

Buddhist Anarchism: Theory and Practice

A Vision for a Buddhist Anarchism

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Contents

Introduction	3
Anarchist Monastic Order	5
Modern Hierarchy	6
Monastic Lay Divide	8
Practice	9
The Way is Rough	11

“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?”

-The Buddha, SN 4.20¹

Introduction

Buddhist Anarchism is a synthesis of Anarchism from Buddhist Religion. Buddhism is a religion over 2,500 years old that teaches people to free themselves from Dukkha (suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness) through practicing Sila, Samadhi and Panya (Virtue, Concentration and Wisdom) and achieving nibbana (enlightenment, freedom from dukkha). Anarchism is a political philosophy in favor of egalitarian and mutual relationships between people and opposed to hierarchy, domination and authority. Anarchism asserts a world where everyone has control over that which directly affects them. Anarchism includes concepts of free association (federation as a process of forming egalitarian associations without coercion of government), mutual aid, and direct action. While Buddhism teaches compassion, individual responsibility and community interdependence.

Buddhist Anarchism is an Anarchism that is derived from Buddhism; Anarchism flows down from the application of Buddhist thought to questions of authority, domination and social organization. In considering how a state functions we find that the fundamental requirements of a state or government rely on breaking the most basic precepts (training rules) of Buddhism. The five precepts are considered the most basic rules for both monastic and lay people to follow. They 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 (alcohol, etc.)

Nonviolence is a basic tenant of Buddhism that the Buddha was unambiguous with. The Buddha asserts non-retaliation is a practice that is difficult and often unpopular and if you are serious about ending suffering, one must commit to nonviolence². The only leeway being the small room given when someone strikes a blow “desiring freedom” (such as being grabbed by a kidnapping police officer). This exception does not include the violence committed by the military or police nor does it allow killing under the guise of self-defense. 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 nonviolence) then the state and capitalism can not reasonably function. Private property cannot be enforced in the absence of violence. Police are not police and soldiers are not soldiers if they are disallowed from violence. What would

¹ suttacentral.net

² www.dhammadtalks.org

stop us from sharing everything if there were no Pinkertons, police departments or military to enforce private property?

The precept against not taking what is not given comes to encompass the largest forms of theft today: theft of surplus labor value, private property and wages. Whenever a worker does not fully receive the value of their labor, the capitalist effectively steals that surplus value. When a boss withholds duly owed wages and tips for themselves, they steal the wages of the workers. Private property is an institution that seeks to legitimize the theft of formerly collective or free land by utilizing violence to kill, injure or imprison anyone who attempts to use what was once free for all³. Private property enables exploitation and creates an inherently oppressive dynamic between those who own property and those who are permitted to use it. If we seek to renounce oppression, we must also renounce theft and in doing so renounce private property.

The state and corporations rely upon lying and deceit. From corporate spying and advertising to government espionage and propaganda. A state must constantly reassert its own authority in dependence on violence, yet in doing so it constantly lies about the source of its authority, seeking to obfuscate that any government rests upon a willingness to enact violence against its own citizens. Politicians could not function without lying, electoral politics runs on many layers of obfuscation around both how the system works and what results from it. Police in the US and many countries depend upon lying to suspects and innocent people alike. If you did not want to exist under the purview of the state there is no alternative for you but to suffer great violence and deprivation, you cannot opt out because it was never a choice to be a citizen. Yet this truth is constantly paved over by valorizing the nation. There is no virtue in worshiping power and The Buddha never proposed that enlightenment could be found on the sole of a boot.

While the precepts against sexual misconduct and intoxicating drugs are not necessarily required for a state to function, they exist as crucial elements in the state's oppression of people. When the CIA funneled drugs into black communities it was a methodology to hurt and maintain oppression of black people while supporting state violent interests globally⁴⁵. Sexual abuse exists rampant in the US military and plays a crucial component in womens' oppression within both government and corporate organizations⁶. A society that truly renounces sexual misconduct is one that creates a culture of opposition to sexual oppression. A society that understands the harm associated with intoxicating drugs seeks to most effectively communicate the dangers and pleasures associated, while abandoning ineffective moralizing and criminalization that does more to harm people who use drugs than it has ever done to promote a life worth living⁷⁸⁹.

