

Meditative Revolutions? A Preliminary Approach to US Buddhist Anarchist Literature

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This article discusses the various shapes, inner structures and roles given to transformative and liberative practices in the work of US Buddhist anarchist authors (1960-2010). Unlike their Chinese and Japanese predecessors, who focused more on discursive parallelisms between Buddhism and anarchism or on historical instances of antiauthoritarianism within the Buddhist tradition(s), US Buddhist anarchists seem to favour practice and experience. This emphasis, characteristic of the way Buddhism has been introduced to the West, sometimes masks the way meditative techniques were used in traditional Buddhist contexts as oppressive technologies of the self. Whereas the emphasis on the inherently revolutionary nature of Buddhist practice represents a radical departure from the way those practices have been conceptualised throughout Buddhist history, it also involves the danger of considering Buddhist practice as an ahistorical sine qua non for social transformation. This is due to the fact that most early Buddhist anarchist writers based their ideas on a highly idealised, Orientalist imagination of Zen Buddhism(s). However, recent contributions based on other traditions have offered a more nuanced, albeit still developing picture. By assessing a number of instances from different US Buddhist anarchist writers, the article traces the brief history of the idea that meditation *is* revolutionary praxis, while also deconstructing and complicating it through historical and textual analysis.

Keywords: Buddhism; anarchism; counterculture; Orientalism; Zen; meditation

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¿Revoluciones meditativas?

Una visión preliminar de la literatura budista anarquista estadounidense

Este artículo analiza las diversas formas, estructuras internas y roles dados a las prácticas transformadoras y liberadoras en el trabajo de autores anarquistas budistas estadounidenses (1960-2010). A diferencia de sus predecesores chinos y japoneses, que se centraron más en los paralelismos discursivos entre el budismo y el anarquismo o en instancias históricas de antiautoritarismo dentro de las tradiciones budistas, los budistas anarquistas estadounidenses parecen favorecer la práctica y la experiencia. Este énfasis, característico del modo en que el budismo se ha introducido en Occidente, en ocasiones oculta la forma en que las técnicas meditativas se utilizaron en contextos budistas tradicionales como tecnologías opresivas del yo. Mientras que el énfasis en la naturaleza inherentemente revolucionaria de la práctica budista representa una desviación radical de la forma en que esas prácticas se han conceptualizado a lo largo de la historia budista, también conlleva el peligro de considerar la práctica budista como una condición sine qua non y ahistórica para la transformación social. Esto se debe al hecho de que la mayoría de los primeros escritores budistas anarquistas basaron sus ideas en una imaginación orientalista altamente idealizada de los budismos Zen. Sin embargo, contribuciones recientes basadas en otras tradiciones han ofrecido una imagen más matizada, aunque aún en desarrollo. Al evaluar una serie de casos de diferentes escritores anarquistas budistas estadounidenses, el artículo rastrea la breve historia de la idea de que la meditación es una praxis revolucionaria, mientras que deconstruye y complica dicha suposición a través del análisis histórico y textual.

Palabras clave: budismo; anarquismo; contracultura; orientalismo; Zen; meditación

I. INTRODUCTION

Although the first individuals who attempted to combine Buddhist and anarchist ideas lived in early twentieth-century China and Japan,¹ since the 1960s an increasing body of Buddhist anarchist literature has also been produced in the US. In the same way that their Asian predecessors used the then modern capitalist states emerging from the Meiji and Qinhai revolutions as a negative reference point, US Buddhist anarchists develop their political imagination against a backdrop of financial capitalism, the surveillance state and environmentally destructive practices. Since Gary Snyder first coined the term *Buddhist anarchism* in 1961 ([1961] 1969), many others have tried to formulate projects that aim to bring together Buddhism and radical politics. Many of these projects, Snyder's included, regard personal transformation as central to social transformation, often arguing that Buddhist practices of the self can have antiauthoritarian implications. Whereas early Buddhist anarchists such as Uchiyama Gudō emphasise the importance of consciousness for the achievement of a free society, their understanding of consciousness is closer to class consciousness and the revolutionary will of classic anarchism than to any Buddhist idea of enlightenment. For instance, Uchiyama discusses this revolutionary consciousness under headings such as *factory consciousness* and *agricultural consciousness*, and although he grounds his vision of freedom and equality in Buddhist ideas he never presents the Buddhist path or its goal as a prerequisite for social revolution.²

Uchiyama's approach contrasts sharply with Kerry Thornley's formulation of *Zenarchy*, which "as a doctrine [...] holds Universal Enlightenment a prerequisite to abolition of the State, after which the State will inevitably vanish. Or—that failing—nobody will give a damn" (1991, 13). Although Uchiyama was a Zen priest who practised meditation regularly and preached Buddhist values in his temple, he does not regard the practices or experiences of his tradition as a requisite for social goals. The only condition for revolution is common consciousness, for which he prescribes no esoteric method, as it is meant to arise "through cooperation" (Rambelli 2013, 53). This was exemplified throughout Uchiyama's short life, in which he struggled against the authorities of his time alongside atheists, Christians and Buddhists from other traditions. Whereas the early Buddhist anarchists highlight the antiauthoritarian potential of Buddhism, they do not consider Buddhist practices or experiences to be inherently progressive as they are painfully aware of the more established and conservative interpretations of those practices in their historical and institutional contexts. Taixu even considers that the realisation of a free society would bring

¹ The most significant figures are Uchiyama Gudō (1874-1911) and Takagi Kenmyō (1868-1914) in Japan and Taixu (1890-1947) in China. For more on Takagi, see Takagi (2004). For more on Uchiyama, see Brian Daizen Victoria (2006, 38-47) and Fabio Rambelli (2013).

