

Article

Navigating Extinction: Zen Buddhism and Eco-Anarchism

Kevin J. Holohan 

College of Education and Community Innovation, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI 49401, USA; holohank@gvsu.edu

Abstract: What can esoteric knowledge and spiritual practices from the East teach us about the deep psychological roots of domination and hierarchy? In what ways have ancient Buddhist sages acted as anarchist exemplars and deep ecologists long before these traditions began in the West? How might these anarchistic spiritual traditions inform our approaches to work in education, expand our notions of community, help us navigate ecological collapse, and contribute to our efforts to sustain living systems and rekindle our connection to the myriad sentient inhabitants of the places we live beyond the reaches of capital and the State? This paper will examine the anti-doctrine doctrine of Zen Buddhism as a concrete and embodied system of thought and practice for seeing through the delusions of the ego and the psychological and cultural conditioning these delusions engender. What will also be acknowledged is the general lack of attention this spiritual tradition has given to the capitalistic, authoritarian, and anti-ecological systems that tap into and flow from these delusions. It will be argued that these experiential approaches to overcoming the tyranny of the ego have significant implications for loosening the grip of hierarchical thinking, capitalist hyper-consumption, centralized systems of obedience and command, and human destruction of the biosphere.

Keywords: Buddhism; Zen; Anarchism; ecological crisis



Citation: Holohan, Kevin J. 2022. Navigating Extinction: Zen Buddhism and Eco-Anarchism. *Religions* 13: 60. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010060>

Academic Editor: Deborah Orr

Received: 12 November 2021

Accepted: 7 January 2022

Published: 10 January 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

“The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both.”—Gary Snyder, *Buddhist and the coming revolution*, 1969.

What can esoteric knowledge and practices from the East teach us about the deep psychological roots of domination and hierarchy? In what ways have ancient Buddhist sages acted as anarchist exemplars and deep ecologists long before these traditions began in the West? How might these anarchistic spiritual traditions inform our approaches to work in the social foundations, expand our notions of community, help us navigate ecological collapse, and contribute to our efforts to sustain living systems and rekindle our connection to the myriad sentient inhabitants of the places we live beyond the reaches of capital and the State? This paper will examine the underlying premises of Zen Buddhism as a concrete and embodied system of thought and practice for seeing through the delusions of the ego and the psychological and cultural conditioning these delusions engender. What will also be acknowledged is the general lack of attention this spiritual tradition has given to the capitalistic, authoritarian, and anti-ecological systems that tap into and flow from these delusions. It will be argued that a refined set of principles and practices for overcoming the tyranny of the ego have significant implications for loosening the grip of hierarchical thinking, capitalist hyper-consumption, centralized systems of obedience and command, and human destruction of the biosphere. Transcending the ego and the direct recognition of a “community of all beings” has foundations-shaking repercussions and can be realized through the pursuit of a Buddhist Anarchism.

Many scholars, social critics, philosophers, and religious leaders have pointed out that the social and ecological crisis of which we are in the midst is, at root, a cultural and

spiritual crisis (Berry 1988; Bowers 2001; Martusewicz et al. 2015). Taking this idea seriously, humanity is at a crossroads. One possible path represents the continuation of philosophical and cultural frameworks that posit humans as standing above and independent from natural living systems and the earth itself, a path of control and domination, of conquest and colonization of communities human and more-than-human, where the only possible solutions to the mess we are in lie in technological manipulation of the biosphere or escape to far-off worlds for those who can afford it. However, other possibilities exist and have been operating alongside the techno-industrial social order since its inception. One of these possibilities, an alternative that has been well-traveled by our paleolithic ancestors, past and present land-based cultures and communities, contemporary indigenous peoples, and eco-centric conscientious objectors who refuse to participate in the systems and institutions responsible for murdering the planet, points in the direction of scaling down and dismantling industrial civilization and creating communities the every action and decision of which is rooted in the recognition of interdependence, compassionate concern for all sentient beings, and a desire to end suffering. It would be naïve, and perhaps misguided, to think we could simply abandon the complex system of nation-states and economies and the deeply held cultural beliefs the undergird and perpetuate this system. However, we have living examples of those who have chosen to take an alternative path, and in the spirit of the old saying, to build a new world in the shell of the old. As will be argued, Zen Buddhism provides a map and compass for this path but leaves the walking to each of us.