Within the suttas (scripture of the Buddha's teachings) it's written that in order to practice the Dhamma (the teachings) we must have the four requisites for practice: food, shelter, medicine and clothing¹⁰. If someone lacks one or more of these requisites they will struggle to implement the Dhamma and engage with the Sangha (community of Buddhists). If we want to provide opportunities for others to practice Buddhism, we must create a society that provides for all beings

³ theanarchistlibrary.org

⁴ jacobin.com

⁵ oig.justice.gov

⁶ web.archive.org

⁷ www.npr.org

⁸ www.cdc.gov

⁹ harmreductionjournal.biomedcentral.com

¹⁰ www.wisdomlib.org

the requisites needed for practice. This means giving to others regardless of what they have done, are doing or will do. Wishing good will and happiness we must provide for others and ourselves these basic necessities without requirement. Because of the restrictions of the precepts and the necessity of requisites, a state cannot exist morally under a Buddhist framework.

As Anarcho-Buddhists we assert the most effective, compassionate and virtuous way to lead people to the triple gem of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is to provide the material requisites without coercion or hierarchy: to build a society where people exist with a high degree of autonomy that they might realize the Dukkha of the world. We know that to blame or shame for sensual pleasure is fundamentally unhelpful for getting someone to see the pleasure and pain of the world. An honest and genuine allowance of freedom will more quickly cause people to seek an end to Dukkha through the practice of Sila, Samadhi and Paññā than moralizing or criminalizing ever will.

Buddhist Anarchism takes seriously the teachings of The Buddha and asks how a society organized around these teachings would look and concludes it is a world without a state, without misogyny and other sexual oppression, a world that doesn't obfuscate or lie about how drugs and products affect us, a world without spies or prisons. A Buddhist Anarchist world seeks true freedom in both material and mental spheres and a higher and more desirable form of autonomy: the autonomy to practice the Dhamma and or live freely, not the autonomy to struggle, suffer and survive in isolation.

Anarchist Monastic Order

In the Vinaya (rules for monastics) there is a lack of strong hierarchy, individual monastics are not granted more institutional power than other monastics. Individual responsibilities are doled out (such as someone who accounts for food storage) and are both elected by and immediately re-callable by the sangha. There is acknowledged social expectations that more experienced monastics ought to be respected (we respect the shoe-maker in shoe making and the monastic in the Dhamma) yet those experienced monastics do not (or rather, did not originally) have coercive power to compel other monastics into service or specific action: if one monastic feels that to do something is to break with the Dhamma, they should not do it even if a senior monastic asks it.

We already see egalitarian decision making within the monastic community, based on the shared rule for consensus (158 for nuns, 80 for monks): "Should any bhikkhuni (nun), 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" (Pācittiya 158)¹¹. This blocks all decision making because sangha matters have to be decided unanimously as in any consensus decision making. As Venerable Sujato notes in his essay Hierarchy:

"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.

¹¹ suttacentral.net

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 decision¹².

In terms of seniority, it can be 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.¹³ 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. The start of the Thai Forest Tradition (Dhammayut Order) was a return to form for Buddhism in Thailand and in doing so was a departure from the existing Buddhist orders in Thailand. The earliest figures in the forest reformation were not at risk of being unable to seek alms. Venerable Sujato speaks to the seniority dynamic: "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"¹⁴. The monastic codes create a community without coercive control over others, especially in strict interpretations of the Dhamma-Vinaya.

