiality. They're nothing but a lie "in themselves." The truth is always elsewhere—his words and everything else can only be understood as inseparable parts of an interrelated web. This web is often pictured as "The Jewel Net of Indra," an infinite expanse of gems, each one reflecting the light of all the others. We distort the interconnectedness and interdetermination of the entire infinitely-faceted Intergalactic Net when we abstract separate objects and egos from it.

This is a very radical teaching. Blake had the same idea, that if the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear as it is: Infinite. *The Heart Sutra*, which is one of the most important Buddhist texts and is recited daily in many monasteries, shows the revolutionary implications of this idea of deep interrelatedness (dependent origination or *pratityasamutpada*), the idea that all things open into the infinite. This sutra says that all dharmas, the constituents of all beings, are "marked with emptiness," and that "in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight-organ element,...No mind-consciousness element...no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance...no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death...no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path...no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment." [HS 91, 97, 113] It's pretty much no nothing, and this destroys the basis for everything, including all the most fundamental tenets of Buddhism. The

central teachings, the Four Noble Truths of Suffering, the Cause of suffering, the Cure for suffering, and the Way to effect the cure are all undermined, because here is no suffering, no causality, no cessation, no way!

And Buddhism is all about the “awakened mind,” right? Tough luck: “no mind!”

### **Have A Little Compassion**

How depressing! Everything’s running on empty, all our goals are pointless, and nothing we say communicates anything! But irony strikes again. Coming to a realization of all these limits is part of therapy that we need to escape the real suffering that comes from living in a constantly-disappointing bad-dream-world of illusion—a world in which we pretend that what is empty is full, that we (unlike anybody else) can literally do the impossible, and that our own personal ideas are a good substitute for reality. Though neither our suffering nor the ego that we think undergoes the suffering have “inherent existence,” there is a real experience of suffering that hits us when we succumb to these illusions. The dissatisfaction, hopelessness, anxiety, and depression that follow lead us to lash out angrily at the world and to struggle desperately to gain impossible control over it. So we end up inflicting even more suffering on the humans, cats, dogs, door frames and other beings that have the bad luck to stand in our way.

So what can we do? Shakyamuni Buddha once said that if you find someone who has been wounded with a poison arrow, the most urgent thing is not to find out who shot the arrow, what the bow was made of, who made the arrow, etc. but to remove the goddamn arrow! Every day we observe a world of people walking around with arrows sticking out of their chests. We look in the mirror and see an arrow protruding from our very own skull. Lost in thought, on whatever irrelevantly exalted or distractingly trashy level, we somehow forget to show a little compassion for others or even ourselves and get to work on extracting those arrows.

Zen is about that compassionate action. It’s the way of negation, but it’s also the most positive and practical path imaginable. According to Hui-neng, “the spirit of the Way means always behaving respectfully, universally respecting and loving all creatures, without disdain.” [SH 91] If we open ourselves to really experiencing other beings and nature, we can stop dominating and manipulating them, and begin to appreciate and even love them. This boundless care for other beings is expressed in the Shiguseigan or bodhisattva vow that’s recited at the end of zazen (sitting) practice. It begins: “beings are countless, I vow to save them all.” Cross my Heart Sutra and hope to neither be born nor die! If I can’t save trillions, maybe I can at least save a few billion. Zen urges us to aim our anti-arrows very high!

### **Living In Lotus Land**

It should be clear now that Zen is not a form of mere escapism—in fact, it’s just the opposite. It does promise an escape—an escape from suffering and the illusions that cause it. But it teaches that liberation from illusion and suffering can only be achieved by a more intense experience of the reality of the world and of nature. Zen, for all its ascetic practices, revels in worldliness. It’s true to the Buddhist teaching that Samsara, the crazy, bustling, dusty world of constant change is itself Nirvana, the liberation that results from complete awakening. Hui-neng says that “Seeking enlightenment apart from the world / Is like looking for crawfish tails on a nutria.” [SH 23, slightly revised] Hakuin expresses the same idea when he says that “This earth where we stand is the Pure Lotus Land, / And this very body, the body of Buddha!” [ZW] And contemporary Buddhist poet Gary Snyder says that “the truly experienced person,” by which he means the truly experiencing person, “delights in the ordinary.” [PW 153]

In a similar spirit, Hui-neng asks how the legacy of great masters should be “demonstrated and transmitted?” This is pretty important, because Zen is defined as the school of “direct transmission outside the scriptures.” Hui-neng replies that “there is no demonstration or transmission; it is only a matter of seeing nature, not a matter of meditation or liberation...these two things are not Buddhism; Buddhism is a non-dualistic teaching.” Not “transmitting something,” but seeing nature. If we allow ourselves to really experience nature we find that we are not just in it; we are it, though even to say that distorts what we see. That old Jewish lens-grinder who worked so diligently to clarify our sight expressed it accurately: “we” and “it” are both forms of natures naturans, “nature naturing.”

Zen would add, “empty forms.”

## **Please Identify Yourself**

Hakuin says that “it is with great respect and deep reverence that I urge all of you superior seekers who investigate the secret depths to be as earnest in penetrating and clarifying the self as you would be in putting out a fire on top of your head.” [ET 3] I’m sure we’ve all been in that situation and have probably not spent a lot of time weighing our options. Hakuin’s urgent message about the self might really be phrased: “Liar, liar, brain’s on fire!” It’s hard for us to face self-non-knowledge. Should we look for the true self, the real self, the authentic self? Good luck! If you do it you’re in for a big (or more precisely, an infinitely small) surprise. Hakuin says that “if we turn directly, and prove our True Nature / That true Self is no-self / Our own Self is no-self / We stand beyond ego and past clever words.” [ZW]

But if there is no self, why then does Buddhism, and even Zen itself, sometimes talk of a self? According to Hui-neng it’s not because though there’s no “little self” there’s a “Big Self.” It’s not because though there’s no “lower self,” there’s still a “Higher Self.” He sticks with the basic Buddhist view, “No Self (anatta),” but points out that “in order to liberate people, the self is provisionally defined.” [SH 125] We can give the self some slack for a while. In the end, though, we have to shoot it down. Dogen puts it as follows: “To study the Buddha is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.” [GK 36] This is from the “Genjo Koan,” a brief text that is Dogen’s most famous one. We find our self by forgetting the self.

