

Zen and the Art of Anarchy

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“Do be do be dooo.”

— Frank Sinatra

Scholar warriors. Warrior priests and poets. That’s what they were called in feudal Japan — Zen practitioners of learning and warfare. Cultured destroyers, enlightened fighters. Can it be any different with us?

Postmodern jargon-junkies call ideologies (aka, “isms”) like anarchism “emancipatory meta-narratives” — can you believe that? What the fuck does that mean, anyway? I’ll tell you: it means systems of belief no different from what came before:

Believe in X, and You Will be Free. You Will Reach Paradise.

Most isms are full of it, and some would say anarchism is, too. Can’t be done. Impossible. Utopian. A crack-pipe dream. Pie-inna-sky. Fuck that. Fuck Paradise. Make your own damned Paradise, or make none at all. Anarchism’s bigger than that.

Now, you’re wondering, “what the hell are you talkin’ about?” So I’ll tellya. The way of the scholar warrior offers insight. To appreciate anarchism, we must become enlightened individuals.

What the hell is that? Let me backtrack: isms look outside the person and find sin and salvation abroad. Call it *the Politics of Finger-Pointing*, if you like. Whatever. Meantime, you remain basically the same, like who you always were. Sure, you believe this new doctrine, but you’re basically no better off. Maybe thinking you’re different, but you aren’t. You’re the same you were before, mostly. Maybe an attitude adjustment, but that’s it. Is that progress?

For the anarchist, it can’t be. Anarchism bases itself on respect for the individual — something an ism just can’t fucking do. Ism’s aren’t alive, so they can’t respect anybody, not you, not me, not anybody. If we’re talking about respecting the individual, then what can you do as an individual to be worthy of respect?

I say it’s the cultivation of knowledge of the self — knowing who you are — that makes a good anarchist. It means developing yourself in Mind, Body, and even your damned Spirit (MSB) to become a better person.

Now MSB talk is so cliched, to New Age, right, who’d listen to it? Not me, for one. Hell, the anarchist worth their salt probably doesn’t believe a soul exists, so what’s to develop?

In here, I see “spirit” as that which makes life more liveable, like somewhere between mind and body, okay? So get off my case about it already. I see art as the language of anarchic spirit.

Western isms seek change while the inner self, whatever makes you **you**, withers away. Capitalism tries to fill that void with goodies — money, property, possessions — stuffing you with **stuff**, to plug the hole. Socialism either ignores the inner self as unscientific and meaningless, or maybe subsidizes the arts as like, civic duty or something. Christianity just says “believe in God and blah blah blah blah...”

So what does anarchism do? There’s no formula or magic button here. But for anarchism to transcend the other isms, to be really new, some kind of approach is needed, if you ask me.

That’s why I come back to the Scholar Warrior idea, again and again. It can be broken down as *the deliberate pursuit of enlightenment and growth, the seeking of knowledge, and the development of the individual*. Now, that’s just what I call it — maybe you got something better, and if you do, then good for you, cuz the above’s the best I can do.

It’s broken down like this:

1. Martial Arts: That which strengthens MSB.
2. Art: That which has no purpose save joy.
3. Crafts: That which brings joy through purpose (usefulness).
4. Games: That which challenges the mind.
5. Language: That which lets you reach and learn about others.
6. Philosophy/History: That which brings knowledge.

Looking at the above, I see I'm not probably explaining it quite right; it's like it makes sense to me inside, but when I try explaining it, it doesn't always come out right, so bear with me. It might look like Eastern Mysticism or something, but it's more like an antidote to Western Living.

Anarchism is about the individual, and how they relate to society — but how is that possible without knowledge of who you are and what you are capable of?

Self-knowledge grows from challenge, and challenge brings growth. Challenge, and come to know, yourself. And in doing this, derive meaning for yourself.

Revolutionaries seek salvation in **the cause** — this is similar to the way the religious operate — **the cause** takes over your life, becoming more important than you are. At root, many revolutionaries are unbalanced people. I say that not meaning crazy, although some are fucking crazy — more like when I say “unbalanced” I mean they're not fully developed, or broadly developed, with a narrow range of interests. Anarchism's about bottom-up organizing, people say — I say it's inside-out organizing first. I mean, if you're fucked up, how are you going to possibly be able to organize others? No fucking way. Get your own house in order before you go knocking on other people's doors. Inside-out, bottom-up, fringes-center. That's how it should be done. Otherwise you're just repeating what's been done before.

