

Anarchism as a Spiritual Practice

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Contents

First, the Tao	3
Oneness and Action	4
Making Our Anarchism Personal	4
Like Dismantling Systems of Oppression but for Yourself	5
Like Grassroots Organizing but for Yourself	5
Like Horizontalism but for Yourself	6
Like Structural Flexibility but for Yourself	6
Like Free Association but for Yourself	7
Like Transformative Justice but for Yourself	7
Towards Utopia	8

Anarchism is my religion.

Ignoring the black flag ritual trappings and Bookchin/Graeber/Kropotkin pseudo-deity worship, what I mean is that anarchism is as personal, emotional, psychological and universal to me as any religion or spirituality could be. It's a total framework through which I view my life, my choices, my relationships, and the world, as rooted in the ancient Chinese concept of *Tao* as it is in the abolition of state domination (and the two aren't really separate).

When I talk about spirituality, I speak of nothing other than *what is*: our feelings, our selves, our world, our existence, our lives. I'm not getting at anything pan-dimensional or explicitly sacred here—just our psyches, how we relate to ourselves, our communities, how we relate to each other, and making the external practices of horizontalism, self-determination, spontaneity and mutual aid an internal practice too. The societal choices alive in anarchist philosophy have applications at the personal and universal levels, and for a transformation to be total, the internal realm cannot be ignored.

That internal practice and universal framework, I'm choosing to call a Spirituality. If you don't resonate with that word, think of this as an emotional or psychological anarchism, and feel free to ignore the universal bits if they don't fit well in your mind.

What does it mean to take these structural ideals and build a personal practice and total world-view around them?

The phrase I keep coming back to in explaining all of this is **organic emergence**: choices that arise naturally out of an authentic state of being. Like rooting our politics in the needs of our communities, we can consciously root our action in our own feeling. Like allowing our order to emerge from the bottom up, we can allow ourselves to emerge from our own nature.

First, the Tao

Look, you're a natural phenomenon too. You are an inseparable part of nature. It follows that your nature *is nature*. So, acting in harmony with your nature is acting in harmony with the Way of nature, sometimes called the *Tao*. Tao is, at its most simple understanding, the *nature of nature*. If you don't like the term *Tao*, think of it as the nature of nature, or what Bookchin might have called "ecology" (he'd never admit the parallel, so I'll admit it for him.)

Tao is not the *Way* in the sense of a road or particular path, but rather, the *way* the Earth revolves around the sun. The *way* trees grow and flowers bloom. The *way* we are born, grow and die. The *way* that we feel. The *way* we are. Infinitely complex in manifestation and resoundingly simple in concept, unknowable from a linear and stagnant perspective and yet never unknown because we live it every moment, eternally interconnected, interdependent and intricate: this is the Way of Nature.

In Taoist philosophy, there's a concept called *wu wei*, often translated as "non-action." It is not inaction by any means, simply action that is *effortless*. Try thinking of it like this: a river doesn't try to flow, it just flows. It exerts force and pressure and power for millennia to carve its way through rock to the sea, but its action is a non-action. That is just what rivers do, because that is just what rivers *are*.

Effortless action is to allow your action to arise from your nature, to respect no authority beyond your own feeling and needs in the understanding that they are what is needed and felt, and make choices in alignment with them. Your feelings and your needs are how you go through

existence. They are your *Way*. Self-determined, as grassroots as you can get. Are you seeing political parallels here?

Taoism has always been an anarchist philosophy to me. Its fundamental tenets are simplicity and non-coercion: to become aware of yourself, stop trying to control things and let them emerge. To control is to seek to upset the universal harmony of the way of nature. To control is nothing more or less than to use one's force in this world to limit something else from using its force. Instead, we can allow everything in existence to take its own authentic path and use its force in the world in pursuit of its own flourishing. It is through that individual flourishing that existence as a whole will flourish, through the mutual aid of flourishing individuals, and thus any collective arising only to meet the needs of the individuals within it.

Oneness and Action

Say what you will about a more “spiritual” understanding of Oneness — we can't escape the fact that we're a product of everything around us. I mean this in a wholly secular way. We are the result of our conditioning, our biology (which itself comes from eons of conditioning), our upbringing, our experiences, and what we ate for dinner last night. All of us, our whole selves, have emerged from the forces and beings around us, physically and psychologically, materially, mentally, emotionally. We could not be us without them.

And yet, we still are *us*. We are distinct, but not separate, from the world around us. With that distinctness comes the ability to make choices.

Consciousness is nothing more or less than the awareness of our ability to make choices, to act or not act in particular ways. In allowing our action to emerge organically from our nature, we are choosing to align our paths through existence with the *nature of existence*, as our nature is nature.