² Uchiyama's discussion of *common consciousness* can be found in Rambelli (2013, 53-65).

about the fading away of Buddhism as we know it, a disappearance he regards as the ultimate fulfilment of Buddhism.³

The problematic construction of Buddhist practices as inherently antiauthoritarian is thus a feature of Western Buddhist anarchism and is largely connected to the way in which Buddhism has been presented and marketed in Europe and the US. The aim of this article is to analyse the different ways in which Buddhist practices and transformative experiences are presented in US Buddhist anarchist discourses by elucidating their discursive histories and routes, both before and after they came to the West. It is worth noting that most of the individuals who have written about Buddhist anarchism are white, male US citizens who are often, though not exclusively, associated with the Zen tradition(s). A dominant tendency in these Zen formulations of Buddhist anarchism is the significance of meditation as a revolutionary tool that has “nation-shaking implications” (Snyder [1961] 1969). This emphasis on the antiauthoritarian quality of Buddhist meditative practices, sometimes understood as essence and sometimes as potentiality, is doubly problematic. Firstly, it ignores the histories of the practices themselves, which contain many instances of them being used for authoritarian purposes—making more efficient and ruthless soldiers, instilling obedience and passivity, and so on. Secondly, it makes meditation indispensable for social revolution, which would mean that a free society can only be achieved if everybody takes up Buddhist meditation.

While there is a fair amount of scholarship about iconic, foundational figures of Asian Buddhist anarchisms like Uchiyama (Rambelli 2013; Victoria 2006) and Taixu (Ritzinger 2017), the more recent Buddhist anarchist literature from the West, largely from the US, has not received so much attention. This is largely due to the fact that Western Buddhist anarchism sits at the crossroads of many trends and subdisciplines, such as the study of Buddhist modernism (López 2002; McMahan 2008); the spread of Buddhism in the West, particularly Japanese Buddhism, given Western Buddhist anarchists’ fascination with Zen (Snodgrass 2003; Foulk 2008; Brown 2009); and the academic analysis of the intersection of Buddhism and radical politics (Tsang 2007; Park 2008; Rambelli 2013). Recent studies on the radical potential of meditative practices (Godrej 2016; Mathiowetz 2016; Rowe 2016) are also relevant to the writings of Western, particularly US, Buddhist anarchists, as meditation is often a crucial feature in their formulation. I now turn to a brief history of how meditation came to be perceived as a revolutionary tool.

³ For a thorough discussion of how Taixu imagines the role of Buddhism, and religion at large, in a free society, see Justin R. Ritzinger (2017, 125-43).

2. A RECENT HISTORY OF MEDITATION

Before engaging in an analytical reading of the various Buddhist anarchist texts produced in the US from the 1960s onwards, it is worth defining and explaining the history of some of the key terms employed in this discussion, such as *meditation*. Although there is no rough equivalent in Pali or Sanskrit for the word *meditation*—in fact, the various terms that have been collectively rendered as *meditation* (including *bhavana*, *samadhi*, *dhyana*, *smriti*) have divergent meanings depending on the context in which they are used—it has become a key feature in the presentation of Buddhism in the West. However, most Buddhists in the world do not practise “meditation” at all, but rather some form of chanting combined with physical ritual acts, such as offering incense and bowing. Moreover, in most Buddhist traditions throughout history, meditative exercises that involved silent contemplation were often exclusively practised by a monastic elite and not by the vast majority of lay or monastic followers. Words such as *bhavana*—literally *cultivation* of Buddhist values through various forms of training discussed below—or *smriti*—which could be rendered as mindfulness, but also remembrance—include silent forms of contemplation, but they also encompass practices such as sutra chanting, recitation of the Buddha’s name(s), physical acts of devotion such as bowing and prostrating, making donations or observing precepts. It is significant that Snyder, the first self-identified Western Buddhist anarchist, chose to translate the word *samadhi*, which comprises various contemplative practices and meditative/visionary states but also the faculty of awareness itself, as meditation.

The emphasis on meditation is not, however, an exclusive feature of Western Buddhist anarchist writings, but rather part of what David McMahan calls “a modern hybrid tradition with roots in the European Enlightenment no less than the Buddha’s enlightenment [...], and in the clash of Asian cultures and colonial powers as much as in mindfulness and meditation” (2008, 5). Most US Buddhist anarchists engage with different offshoots of Buddhist modernism, which have frequently focused on meditative practices by presenting them as scientific, universalistic and not inherently linked to tradition. This is a perception that enables the construction of meditation as a tool for social revolution, because “the idea that the goal of meditation is not specifically Buddhist, and that ‘Zen’ itself is common to all religions, has encouraged the understanding of *zazen* as detachable from the complex traditions of ritual, liturgy, priesthood, and hierarchy common in institutional Zen settings” (McMahan 2008, 187).⁴ Through this discursive turn, those traditions of Buddhism with more of a meditative outlook see an opportunity to present their practices as a modern, neutral method compatible with scientific thinking. In the context of Japanese Buddhism, these discursive dynamics are clearly instantiated in the debates between Japanese Buddhists and Japanese Christians at the Columbian Exposition (1893), which were studied in detail by Judith Snodgrass: “Each accused the other of being non-scientific, irrational,

⁴ *Zazen* refers to seated (*za*) meditation (*zen*).

and therefore incompatible with the modern world” (2003, 3); however, “Buddhist and Christian delegates, opponents in the local arena, were allied as patriots, challenging the West and extolling *yamato damashii*, the spirit of Japan” (4). US Buddhist anarchists are often unwitting inheritors of this construction, steeped in the modern imperialism of the Meiji era and articulated through a set of Orientalist and Occidentalist tropes.

