

Envisioning a Buddhist Anarchism

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November 2011

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I see Buddhist anarchism as being important for two reasons. I see Buddhism as essentially being about the individual's personal liberation from unnecessary suffering. Anarchism I see as essentially being about freeing the world, through a profound social and political transformation, from unnecessary pain. We create all of this unnecessary pain and suffering ourselves.

The distinction between the two is that pain is usually a physical or an "external" thing, such as what you would normally think of with pain. There is also emotional pain, such as what comes with the loss of a loved one. Suffering is the particular kind of agony that comes about by holding onto an idea that something "should not" be happening that is happening, or "should" be happening that is not happening. This turns whatever pre-existing pain into something else, something worse. That's suffering. Suffering is created by our own habits of mind, where we choose to put our attention and what we choose to hold onto. Pain on the other hand is inevitable in life, however the social systems and institutions that humanity has chosen to organize the world with creates more pain for people than is necessary. A Buddhist anarchism would simultaneously be eliminating unnecessary suffering in the psyche and unnecessary pain in the world, and towards more joy and appreciation of life.

The other reason why I see a Buddhist anarchism as being important is that I see the two philosophies as complimenting and completing each-other. It is a union of the personal and the political, the psychological and the social, so to speak. This is ultimately about liberation in its fullest sense – both on the individual personal level and within the larger social body.

The philosophy of anarchism implies that a fundamental shift in the consciousness of people is necessary. In order to have a new world without domination, property or authority, people would need to be accustomed towards living with more benevolence, attentiveness, caring and flexibility with each-other. However, this shift in consciousness is rarely explicitly stated or elaborated upon in anarchist discourse, and the skills necessary for how people can achieve this shift in consciousness are almost never taught within anarchist circles.

The other angle to this is related to the arguments for what is called "Engaged Buddhism," and that is that far too often Buddhism in practice becomes a means for people to escape from the world, to ignore the sufferings of others, and to blindly contribute to the injustices of the world. If one really does wish for the liberation of all beings, then one would inevitably be drawn to more thorough social engagement for working towards this.

Time has passed

A number of months have elapsed since I wrote my previous essay about this subject. I've received a number of different responses to it, all across the board. I've had some time to reflect further on the matter. One thing that has struck me is that there really is no pre-existing philosophy that is formulated which goes into depth about "Buddhist anarchism." Various people have used this label to describe themselves, different articles, blog posts, audio or video recordings have been made, yet there has been no real lineage or tradition established for "Buddhist anarchism" as such.

This term was first publicly noted as being used 50 years ago, in 1961, by Gary Snyder with his essay entitled "Buddhist anarchism." Given that Snyder is still alive, that means that we are still in the period of the first generation of living "Buddhist anarchists." The whole thing is still very much in its initial formative stage, which means that we all can still define and lay out what

we would like for a Buddhist anarchist philosophy to be. I would like to contribute a few more pieces here about what I would like for such a philosophy to include, this time drawing more from the core tenets of Buddhist philosophy than my previous essay did.

Disclaimers for potential subtlety

One thing that I would like to say right away is that I do not see Buddhist anarchism as being in any way connected with the various tyrannical governments, religious superstition and patriarchal traditions around the world that are associated with Buddhism. The “Buddhism” that a “Buddhist anarchism” is connected to would be the core philosophical tenets of Buddhism. The various outgrowths of Buddhism which are fundamentally at odds with the philosophy of anarchism are not a part of Buddhist anarchism as I see it.

I do admit that there are many different kinds of Buddhist philosophies out there. There are many different kinds of anarchist philosophies out there as well. Put together, this means that there exist innumerable different ways in which “Buddhist anarchism” can take form and be expressed by different people. My own background that is influencing my perspective on Buddhist anarchism is coming from my experience with Vipassana Meditation, which derives from a Theravada Buddhist tradition, and anarcho-communism which is associated with the writings of the Russian anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin.

Core Components

Despite all of the diversity within Buddhism, there do exist some things that are core to Buddhism and that all of the different traditions have in common. Looking at these core elements, I see a number of parallels and cross-overs with the philosophy of anarchism. Let’s start with the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is that suffering exists everywhere. Wherever you look you will see people miserable or in some way experiencing some degree of suffering in their lives. This would then correlate with anarchist philosophy which says that the world that we live in is organized in a way that is fundamentally corrupt and harmful to life. Anarchists everywhere share the commonality of looking around at the world and seeing a society that is deeply and pervasively against life. The world as we know it is really messed up.