2. Anarchism and Buddhism

2.1. The Anarchistic Nature of Buddhism

While a thoroughgoing exploration of anarchist principles is beyond the scope of this paper, as a political philosophy it aims for the elimination of unjustified hierarchy and domination, equality in social, political, and economic relations, decentralized decision-making, direct democracy, individual autonomy, voluntary association, and mutual aid. Perhaps it is odd to speak of one of the world's major religions, Buddhism, in the same breath as one of the world's most vociferously anti-religious political philosophies, anarchism. As John P. Clark (2005) explains, "Almost all the major European classical anarchist theorists opposed religion and defended a secularist, scientific and sometimes positivistic view of nature against what they saw as religious obscurantism and other-worldliness" (p. 49). However, I am certainly not the first to call attention to the overlap and intersections between eastern forms of spirituality and the relatively recent Western tradition of social anarchism whereby individual freedom is viewed as intimately intertwined with ideals of community interdependence and social equality.

As Peter Marshall ([1992] 2010) points out, "The first clear expression of an anarchist sensibility may be traced back to the Taoists in ancient China from about the sixth century B.C. Indeed, the principal Taoist work, the *Tao te Ching*, may be considered one of the greatest anarchist classics" (p. 54). Early forms of Taoism, such as those offered by Chuang Tzu, articulate a conception of humanity as deeply embedded in and interdependent with a living, natural world. While this sensibility does not apply to all forms of social anarchism, it has certainly been central in the development and articulation of green or eco-anarchism (Curran 2007; Hall 2011). According to Clark (2005), "Though the specifically political implications of Chuang Tzu's thought are far from clear, his Daoism has been interpreted as one of the most consistently anarchistic critiques of the domination of humanity and nature and of the egocentric and anthropocentric mentality that underlies domination" (p. 50). Chuang Tzu's Taoism rails against the human impulse to impose order on a naturally chaotic universe, claiming this imposition of order (read rationalistic, quantitative, mechanistic) is ultimately constraining and sometimes at odds with the workings of natural processes. The Taoism of the *Tao te Ching* further foreshadows contemporary anarchism in its disdain for coercion and its inherent trust in the capacity of individuals to manage their own lives without the need for centralized authority and institutions. As the *Tao te Ching* states, "I take unattached action, and the people transform themselves. I prefer quiet,

and the people right themselves. I do not interfere, and the people enrich themselves” (Lin 2006). It is well-documented that these sentiments had a strong and lasting impact on the development of a uniquely Chinese take on Indian Buddhism that later came to be known as Chan or Zen (Hershock 2005).

Since its founding by Siddhartha Guatama 2500 years ago, the core of the Buddhist teaching has been rooted in a deep questioning of the various socio-political orders, ideologies, and forms of human conditioning in which it has found a home. Though the core Buddhist teachings foster this deep questioning, it is important to acknowledge that “Buddhist religious structures in Asia have usually been, and for the most part remain, hierarchical, patriarchal, and complicit with state power. Although Buddhist teachings have sometimes been used to challenge state power, more often than not Buddhist institutions have been implicated in justifying and therefore helping to preserve oppressive social relationships” (Loy 2003, p. 8). While it is important to acknowledge and grapple with the contradictions between the foundational tenets and lived realities of Buddhist teaching and practice, this paper will focus on the potential ways in which Zen can assist us in thinking anew about and reversing ecological degradation.

In examining the connections between Buddhism and anarchism, John Clark (2005) explains that Buddhism “rejected the idea that any authority, whether person or written document, could lead one to truth, and that it must instead be reached by direct personal experience” (p. 51). He goes on to say that “its goal of non-attachment can be seen as an attack on the foundation of political, economic, and patriarchal domination in the desire to aggrandize an illusory ego-self” (p. 52). In some respects, the goal of Buddhist practice is recognizing the illusory nature of the ego and thereby loosening the grip of desire and unhealthy attachment to emotional states, relationships, and material objects, amongst other things. This has significant implications for a philosophy (anarchism) aimed at undermining unequal power relations, enhancing individual autonomy, and promoting mutual aid. Similarly, the Buddhist teaching of *no-self* (or *anatman*) advances awakening to the reality that a solid, unchanging, and permanent self is an illusion. As such, awakening makes untenable feelings of separation and hierarchical thinking and promotes a deep sense of interdependence, mutual connection, and compassion. The Buddha’s teachings around questioning authority, the centrality of direct personal experience of truth (alongside affirmation by an experienced and qualified teacher), overcoming of deeply conditioned habit and desire, and thoroughgoing psychological and ideological freedom/liberation have found their clearest expression in the school that has come to be known as Zen.