It is interesting to notice how many of the early US Buddhist anarchists borrow from the sectarian discourses of Zen traditions and institutions, often adopting their rationalisations of authority and discipline and exceptionalist self-perceptions, albeit couched in the language of Buddhist modernism. Whereas every Buddhist institution perceives itself as the most orthodox and closely aligned with the original teachings of the Buddha, it is rare to find such arguments in the works of reformers, free-thinking clergy or outsiders who reformulate their traditions in a nonsoteriological direction. The fact that US Buddhist anarchists were enamoured with the Zen tradition(s) to the point of proclaiming that “Zen was more anarchic than anarchism” (Clark 2006, 4) requires us to explore how a certain imagination of Zen was first presented, and to a large degree created, in the US. A key figure in the introduction of Zen ideas to a non-Japanese audience was the Japanese scholar Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), known for positing a *pure Zen* that “was, in its essence, an ahistorical, formless, spiritual entity” (Foulk 2008, 36). Furthermore, in terms of the modernist construction of Zen, McMahan points out how the “Romantic-Transcendentalist strains of Suzuki’s articulation of Zen, offer[ed] a promiscuous array of ‘Zen’ quotations from Wordsworth, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Coleridge and Emerson” (2008, 135), which was naturally appealing to the US counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Following a common pattern within the Zen and other Japanese Buddhist traditions that looks back to the Tang dynasty (618-907) as a golden age of Buddhist practice, Suzuki also places silent sitting meditation—*zazen*—at the centre of his presentation, at the expense of other rituals and practices. While it is accurate to say that Zen does emphasise meditation more than other schools of Buddhism, it is also worth remembering that in the current Japanese daily practice of Zen meditation does not play such an important role.⁵ Not only does Suzuki, in line with other early Meiji Zen enthusiasts such as Soyen Shaku (1860-1919), enshrine *zazen* as the essence of pure Zen, but he also regards the experience of Buddhist awakening as transcultural and removed from history, as he explains in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934):

[Zen] is not a religion in the sense that the term is popularly understood; for Zen has no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined, and, last of all, Zen has no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else and whose immortality is a matter of intense concern with some people. Zen is free from all these dogmatic and “religious” encumbrances. (quoted in Foulk 2008, 34)

⁵ A detailed account of the relevance of various, not necessarily meditative, rituals in the history of Japanese Zen can be found in Griffith Foulk (2008).

In this way, Suzuki obscures the reality of institutional Japanese Zen practice at his time—and in our day—as a system primarily concerned with the dead and funerary rites and posits an idea of Zen that is detached from social and historical contexts. The history of this construction is not only problematic from a scholarly point of view; it also carries significant political implications.

Since the Meiji Ishin (1868), Zen exceptionalism has been strategically wedded to Japanese nationalistic ideology in support of the state and its war effort.⁶ By the end of the Edo period (1603-1868), Zen had already been linked to military discipline, as it was a popular form of Buddhism among the samurai class; its ample use of war imagery is a good example of this centuries-long connection.⁷ It must be noted that every form of institutionalised Japanese Buddhism had its own self-legitimising exceptionalist discourse and had endured a long period of cohabitation with the Tokugawa authorities (1600-1868). They also trod similar routes in the Meiji period, as they simultaneously tried to appease an initially hostile new political establishment and to present their message in a “modern” way that would allow Japan to compete with other modern, primarily Western, nations. However, among the Meiji formulations of Buddhism, the construction of Zen is arguably the one that lived longest and travelled furthest; it is also the first one to be engaged with by non-Japanese anarchist thinkers. The imagination of Zen first presented to the West regards itself as “an exceptional gift of the Japanese people to the world,” particularly to a West “overly determined by its rationalistic materialism” (Brown 2009, 214). At the core of this discourse is a Japanese claim to cultural superiority in a world of decaying nations. In a formidable turn in the history of Buddhism, this imperialistic and nationalistic formulation of Zen is appropriated in the US for an antiauthoritarian agenda. It is worth noting that when presenting Zen ideas in the US, Suzuki uses “Enlightenment individualistic language to propagate Zen as a missionary, universal religion whose spiritually revolutionary aim was to liberate the individual both from the cycle of birth and death and from his or her own cultural prejudices and allegiance to the state” (Brown 2009, 214-15). As with many other Japanese Buddhist intellectuals who supported the Japanese imperial state’s war effort, Suzuki leaves such views behind after the Second World War and instead espouses a form of Zen absolutist individualism that questions all external forms of authority, including the state.⁸ This formulation becomes appealing to those individuals who are critical of Western modernity and its authoritarian configurations and so look towards the East as a primitive haven that holds the cure for an ailing Western civilisation.

⁶ The Meiji Ishin—often rendered as *revolution* or *restoration* in English—marks the birth of the modern Japanese imperial state and the beginning of Japan’s imperial expansion.

⁷ A brief discussion of Zen’s violent rhetoric in relation to its alleged iconoclasm can be found in Victoria (2006, 203-206).

⁸ Although a younger Suzuki had written in 1938, in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, that Zen could be “wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatism” (quoted in Victoria 2003, 63), towards the end of his life he said, at a symposium held in 1952, that “anarchism is best” (quoted in Brown 2009, 214).