The Second Noble Truth of Buddhism says that suffering has a cause, and that is craving, aversion and ignorance. In other words, “having to have” something, having to avoid something, or simply refusing to look at life as it is are the causes of suffering. These three causes of suffering correlate with the anarchist philosophy’s pointing to the institutions of capitalism and the state, and underlying that domination per se, as being the cause for all of the corruption and oppression of the world. Domination at its root is based on craving and aversion for it comes about when those at the top of the hierarchy “have to” have things their way, even at the expense of others, and no other possibilities are tolerated or permitted.

Anarchists frequently decry the ignorance that is prevalent in society as well, seeing that as being a fundamental part of the problem. Anarchists see the social tendency for people in our society to ignore or disregard the various injustices and horrors that exist in our world and

instead focus attention on trivialities, superficialities and entertainment. This social dynamic of continuing distractions ensures that all of the injustices and horrors will continue.

The Third Noble Truth of Buddhism is that it is possible to overcome suffering. There exists a psycho-spiritual condition called “nirvana” or “enlightenment” and individuals through their own effort can attain it. The correlation of this with anarchism is that of the vision of a new utopian society which exists without the state or capitalism, without domination or hierarchy, and that instead is based on free people organizing together directly as equals and sharing all of the world’s resources in common. Similar to the Buddhist assertion that it is possible for people to reach this radically different condition through their own efforts, anarchists assert that societies of people can create this radically different world through their own efforts as well.

The Fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism is that there is an explicitly delineated path for people to follow to reach nirvana. This is called the Noble Eightfold Path. I won’t go into each of the points for the Noble Eightfold Path here, perhaps that can be a topic for another article. Instead I will look at the three categories that the Noble Eightfold Path is broken down into: morality (sila), mastery over one’s mind (Samadhi) and experiential wisdom (panna). For the philosophy of anarchism there is also an explicitly stated means for achieving a social revolution that has three different components. This involves practices that are characterized by the principles of prefigurative politics, self-organization and direct action.

The Buddhist concept of morality (sila) is basically that one should not do or say things that will harm others, and that one should work towards doing and saying things that helps others instead. The idea is that if one does or says things that hurt others, one is also at the same time hurting one’s own self psychologically and spiritually as well. I see Buddhist morality (sila) as corresponding with the anarchist notion of “prefigurative politics,” which is the principle that one’s actions and the projects that one engages in now should reflect the kind of world that one wants to see in the future within it. “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” At the heart of an anarchist morality, expressed through a prefigurative practice, would be relationships where the autonomy of each individual is respected, without coercion, and where everyone’s needs are valued equally. Altogether this would mean that one’s actions and projects would be done for the benefit of others as well as for one’s self, and that they are done for the sake of a better future as well as for the present.

Mastering one’s own mind (Samadhi) is about developing the ability to control what thoughts one has on one’s mind at any given time, being able to choose where one places one’s attention, and being able to clearly make decisions and follow through with them. Meditation is a kind of practice that is used to develop mastery over one’s own mind. The anarchist correlation that I see with this is the principle of self-organization, which is where a group of people organize their own affairs together directly and democratically without utilizing social hierarchies or groups outside of them to make decisions for them. I see this as relating in that in order for a group to survive and thrive in a self-organized way, they need to develop means to facilitate what is being talked about, where the group’s attention is placed in a given situation, and to make collective decisions and carry them out effectively. In a way Samadhi and self-organization are both forms of “self-organization,” just one is on the individual level and the other is on a larger social level. Self-organization within a group would require the same kind of cohesion, clarity and self-discipline that are characteristics of Samadhi.

Experiential wisdom (panna) is about experiencing a deeper understanding of the nature of existence personally and directly. This kind of understanding goes beyond what can be read about

in books or writings. In fact it goes beyond what can adequately be expressed in words at all. It has to be lived to be understood. I see this as correlating with the anarchist principle of direct action, which is that of meeting needs and making necessary changes without being told to or asking for permission from some form of authority. I see these as relating in that what is learned in the process of carrying out direct action and the kinds of changes that this brings about within people by going through this process is beyond anything that can be learned or gained by writing or talking alone. Direct action brings about a deep fundamental shift in people, very similar to the kinds of shifts that come from panna. These are both shifts on the direct experiential level. Direct action dispels the illusions of authority, panna shatters illusions altogether. When you are able to see first-hand things getting done without authority, you get a sense of what a straw-man authority is. When you experience the truth that is beyond all words, you can see how paltry words are.

