

Buddhist Anarchism in the Dharma-Ending Age

Commentary on the Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Impossibilities	3
3. Collapse and Messianic Communism	4
4. So what to do now?	8

1. Introduction

Mahayana Buddhism divides human history into three ages: the Age of the Right Dharma (shōbō), which occurred in the first 500 years after the birth of Buddha Shakyamuni, where enlightenment was fully possible and the Buddha's teachings were maintained; the Era of Semblance Dharma (zōhō), the 500 years following the shōbō era, where the Buddhist teachings and practice still existed but were deteriorated and lacked confirmed enlightenment; and finally, the Dharma-Ending Age (mappō), in which gradually all teachings bequeathed by the Buddha will extinguish, spiritual life will undergo universal degradation, the right Dharma will be subverted and profaned, and suffering will intensify in all aspects of life. We currently live in this Age, which will only end with the coming of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future.

Buddhist anarchism proposes the construction of a society free from hierarchical, market, and state sufferings, from a Buddhist perspective. But what does this mean when we take into account the Dharma-Ending Age? Is it possible to build such a society on a large scale when we are in an era of moral, political, and dharmic decline? This essay seeks to explore this question.

2. Impossibilities

Many theorists of Buddhist anarchism and socialism, since the Ven. Monk Taixu, describe the movement as constructing the Pure Land on Earth – or worse, a Pure Land in the “real world” – and although they are very well-intentioned and worthy of our praise and study, we must face this as an impossibility. Reflections of the Pure Land can be glimpsed in our world, and we can bring fragments of this Land to our environment, but to claim that we can transform this Sahā world into a Pure Land is equivalent to saying we can “fix” samsara, something the Buddha declared impossible. Our existence is inherently marked by suffering, and as deluded beings, we cannot, nor should we, alter this fundamental nature.

Some sutras describe the possibility of the emergence of righteous monarchs who turn the Wheel of Dharma, capable of building truly Buddhist, compassionate, and consequently socialist societies on a large scale. However, since the beginning of the Dharma-Ending Age, this has ceased to be a possibility. History shows us that compassionate politics, motivated by Buddhism or other forms of love, no longer finds significant space in our society. Great states that tried to establish socialism degenerated and reverted to capitalism, if they ever achieved socialism. No major revolution occurred after the 20th century, and even if one occurs, it will inevitably be crushed by global capitalist commerce. No matter how well-intentioned state socialists are, it is unfeasible to maintain a Socialist State in a globalized capitalist world.

The idea of a global revolution, anarchist or state-led, is also an impossibility. The imperial system has a practically invincible military force, but not only that: capital, with the advent of global internet, maintains an unbeaten cultural and pedagogical monopoly. All this is a consequence of the Dharma-Ending Age, where, superficially, Mara triumphs over Buddha. We must accept that there will not be a revolution anytime soon. Does this mean we are forever trapped in maraism? No! This is because capital, as a living entity, is unsustainable.

3. Collapse and Messianic Communism

We cannot, through our self power, destroy Capital. However, we can count on its self-destruction. This self-destruction will mark the end of maraism, the Dharma-Ending Age, and the coming of Maitreya, who will bring communism. All this is described in the Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta (DN26), the Sutta of The Wheel-Turning Monarch. This sutra narrates the trajectory of existence, from Primordial Communism, which existed before us, to the global social collapse, followed by the construction of a compassionate society and the coming of Buddha Maitreya, who will bring the definitive dissolution of the State. Let's observe some excerpts from this sutta:

“Once upon a time, mendicants, there was a king named Daḷhanemi who was a wheel-turning monarch, a just and principled king. His dominion extended to all four sides, he achieved stability in the country, and he possessed the seven treasures... He had over a thousand sons who were valiant and heroic, crushing the armies of his enemies. After conquering this land girt by sea, he reigned by principle, without rod or sword.

Then, after many years, many hundred years, many thousand years had passed, King Daḷhanemi addressed one of his men, My good man, when you see that the heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place, please tell me’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ replied that man.

After many thousand years had passed, that man saw that the heavenly wheel-treasure had receded back from its place. So he went to King Daḷhanemi and said, ‘Please sire, you should know that your heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place.’