Our enlightenment comes from everything we experience, the Ten Thousand Things. Hit the road!

## **II. KILLING THE BUDDHA: ZEN’S ASSAULT ON AUTHORITY**

Some people think that the exalted place in Zen practice accorded to the teacher or master proves that Zen is “authoritarian.” Not to mention that the poor student sometimes gets whacked with a stick. Sado-masochistic authoritarianism, no less! No doubt Zen can decline into a cult of personality, but to the extent that it follows its own path of the awakened mind, it is radically and uncompromisingly antiauthoritarian and anarchistic. Neither Shakyamuni Buddha nor any Buddha, Bodhisattva or arhat, much less any master, guru or teacher has the least authority over anyone. As Shakyamuni Buddha himself said we have to “work out our own salvation with diligence” rather than relying on him or anyone else as an authority. No gurus, no saviors. Hui-neng points out that “scripture clearly says to take refuge in the Buddha in oneself, not to take refuge in another Buddha,” [SH 40] and Hakuin echoes this, saying, “Outside us, no Buddhas. / How near the Truth, yet how far we seek! / Like one in water crying, ‘I thirst.’” [ZW]

### **Open Road**

The most sustained and most notorious Zen assault on all forms of authority is found in Lin-Chi, the founder of Rinzai, the most overtly anarchic branch of Zen. For Lin-Chi, “things like the Three Vehicles and the twelve divisions of the scriptural teachings—they’re all so much old toilet paper to wipe away filth. The Buddha is a phantom body, the patriarchs are nothing but old monks...If you seek the Buddha, you’ll be seized by the Buddha devil. If you seek the patriarchs, you’ll be fettered by the patriarch devil. As long as you seek something, it can only lead to suffering. Better to do nothing.” [ZT 47] Doing nothing [wu wei] is the famous Daoist concept for natural action, action in accord with Dao, action in which we freely follow our own way and allow other beings to do likewise. Zhuangzi, the great anarchic Daoist sage, compared it to “riding on the wind.”

To do this, we have to free ourselves from our heavy load of karma, that is, the mental formations, habits, prejudices, filters of experience that are the poisonous legacy of our past egoistic strivings for domination. A lot of the burden consists of images of external authorities—gods and other higher beings, leaders and experts, teachers and gurus, sacred scriptures and other revered documents—that we use as panaceas to avoid confronting our own experience and solving our own problems. Lin-Chi says “Get rid of all of them!” As Laozi (the great donothingist) said, the wise person can travel very far without taking along any baggage! (Maybe just a roll of old toilet paper!)

So then, Zen says we should look away from the world and all external authorities and turn inward to find our source of authority? Far from it! We need freedom from both internal and external authorities and principles. After

all, all those external authorities control us only because they take on the form of a powerful image within our mind. So Lin-Chi says, “Whether you’re facing inward or facing outward, whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you meet a Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch. If you meet an arhat, kill the arhat. If you meet your parents, kill your parents. If you meet your kinfolk, kill your kinfolk. Then for the first time you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go.” [ZT 52] If we kill all these dominating authority-figures (images or figurations within consciousness), then we can experience the reality behind the image, the reality of mind, the reality of beings.

Lin-Chi exhorts the “Followers of the Way” not to “take the Buddha to be some sort of ultimate goal. In my view he’s more like the hole in a privy.” [ZT 76] This (like the toilet paper remark) is a typical Zen comment, and should always be looked upon as is a form of highest praise. The hole in the donut may be relatively useless, but some holes serve a very important practical purpose. Lin-Chi is harsher with bodhisattvas and arhats, who are dismissed as “all so many cangues and chains, things for fettering people.” [ZT 76] The point may be to emphasize the fact that only the free, awakened mind (“Buddha”) is beyond being turned into a new source of subjection and bondage. The Buddha is just the hole through which all the old shit (“die alte Scheisse,” as someone called it) passes when we relieve ourselves of it.

So where should we look as our source of authority? To ourselves, of course—and since there’s no self, that means we should look nowhere. “Do you want to get to know the patriarchs and the Buddhas? They’re none other than you, the people standing in front of me listening to this lecture on the Dharma!” There’s a bit of irony in lecturing the Buddha on the Dharma! But what’s really absurd is all these Buddhas running around looking for gurus to give them the truth. “Students don’t have enough faith in themselves, and so they rush around looking for something outside themselves.” [ZT 23]

Nothing outside, nothing inside.

### III. LAST WORDS

In many of the classic Buddhist and Zen texts it’s important to look at the opening and closing words. Often the parts that seem at first to be peripheral (dedications, salutations, etc.) convey some of the most crucial messages in the entire work. Hakuin concludes his Zen 101 course with two injunctions. First, he humbly begs his students to “overlook once more an old man’s foolish grumblings.” And then he implores them to “please take good care of yourselves.” Thus with his always focused, ever-attentive mindfulness, Hakuin concludes With the essential non-essence of Buddhism and Zen: non-attachment and compassion. [ET 103]

So go out and kill some Buddhas, and have a really, really nice day!

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# fifth Estate

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