Marking a new existence

Buddhism also has a particular understanding of the nature of our world. This is summarized by what are called the “three marks of existence.” Looking at each of these I realized that each can form the basis for an argument for an anarchist world. The three marks of existence are impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha) and no-self (anatta).

The idea behind impermanence (anicca) is that everything is always changing, everything comes and goes, and that nothing stays the same forever. “This too shall pass.” I see this as being an argument for anarchism in that I see the complexities and constantly changing nature of things and situations as being beyond the scope of authority figures or institutional bureaucracies to be able to understand or handle. Things just change too much and too often to keep up. In my view the people who are living and experiencing the changes themselves are those who are in the best position to understand the situation that is going on, and hence are in the best position to be able to deal with it appropriately. For those who are cut off from the situation itself or detached from others who are also experiencing it, the understanding can only be partial.

Suffering (dukkha) was already discussed above as the First Noble Truth of Buddhism. It is that suffering exists and is a fundamental part of the human experience. This in turn relates to an argument for anarchism in that the world that we live in now is filled with immense pain and injustice, and subsequently that this is unnecessary and that we can do something about it.

The third mark of existence is no-self (anatta), which is that there is no essential permanent “self” for an individual. In other words, everything that comprises “you” is so contingent on innumerable different factors and variables, be they biological, social, cultural, material, etc. that there is no basic core “self” which exists independent of all of that. That is, if all of the different contributing influences and components from different sources are taken away, nothing is left.

I see the anarchist correlation to no-self (anatta) as being that all of the notions of property, social status and political power exist as mere social constructs that are comprised by innumerable different factors all coinciding together. The efforts of countless people combined to make a material object that someone considers to be “theirs.” Generations of acquiescence, obedience and the social construction of meaning combined to create what is called a “king” or a “politician.” All kinds of factors reinforced by scores of people created what we have now. No Divine Intervention came and created relationships of domination, nor did capitalism and the state naturally

exist since the beginning of time – we created it all ourselves together and it would not exist without us.

Eight Streams Leading to One

It has been said that the entirety of Buddhism can be summarized with this phrase: “Abandon unwholesome qualities, cultivate wholesome qualities, and purify your mind.” Similarly, a take on anarchism can be: “Abandon capitalist and state-based ways of doing things, create and participate in free and cooperative-based ways of doing things, and clean your mind of the mainstream domination-based programming that fills it.” But what does all of this look like in practice? And what would a specifically Buddhist anarchist approach look like?

Towards this end I have identified eight different pre-existing independent practices, projects or sub-cultures which I believe that woven together could form the fabric for what a specifically Buddhist anarchist practice can be. None of these are explicitly “Buddhist anarchist” per se, but they form the beginning foundations for the practical expression of it.

1. Engaged Buddhism: This is where Buddhism and activism formally meet – where Buddhists do activism (or activists practice Buddhism). Under this name, various groups like the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the Zen Peacemakers and Thich Naht Hanh’s people do the political and social activist work that they do. It could be said that a Buddhist anarchism by definition is a kind of “engaged Buddhism.” The only difference is that the political orientation here is a radical anarchist one.
2. Vegetarianism, veganism, animal liberation: There are some folks, and anarchists and Buddhists are often among them, who say that animals have rights, that animals should be free, and that they should be treated with care and respect. In practice this view-point can be expressed by refusing to eat animal flesh, by abstaining from animal products altogether, or by engaging in more militant actions to free animals from captivity. From an anarchist stand-point this can be justified by the desire to do away with all forms of domination and oppression, and the captivity and killing of animals can be seen as one form of that. From a Buddhist stand-point this can be justified by a desire for compassion for all living beings, by the wish of “may all beings be liberated.”
3. The Public Meditation Project and meditation flash mobs: Anarchists often have the desire to reclaim public space, to open up space for everyone outside of the control of the state or private property. Buddhists often want more people to know about and to practice meditation. Put these two together, and you have the Public Meditation Project. This is an endeavor to have people practice meditation out in the open in public spaces. This can also be done as “meditation flash mobs,” where people semi-spontaneously arrange to all meet up together at the same time and place to meditate in public. Reclaiming public space does not have to be aggressive, in fact no talking even needs to happen at all. It can be done sitting down in complete silence and stillness.
4. Dharma Punk: Since the late 1970’s and early 1980’s the philosophy of anarchism and punk rock music have been strongly associated with each other. The anarchist sub-culture often blends into the punk rock sub-culture, and vice versa. Because of the efforts of authors such

as Noah Levine and Brad Warner, and others, a new sub-culture has come about of Buddhist punks, or “Dharma Punx.” While not explicitly “anarchist,” Noah Levine’s writings at least often make casual reference to how what he is advocating is “revolutionary” and “radical.” Often-times the Buddha himself within this sub-culture is referred to as being “the rebel saint. This particular sub-culture has probably done the most to help develop a Buddhist anarchist culture.