3. MEDITATING THE STATE AWAY? THE EARLY TRADITION

Orientalist tropes are common among the first US authors who appropriated Suzuki's message in an antiauthoritarian direction, as the works of Alan Watts (1915-1973), Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) and Snyder himself (b. 1930) demonstrate. Suzuki's message strategically engaged both Occidental and Orientalist reifications in his presentation of pure Zen, and they live on in the early US Buddhist anarchist tradition. Significantly, some of these Occidental and Orientalist themes appear in Snyder's "Buddhist Anarchism" ([1961] 1969), the first coining of the phrase in the English language. Snyder is very careful not to consider Buddhism or meditation as inherently antiauthoritarian and offers a critique of an "institutional Buddhism that has been conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under" ([1961] 1969). However, he characterises "the mercy of the West [as] social revolution" and "the mercy of the East [as] individual insight into the basic self/void" ([1961] 1969). This statement is not only problematic because of its essentialist portrayal of "the East" and "the West" as coherent, though incomplete, entities; it also echoes Suzuki's emphasis on the individual nature of the Zen experience of awakening. Further, it ignores the histories of social rebellion in "the East" and of meditative introspection in "the West." In rhetoric typical of his time, Snyder regards Buddhist anarchism as the historical product of a momentous intersection between the best of East and West.

Unlike other Buddhist anarchist thinkers, Snyder does not regard anarchism as implicit in Buddhism, instead conceiving of the two traditions as coming from different backgrounds and needing to be combined. This critical difference prevents Snyder from seeing meditation and Buddhism as inherently antiauthoritarian, although he acknowledges their potential and usefulness for social revolution. Consequently, Snyder highlights that the practice of meditation proves that "a culture [need not] be contradictory, repressive and productive of violent and frustrated personalities," but also that "once a person has this much faith and insight [developed through meditation], he must be led to a deep concern with the need for radical social change" ([1961] 1969). Although the phrasing is ambiguous, the fact that the individual enlightened by meditation "must be led" suggests that the "deep concern [...] for radical social change" does not arise naturally out of meditation. Though the phrase could also be read as implying that the will to effect social change is almost a matter of necessity for someone with "faith and insight," other statements in Snyder's essay, such as his criticism of "institutional Buddhism," within which the practice of meditation does not seem to have produced a "deep concern [...] for radical social change" ([1961] 1969), allows us to read his statement in a nonessentialist way. Whether the "leading" is meant as an additional effort outside meditation or as occurring as part of the workings of the meditative process itself, the ambiguity is, in any case, telling.

Such ambiguities are more difficult to find in the works of Robert Aitken (1917-2010), founder of the progressive Buddhist Peace Fellowship (1978), a group Snyder

joined in its early days. Direct references to anarchism or Buddhist anarchism are hard to find in Aitken's vast bulk of talks, articles and books. However, in one of his last addresses in 2006 he openly presents both systems in seamless communion: "Why 'anarchist'? Because we're Buddhist. Buddhism is anarchism, after all, for anarchism is love, trust, selflessness and all those good Buddhist virtues including a total lack of imposition on another" (2006, 9). Despite declaring the overlapping identity of Buddhism and anarchism, Aitken does not prescribe a meditative path for a free society and seeks to extend his solidarity beyond Buddhist milieus and methods. Thus he proclaims that "the fact that Iraqis are my sisters and brothers doesn't need to be swathed in saffron robes" and that "it's time to put ourselves in a position where we have nothing to protect. No group ego. No name, no slogan. Like King Christian X of Denmark we can all wear the yellow star. We can all wave the black flag, no color and no design. It is design that does us in" (2006, 6, 10). He therefore sees the way to dismantle systems of oppression as not being through the sectarian practices of given Buddhist traditions, but through a common notion of "decency" (2006, 10) that cuts across denominations. Aitken's antiauthoritarian formulation is largely ethical and free from soteriology. His ethic of decency, though rooted in "Mahayana responsibility," does not need not to be "nice" (2006, 10) and ought to be proactive and forceful in the face of tyranny. Aitken proposes an "essential agenda that is not necessarily legal" but that can "block the doorway" and "hold up an inexorable mirror to the fiends who are raising hell in our name" (2006, 10).

The relation of this social agenda to meditative or Buddhist practices is not discussed in this address; however, it is significant that the acts of resistance Aitken regards as fulfilling his "essential agenda" do not seem to be particularly connected with explicitly Buddhist practices: "smuggling medicine to Iraqi people [...] or setting up a half-way house for recently released prisoners [...] or feeding the poor, five days a week, week in and week out for years and years, like Catholic Worker houses across the country" (2006, 10-11). The reference to the Catholic Worker houses seems to confirm that although "Buddhism is anarchism," anarchism is not necessarily Buddhism. Furthermore, Aitken's view that Buddhist insights, such as the fact that "everything really is empty, personally interconnected, and precious in itself," are common sense and "we don't need some guy in saffron robes to tell us so" (2006, 10) makes his formulation even more antiauthoritarian. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the person making this statement is indeed a "guy in saffron robes," although as a Rinzai Zen priest Aitken himself wears black rather than saffron robes. Despite his position as Zen master and his preservation of Japanese procedures within his community in Hawai'i, Aitken refuses to live as a priest and instead advocates laicisation as a form of making the Sangha—the Buddhist community—more horizontal. In this respect, he departs from traditional Buddhist hierarchies through what he calls a "friendly divorce" (quoted in Tanabe 2008), with the head priest of the Japanese temple being assigned the task of overseeing his Hawaiian temple community.