2.2. Socio-Cultural Critique Emerging from Zen and Anarchism

Holohan has written elsewhere (Holohan 2019) about the commonalities and intersections between Zen Buddhism and the Western traditions of critical theory and critical pedagogy that have taken shape over the past 150 years. In that paper, the central concept used to compare the different traditions is suffering; more specifically, what is examined are the ways in which each philosophical system conceives of human suffering, the roots of human suffering, and the approaches by which suffering can be diminished or eliminated. In this paper, a similar approach will be used but focus instead on ‘community’, the basis upon which this idea is defined within Zen Buddhism and social anarchism respectively, how it is undermined in contemporary society, and what is necessary for expanding our notions of relationality and strengthening community. Because we are likely more familiar with anarchist conceptions of relationality and community, these will only briefly be explored before moving into a closer analysis of the terms from a Zen Buddhist perspective. Ultimately, the hope is to highlight the ways in which the Zen tradition might broaden our notions of relationality, strengthen the communities we build, and assist us in navigating the feelings of anger, grief, and despair emerging from our recognition that the fabric of our relations and the communities of life upon which we depend are being driven to extinction by human-induced ecological degradation.

Pulitzer-prize winning poet Gary Snyder and other figures from the American literary movement known as the Beat Generation saw strong parallels between their socio-cultural critique of American post-war society, their anarchist leanings, and their engagement with Buddhism and Zen practice more specifically. Gary Snyder's 1969 essay "Buddhist Anarchism" or "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution" makes the argument that historically Buddhism has ignored the injustices, oppression, and domination existing in the societies where it has taken root, whereas the social revolutionary movements of the west have largely ignored individual psychology, neuroses, and delusion. Bringing core elements of Buddhist ethics into conversation with the anarchist social imaginary, Snyder (1969) claims, would have profound effects. As he explains:

The joyous and voluntary poverty of Buddhism becomes a positive force. The traditional harmlessness and refusal to take life in any form has nation-shaking implications. The practice of meditation, for which one needs only "the ground beneath one's feet," wipes out mountains of junk being pumped into the mind by the mass media and supermarket universities. The belief in a serene and generous fulfillment of natural loving desires destroys ideologies which blind, maim and repress—and points the way to a kind of community which would amaze "moralists" and transform armies of men who are fighters because they cannot be lovers (p. 91).

Snyder (1969) goes on to explain that the three fundamental aspects of the "Dharma Path"—wisdom (prajna), meditation (Dhyana), and morality (sila)—could act as a foundation and framework for a free, voluntary, and self-organized collective of individuals liberated from suffering and craving arising from the culturally conditioned ego. Simply put:

Wisdom is the intuitive knowledge of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one's ego-driven anxieties and aggressions. Meditation is going into the mind to see this for yourself—over and over again, until it becomes the mind you live in. Morality is bringing it back out in the way you live, through personal example and responsible action, ultimately toward the true community (sangha) of 'all beings' (p. 92).

In the following, I will expand upon each of these aspects of the Buddhist path and explain how they and other foundational Buddhist teachings can help sustain and advance the development of anarchist communities in an age of social and ecological crisis.

2.2.1. Wisdom (Prajna)

"[Alan] Watts emphasized the need for destruction not of society itself but of the authoritarian mechanism of the ego at the center of the West's psychic life. The proposal that the ego required decentering, as Watts's critique of rationalism suggests, struck the very root of Western civic life" (Brown 2009, p. 222).

From the Zen Buddhist perspective, the ego acts as the nexus for hierarchical systems within the individual psyche and human communities, capitalistic hyper-consumption, the domination of nature, nationalistic ideologies, hyper-individualism, and alienation. Whereas Buddhism has been slower to recognize the ways in which the inherent fragility of the ego has been exploited by contemporary social institutions and formations such as media, marketing, and social group hierarchies, most iterations of Western Anarchism emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have largely ignored the deep-rooted insecurities, fear, and isolation produced by the ego regardless of the social, cultural, or historical context in which it finds itself. The ego is obstructionist and enabler, police presence, judge, and deviant, fearful child and terror-inducing tyrant. Interpersonally, the ego drives us to assess, categorize and analyze, and, ultimately, separates and divides us from anything perceived as separate from us. However, according to Zen, all of this is an unnecessary misapprehension of our original nature.