Making Our Anarchism Personal

As anarchists and libertarian socialists more broadly, we understand this concept deeply when talking about social organization. We believe the best forms of organization come from fluidity and responsiveness to the needs of individuals, from the empowerment of individuals to act on their needs and determine their structures accordingly. We are comfortable and forthright in this realm, but we often ignore the applications of our beliefs at levels smaller and greater than the societal.

We talk about praxis, but not practice. What is praxis but finding more ways to practice our philosophies in action?

We talk about power, but not consciousness. But what is power but the ability to take conscious action, and consciousness but becoming empowered in the choices one makes?

We talk about justice, but not harmony. But what is justice beyond an effort at fostering a lived harmony?

We want to tear down oppressive systems that confine us and condemn our flourishing, and build up new ones that affirm us equitably. We want our structures to be aligned with our needs and responsive to them, rather than enforced, coercive and rigid. We want power to be rooted in each and all of us rather than lorded over us. We want the ability to determine our courses of

action for ourselves and in community, and the freedom to associate based on consent. We want justice to be true and genuinely felt.

Every single one of these structural ideals has an internal reflection, from dismantling systems of oppression to non-hierarchy to transformative justice. Their application to the self can align our action not only with our politics, but with a universal harmony between self, other, and existence as a whole.

Like Dismantling Systems of Oppression but for Yourself

Resisting unhelpful conditioning.

A system is like a current: a pattern of behavior strong enough that it has the ability to shape behavior. It is essentially a *conditioning* mechanism. I'd assume many of you have heard the phrase, "Decolonize your mind"? That's what I'm getting at here.

We are a product of our conditioning, and our conditioning is a product of us. As those of us surviving under imperialist statist capitalism know quite well, not all of our conditioning works in service of our flourishing.

To allow your action to emerge authentically out of your own nature means you often have to resist the very things that come automatically to you. Automatic is not the same as natural; automatic is a reflexive response to conditioning that may well have long been aimed at divorcing you from your very essence. Resisting our conditioning can be an unbelievably powerful tool, for it allows us to tap into true freedom.

When we feel as comfortable breaking the rules we've been taught to live by as we are obeying them, our action can truly be free to emerge from nothing but our nature.

What is our nature? What we feel, and what we need.

Like Grassroots Organizing but for Yourself

Understanding feelings and needs.

I love the term *grassroots* because it has "roots" in it. On the most fundamental level, the root of all of our experience of existence is our feeling. Feelings: physical sensations, emotions – these are how the external world touches our internal world.

Feelings, though distinct from needs, are not separate from them. We feel cold, so we need warmth. We feel hunger, so we need food. The causal relationship between need and feeling flows both ways.

What do you need?

What do you feel?

What do you need to *feel*?

Getting to the roots of who we are means tapping into our feelings and pursuing our needs. If that sounds like a recipe for chaos, remember that you are not separate from the rest of existence. Your feelings are not separate from everything else in existence; feelings are where you and the rest of existence meet. Feelings and needs are not separate from each other. So, your needs cannot be separate from the needs of existence. That sentence flows both ways as well.

Like anarchism, this takes tremendous trust in others and in yourself to fully understand. When you live as though you are not separate, the needs of others *are your needs*. Call it soli-

clarity if you will. When you live as though you are not separate, *your needs* are the needs of everyone. Dissolving that division between self and other means needs are simply needs, feelings are simply feelings, and action in service of meeting the needs that arise authentically from feeling is action in service of existence as a whole.

This requires actually understanding your needs, which in turn requires actually being aware of your feelings.

Like Horizontalism but for Yourself

Dissolving Ego.

If we're going to rail against societal systems that seek to define for us what we need, deserve, and get to do, *why do we do all of this to ourselves?*

Forcing ourselves to be a certain way and seeking rigidly to control ourselves is the exact same paradigm as the state, and as capitalism. It is using force to limit something else from using its force, and taking control away from the roots (our feelings and needs). When we divide ourselves internally into an *I* and a *Me*, that is, look at ourselves as if from the outside and try to control ourselves, we're mimicking the logic of capitalism and state domination; these external forms of domination mirror and are mirrored by our internal relationship to ourselves.

So, seize the means of your own production. Let your action serve your authentic needs. How do you know what your needs are? Become aware of your feelings.

Give up control of yourself entirely unto yourself, to that deeply authentic self, the part of us that *feels*. Rather than trying to determine what you "should" be doing, respond to your feelings and try trusting yourself. Trust that you already have your best interests at heart, and seek not to externally contrive and determine for yourself what that interest is.