Aitken's separation of the anarchist ethic and Buddhist life is absent in other formulations of Zen anarchism. Two good examples of a highly rhetorical and often essentialist entwining of Zen and anarchy are Thornley's "Zenarchy" (1991) and John Clark's (a.k.a. Max Cafard) "Zen Anarchy" (2006). Though published in the early 1990s, many of Thornley's writings date back to the late 1960s and early 1970s and ought to be seen as part of the zeitgeist of the counterculture. Thornley (1938-1998) formulates *discordianism* by originally combining disparate and decontextualised elements from the Zen tradition, Daoism—which he transforms into Chaoism— anarchist thought and even Hasidic Judaism. Although Zenarchy does not claim to be a thorough formulation of Buddhist anarchism, it is interesting to notice how an essentialist and monolithic view of Zen appears throughout the miscellaneous series of "Stoned Sermons" included in "Zenarchy." Thornley's approach to meditation and its role in Buddhist anarchist praxis is at best characterised as ambivalent. He describes how his erratic meditation practice was "symptomatic neither of a belief system nor a discipline" and how his "meditation table" contained not just "incense, flowers and Zen books" but also his "marijuana stash" (1991, 7), while going on to define Zen as meditation and Zenarchy as "the Social Order which springs from Meditation" (1991, 13). In this way, the discordian trickster resists the disciplinary regime of meditation through his undisciplined and disruptive lifestyle, yet when formulating his insight in a more theoretical manner, still resorts to sweeping generalisations and problematic abstractions. A good example is the central "doctrine" of Zenarchy that construes "Universal Enlightenment [as] a prerequisite to abolition of the State, after which the State will inevitably vanish" (1991, 13).

This formulation fails to address why a body of people who practised meditation regularly throughout the centuries did not themselves produce Zenarchy in the societies they lived in but, instead, often supported authoritarian and hierarchical forms of governance. Lack of historical awareness is often punctuated by many ironic and self-defeating remarks that warn the reader against taking the author's "sermons" too seriously. However, within Thornley's playful self-contradictions there are instances of an essential, almost absolutist view of Zen that sit awkwardly with an anarchist formulation of Buddhism and Thornley's own libertarian agenda. Thus, ahistorical, pure "Zen remained alive and vigorous for many generations than would otherwise have been possible. Neither was it easily co-opted nor did it degenerate into superstition" (Thornley 1991, 5). This tendency, Thornley claims, extends to Buddhism as a whole, which was founded on Siddhartha's personal rejection of social privilege, and so it is construed as "the art of steadfastly failing to provide political leadership and, by having as little to do with political power as possible, [...] transforming the empire" (1991, 48).⁹ Although this representation of Buddhism could more or less accurately describe

⁹ The historical Buddha, Sakyamuni or Siddhartha Gautama, gave up his kingdom to become a wandering ascetic. Siddhartha's leaving the royal palace and concomitant renunciation of privilege, a narrative present in all Buddhist traditions, has received attention from Buddhist anarchist thinkers.

some of its more radical strands throughout history, it fails to see Piotr Kropotkin's insight into the history of Europe, as formulated in *The State: Its Historic Role* (1896), in the histories of Buddhism: "Throughout the history of our civilization, two traditions, two opposed tendencies, have been in conflict: the Roman tradition and the popular tradition, the imperial tradition and the federalist tradition, the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition" (quoted in Thornley 1991, 49).¹⁰ Thus, when Thornley confesses that his "fascination with Zen outstripped [his] devotion to rigid anarchist ideology" (1991, 11), the reader is left to wonder whether the new fascination is not another rigid form of devotion.

In the end, "Zenarchy" is more an example of poetic ranting than political theology, yet it should be credited for an original and, for its time, innovative celebration of the antiauthoritarian themes latent in the construction of Zen that was popular in countercultural circles. Similar dynamics can be appreciated in a work of almost identical title, which, though far more articulate, also presents a view of Zen that is strongly based on decontextualised rhetoric and ahistorical abstractions: Clark's "Zen Anarchy." Clark's text is deeply steeped in the exceptionalist self-perception of Zen institutions, celebrating Zen as "the strictest and most super-orthodox form of Buddhism" (2006, 3), just, in fact, as any other school of Buddhism would. Though Clark (b. 1945) is much more lucid in his presentation of Zen Anarchy than Thornley, his enthusiastic celebration of the antiauthoritarian elements of Zen neglects important aspects of institutional authority, such as the lineage that connects every Zen master to the Buddha. Clark proclaims that Zen is not founded on "any succession of infallible authorities" but rather on "the anarchic mind" (2006, 3). Although he compellingly identifies constantly shifting, rhizomatic, anarchistic dynamics at the heart of many stories, proverbs and *koans*—riddles used in training—from the Zen traditions, he seems to ignore the institutional structures within which they operated.¹¹

Furthermore, in an ambiguously crafted wordplay, Clark offers a very insightful remark framed in a language imbued with Zen exceptionalism: "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 the authoritarian ideological garbage that automatically collects in our normal, well-adjusted mind" (2006, 3). After warning

¹⁰ Two good examples of Buddhist movements that challenged and even threatened the state's very existence were the millenarian White Lotus Society, which inspired the Red Turban Rebellion against the Yuan Dynasty (1351-1368), and the Ikko-Ikki uprisings in Japan, which span from 1488 to 1580 and were inspired by the Jodo Shinshu teachings. Whether these movements can be considered antiauthoritarian is a different and complex matter; be that as it may, they provide instances of rebellious Buddhist movements that did not submit to the state or the political authorities of their time. Interestingly, neither of these movements was connected to Zen Buddhism but to various forms of Pure Land Buddhism. For a detailed discussion of the White Lotus, see B. J. ter Haar (1992), and for the Ikko-Ikki, see Carol Richmond Tsang (2007).