Simply put, wisdom or *prajna* in the Zen Buddhist context is insight into the true nature of reality. This consists of the extra-intellectual and experiential understanding of the universal laws of impermanence, suffering, and no-self or non-duality (Suzuki [1956] 1996; Suzuki 1960; Loy 2019b). However, it would be a mistake to imagine this as a conceptual grasp of these inescapable realities. Rather, Zen aims at a complete integration of this reality into our day-to-day lives and relationships. A thoroughgoing apprehension of impermanence, suffering, and no-self leads not to disconnection much less apathy but rather engenders what Peter D. Hershock (2005) describes as “the personal demonstration of responsive virtuosity and the relational expression of truly liberating intimacy among all things” (p. 79). In other words, wisdom is not a static knowledge, however sublime, but a particular way of functioning in and with the world.

In relation to anarchist communities and community-building, recognition and cultivation of *prajna* helps one see through the illusion of the ego and radical separation one feels from the rest of being. Zen teaches this separation and the fear and anxiety it engenders is a way of viewing our relationships rooted in ignorance of the fundamental truth of non-duality and interdependence. Even in communities striving to engender mutual aid, eliminate domination, and foster non-hierarchical relationships, the conceit that ‘I am’ often interferes. Deep *prajna*, on the other hand, naturally gives rise to a “liberating intimacy” and limitless compassion for all beings. In short, it becomes impossible to put oneself in a position of authority or dominance over an ‘other’ for the other and I are not two. As Kazuaki Tanahashi (1999) explains,

The experience of nonduality is the basis for the Buddhist teaching of compassion. When one does not abide in the distinction between self and other, between humans and nonhumans, and between sentient beings and insentient beings, there is identification with and love for all beings. Thus, the wisdom of nonduality, *prajna*, is inseparable from compassion (p. xxxiii).

2.2.2. Meditation (Dhyana)

“In his attempts overcome the illusory Cartesian ego, with its associated post-Cartesian disciplines—lobotomous psychotherapy and mass education—the poet takes refuge in Zen meditation” (Zen of Anarchy, Brown 2009, p. 229).

Zen is the transliteration of the Chinese word *Chan* which is the transliteration of the Sanskrit word *Dhyana* meaning meditation. Thus, Zen is considered the meditation school of Buddhism. In alignment with its name, Zen places central importance upon the practice of meditation in recognizing one’s true nature and cultivating one’s inherent wisdom. Seated meditation, or *zazen*, is a psycho-physical practice by which one can relax the body and quiet discursive thought, see through the illusion of a separate, independent self, and recognize one’s “original face”. From the Zen perspective, meditation is viewed as indispensable to awakening and this perspective is unique among schools of Buddhism. In fact, these three—meditation, Buddha-nature, and wisdom—are inseparable and mutually support one another. Meditation is a practice which cultivates the Middle Way taught by the historical Buddha; that is, the middle ground between “is” and “is-not”, between cause and effect, mind and matter, self and other, and independence and dependence. Rather than an escape from the world and its ills, Zen meditation has the potential to foster an unfiltered and unmediated presence in the here-and-now.

The noise and clutter are practically incessant—streams, tweets, memes, likes, posts, pics, products, faces, filters, fake news. The act of turning off the devices and tuning out the noise, sitting on the floor and holding oneself up in a state of relaxed awareness, lowering the gaze but not shutting the eyes, and focusing on the ever-present taking in and letting out of air—the practice of *zazen* is a significant act of resistance in our age of acceleration, distraction, and information saturation. Following the breath or working on a koan help cultivate concentration, awareness, and a lowering of the volume of internal chatter. However, these are merely by-products of the practice. Ultimately, *zazen* is the functioning of wisdom, the Mind of non-duality. As Robert Aitken (1982) explains, those

practicing Zen “are concerned with realizing the nature of being, and zazen has proved empirically to be the practical way to settle down to the place where such realization is possible. Zazen is not merely a means Dogen Kigen Zenji said, ‘Zazen is itself enlightenment.’ This unity of ends and means, effect and cause, is the tao of the Buddha, the practice of realization” (p. 14).