Modern Hierarchy

In modernity, Buddhist orders worldwide function as rigid hierarchies with those at the top exercising strong control over others. Venerable Sujato notes the irony: "Unlike most religious organizations...the guidelines for the Buddhist monastic community are anti-hierarchical. Despite this, modern Buddhist organizations tend towards a strongly hierarchical model"¹⁵. Senior monks have more control over novice monks. We do not live in a society that functions on needs-based justice, therefore leaving the monastic order has the potential to endanger those who leave when they do not have a family or community which can support them in the transition back to lay-life. We see many children who join monasteries principally for education and material support and in doing so often become vulnerable targets for abuse. In this way a hierarchy that developed from the establishment of monasteries as sources for material support endangers an individual monastic's ability to survive in the event they leave the monastery as well as compromising the motivation behind ordination. Effectively creating a situation of coercion: stay here or you won't get food. At the time of Buddhism's inception there was a culture of materially sup-

¹² discourse.suttacentral.net

¹³ dhammaflow.org

¹⁴ discourse.suttacentral.net

¹⁵ discourse.suttacentral.net

porting those who became homeless to focus on religious practice, meaning whatever hierarchy was present originally looked and functioned very differently than it does today.

This older nonhierarchical structure has been curtailed by the state itself. In many Buddhist majority countries, the monastic community is regulated by state law in such a way as to create rigid hierarchies more easily utilized by the state to maintain power. As Ajahn Brahmali notes: “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 Vinaya¹⁶.” In some cases Buddhism would develop a theocracy, as seen in Tibet where coercive control is directly in the hands of the monastic order¹⁷¹⁸¹⁹.

When looking at the setup and modern organization of the Buddhist sangha it’s important to consider the historical context in which the monastic order was established: a patriarchal and feudal time when The Buddha was just beginning to establish a new religion. If you look at the origin stories for many of the rules in the Vinaya, many have to do with complaints from lay people. Given that monastics are absolutely dependent upon lay people for survival, maintaining a good relationship and image to the lay community was and is vital for the survival of the monastic community.

The original sangha’s power dynamic was one of being materially dependent upon laypeople, the 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. If the monastics are not up to snuff, it is completely within the power of the lay people to refuse support. There are even many rules within the Vinaya about hoarding resources (excess robes) or having particularly nice items (a jeweled alms bowl). Later on, the sangha would integrate with various state powers such as King Asoka’s monarchy and various kingdoms in Asia. The monastic community over time made itself approachable by supportive powers of state and capital by maintaining a hierarchy within the monastic community. As Rome sought to establish governments within European tribes so they could take advantage of them, the Buddhist community has similarly structured itself to benefit from, be controlled by and generally interface with the state and capital²⁰.

By making itself into a hierarchical structure actively interfacing with the state, the sangha becomes beholden to the state. The sangha becomes coercively controlled not by the laity, yet by the state whose favor is necessary to maintain positive status lest the order be culled as has happened in India and China before. We know that King Asoka’s conversion and subsequent sponsorship of Buddhism is a major factor in Buddhism’s survival and spread, contrasted with other religious groups which never gained state support²¹. It’s hard to argue that if this was the intention of the Buddha, it wasn’t effective. After all, Buddhism now sits firmly rooted as a major world religion and conversion grows in America and Europe. While many religions contemporary with Buddhism’s inception remain confined to parts of India or are gone entirely.

Seeking sponsorship of the state was a temporary survival measure for the order. In order to survive the sangha invested great time in seeking stability and protection from a variety of

¹⁶ discourse.suttacentral.net

¹⁷ hir.harvard.edu

¹⁸ case.edu

¹⁹ case.edu

²⁰ theanarchistlibrary.org

²¹ www.accesstoinsight.org

different state powers. Yet, 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 Buddhist organization towards the well being and freedom enabled by Anarchism.

Monastic Lay Divide

In Ajahn Lee's biography he talks about this relationship he had with one of his teachers, one of utter servitude²². There was a clear hierarchy between himself and the master. He'd listen to the wall after cleaning up his master's dwelling place, gauging each noise the master would make and changing his behavior in terms of cleaning to further please his master. He frames this as effective training in observation. While it may help one in becoming more observant and careful, unequal relationships breed trauma and are more likely to turn people away from dhamma than draw them in. Ajahn Lee's relationship to his master was not founded on mutual aid, it's one person begging at the feet of another.