¹¹ The concept of an unbroken lineage that can be traced back to the Buddha has been an essential element in the institutional legitimation of Zen traditions, like in many other Buddhisms, as Philip Yampolsky has shown (2003). The list of masters is still regularly chanted in Zen communities in the West, as Grace Schireson discusses while highlighting the absence of female masters (2014).

the reader against “a mind of state,” Clark constructs Zen as a way out of authoritarian ideological propaganda. In this regard, he is not alone among anarchist writers who take at face value the rationalisation of authority offered in many Zen narratives.¹² “Zen Anarchy” dismisses, for instance, the authoritarian role of the Zen teacher simply because it contradicts Zen’s anarchistic and absurdist rhetoric, thus turning a blind eye to the possibility of the Zen Roshi or ecclesiastical hierarch abusing their power.¹³ Although he acknowledges that “Zen can decline into a cult of personality,” Clark resorts again to an ideal, pure Zen to dispel such a possibility, since “to the extent that [Zen] follows its own path of the awakened mind, it is radically and uncompromisingly anti-authoritarian and anarchistic” (2006, 8). The self-referential nature of this discourse enshrines a problematic, ahistorical Zen that preserves an anarchist essence beyond specific authoritarian manifestations. In fact, the historically authoritarian incarnations of Zen are altogether dismissed as not worth addressing. “Zen Anarchy” is a celebration of the anarchistic principles at the heart of timeless, flawless Zen, which remains locked within its own world of closed references. Not unlike Thornley’s, Clark’s piece is closer to literary expression than to political theology; it celebrates the idea of Zen Anarchy but it does not really formulate a Zen Anarchism.

Significantly, the fraught connection between meditative practices and political action has been explored at length since Thornley’s and Clark’s writings were published. In a 2016 special section of *New Political Science* entitled “Symposium: Mindfulness and Politics,” scholars/practitioners assess the radical potential of mindfulness practices such as *zazen* or *vipassana*.¹⁴ The articles address a number of different practices, many of them not Buddhist, but grapple with the same problem that animates a lot of Buddhist anarchist writings. Authors like Anita Chari see a radical potential in “mindful embodiment” (2016, 226) when applied to a preexisting activist context. In the same vein, Farah Godrej (2016) and James Rowe (2016) emphasise the importance of context in defining the political orientation of any given meditative practice. Dean Mathiowetz, however, compellingly argues that meditation is a disruptive practice that goes against the neoliberal focus on productivity. This assertion is based on Zen rhetoric, in particular on a phrase “often shared in the American Zen tradition [which] insists that ‘Meditation is good for nothing’” (Mathiowetz 2016, 246). Although Mathiowetz’s

¹² The best example is Peter Marshall’s monumental *Demanding the Impossible*, which contains a very Zen-centric account of the libertarian potential of Buddhism that ignores other Buddhist traditions and does not question the rationalisations of authority and discipline crafted within Zen institutional contexts (2008, 60-65). Thus, the role of the Zen master and his, sometimes, violent behaviour towards the student is justified because “[the master’s] task is to help [the students] break out of their everyday perceptions and intellectual habits” (2008, 61-62).

¹³ Leaving aside historical examples of larger social authoritarianism, such as those discussed in Victoria’s *Zen at War* (2006), a more focused discussion about the logical mechanisms that enable authoritarian practices through Zen rhetoric can be found in Jin Y. Park (2008, 135-43). For a critique of Zen authoritarianism in a US Buddhist context, see Stuart Lachs (2002).

¹⁴ *Vipassana*—from Pali, literally “special seeing”—is a silent meditation practice from the Theravada tradition popularised in the West as *insight meditation*.

essay is nuanced and grounded in political theory, it fails to address how a practice that is “good for nothing” could be used, arguably successfully, in twentieth-century Japan to mobilise both soldiers to fight and employees to enhance their efficiency.

The use of Zen techniques both for training corporate workers and soldiers has been explored in Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* (2006) and “Japanese Corporate Zen” (1980) respectively. Victoria offers a sober reflection on the authoritarian past and present of Zen institutions while remaining a committed ordained monk in the Soto-shu tradition and a history scholar with an interest in anarchism. Though none of his written work has directly addressed Buddhist or Zen anarchism, other than through a discussion of Uchiyama Gudō, Victoria denaturalises the link between meditation and progressive social engagement by exploring many examples in which Zen meditation was used for oppressive enterprises. Victoria's thorough historical reflection and analysis become his method for reforming the tradition in a less authoritarian and more socially engaged fashion.

Victoria's work, along with more critical and nuanced formulations of Zen anarchism like Aitken's, demonstrates that it is possible to construct a Buddhist anarchism rooted in the Zen tradition(s) once the Orientalist/Occidentalists' imagination of Zen is shed and the histories of Zen lineages are carefully examined and questioned. To critically explore the trajectories of Zen institutions is to complicate the idea that Zen is the most anarchistic form of Buddhism, and it paves the way for a self-aware, self-reflective Zen anarchism as much as it makes it possible to turn to other Buddhist traditions for radical inspiration. In the next section, I explore more recent Buddhist anarchist formulations outside the Zen tradition(s), which are also more wary of the problematic ways in which other Buddhisms have been constructed and marketed in the modern West.

4. BEYOND ZEN? CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST ANARCHISM

More recent, self-critical and articulate formulations of Buddhist anarchism outside the Zen tradition include Ian Mayes's blog entries “Reflections on a Buddhist Anarchism” (2011a) and “Envisioning a Buddhist Anarchism” (2011b), as well as the anonymous “Dhammic Mutualism” (2011), all rooted in a Theravada understanding of Buddhism. Mayes's writings constitute a comprehensive attempt at constructing a Buddhist anarchism based on *vipassana* meditation and Kropotkin anarcho-communism (2011a). Mayes does not regard the two traditions as being naturally identical, but explores their potential to complement each other. His discourse resembles Snyder's in that he sees the Buddhist and anarchist approaches to responsibility as “two sides of the same coin,” but is also careful to regard Buddhism and anarchism as distinct “historical streams of thought and practice” that nonetheless “can be quite beneficial and mutually reinforcing” (2011b). Mayes also echoes Snyder when he imagines Buddhism as “essentially being about the individual's liberation [...] and anarchism

[...] as essentially being about freeing the world from unnecessary pain” (2011a). Thus, Buddhism offers individual liberation and anarchism, social liberation. However, Mayes does not consider Buddhism “Eastern” any more than he considers anarchism to be “Western.” In his attempt to make Buddhism and anarchism engage in dialogue and agree on issues such as “the delusion of ownership” or “the delusion of controlling others” (2011b), Mayes focuses more on what anarchists can learn from Buddhism to achieve their goal than on making Buddhism more anarchical.