Tuning into the unity of body and mind and consolidating and focusing one’s energy, the practice of zazen cultivates emotional clarity and deep recognition of the interdependent nature of all phenomena, including the socio-political. The mindful awareness of our inner lives and their relationship to the turmoil that exists in the external world equip us to respond to both with deepened wisdom and compassion. Philip Kapleau [1989] (Kapleau [1989] 2000) describes the fruits of diligent zazen this way:

“ . . . the emotions respond with increased sensitivity and purity, and volition exerts itself with greater strength of purpose. No longer are we dominated by intellect at the expense of feeling, nor driven by the emotions unchecked by reason or will. Eventually zazen leads to a transformation of personality and character. Dryness, rigidity, and self-centeredness give way to flowing warmth, resiliency, and compassion, while self-indulgence and fear are transmuted into self-mastery and courage” (p. 18).

The qualities cultivated in zazen enable one to quell the flames of material desire fanned by the culture industries, recognize more clearly the roots of social and ecological crises, and discern and engage ethical responses suitable to the challenges confronting humanity. Far be it simply a method for reducing stress and quieting the mind, zazen stands on the front lines of the battle for our inner lives. As described in Peter Doran’s (2017) book, *A Political Economy of Attention, Mindfulness, and, Consumerism*:

The ‘attention economy’ can be understood as a new arena of struggle in our age of neoliberal governmentality; as the forces of enclosure—having colonized forests, land and the bodies of workers—are now extended to the realm of our minds and subjectivity. This poses questions about the recovery of the ‘mindful commons’: the practices we must cultivate to reclaim our attention, time and lives from the forces of capitalization (cover copy).

Ultimately, the wisdom, equanimity and spaciousness cultivated in meditation must be embodied and enacted in the conduct of our day-to-day lives and relationships, and we are not left without guidance in this undertaking.

2.2.3. Morality (Sila)

“The bettering of a general ill begins with the individual, and then only when he makes himself and not others responsible. This is naturally only possible in freedom, but not under a rule of force, whether this be exercised by a self-elected tyrant or by one thrown up by the mob” (Jung 1968, p. 49; emphasis mine).

Zen has a reputation for exhibiting a certain moral iconoclasm and even of attacking some of the fundamental tenets of the broader stream of Buddhism out of which it flows. There is a long and well-documented history of Ch’an and Zen masters urging their students to abandon all conceptions and inherited understandings of truth, reality, and the nature of good and evil and “to take a step from the top of a one-hundred foot pole” or “to kill the Buddha if you meet him on the road.” These are not necessarily suggestions to abandon morality per se, but rather a challenge to “self-enslaving habits of mind, moral discrimination, [and] ‘picking and choosing’” as impediments to spiritual liberation (Whitehill 1987, p. 9). These challenges to externally imposed systems of authority, command, and obedience do not carry with them the implication that Zen lacks a moral center. Just the opposite is true. Truly moral behavior is at the center of the Zen teachings and is impossible without diligent practice and the innate wisdom and insight into reality that it uncovers. In fact, the Buddhist precepts, according John Daido Looi (1996), “are the definition of the life of a Buddha” (p. 2). While some have interpreted Zen’s iconoclasm,

disdain for doctrine, and emphasis on insight into the co-dependent origination of all phenomena (emptiness/shunyata) as evidence of its amoral character (Hamacher 2012), this could not be further from the truth.

In receiving the precepts (The Three Treasures, The Three Pure Precepts, and the Ten Grave Precepts), one is not only making a commitment to live the life of a Buddha, but also, in the words of John Daido Looi, taking “responsibility for the whole catastrophe”. The moral and ethical teachings of Zen Buddhism are not a system of command and obedience to be rigidly followed or adhered to divorced from the context in which they manifest themselves. The precepts emerge out of *prajna* wisdom, the interpenetration of all things, the codependency and mutual causality that permeates all phenomenal reality. As such, and from the Absolute perspective, there are no precepts to uphold and no one to uphold them. However, this does not mean ignoring the very real suffering and myriad beings of the world around us; as suffering, the one who suffers, and “I” am not separate, I take responsibility for all of it.