Relationships like this are ultimately ineffective in training. Most people don't want to act like a servant or a slave. The teaching dynamic between student and teacher ought to be one of mutual aid, cooperation and voluntary contract. The relationship between laity is often similarly servile in order to honor the great courage and effort that goes into monastic life. It's no small feat to be a monastic, at least one which follows the Vinaya. That kind of effort deserves a kind of respect and that respect can in turn motivate the monastics themselves to live up to it. Great guilt can be felt when you don't measure up to the image in which people see you. Similarly, that reverence given to monastics gives a sense of weight and prestige to the teachings themselves. Yet we don't have to deify monastics, to do so is to grant a kind of blindness to ourselves that so often leads to abuse²³²⁴.

A better connection to the teachings and greater benefit can be had if the dynamic between laity and monastics is made less reverential and more respectful. If the relationship were one of friendship, community and mutual aid, where laity are supporting monastics out of compassion and desire for their success. With the love and wisdom that someone is able to spread from living as a monastic, there could be more benefit for all beings. There could be less alienation between the two parts of the community. More openness for questions and engagement, less fear. The framework of both monastic and lay communities could seek a more honest and egalitarian decision making process, where each voice in the community is made equal. Giving people as much power over their own lives and that which affects it as possible. In doing so people jump to their desires of freedom with ever more energy than through shame, guilt or hierarchy. People more deeply embrace and practice the dhamma when it is a choice made in freedom. A teaching rela-

²² dhammatalks.net

²³ www.buddhistdoor.net

²⁴ journals.sagepub.com

tionship between monastics and laity founded on mutual aid, cooperation, and the reciprocation of dhamma and material support can only improve the Sangha.

Practice

There's a part of Mae Chee Kaew's biography where it talks about how once someone is in one of the hells, it's a lot harder to work your way up to a birth with more favorable circumstances²⁵. Essentially emphasizing out how the circumstances into which we are born do make it harder to practice. When your entire life is horrifying suffering as a screaming ghost, or more close to home, constant insecurity in respect to food, clothing, medicine and shelter, it's hard to keep a reign on feelings of anger and despair, it's hard to concentrate the mind, it's hard to be generous, it's hard to be forgiving.

An Anarcho-Buddhist practice seeks to provide the four requisites to all people in the knowledge that without those requisites people cannot seriously approach or practice with the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. While providing those requisites it is understood that coercion cannot compel someone to Dhamma, no one else can do the practice for you, you must be at the forefront of your own liberation, and you must be empowered with autonomy to practice Dhamma genuinely. In providing the requisites the Anarchist Buddhist goes about their practice while following the basic moral precepts of Buddhism. In doing so our service is blameless and provides a truly solid foundation for a better world.

What does this look like, practically? In terms of community building we can focus on:

1. Immediate provision of the four requisites to all people without requirement or coercion
2. The building of the Sangha in such a way as to ensure requisites and autonomy now and tomorrow

Immediate provision is experienced when we give a hungry person food, provide medical care, hand out jackets for the cold and give houses to those without. It is a present albeit temporary fix to a long standing issue, a sandwich lasts only until it is eaten. This kind of practice is immediately beneficial, it is a crucial practice of Sila, to provide for others the opportunity to see the Dhamma. Yet this giving alone is not enough to ensure a long term and consistent access to the requisites, it is a temporary stop-gap under an imperialist capitalist system that demands some go without food so that others may eat from golden tables heaped with caviar. In order to ensure everyone has the requisites for practice, we must revolutionize society to provide food, medicine, shelter and clothing for all people regardless of who they are, what they have done, will do or are doing.

We can begin by creating the kind of Sangha that provides for all by creating communities which are horizontal (non-hierarchical), independent, self-sustaining and possessing a culture of mutual aid. By creating communities independent of the state and capitalism we can cultivate the basic well-being and materials needed to see the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. These communities can take various forms from squat houses, monastic communities, general communes, affinity groups, direct action cells, free stores, community meetups and more. Through these communities we can create a cultural attitude of compassionate giving to all who are without and strong opposition to the forces and institutions which rob and oppress people. When we create

²⁵ forestdhamma.org

communal structures outside the arm of the state we create the shell of the new world within the old, when we practice direct action we chip away at the shell of the old to give sunlight to a new world. We resist rugged-individualist, consumerist and hierarchical cultural and state institutions by willfully living with autonomy and compassion.

