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The Buddha's Hierarchy

Why would you do this?

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October 16 2020

Buddhist institutions have a hierarchy within them. The strength of these hierarchies varies greatly between and within traditions, even between individual monasteries. Largely, some of this hierarchy has been around for a great deal of time, with some parts present from the origin of the order.

If we hold that horizontal organizations are more egalitarian and more effective than hierarchical organizations, then we must ask the question: why are Buddhist institutions largely hierarchical and who is responsible for this development?

There are a few responses:

1. The Buddha believed that a hierarchical system would prove superior as a vehicle for the Dhamma
2. The hierarchy was developed and solidified after The Buddha died, potentially with appropriate textual revisions.
3. Horizontal systems are actually not effective, The Buddha knew this and moved away from them.

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4. Buddhist institutions developed hierarchies in imitation of the state and or other hierarchical religious orders.

Naturally one or more of these can be true. So let's address each one in turn. First, that The Buddha favored a hierarchy during the initial creation of the order. If we look at the original context of the order, as something new which raised objections against much of the pre established hierarchy present in the Brahmanical religion (see: caste, who is allowed to ordain, the importance of ritual, existence of a soul, creator deity, etc.) we might conceive that The Buddha saw a hierarchy as lending both legitimacy to the order and making the order more similar to existing power structures.

He may have had the thought that the preservation and dissemination of Dhamma was of greater priority than the creation and maintenance of a horizontal order. That spreading the Dhamma was best achieved by a hierarchical order.

Does this make sense? Potentially, as state powers organized with a hierarchy are able to offer unified decision making in such a way as to present homogeneity and make itself more easily comprehensible to existing powers. So too may the order have done such initially.

It's worth noting however that the hierarchy within the order was not one of coercion, no monastic could beat you up or take your stuff (what little one has) if you're out of line. Rather, like many stateless organizations, leaders and important figures were directly beholden to the people they ministered too, in the case of the monastics this is clear given the monastic dependence on lay people for food and other goods. If the monastics are not up to snuff, it is completely within the power of the lay people to refuse support.

Yet, presently many Buddhist institutions have developed a kind of theology which can at least feel coercive. Fear of hell and the merit that keeps one from it through service to the monastics being my primary thought. I think this dovetails well into the

second point: that perhaps the hierarchy was developed and strengthened after The Buddha's death.

If the original sangha's power dynamic was one of being materially dependent upon laypeople, then coercive control (direct control of food and resources) sits entirely in the hands of lay people who can decide at any time to withhold resources. There are even many rules within the Vinaya about hoarding resources (for example, excess robes) or even having particularly nice items (say, a jeweled alms bowl). Later, the sangha would integrate with various state powers such as King Ashoka and various kingdoms in South East Asia. Gaining, to a greater or lesser extent, patronage from a state. In this way the sangha becomes beholden to the state, coercively controlled not by the laypeople yet by the state whose favor is necessary to maintain positive status lest the order be culled as has happened at various points in Buddhism's history, we might think of China's oppression.

In some cases Buddhism would develop a theocracy, as seen in Tibet where coercive control is directly in the hands of the order. Certainly there has been a development and empowering of hierarchy within the order after The Buddha's death.

We can look now at the third point: that perhaps horizontal organizations are ineffective, either broadly or specifically in the case of a religious monastic order. I won't spend time here arguing the veracity of horizontal effectiveness, rather suggest readers investigate *Anarchy Works and Worshipping Power* by Peter Gelderloos.

If we are asking whether hierarchy is effective specifically within the order, we might be thinking of the student/teacher dynamic as one. Yet I'll contend, at least within the original context of the order, that this relationship was not coercive. One might follow a teacher based on the belief that in doing so one gains knowledge and training that is otherwise very hard to attain on one's own. In the original context there were no established monasteries which hosted monastics year round, nomadic wandering was the norm. A student could at any time choose to leave

a teacher they find unsuitable and not find their resources in jeopardy, the way a contemporary student might if they leave a monastery and do not practice alms round.

In this way a hierarchy that developed from the establishment of monasteries as primary sources for resources endangers an individual monastic's ability to survive in the event they leave said monastery. Effectively creating a situation of coercion: stay here or you won't get food. This was not part of The Buddha's original order and is a later development, giving credence that whatever hierarchy was present originally, looked and functioned very differently than it does today.

The fourth point primarily centers around bids the order may have made to maintain itself and spread the Dhamma. We know that King Ashoka's conversion and subsequent sponsorship of Buddhism is a major factor in Buddhism's survival and spread, contrasted with Jainism which (AFAIK) never gained such state support. It's hard to argue that if this was the intention, it wasn't effective. After all, Buddhism has spread far and wide whilst Jainism remains confined to parts of India.

We might concede that seeking sponsorship of the state was a temporary survival measure for the order, especially after invasion wiped out every original school other than Theravada. In order to survive the sangha may have invested great time in seeking stability and protection from kingdoms in South East Asia. Yet Buddhism now seems firmly rooted as a major world religion, conversion continues to grow particularly in America and Europe. I'll put forward the claim that whatever utility state sponsorship had for Buddhism before, it has now become a force railing against the Dhammic values of being unburdensome and unfettered.

Buddhist hierarchy and state sponsorship should be dismantled and abandoned. To allow for a more effective, unfettered and unburdensome transmission and practice of The Dhamma. The original order's version of hierarchy was weak and all power was primarily in the hands of lay people, hierarchy later developed to

maintain the power and influence of the order, temporarily to its benefit and detrimental in the long run. It's time we shift Buddhism towards the well being and freedom enabled by Anarchism.