Ultimately, the Zen teachings on morality are an expression of the innate harmony of the world, a harmony that exists in the nature of plants, animals, mountains, and rivers as well as in the nature and life of humans and their communities when not obscured by greed, anger, and ignorance. This harmony is not something we create out of a primordial chaos or corrupted nature, rather through practice (meditation), realization (*prajna*), and the functioning of that realization (*sila* or morality) we become one with it and allow it to freely function in and through our lives.

3. Discussion

Implications of a Buddhist Anarchism

Unlike some of the world’s religions (or the ways in which certain religious beliefs have been interpreted) that exalt “a supernatural and transcendent reality and devalue the material and natural”, Zen Buddhism does precisely the opposite (Clark 2005, p. 49). It draws an unwavering focus on the reality of cause and effect, the interdependent nature of all phenomena, and the incomparable immediacy of the present moment. In fully confronting impermanence, the inherent emptiness/shunyata of the subject, and the resulting dissolution of ego-boundaries, Zen has the potential to free the individual from subjugation and submissiveness to the psychological apparatus as conceived in Western philosophical and medical discourse as well as from the coercive power of the state and the ideological power of hierarchical, theistic organized religion. Not unlike the desires, fears, habits, and anxiety bound up in the individual, authoritarian political regimes and cultures of hyper-consumption would be viewed by Zen as arising out of deep-seated delusion and a pervasive anxiety surrounding (self) extinction. In other words, from the Buddhist perspective, much of our individual and collective behavior is driven by the fact that, “the ego is not a self-existing consciousness but a fragile sense of self that suspects and dreads its own no-thing-ness” (Loy 2003, p. 22). In freeing ourselves from this existential dread, we might escape the trappings of hyper-individualism, hyper-consumption, and ecophobia engendered by late capitalism. It follows that Zen might strongly complement efforts toward creating anarchist communities by advancing deconstruction of internal as well as external barriers to freedom. It binds the liberation of the individual to the liberation of all sentient beings and allows for the radical acceptance of the middle way between *is* (the Cartesian subject) and *is-not* (extinction, impermanence, etc.).

In attacking and undermining the illusory ego-self by way of wisdom, meditation, and morality, Buddhism’s “ideal of the sangha or spiritual community is seen as an anarchistic concept of association based on compassion and recognition of true need, rather than on economic and political power and coercive force” (Clark 2005, p. 51). The sangha embraces simplicity, self-sufficiency, and cooperation, foregrounds mindfulness of and gratitude for the innumerable causes and conditions of human and non-human life that make the community possible, engages in diligent and disciplined practice in the pursuit of liberation for all sentient beings, and recognizes the infinite possibilities for awakening

in the most mundane aspects of daily life. It is not difficult to see how this particular conception and practice of community fundamentally challenges the very foundations of capitalism, hierarchies and domination based on sex, race, and class, and the deep-seated anthropocentrism driving humanity's destruction of the biosphere.

Zen espouses what John Clark (2005) describes as a:

radically anarchistic view that none of our concepts of substantial realities (including even our most exalted concepts) can capture the nature of an ever-changing reality that constantly surpasses all categories and preconceptions. Inherent in this outlook is a deep respect for the integrity of nature and a desire to allow nature to express itself without human domination (p. 51).

In addition to non-interference, this proto-anarchistic view lends itself to an individual first-hand experience of reconnection and reidentification with the larger, living world and an expanded definition of community which includes the more-than-human as kin and, ultimately, as one's own body. This reidentification may in turn engender a more intense sense of loss and profound grief around human-induced ecocide and the prospect of human extinction. As a sickness to heal the medicine of techno-salvation and extraterrestrial escapism, Zen may also precipitate our confrontation with and working through the profound denial, inconceivable uncertainty, and personal paralysis induced by the specter of near-term social and ecological collapse.