Before I continue, keep in mind that you don't need to jump on these all at once — try adding one each month, so you won't get overwhelmed and discouraged. But do this!

Martial Arts

Why martial arts? At the most basic, they're exercise, which Americans in particular need — we're a bunch of fatties, you know. Like a nation of fatasses, so that's one benefit already. But unlike usual Western sports, martial arts offer more than routine workouts. They offer opportunities to explore other cultures.

Kung-fu, capoeira, kendo, judo/jujitsu, aikido, hapkido, tae kwon do, karate, boxing, fencing (maybe) — take one of these up. Learn it, explore it, master it. These will teach you a lot about yourself, and give you confidence.

Some of the above are hard arts, and some are soft — I'll explain: hard arts focus on offense — you tend to strike and disable your opponent; soft arts focus on defense, misdirection and evasion — you use your opponent's attack or weight against them; they sorta defeat themselves. Now, don't think that hard/soft means one's tough and one's for sissies. Soft arts can be plenty hard — if you've ever been flipped by a judo master, you'll know what I'm talking about. It's just a different approach.

Hard arts: kung-fu, kendo, tae kwon do, karate, boxing, fencing. Soft arts: judo/jujitsu, aikido, hapkido, capoeira, tai chi (mostly just for exercise these days) Martial arts are vital, but it's important to find a good place to learn the art you choose. Many places are simply out for your money, or to terrorize you or focus simply on beating the crap out of somebody. This is *fighting*, **not** martial art.

By working out the body, the martial art of your choice provides a firm foundation on which you can build.

I studied tae kwon do for several years, and am now beginning to explore kendo, although I'm really interested in learning capoeira.

Art

Pick an art that interests you, with the rule that it **must not be practical** — writing, poetry, sculpture, painting, drawing, singing, dancing, music, acting — any of these or others so long as the **sole** purpose of this is self-expression and joy. In our society, these feelings are discouraged — we live in the nether world of heedless gratification, repression, and self-denial. Art is against all of this; art is freedom. Know art, and get an inkling of what anarchism's about.

Pick one of the ones I listed, or something like it — give it a try; if you're no good, keep trying — the important thing is learning and doing. Pick a medium you enjoy and run with it. Try to do it daily, or weekly. Make it a habit.

I find sculpture and collage fun, myself, although it's a pain in the ass finding the parts to assemble.

Crafts

I would describe a craft as a practical art — like an art that produces something useful in the end. Some examples are: pottery, woodworking, metalworking, glass-blowing, cooking, sewing/weaving, gardening, brewing — anything that gives you something useful in the end. Hopefully you get the idea.

Arts and crafts are usually fused in people's minds, because there is craftsmanship in art and artistry in crafts — but I deliberately break them up along the lines of practicality to teach a lesson that what is good comes in many shapes and sizes, and it needn't always be something useful.

Stick to your craft of choice until you are good at it. Create useful things of beauty. If nothing else, it'll give you a way to let off steam, and you'll have a useful skill to fall back on if you have to.

If you master a given craft (and that can take a lifetime in some cases), take up another that interests you, if you want.

I've been working on mosaics, myself. I think they're cool. I also cook stuff.

Games

With all this work, you must make time for play, too. Play games — this is purely for your amusement, but should challenge your mind, too. We're not talking Monopoly, here — more like chess, or go — games that work your mind. Sports can also fit in this category, but there should be a mental component to it, not just pure physical stuff, cuz the martial art you picked should cover that pretty well.

I dig chess myself — and if you live in a city, you can find street chess players, if you know where to look. Don't try playing them straight out, cuz most'll kick your ass, and they play fast.

Language

Pick any that gets you going, for whatever reason. This is an exercise for your mind and exposes you to other cultures and ways of thinking. If you learn a language well enough to speak fluently with others, then consider learning another. This isn't easy, especially if you're not a kid anymore. But do it.

Anarchism's international in character, so that's why it's good to be multilingual. All too often, especially Americans, can barely speak English, let alone another language. There's a sense that everybody's supposed to be like Americans, and fuck everyone else. Learning a foreign language shows your willingness to learn something about them. The important thing is to choose one you like, take your time, and **stick with it**.

I am considering learning Spanish, cuz so many people speak it, it seems a useful one.

Philosophy/History

Finally, there's this. Take some time to learn about good ideas and bad — see what's been thought before. Check out the *Tao Te Ching* and Zen Buddhism — they're kinda cool, but that's just my own bias. The anarchist must be a philosopher, not a red-faced zealot or would-be thug.

Maybe grab one of those philosophy compilations and breeze through it. You'd be surprised how little Americans know about philosophy — but when you start reading it, learning about ideas, you can organize your thinking, which is a big help.

Related to this, pick an area of history that interests you and try to read about it once a month. Come to learn deeply of past eras — it doesn't have to just be anarchist stuff, either. Probably shouldn't — learn about your ancestors, like your culture, where you came from, if you like. Whatever. But learn. History is way useful to the revolutionary cuz it reveals the mistakes, triumphs, and lost ideas of the past.

(Learn a Trade)

This one's optional — if you're *really* hardcore — if you've done all the others and want to learn more — you could take up a trade. This is a practical skill that will put you in touch with true proles — working people. Trades are things like carpentry, construction, plumbing, welding, locksmithing, etc. — all the things that keep society running smoothly. These jobs pay very well, are almost all union (trade unions), and are hard work. A trade isn't glamor work, but it's honest work, and there is apparently a lack of young people taking trades up, because of the social stigma associated with them in our fucking white-collar world.

The reason I say this one is optional is because it's more of a time commitment than some of the others — many of these trades offer apprenticeships and so forth, but you'll have to commit more time and/or money to these than to some of the others.

The advantage here is that you'll be working with honest-to-goodness working people, folks who work with their hands. The other advantage is you'll come to know a skill that will pay you very well, and, depending on the skill, be very useful for your anarchist actions. An anarchist

locksmith or electrician is a fucking nightmare to the authorities, let me tell you. You can fill in the dots on that one.

Do all this, and in time you'll become a Scholar Warrior, a poetic revolutionary, with a strong sense of yourself and what you are capable of. Most people don't push themselves, they think "oh, I can't fucking do that" and so they don't. Anarchists can't be like that.

What's extra cool is if you do all of this stuff, you'll become a more interesting person, with many varied interests, skills, and stuff — which will put you far ahead of most other revolutionaries. This idea is most revolutionary of all — you fix yourself up first, then move on.

But don't start thinking you're way cool or whatever — ideally, the more you learn, the more you will realize there is stuff you don't know, and it will both discipline and humble you. Americans are the instant culture — like take a pill and solve the problem, the Scholar Warrior way is like a long process of development, and takes time and energy, so it's like self-defense against the consumer culture. That's my take on it, anyway.

Because anarchism is so different from the usual isms, so must the anarchist be different. The path is no way easy — I've tried this myself for years, and it's hard as hell, but it's worth it. Do it, and grow.

Or do nothing and remain as you are. Your choice, and I don't care. But you'll find that pushing yourself makes you stronger, not weaker. There's more I can say to this, but I gotta go.

Zen Anarchists

So, you're probably asking yourself, why the hell should I devote time and energy to this? Because we (anarchists) must become the living batteries of the future, ambassadors of the new society, visions of a possible, better future..

Mass capitalist society weans us from having to know how to live and think. It makes us soft and weak, dependent on the very consumerist civilization we claim to oppose. The age of convenience has made us lazy — lazy in body and in mind, addicted to convenience and instant results.

Anarchists must therefore contain fragments of the new society within themselves, in our hearts and minds — we must become the future, and the only way to do that is through knowledge. Right now things are easy — gaining knowledge is comparatively easy, which is why we're so fucking lazy. Information, good and bad, is in heavy supply (more bad than good — noise, you know?) Because of that heavy supply, demand for it is pretty low — hence the idea of "information overload" — **too much information, gotta tune it out!** People can't take it and want to shut themselves down, crawl into a hole.

But it wasn't always that way — knowledge was once terribly hard to come by. Social control depends on the lack of individual knowledge — on ignorance. That's where the idea of censorship comes from. Keep the people ignorant, keep them from knowing any better, and they'll stay in line. The cliché is that "knowledge is power" but like all such axioms, there is truth inside. In older times, people were too busy trying to survive to cultivate knowledge — it became the province of a few fanatic religious types and the rich. You want to go back to that? Not me.

