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Buddhist Anarchism

Is Buddhism and Anarchism Compatible

Mx. Flow

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The question, “Is Buddhism compatible with Anarchism?” pops up sometimes in r/Anarchy101. Given Buddhism’s growth in the west and potential attraction to nontheists, this remains an important question.

Buddhism is both compatible with and supportive of Anarchism as an ideology opposed to coercive hierarchies. Primarily in that the five precepts, moral codes followed by both lay people and monastics, are antithetical to capitalism and the state. The five precepts are:

1. Not to kill
2. Not to steal (take what is not given)
3. Not to commit sexual misconduct (cheating, abuse, etc.)
4. Not to lie
5. Not to use intoxicants

Killing and the broader infliction of violence is anathema, with only small room given when someone strikes a blow “desiring freedom” (such as being grabbed by a kidnapper), which

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does not include the violence committed in wars or the violence routinely committed by police. The state and capitalism ultimately require a monopoly of force to be held by the state and its enforcers (police, military). If that violence is never a possibility (as in well practiced pacifism) then the state and capitalism can not reasonably function.

To take what is not given includes also the theft of surplus labor value. Meaning that whenever a worker does not fully receive the product of their labor, the capitalist effectively steals it. Being threatened with starvation, homelessness or lack of medicine otherwise the worker often has little recourse.

The state likewise often relies upon the usage of espionage in terms of both domestic and foreign spying, not to mention in-state propaganda. Naturally this is also present within corporations. Take a look at deceitful advertising and corporate espionage for starters.

In this way, if all beings were to follow the basic moral guidelines of Buddhism it would effectively neutralize the military, police and capitalism. The Buddha himself directly considered if a state could ever be justified in SN 4.20:

“Is it possible to exercise rulership righteously:
without killing and without instigating others to
kill, without confiscating and without instigating
others to confiscate, without sorrowing and
without causing sorrow?”

SN 4.20

Here Buddha states a few things which are aspects of unjust states: killing, confiscating materials, sorrowing or causing others to do any of these things (such as a monarch ordering an execution or seizure of land). Taking this together with the above restrictions of the precepts I cannot conceive of a state which is able to exist justifiably.

Counter arguments

“A senior is felt to be respected and worthy of honor. However, when you look closely at the Vinaya, this is applied in only a few minor instances; for example, the order in which monastic eat is often in accordance with seniority. And the Buddha is very careful to point out that the true meaning of a senior is one who acts in a respectable way, undermining the notions of automatic authority due to seniority.”

Hierarchies

In conclusion, Buddhism philosophically frustrates the coercive hierarchies of capitalism and the state. While organizationally the monastic codes create a community without coercive control over others. Issues commonly raised are primarily misunderstandings of kamma and how it works or refusing to see nuance within the Buddhist community. Buddhism is both compatible with and in support of Anarchism, most especially in strict interpretations of the Dhamma-Vinaya.

In the aforementioned Anarchy101 discussions two main objections are usually raised:

1. the law of kamma (karma) is an unjustified hierarchy
2. Buddhist institutions are hierarchies

To the first, the line of reasoning often goes that because kamma can determine one's place of birth that this serves as justification for oppressive hierarchies. Such as someone being born into royalty being a factor of their kamma and therefore being legitimized in whatever they do. This argument misses important understandings of kamma and its relation to virtuous action.

Namely that the effects of previous actions do not justify or absolve current evil actions. No amount of compassion makes murder permissible. In this way whatever actions led to an individual taking birth in a position of power do not legitimize any actions taken thereafter. In the same way ordination does not legitimize any behavior done by a monastic, as any monastic of any seniority can be expelled for committing some offenses.

In respect to Buddhist institutions being hierarchical, I don't dispute this necessarily as Ven Sujato says in his essay *Hierarchies*

“Unlike most religious organizations, however, the guidelines for the Buddhist monastic community are anti-hierarchical. Despite this, modern Buddhist organizations tend towards a strongly hierarchical model”

Hierarchies

Realistically many Buddhist organizations function as rigid hierarchies with those at the top exercising strong control over others. However, this isn't a necessary facet of Buddhism per se as Ven Sujato shows by example:

“Within the Sangha, a hierarchy of power is only established in certain limited circumstance, namely, in disciplinary proceedings and in the appointment of Sangha officers. In the case of disciplinary proceedings, the authority stems not from any individual but from the Sangha as a whole. This is the normal state of affairs in Vinaya. Only the Sangha, in the sense of the monastics present within a particular monastery boundary, has the authority to make enforceable decisions, and only then when it operates in accordance with the Dhamma and Vinaya.

In the case of Sangha officers, the Sangha delegates its power to an individual. When there is a job needing to be done in the Sangha, for example looking after the monastery stores, the Sangha may appoint a monastic to do the job. That monastic should be competent and capable of doing the job properly. Since it is the Sangha’s duty to ensure that the candidate is competent, once they have taken office, their decisions should be respected within the scope of their job. They do not need to refer back to the Sangha for every little decision.

An individual monastic should not criticize or disobey the Sangha officer within the scope of their duties. For example, if a requisite is scarce and the Sangha officer allocates it to the monastics via a lottery, someone who has missed out should not just take what they want from the stores, nor should they groundlessly accuse the Sangha officer of bias. But if a genuine conflict or difficulty arises, the Sangha can raise the issue and make a decision.”

Hierarchies

In fact, if you look at the Vinaya, the shared rule on consensus (158 for nuns, 80 for monks) says:

Should any bhikkhuni, when deliberation is being carried on in the Community, get up from her seat and leave without having given consent, it is to be confessed. *(this blocks all decision making because sangha matters have to be decided unanimously)*

Pācittiya 158

This originally nonhierarchical structure has however been curtailed by the state itself. In many Buddhist majority countries, the monastic community is regulated by secular law, in such a way as to create rigid hierarchies more easily utilized by the state to maintain power.

In Thailand there are a number of such laws that directly regulate the Sangha. An important aspect of these laws is the creation of a Sangha hierarchy that to some extent overrides the independence of individual monasteries as established by the Vinaya.

Ajahn Brahmali

In terms of seniority, I think this can be reasonably classified as an influence rather than a hierarchy because no monastic no matter how senior has the ability to violently threaten another monastic’s livelihood. A monastic is both free to leave a particular teacher or to disrobe altogether, as is any layperson likewise free to find a new teacher or community, free from coercive reprisal. For example, the start of the Thai Forest Tradition (Dhammayut Order) was a departure from the watering down of Buddhism in Thailand. Otherwise, Ven Sujato speaks to the seniority dynamic: