

Anarchy in the Sangha

AGAINST THE STREAM

A Buddhist Manual for Spiritual Revolutionaries

by Noah Levine

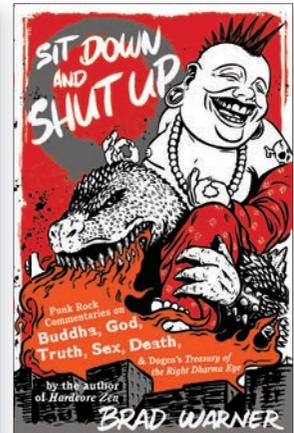
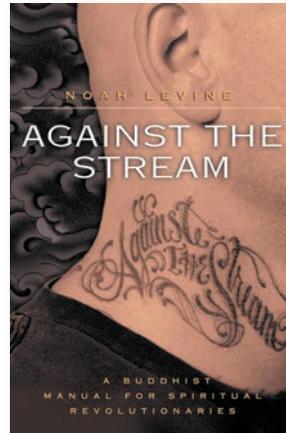
[HarperOne, 2007, paperback \$13.95]

SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP

Punk Rock Commentaries on Buddha, God, Truth, Sex, Death, & Dogen's Treasury of the Right Dharma Eye

by Brad Warner

[New World Library, 2007, paperback \$14.95]



Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha subverted the status quo of human ignorance by rebelling against all external sources of authority and boldly discovering for himself what is ultimately true. If all he needed to succeed was a little antiauthoritarian angst, who's to say that the punk rockers and juvenile delinquents of today aren't already halfway up the mountain to perfect Buddhahood?

At least that's the basic idea behind two recent books by a couple of young American Buddhists with more than a little punk-rebel rage running through their veins. Could they be on to something? Demolishing the peace-loving, mellow-yellow Buddha Way preached by their parents' generation as they passionately promote something slightly more radical?

That's certainly the spirit fueling the latest work by *Dharma Punx* author Noah Levine. Titled *Against the Stream: A Buddhist Manual for Spiritual Revolutionaries*, Levine's short new book is an all-out blast of traditional Theravada Buddhism, which prides itself on preserving and practicing the Buddha's teachings in their original (Pali Canon) form. Departing from the autobiographical troubled-teen-finds-Buddhism backbone of his first book, the thirty-six-year-old Levine has stepped into the role of a full-fledged spiritual teacher, expounding the Buddha-dharma as it was taught to him by his mentor, American meditation teacher Jack Kornfield—only with far more of an edge. As Levine told *WIE* in 2004, he has different aspirations in mind from those of Kornfield and his baby-boomer Buddhist peers. "I'm not going to hang out with these people all the time," he said,

"and I don't really want to be like them, because my attitudes are different. But they have this wisdom that I want."

In *Against the Stream*, it's clear that Levine has developed plenty of original Gen-X wisdom all his own, and his progress on the Eightfold Path has been a tumultuous tale of punk rock reformation. "In 1988," he writes in a brief autobiographical intro, "I woke up in a padded cell, addicted to drugs, committed to a life of crime and violence, and wanting to die." Now that he has your attention, he continues: "Prior to that day, I had seen myself as a rebel, a punk rock revolutionary. . . . And I had been successful at defying the cultural norms of society's laws and structure—at least externally. I had raised myself on a steady diet of punk rock nihilism and antiauthority ethics in a haze of drug-induced self-destruction."

Yikes. But these days, having turned his life around completely, Levine is a passionate advocate for what he calls "inner revolution," the "radical and subversive personal rebellion against the causes of suffering and confusion" within. And though this revolution begins inside each of us, its effects are meant to be felt far and wide. "We have the ability to effect a great positive change in the world," he writes, "starting with the training of our own minds and the overcoming of our deluded conditioning. Waking up is not a selfish pursuit of happiness; it is a revolutionary stance, from the inside out, for the benefit of all beings in existence."