Despite being self-critical and self-aware in its formulation, Mayes’s approach relies on a familiar division between “the core philosophical tenets of Buddhism,” which he views as anarchistic, and “the various outgrowths of Buddhism which are fundamentally at odds with the philosophy of anarchism” (2011a). These “various outgrowths” seem to constitute the historical and particular Buddhisms—“the various tyrannical governments, religious superstitions and patriarchal traditions around the world that are associated with Buddhism”—that are juxtaposed with the purity and originality of the ahistorical “core philosophical tenets” (Mayes 2011a). The abstraction of a pure, philosophical Buddhism is originally a European construction forged in the context of the British colonial project with a particular focus on Theravada Buddhism, the most widespread Buddhist tradition in the territories under British administration.¹⁵ However, this construction was later appropriated by Buddhists in Asia to challenge Eurocentrism in its own language, not unlike Suzuki’s formulation of pure Zen. Although Mayes relies on this essentialist abstraction, his rhetoric does not remain locked within the discursive realm where Buddhism and anarchism effortlessly complement each other. His approach is far more pragmatic when he asks, “what could a Buddhist anarchist sangha [community] look like?” (2011b). Although he offers no direct answers, he discusses self-organisation and prefigurative politics as embodied by the idealised, consensus-based character of early Buddhist communities.¹⁶ Despite being ahistorical, Mayes’s attempt at imagining what a Buddhist anarchist sangha would look like constitutes one of the first US endeavours to imaginatively articulate Buddhist anarchism in practice.

Regarding how such a community could be brought about, Mayes is also a pioneer in not emphasising the centrality of meditation, neither as the essence of Buddhism nor as revolutionary practice. Instead, the libertarian and pacifist implications of Buddhist ethics—or a certain Buddhist ethos—are seen as pervading the triple traditional division of Buddhism as *sila*—precepts, ethics—*samadhi*—awareness, meditation, cultivation—and *panna*—insight, wisdom, understanding. Though meditative

¹⁵ The particular construction of Theravada Buddhism reflects the complex dynamics of the British imperial production of knowledge about Buddhism and the appropriation of said knowledge by its colonial subjects to shape a “modern Buddhism.” For an in-depth discussion, see Charles Hallisey (1995), Elizabeth Harris (2006, 161-88) and McMahan (2008, 50-52).

¹⁶ Mayes draws this account from Pankaj Mishra (2004), who freely appropriates and reinterprets elements from early Buddhist sutras in his personal reading of the Buddha’s teaching.

practice is not deemphasised and is connected to the crucial attempt to “[master] one’s own mind,” which finds its social equivalent in “self-organization” (2011a), it is not regarded as a self-standing and magical tool for social change. A deliberate reorientation of Buddhist practice towards an antiauthoritarian goal is needed on the part of the Buddhist anarchist; simply meditating or blindly following a tradition will not necessarily effect social change. Furthermore, Mayes’s formulation does not stop at discursive similarities and actively looks for examples that already embody a Buddhist anarchist praxis. His “eight streams leading into one” offer a comprehensive account of potential Buddhist anarchist crossroads, but also show a willingness to bring Buddhism into larger non-Buddhist movements—and vice versa. The streams encompass groups and movements as seemingly disparate as “Buddhist Atheism and Critical Buddhism,” “Animal Liberation,” “The Gift Economy,” “Dharma Punx,” “Engaged Buddhism,” “Radical Political Straightedge” and “Nonviolent Communication” (2011a).

The fact that Buddhist anarchism is portrayed as emerging from these myriad streams makes Mayes’s approach inclusive, heterodox and dialogic. The implication seems to be that Buddhist traditions and groups need to learn from other social experiences in order to become more anarchistic and fulfil the antiauthoritarian potential of their philosophy. This marks a significant departure from approaches that regard anarchism as inherent in Buddhism and tend to be more essentialist and borrow from sectarian language. The relational quality of Mayes’s Buddhist anarchism goes as far as discovering its ideal praxis, partly prefigured in social experiences that are not Buddhist. In this respect, Mayes seems to deliver the promise implicit in Aitken’s address, which exhorted Buddhists to go beyond sectarian borders and be active across different sections of society. This porous, changing Buddhist anarchism is in line with Mayes’s self-critical concern about not “merely contributing another label, another -ism, another ideology to a world that is already saturated by these” (2011b). Though very heavily grounded in a Western lay Theravada interpretation of the Buddhist canon,¹⁷ Mayes’s Buddhist anarchism never ceases to question itself and is ever willing to learn from and be disproved by a variety of others.

Mayes’s open-ended, ahistorical, pragmatic Buddhist anarchism finds an interesting counterpoint in the anonymous essay “Dhammic Mutualism,” a term that would appear to be another name for Buddhist anarchism, rendered also as a Pali neologism, *dhammika parasparavada*. The author(s) of “Dhammic Mutualism” are distinctly aware of previous historical attempts to bring together Buddhism and radical politics, and the new formulation presents itself as “a synthesis of Ajarn Buddhadasa’s *Dhammika Sanghaniyama* (Dhammic Socialism) with anarchist mutualism” (“Dhammic Mutualism” 2011). “Dhammic Mutualism” claims a wide spectrum of inspirations, from “early Buddhist communities [that] embodied the principle of mutual aid” to Emma

¹⁷ For the history of this particular reading of the Theravada tradition, sometimes called “Protestant Buddhism” (Harris 2006, 161), see footnote 15.