5. Nonviolent Communication and the Consciousness Transformation Community: Coming from the self-help scene is a practice called “Nonviolent Communication,” or “NVC” for short. This is a series of conceptual and interpersonal tools that can be applied to help with resolving conflicts between people, developing personal clarity or sensitively listening to others. From a Buddhist perspective I see this as in many ways being a kind of “applied Right Speech.” From an anarchist perspective the principles and theory underlying NVC explicitly rejects relationships of domination, and NVC is viewed as being a way to help overcome it. Most recently something has emerged from NVC that is called the “Consciousness Transformation Community.” The CTC is based around a set of 17 “core commitments” which basically summarize the kind of consciousness that NVC aims for. In the realm of interpersonal relationships, NVC and the CTC can be viewed as tools and a framework for practicing Buddhist anarchism.
6. Radical political straightedge: In the hard-core punk sub-culture there exists a tendency called “radical political straightedge.” This is a kind of social intersection where people are into punk rock music, hold radical political views, and abstain from all forms of alcohol consumption, recreational drug use and intoxication in general. Within the Buddhist morality (sila), there is a precept where one who wishes to develop along the Buddhist path vows to abstain from all forms of intoxication. Radical political straightedge can be seen as one step on the Buddhist anarchist path within a (sub-)cultural context.
7. Buddhist atheism and Critical Buddhism: There is an author named Stephen Batchelor who is a former Buddhist monk in both the Tibetan and the Zen traditions who has renounced his monk-hood. He has recently been writing about what he calls “Buddhist atheism.” This approach is basically where all of the metaphysical ideas within Buddhism such as the notions of rebirth and reincarnation, as well as beliefs in deities and “higher” and “lower” cosmologies, are stripped away from Buddhism.

Similar work has been taking place in Japan with something that is called “Critical Buddhism.” This has been the work of some Japanese Buddhist scholars to modernize Buddhist beliefs to make it all more relevant and applicable to a contemporary audience. Given that most anarchists are atheists (ie, “no gods, no masters”), or at least come from a Western secular outlook on life, such forms of Buddhism would be the most appropriate for a Buddhist anarchism.
8. The Gift Economy: This is a way of arranging economics where all goods and services are offered freely as a gift. With this nothing is offered with a price-tag or as a part of a trade or exchange. Everything is given without any strings attached. People may give things to the original giver, but that is done so as a gift in itself, not as “payment” or “reimbursement.” A number of different anarchist events and projects operate as a gift economy, as do

a number of Buddhist events and projects as well. Within the Buddhist context the practice of operating with a gift economy is connected with the virtue (Pāramitā) of “Dāna,” or “generosity.” Within the anarchist context, the gift economy would form the basis for an anarchist-communist society. There is much potential within the gift economy to be explored.

Letting Go For Freedom

Perhaps the most succinct to-the-point summary of Buddhism is this one quote that has been attributed to Gotama the Buddha: “Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.” Clinging to ideas of the way things should be, what should be happening, what people should be doing, etc. is one of the sure ways to ensure that one will experience suffering. Likewise, for anarchists, clinging to ideas of how the world should look, how projects should be carried out, ideas of identity or ideological purity have also caused a lot of suffering. I believe that one of the biggest contributions that Buddhism can make for anarchism is precisely this peace of mind which comes from not clinging. Without clinging, desperation, anxiety and putting demands on one’s friends and comrades goes away. Instead, projects can be carried out with calm, clarity and a sense of inner spaciousness. This in turn can set the tone for the kind of world that we would like to live in.

Taking Up Responsibility

Having said all of this, I want to emphasize — anarchism and Buddhism are not the same thing. They are two separate traditions. They are two traditions that complement each-other like two sides of the same coin of true and total liberation. Buddhist anarchism is something new, even though it has very long and ancient roots. My hope with writing all of this is to help to make space for this something new to emerge further. Both traditions emphasize responsibility, individuals taking responsibility for themselves in the fullest way possible. The same goes with the future of the philosophy and practice of Buddhist anarchism. If we want for it to grow, develop or evolve, the responsibility is up to us. As with everything, when it comes down to it, it is always up to us.

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