Throughout *Against the Stream*, Levine keeps his revolutionary stance running strong. Chapter titles include (in military-stencil typeface) "Basic Training," "Boot Camp," and "The Revolutionary Manifesto." Levine is clearly not lacking in

idealism, but his rebellious theme does eventually feel a bit overdone. After all, we're talking about individuals learning to practice a twenty-five-hundred-year-old teaching of *mindful living*—which isn't exactly the most socially destabilizing or spiritually progressive practice I can think of. But that's why it's important to consider who the book is, in large part, trying to appeal to: wayward young punks. Levine regularly teaches the theory and practice of Buddhist vipassana meditation at juvenile halls and prisons, using the dramatic authenticity of his own story to open the minds of rebellious Gen-Y kids and introduce them to the path of insight and care that saved his life and, therefore, might save theirs as well.

"The whole point of spiritual practice," he writes, "is to have a meaningful and fulfilling life of ease and well-being and to utilize our life's energy to bring about positive change in the world." According to Levine, such positive change includes "taking the practice to the streets, serving the needy, protecting the oppressed, and educating the masses in the universal truths of kindness, generosity, and forgiveness."

I suppose if Levine can get a few kids to give up a life of drugs and violence for ideals like *those*, well, maybe he *will* have something of a revolution going on. But its peaceful, compassionate nature will be anything but "punk." Ironically, the ultimate message of Levine's punk Buddhist manifesto is that if you're an angry punk today, your raging ways will fall away the day you meet the Buddha.

So is it even possible to reconcile a punk attitude with the Buddha-dharma? Or are the two, from the start, diametrically opposed?

Our next clue comes in the form of an entertaining primer on Zen Buddhism by Brad Warner, a Gen-X ex-punk rocker from Ohio. Framed around a trip Warner takes to his hometown (Akron) for a reunion gig with his early-eighties punk band (Zero Defects), *Sit Down and Shut Up* is a fun but serious explication of Zen practice and theory by a self-avowed master. Because Warner hails from the Soto school of Zen, his primary love is the committed daily practice of seated meditation, or *zazen*, which he stresses the importance of every chance he gets. And just like in his first book, 2003's crude and brazen *Hardcore Zen*—which I criticized in Issue 25 of *WIE* for its adolescent inanity—he doesn't pull any punches in his attacks on other spiritual paths, giving special attention to those that appear to promise any kind of instant enlightenment. (This includes Soto Zen's traditional arch rival sect, Rinzai, with its fascination for sudden enlightening blasts of insight called *satori*.) But this time around Warner doesn't seem to be nearly so interested in rebuking the rest of the spiritual world merely for his own amusement; instead, his periodic volleys of vitriol actually tend to advance his philo-

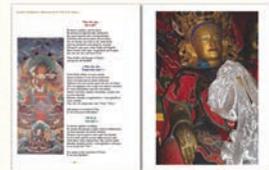
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sophical arguments, and he sounds refreshingly sincere.

Having lived many years in Japan, “working for a company that makes cheeseball sci-fi movies,” Warner was able to find himself a genuine Japanese Zen master, an octogenarian ex-banker named Gudo Nishijima. And despite Warner’s own repeated warnings about following “authority figures,” his respect for his master runs deep. He quotes and refers to Nishijima throughout the book, highlighting his teacher’s West-friendly, no-nonsense, no-metaphysics approach. The pragmatic brand of Buddhism espoused by Warner and Nishijima, however, often comes across as a form of scientific materialism, discounting the traditional Buddhist notion of reincarnation entirely and lending a flat-out reductionistic interpretation to the nature of consciousness. “What we call ‘consciousness’ is just electrical impulses bouncing around in that lump of meat in our skulls,” Warner writes. “Nothing more.” Statements like this, coupled with his apparent cosmic pantheism (“God is the Universe”), make his repeated insistence that he’s *not* a materialist rather dubious. Yet Warner is convinced that his position represents neither materialism nor idealism but simply the nondualistic viewpoint of a masterpiece of ancient Zen-speak known as the *Shobogenzo*, which much of *Sit Down and Shut Up* is devoted to interpreting.