Goldman, Kropotkin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, along with Buddhist radicals such as Aitken, Snyder, Taixu and Takagi (2011). Among the long list of influences provided are figures as disparate as Alexandra David-Néel, Lala Har Dayal and Jigme Singye Wangchuk, former King of Bhutan. Such a miscellaneous collection of inspirations contrasts with a very structured, univocal formulation of the anarchist implications of the Buddhist message. Giving Buddhadasa's *dhammic* socialism a libertarian spin, "Dhammic Mutualism" construes the "Three Seals of Dhammic Existence"—Pali *tilakkhana*, literally "three marks of existence"—as a critical tool for deconstructing political institutions and ideologies. Because all things are impermanent and in flux, they are ever imperfect and unsatisfactory and cannot be said to have inherent existence. According to such reasoning, "any man-made institution," including capitalism and the state, also becomes imperfect and disposable (2011).

Despite its faithful mimicry of Buddhist lists and structures of thought, "Dhammic Mutualism" does not present itself as an unquestioning, sectarian or reified orthodoxy. Not much is said about the role of meditation, as the emphasis seems to be on finding and expressing a certain Buddhist ethos that can be practised as anarchism. This ethos is based on apprehending or internalising certain core philosophical principles such as interdependence, relationality and impermanence. When Buddhism is seen in this light, mutualist anarchism seems to provide the best means for a Buddhist-inspired social praxis. However, "Dhammic Mutualism" is a manifesto-like entry that remains in the rhetorical realm and does not openly discuss how Buddhist anarchism could be practised. The many sources of inspiration and projects mentioned instantiate theoretical similarities yet offer no prefigurations or practical examples. However, a pathway is faintly hinted at when "selfless compassion for humanity as a whole" is presented as the driving force that "inspires the Buddhist towards activism and Dhammic Mutualism" (2011).

The crucial role played by this compassionate solidarity in effecting change echoes the way meditation was portrayed in earlier Buddhist anarchist formulations. However, this driving sentiment is not necessarily or exclusively linked to a Buddhist framework; rather, it seems to be a combination of the Buddhist idea of compassionate, selfless action and the anarchist notion of solidarity. "Dhammic Mutualism" presents this compassionate drive as emerging from understanding the concept of *anatta*—no-self—and not necessarily as the natural result of a Buddhist disciplinary model involving meditation or precepts. The centrality given to (individual) understanding makes "Dhammic Mutualism" more fluid and less locked into sectarian self-referentiality, though it also connects it to previous formulations that emphasise an individualised, internal, socially detached Buddhist experience. The entry closes with an invitation to be free of "rigid ideological structures and dogmas" and quotes Thich Nhat Hanh's injunction to "not be idolatrous about doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones [...] and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive other viewpoints" (2011). As this closing quote demonstrates, the emphasis placed on (non)

attachment makes “Dhammic Mutualism” very open at a theoretical level but also detached from practice and pathways of action. Since there is no reference to the history of Buddhism—except for a few individuals and communities that are mentioned but not discussed in any detail—there is no historical analysis of specific instances of Buddhist authoritarianism. However, “Dhammic Mutualism” presents a substantially nuanced, self-reflective, open construction of Buddhist anarchy, one that not circumscribed to a single Buddhist tradition or discourse.

5. CONCLUSION

The various instances of Buddhist anarchist discourses addressed in this discussion by no means constitute a closed or exhaustive list of US Buddhist anarchist voices; however, they are arguably some of the most vocal in openly claiming the term. Blog entries and short online essays about Buddhist anarchism seem to have significantly increased since the early 2010s. There are many Buddhists with anarchist sympathies who are prolific writers and who, despite not using the label, are in fact formulating their own Buddhist anarchisms. A good example is Jimmy Davis’s decidedly personal, antiauthoritarian reading of Shinran’s Jodo Shinshu Buddhism in *Western Pure Land Buddhism* (2009), which appropriates and adapts the Pure Land Buddhist narrative of social criticism.¹⁸ The online writings of Spanish Zen master Dokusho Villalba and Buddhist Peace Fellowship web editor Kenji Liu are also more or less explicit examples of Buddhist anarchisms in the making. Liu’s comment on “Dhamma and Decolonization” (2013) both hints at the possibility of using Buddhist practices for overtly antiauthoritarian purposes and urges Buddhists to take a self-critical look at their own relation to colonialism and modernity. The promise implicit in Liu’s words has not yet been fully developed in his writings, even if his shift of focus is already significant. The ongoing and dialogic interaction between Buddhism and anarchism finds itself slowly moving away from its early Orientalist, essentialist formulations towards a more self-critical, self-questioning character.

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¹⁸ Although socially critical elements have pervaded the Pure Land traditions at least since their formulation as institutionally independent strands of Buddhism after the death of Hōnen (1133-1212), the traditions have also undergone substantial co-optation. However, Rambelli discusses a resistant undercurrent of “Radical Amida Cults” largely from the thirteenth century (2003, 192). Seemingly unaware of Rambelli’s study, in *Western Pure Land Buddhism* Davis also discusses thirteenth-century “heresies,” which he links to “Radical Shin teacher Ken O’Neill of Austin, Texas” (2009, 9). A thorough discussion of how Davis discerns an antiauthoritarian ethos in Shinran’s Pure Land Buddhism is beyond the scope of this article (see Curley 2017, 161-63).

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