The people who do not seek enlightenment will become our enemies in hard times — by supporting dictators who make them feel secure, or by becoming thugs themselves. The anarchist doesn't want to become a thug, hence the pursuit of enlightenment. No way we can be

all-knowing, but we can learn now, while learning is easy, and know enough to become interesting people.

The simple fact of it is that revolutionaries — and I use that term tongue-in-cheek — are fucking boring people. Can you think of anyone more boring? **The cause, the cause, the cause yawn** — boring as hell, like a fucking broken record, and just as annoying. They make me think of Christians, like it's the same thing, only replacing the religion with the ism. Same damn thing.

The anarchist must redefine what being a revolutionary is all about, and that means changing ourselves as people, and going from a bunch of preaching one-trick ponies to truly intriguing people with many varied interests.

Revolutionaries are painfully conformist people — really quick you learn right — from wrong-think, and it makes you dry up inside and become a boring drone. Look at Communists and Maoists for examples of this, you'll see it in spades, but the problem exists with all radicals, including anarchists. But we have a way out, and that lies with our support of the individual.

By becoming a scholar warrior, or whatever you want to call it, by cultivating enlightenment — by learning stuff — you attempt to escape the curse of revolutionaries everywhere.

Now, few people will actually try this stuff I laid out. They'll be too lazy to do it. And if they're too lazy for self-improvement, how in the hell can they be any good in the movement as a whole? If you're not willing to take time to better yourself — and who would argue that acquiring knowledge is bad — then why should we listen to you, anyway? Either you think you're perfect, in which case you're a nut — or you're too full of self-loathing to give a damn, or you're too lazy — so who needs you, anyway? Not anarchism, for sure.

Those few who actually do this, those are your hopes for the future. These are people who are willing to grow and learn and work, and the benefits for organizing, beyond simply being more confident and capable, is that you'll be able to give something to your community beyond empty rhetoric.

With your language, you could interact with groups speaking that language, or tutor folks. The fucking Jesuits did that — they always sought to learn the language of the people they were preaching to, because it was like they felt if they approached them on their own terms, they'd make more progress than trying to force them to be like them.

With your art, you can make the community more beautiful, and again you can teach people the art. You can put that to work in a bunch of ways. Same with the craft — you could start a co-op for that particular craft. And so on — the skills you learn become part of your anarchist toolkit.

It puts the lie to the people who think anarchists are just modern-day barbarians out to break stuff; it shows what a motivated individual can do (both to others, and to yourself); it gives us knowledge that we'll be able to use in harder times. It provides a framework of interaction between anarchists and other people, too — based around common interests, whether pottery, or calligraphy, woodworking, or whatever. And it also lets anarchists come together and pool their knowledge as an active collective offering more than just rhetoric and leaflets — you could start community learning centers, etc. The benefits of it go on and on.

If you actually start on the scholar warrior path, and believe me, not very many people will do this — they'll either sneer, turn up their noses, or think it's too hard for them, blah blah blah — anyway, if you do it, congrats to you — but don't get cocky. The scholar warrior is humble. Give yourself a year to cultivate enlightenment, and see how you do. It's not easy, but stick with it. After a year, you'll see, you'll be better off than you were.

Revolutionaries try so hard to change the world, without changing themselves — anarchists should change themselves, and then the world.

A Bit More

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.”

— Lao Tzu

So, you done anything yet? Bet lotta you haven't, right? That sucks — people might think, “hey, man, that's a good idea, you know?” and leave it at that.

Not good enough — that's old thinking, like lazy-ass western-style thinking. Now, let's think about what you can do to maybe get stuff done. Maybe, it's like too much to think about all at once, so instead of just diving in without planning, get yourself a little planner, like a year-long weekly planner, something cheap, and then put stuff down in there, like what you're going to do. Put little circles in under each thing, and fill them in when you actually do them. Then, as the week ends, you can look back and see what you did and didn't do.

The value of that is that you can decided what you really want to do, and what you only *thought* you wanted to do. Like if you put “kung fu” down as something you wanted to learn, but week after week, you've done nothing about it, maybe that's not what you wanted to do after all.

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