Written by Zen Master Dogen, famed thirteenth-century founder of the Soto sect, the *Shobogenzo* is a ninety-five-chapter summation of Dogen’s *shikantaza*, or “just sitting,” philosophy—the idea that the posture and attitude of formal meditation practice are synonymous with the state of Buddhahood itself. It’s this basic Soto tenet that inspires Warner’s frequent attacks on all who would naively aspire after a sudden be-all, end-all goal of spiritual practice called enlightenment. After he spends many pages criticizing a stereotypical version of that transcendent ideal, in a chapter titled “Enlightenment Is for Sissies!” he admits that “enlightenment experiences do happen,” but he explains that “in Dogen’s way of thinking, zazen itself is the practice of enlightenment—meaning enlightenment is not something you can achieve; it’s something that you *do* every single moment of every single day until you can’t do nuthin’ more.” In the context of today’s quick-fix pop spirituality, where occasional glimpses of the eternal Now are often taken to be a complete spiritual path unto themselves, some readers may find this message of lifelong effort off-putting. But if you’re one of them, Warner has nothing but contempt for you, insisting that the authentic spiritual life is a never-ending daily grind, fueled entirely by one’s “will to the truth”—and definitely not for sissies.

As much as I admire such hardcore sentiments, I’m not sure what he finds so radically punk rock about *zazen*, which essentially means sitting quietly for “an hour each day.” His attempts to dispel the mythical aura surrounding the concept

of enlightenment, while often clarifying, also tend to suck a lot of the fire out of the spiritual quest, and at times I found myself wondering if he and the Buddha (and Zen Master Dogen) are really on the same page with this enlightenment thing. In any case, Warner is up front about where his chosen path has taken him. He explains how his decades of committed Zen practice have given him some degree of distance from his mental and emotional experience and dramatically changed his outlook on life, making him—surprisingly—highly critical of even the punk ethos he once held dear. In a powerful passage, he explains that the victim mindset of the punk rocker (and everybody else) becomes ridiculous once you truly realize that “all is one,” because you then find it impossible to rail angrily against “the System” or in any other way avoid the fact that, ultimately, you are the entire universe and therefore ultimately responsible for everything that happens in it. “Try that one on for size sometime,” he says, in all seriousness. “Don’t make any excuses or exceptions for any reason whatsoever. Accept all responsibility yourself and see how easy or nice the whole ‘all is one’ thing sounds to you.”

In the end, though, the power of Warner’s book is somewhat diluted by the ambiguous dichotomy between its premise and its message. On the one hand, Warner seems to believe, like Noah Levine, that the punk attitude of his youth and the Buddhist wisdom of his adulthood go hand in hand—rebelling against authority figures and sacred scriptures, freeing oneself from an oppressive and ignorant society, etc. On the other hand, his profound adoration for his own favorite authority figures and holy books, along with his explicit deconstruction of the punk victim mentality, seems to convey exactly the opposite stance. And Warner seems unable to reconcile these two aspects within himself, drawing a sharp line between them: “In Ohio I was a rock star. But out here in California, I was a Zen teacher. It’s hard to say which I prefer.” Thus, in a way, Warner appears to be much more conscious of this discrepancy than Levine, admitting to at least some inherent contradiction between peace-loving Buddhism and rabble-rousing punkdom. Undoubtedly, his book could have made a stronger philosophical statement if he’d put some more thought into explaining the actual relationship (or lack thereof) between the two, but for some reason, I suspect he doesn’t give a damn. “It’s hard to worry what other people might think,” he writes, “when you realize their thoughts are just as dopey and meaningless as yours.”

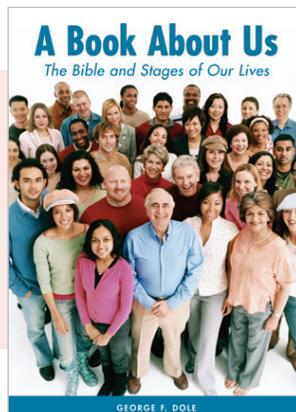
And in that seamless blend of an F-you attitude and deep insight into the nature of the mind, perhaps he proves—in action if not in theory—that it’s possible to be a true Punk Buddhist after all.

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