To create such communities we must find other individuals willing and able to participate through networking in existing Anarchist and Buddhist spaces. The community can then decide the best avenue for itself based on its own specific context. Any given community might decide that establishing land and residence is important, another may focus entirely on sourcing and distributing food, a third simply creating an egalitarian place to practice and learn the Dhamma and a fourth may form an action group to directly oppose violence and oppression wherever it may be. Whether a community focuses on mutual aid, direct action or inward focused community building, through existence as a free people we demonstrate the joy and peace of living beyond the state. These communities are not only a source for freedom from hunger, nakedness, and other material deprivations but also a way to the true liberation of Nibanna.

As any Anarchist Buddhist community begins it must reckon with two separate spectrums of how it relates to the law and industrial capitalism:

1. Illegalist vs. Legalist
2. Self-sustaining vs. Industrial Dependence

How willing is a given community to follow or break the existing law? The law isn't now nor has it ever been a measurement for moral action, but deciding to break the law comes with great difficulty. Land is considered private property and within the purview of the state it demands titles and money for its use, a given community may practice squatting or otherwise seize such land for their own use illegally or seek to pool resources and legally acquire such land. This is not a binary, a community may seek to legally acquire land only to covertly construct buildings outside of existing building codes and under cover so as to avoid taxation or a community may skirt the law by making multiple technically mobile trailers not considered under building codes. Taking patented plants owned by corporations and using their engineered genetics to covertly grow food without paying the corporations. Sabotaging weapons factories or handing out sandwiches. Dumpster diving for resources or begging for food. There's a broad spectrum between bowing to the state when it's most effective and disobeying its dictates when it suits the particular community.

Self sustainment is a question of the circumstances of the community. Is there arable land where the community is? Are there any appropriate dumpsters to get food from? Are there enough able bodied lay people to till the soil? Can sabotage be enacted without killing anyone? Can a well be drilled and textiles grown? These circumstances are both highly specific and subject to change. A given community may start by carrying in water from an outside source only to set up a well within a few years, likewise with food, textiles and electricity. A food distribution group might start by dumpster diving but soon supplement from grocery store donations. There is an ever growing resource of accessible information about sustainable agriculture, squatting, food reclamation, direct action, off-grid electrical systems, and independent ways of creating all we need or want from sex toys and instruments to farming equipment and medicine. In an ideal situation a given community can start or become totally independent of capitalism and the state.

While this is often inaccessible at the start or not possible without much broader inter-community support, it ought to be a sought after goal.

As we build our communities we can look to practices of squatting, non-violent resistance, sustainable manufacturing and agricultural practices, egalitarian decision making and free association to create a Sangha and ultimately a world free of coercion and material deprivation. We can create a world with genuine freedom and autonomy, a world where no one goes hungry, cold, or without care. We can create the kind of Pure Land that conduces directly to awakening, if we work together with intention and will.

So, what happens if we disregard the claims of the state to every tree and every tract of land, every naturally growing food and every human body, to assert that all beings have a right to autonomy and that through enshrining autonomy and providing for the body we empower all beings to reach towards Nibbana? The state, eventually seeing a threat to its power, will attempt to police or outright destroy such challenges. Through taxation of the Sangha to support its imperial military and police efforts. Through demanding that any community follow the dictates of the state independent of what the Dhamma says as in compulsory military service, immoral laws, private property, deprivation of material needs from the poor and the demand that any land used by the community be acquired through state regulated private property regardless of whether it's being used as a financial holding or third home of the rich. Through severe and protracted targeting and legal action against nonviolent direct action groups such as the Animal and Earth Liberation Front and its supporters²⁶²⁷. In response to state repression there are many tactics we might employ to avoid or subvert the ire of the state. We can obfuscate building projects through camouflage or legal loopholes, engage in direct action using appropriate security and clandestine operating procedures. Refuse dictates from the state and even defend our communities with our own bodies through nonviolent resistance when the state seeks to eradicate us²⁸.