4. Conclusions

The ecological and social crises we currently face are at root spiritual crises (Berry 1988; Larchet 2018). They are the culmination of a humanity which no longer views nature as sacred, perceives the fecundity of nature as but resources for unconstrained consumption, and observes around itself and within itself the workings of a highly complex machine to be dissected, tinkered with, or reengineered to satisfy its voracious appetite. While establishing a clear path for individual liberation from suffering, it is important to acknowledge that Buddhism has never been particularly effective at analyzing institutions, addressing structural problems within society, and working for systemic change. When primarily concerned with individual liberation or well-adjusted mindfulness, Buddhism and Zen are more a part of the crisis than a sublime way of responding to it (Forbes 2019; Purser 2019). If, on the other hand, the practice of meditation, the cultivation of wisdom, and the functioning of the related moral precepts in life expand our definitions of community to include the great earth itself and foster the necessary insight and equanimity to act without expectations or attachments to the results, these three teachings may be precisely what we need. Speaking to the intersections between Buddhism and the ecological crisis, I will end with the thoughts of David Loy (2019a):

our task is to do the very best we can, not knowing what the consequences will be—in fact, not knowing if our efforts will make any difference whatsoever. We don't know if what we do is important, but we do know that it's important for us to do it. Have we already passed ecological tipping points and civilization as we know it is doomed? We don't know, and that's okay. Of course, we hope our efforts will bear fruit, but ultimately, they are [only] our openhearted gift to the earth (n.p.).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Aitken, Robert. 1982. *Taking the Path of Zen*. New York: North Point Press.
- Berry, Thomas. 1988. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Bowers, Chet A. 2001. *Educating for Eco-Justice and Community*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Brown, James. 2009. The Zen of anarchy: Japanese exceptionalism and the anarchist roots of the San Francisco poetry renaissance. *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 19: 207–42. [CrossRef]
- Clark, John P. 2005. Anarchism. In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. New York: Continuum.
- Curran, Giorel. 2007. Ecology and anarchy. In *21st Century Dissent. International Political Economy Series*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. [CrossRef]
- Doran, Peter. 2017. *A Political Economy of Attention, Mindfulness, and, Consumerism*. New York: Routledge.
- Forbes, David. 2019. *Mindfulness and Its Discontents: Education, Self, and Social Transformation*. Black Point: Fernwood Publishing.
- Hall, Matthew. 2011. Beyond the human: Extending ecological anarchism. *Environmental Politics* 20: 374–90. [CrossRef]
- Hamacher, Christopher. 2012. “Zen has no morals!”—The latent potential for corruption and abuse in Zen Buddhism, as exemplified by two recent cases. Paper presented at the International Cultic Studies Association’s Annual Conference, Montreal, QC, Canada, July 7.
- Hershock, Peter. 2005. *Chan Buddhism*. Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Holohan, Kevin J. 2019. Breath by breath: Reconsidering the project of critical pedagogy through the lens of Zen Buddhist thought and practice. *The Journal of Transformative Education* 17: 353–70. [CrossRef]
- Jung, Carl G. 1968. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kapleau, Philip. 2000. *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*. New York: Anchor Books. First published 1989.
- Larchet, Jean-Claude. 2018. *The Spiritual Foundations of the Ecological Crisis*. Geneva: Syrtes.
- Lin, Derek. 2006. *Tao te Ching: Annotated and Explained*. Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing.
- Loori, John Daido. 1996. *The Heart of Being: Moral and Ethical Teachings of Zen Buddhism*. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co.
- Loy, David. 2003. *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Loy, David. 2019a. Can Buddhism Meet the Climate Crisis? *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner’s Quarterly*, Spring. Available online: <https://www.lionsroar.com/can-buddhism-meet-the-climate-crisis/> (accessed on 6 January 2022).
- Loy, David. 2019b. *Nonduality: In Buddhism and Beyond*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Marshall, Peter. 2010. *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. Oakland: PM Press. First published 1992.
- Martusewicz, Rebecca, Jeff Edmundson, and John Lupinacci. 2015. *Ecojustice Education: Toward Diverse, Democratic, and Sustainable Communities*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Purser, Ronald. 2019. *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Snyder, Gary. 1969. Buddhism and the coming revolution. In *Earth Household*. New York: New Directions Books.
- Suzuki, Daisetz T. 1996. *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*. Edited by William Barrett. New York: Doubleday. First published 1956.
- Suzuki, Daisetz T. 1960. *Manual of Zen Buddhism*. New York: Grove Press.
- Tanahashi, Kazuaki, ed. 1999. *Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dogen*. Boston: Shambala.
- Whitehill, James. 1987. Is there a Zen ethic? *The Eastern Buddhist* 20: 9–33.