Like Structural Flexibility but for Yourself

Responding to the shifts in your needs.

Just as we seek systems that can adapt to the shifting needs of individuals and communities, we can adapt our action to our own needs. We can adapt our frameworks to our experiences. We can *adapt*.

This is where we come to the concept of "flow states": they're basically just *wu wei*. As experiences shift, feelings shift, so needs shift, so action shifts. Allowing ourselves and our action to be flexible, rather than viewing ourselves as some rigid, defined thing, is what cultivates harmony between our action and our nature. When we are aware of our feelings and serving to meet our needs in harmony with our feelings, rather than fighting our feelings, forcing ourselves and controlling ourselves, our action becomes effortless. There is no internal wall against which to push; action simply flows.

Like the river to the sea, there still may be miles of rock to carve through, but that path becomes effortless. Now you are putting your conscious effort towards that which you could never not do, towards that which you are *never not doing*: feeling your feelings, and seeking to meet your needs.

Like Free Association but for Yourself

Allowing the self to be a process.

On that same note, treating the self as a non-stagnant, unrigid process means we can take on and discard parts of ourselves as those parts serve our needs. To quote Whitman, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Free association within ourselves unfixes our minds from some stagnant understanding of who we are. The nature of nature is flux. Resolute stagnation, and clinging to rigidity, dams the river of our authentic emergence as we wind our ways to the sea of our understanding of The Good Life.

This desire to regulate, control and define the self is nothing but putting an arbitrary border around that which is fluid and migratory. You are not your conceptions of your identity. You just are. Any identity you have fits in some ways, and does not fit in others. Take it on and cast it off as best serves you, from a place of freedom and conscious choice.

Like Transformative Justice but for Yourself

Turning from shame and blame to responsibility.

One of the deepest poisons to our flourishing is shame. Shame, “shoulds,” and questions of fault and blame are deeply tied to a desire to control, which is itself deeply tied to fear. Shame is self-punishment, an excruciating feeling stemming from an internalized belief that a thing we did was *wrong*.

Who, exactly, is this universal judge of goodness that can determine if anything is right or wrong?

Just as many of us seek a justice system that looks to genuine resolution and an inclusion of the wider structural factors involved in harm being done, so too can we apply this framework to ourselves. What situational factors led to us taking the action we took? What conditioning? What experience? What triggers? Now, rather than fixating on self-punishment, how do we best remedy the harm done going forwards?

If shame serves your flourishing by teaching you not to do something that harms you and others, then it has served its purpose. But like all conditioning, it can become automatic, wherein it inhibits freedom, inhibits flourishing, and inhibits harmony.

In *The Tao of Pooh*, there’s a little story that’s stuck with me. It’s about Winnie the Pooh opening a honey jar. All the other animals in the Hundred Acre Wood try to open the jar, but only Pooh succeeds. They ask him how he did it, and he says something to the effect of, “Well, I turned the lid as far as it would go. Then I breathed. Then I turned it more, and it opened.”

As trite as the example may seem, it is a powerful lesson about action, about growth, and about learning. To take responsibility, rather than fixate on blame, is to step into the present moment. To become aware of the present situation and one’s relationship to it, and decide from *here* how to move forward.

Because the thing about all of this is that you’re always already doing it.

You are trying to live your unique version of The Good Life with every step you take. In every moment you are feeling, and responding to your feelings, needing, and seeking to meet your needs.

To practice an internalized, “spiritual”, anarchism is nothing more than learning to get out of your own way.

Like Pooh opening the honey jar, you’re already trying to do it. Take stock of the situation. Take stock of your relationship to yourself. Breathe. Now, do it more.

Towards Utopia

Frankly, I’m sick of everything that’s not Utopia. To me, Utopia is a dynamic equilibrium; it is whatever emerges out of everyone living their personal Utopia, their unique vision of The Good Life. I believe everyone living their unique Utopia could produce harmonious and spontaneous structures of people living in Utopia together. Actually, I believe it’s the only thing that can.

In seeking to dismantle systems of oppression in the world, I think it’s about time we did the same within ourselves. The more we can practice cultivating harmony within ourselves, the more we can cultivate authentic and spontaneous harmony with each other. The more we can cultivate harmony with each other, the more we can cultivate genuine harmony in societal structures.

As above, so below; as within, so without.

This is not to say “cease working on the external” – shifting external structures will hasten the internal process, and vice versa.

Start where you are, with who you are, with what you feel and what you need. Start with what feels true to you. Treat this as practice. Experiment. Hold it lightly, and use it as best serves you.

Go forth, my darling Leftists, and be free.

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