The path to a beautiful world and thriving Sangha is not without hardship. The practice is difficult and there's joy in creating living communities which reduce or eliminate painful circumstances and allow people the context in which to grow as practitioners and individuals, there's breath granted when the machine that builds bombs stops for a moment. In these communities we can utilize a horizontal organization founded on mutual aid, needs based justice and Dhamma. In stark contrast to the existing worldly institutions of the state and capitalism, as Emma Goodman says: "an organization without discipline, fear, or punishment, and without the pressure of poverty: a new social organism which will make an end to the terrible struggle for the means of existence, — the savage struggle which undermines the finest qualities in man, and ever widens the social abyss"²⁹. Tomorrow can be better if we work together.

The Way is Rough

A wonderful bhikkuni once told me of a monk imprisoned by a government, who was tortured for years. After release he showed no signs of PTSD or other negative effects. When asked how he had managed it, he attested to his internal commitment not to let resentment or anger arise in

²⁶ en.wikipedia.org

²⁷ theanarchistlibrary.org

²⁸ archive.org or www.waveland.com

²⁹ theanarchistlibrary.org

him. Through this practice of deep compassion and peace he was able to endure great suffering from the state. We can look to one of the innumerable monastics who have been forced to endure state torture, Palden Gyatso:

“The [political] prisoners were unyielding. They said openly that they would prefer to die rather than submit to the Chinese. [...] For those who use brute force, there is nothing more insulting than a victim’s refusal to acknowledge their power. The human body can bear immeasurable pain and yet recover. Wounds can heal. But once your spirit is broken, everything falls apart. So we did not allow ourselves to feel dejected. We draw strength from our convictions and, above all, from our belief that we were fighting for justice and for the freedom of our country³⁰.”

Practicing Buddhism and being socially active are difficult, especially in the anarchist scene, where many anarchists advocate tactics of shoplifting, deceit and killing. Following the precepts and fighting for a peaceful and egalitarian society is not as straightforward as it might seem. It is a frequent question whether the goodness of feeding the hungry and liberating the enslaved justifies the shoplifting and killing we might use to do it. The Buddha cautioned us against spending too much time investigating the kammic result of any action: “The [precise working out of the] results of kamma...are not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness & vexation to anyone³¹.” While we shouldn’t waste time obsessing over the mathematical consequences of every action, The Buddha wasn’t ambiguous about what is conducive to internal liberation. A complete commitment to Buddhism is an extremist commitment to harmlessness, to honesty, to sexual safety, to living off what people give to us willingly and doing all of it with as clear a mind as we can muster. Buddhist Anarchism is hard and the benefits of a buddhist life are found now and later, in short term peace, calm and a stable determination to a lasting liberation, a peaceful society or fortune rebirth³².

The Buddha was clear that a commitment to not killing is essential:

“All tremble at the rod, all are fearful of death. Drawing the parallel to yourself, neither kill nor get others to kill.

All tremble at the rod, all hold their life dear. Drawing the parallel to yourself, neither kill nor get others to kill.

Whoever takes a rod to harm living beings desiring ease, when he himself is looking for ease, meets with no ease after death. Whoever doesn’t take a rod to harm living beings desiring ease, when he himself is looking for ease, meets with ease after death.”

– Dhammapada 129–132³³

The necessity of virtue for internal liberation is repeated throughout scripture as in MN 136: “Here some person kills living beings, takes what is not given, misconducts himself in sexual

³⁰ savetibet.org

³¹ www.dhammatalks.org

³² www.accesstoinsight.org

³³ www.accesstoinsight.org

desires, speaks falsehood, speaks maliciously, speaks harshly, gossips, is covetous, is ill-willed, and has wrong view. In the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell.” this is reiterated in AN 8.39 and countless other suttas³⁴.

Even those who kill yet attain fortunate rebirths are given a response: “In the case of the person who takes life...[yet] on the break-up of the body, after death, reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world: either earlier he performed fine kamma that is to be felt as pleasant, or later he performed fine kamma that is to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out right views. Because of that, on the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world. But as for the results of taking life... holding wrong views, he will feel them either right here & now, or later [in this lifetime], or following that...” MN 136³⁵

It’s easy to try and justify breaking precepts because it can seem expedient to our worldly goals. If I just take this pair of bolt cutters, could they not aid in the liberation of those imprisoned? Yet this failure to uphold the precepts reflects the importance of prefigurative politics and a misperception of what leads to internal liberation. If we want a society without lies, without killing, without sexual misconduct or theft or other ills, we have to practice creating that society today. The anarchist world cannot be built at a later date or after some revolution, insurrection or other delusion of mass social improvement. We as individuals must live the pure land now if we want to see it reflected back in others.

We can justify killing cops as self defense seeking liberation, theft as expropriation of duly owed goods, lying as a tactic against state repression. Yet all these justifications are ways to try and cope with the difficulty of practice and avoid the truth that you can’t negotiate your way around hell, you have to go through it. You can’t produce positive peace with violence or honesty with lies. While some anarchists argue that because private property is theft itself we are justified in shoplifting, this argument ignores the multifaceted reasoning behind the precepts as both broad moral guides and training rules. All our actions create habit energy that helps or hinders the arising of further action. When we accept shoplifting as permissible we create a habit that makes taking what is not given easier and engage in action that distances us from internal liberation. Abstinence is easier than moderation. If we desire liberation for ourselves and others we have to train ourselves to relinquish even the thought of killing, theft, lying and sexual misconduct.

This commitment to internal liberation doesn’t mean that the kamma incurred when someone kills seeking genuine liberation or shoplifts to redistribute goods to those in need is all painful unpleasant kamma, we don’t need to fall into puritanical absolutism about the morality of every action. Yet as Buddhists we have to consider our motivations for any action, are we trying to seek enlightenment? Or focus solely on the state of the world? These goals are not mutually exclusive and do have different tactics. It’s unarguable that the assassination of an evil tyrant does much to change the state of the world, yet has it done much for the assassin’s internal liberation? We can decide to refrain from shoplifting extra food in pursuit of our internal liberation, yet we are being disingenuous if we do not take seriously the opportunity shoplifting presents as a way to feed the hungry on a budget. As individuals we all have to make our own decisions about what

³⁴ www.accesstoinsight.org

³⁵ www.accesstoinsight.org

is most important to us and what we are willing to do for our goals. We don't have to dictate to others what their goals are or ought to be, we can exist within our own autonomous lives and make our own calls around what we're seeking and how.

When engaging with others we must always remember compassion and understanding. Moralizing a homeless person over stealing isn't going to stop the behavior or banish their hunger. Trying to convince a traumatized trans person to accept a lynching only turns people away from the Dhamma and leaves another trans body on the ground. Many of Buddhism's earliest converts came from upper class backgrounds and this class discrepancy allowed those individuals the material time and space to completely engage with the Dhamma³⁶³⁷. We need compassion for the poor and oppressed who aren't able to easily interface with the Dhamma. We need to provide more wholesome ways to satisfy material needs and refrain from Puritan blaming and shaming for survival and liberatory behaviors. It's a waste of breath to needlessly call out the relative imperfections of the dispossessed, we ought to seek solidarity even with those who do not share our religious practice. Through the simple display of the peace that comes from practicing the Dhamma we can be a beacon to those seeking to escape stress and suffering independent of their surrounding circumstances.

As Buddhist Anarchists we are practicing for a world of peace, where no one fears being left outside, where there is no anxiety that a boss or merchant will swindle us, where there is no danger of sexual assault or rape, where anything can be left without worry over loss. We are striving for a world without binds, without violent institutions, without anyone being better, worse or the same as anyone else. To actualize Buddhist Anarchism is to create a pure land here and now, to reach out our hands to those around us, to hold and be held, to breathe without stress. To live as Buddhist Anarchists is to live as free people.

³⁶ discourse.suttacentral.net

³⁷ discourse.suttacentral.net

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A Vision for a Buddhist Anarchism
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