So the king summoned the crown prince and said, Dear prince, my heavenly wheel-treasure has receded back from its place. I’ve heard that when this happens to a wheel-turning monarch, he does not have long to live. I have enjoyed human pleasures. Now it is time for me to seek heavenly pleasures. Come, dear prince, rule this land surrounded by ocean! I shall shave off my hair and beard, dress in ocher robes, and go forth from the lay life to homelessness.’

And so, after carefully instructing the crown prince in kingship, King Daḷhanemi shaved off his hair and beard, dressed in ocher robes, and went forth from the lay life to homelessness. The signs of the renunciate predate Buddhism. Seven days later the heavenly wheel-treasure vanished.

Then a certain man approached the newly anointed aristocrat king and said, ‘Please sire, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.’ At that the king was unhappy and experienced unhappiness. He went to the royal sage and said, ‘Please sire, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.’

When he said this, the royal sage said to him, ‘Don’t be unhappy at the vanishing of the wheel-treasure. My dear, the wheel-treasure is not inherited from your father. Come now, my dear, proceed in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. If you do so, it’s possible that—on a fifteenth day sabbath, having bathed your head and gone upstairs in the royal longhouse to observe the sabbath—the heavenly wheel-treasure will appear to you, with a thousand spokes, with rim and hub, complete in every detail.’

[...]

And for a second time, and a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, and a seventh time, a wheel-turning monarch was established in exactly the same way. And after many years the seventh wheel-turning monarch went forth, handing the realm over to the crown prince. Seven days later the heavenly wheel-treasure vanished.

Then a certain man approached the newly anointed aristocrat king and said, 'Please sire, you should know that the heavenly wheel-treasure has vanished.' At that the king was unhappy and experienced unhappiness. But he didn't go to the royal sage and ask about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. He just governed the country according to his own ideas. So governed, the country's people did not prosper like before, as they had when former kings proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch.

Then the ministers and counselors, the treasury officials, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers gathered and said to the king, 'Sire, when governed according to your own ideas, the country's people do not prosper like before, as they did when former kings proceeded in the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. In your realm are found ministers and counselors, treasury officials, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers—both ourselves and others—who remember the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. Please, Your Majesty, ask us about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. We will answer you.'

So the anointed king asked the assembled ministers and counselors, treasury officials, military officers, guardsmen, and professional advisers about the noble duty of a wheel-turning monarch. And they answered him. After listening to them, he provided just protection and security. But he did not provide money to the penniless in the realm. And so poverty grew widespread.

[...]

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty became widespread. When poverty was widespread, theft became widespread. When theft was widespread, swords became widespread. When swords were widespread, killing living creatures became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom killing was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. Those people lived for 80,000 years, but their children lived for 40,000 years.

Among the people who lived for 40,000 years, a certain person stole something from others. They arrested him and presented him to the king, saying, 'Your Majesty, this person stole from others.'

The king said to that person, 'Is it really true, mister, that you stole from others?'

'No, sire,' he said, deliberately lying.

And so, mendicants, from not providing money to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, and killing became widespread. When killing was widespread, lying became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom lying was widespread, their lifespan and

beauty declined. Those people who lived for 40,000 years had children who lived for 20,000 years.”

We can see that, before all our existence, even before the existence of the first human as we know it, in primordial times beyond history, there was a just society where all basic needs were met, poverty was non-existent, and harmony was universal. However, from the first neglect of the needy, society began to collapse. With the breakdown of this primordial socialism, all human problems began.

We must consider that the monarchical language of this text, in this context, was a way that the Historical Buddha used to explain the existence of Primordial Communism to an audience familiar only with monarchy as a system. This primordial communism existed both symbolically and literally – the literalness, in this case, does not manifest in our plane of existence but in other planes of existence that transform into ours in a long process – not necessarily meaning a literal monarchy.

After the temporary end of this Primordial Communism, society began a process of regression from Buddhist to maraist systems. Obviously not as a linear regression – feudalism is certainly not more Buddhist than capitalism – but also not as an idea of progress, from the worst system to the best system – primitive communism can be considered more Buddhist than later systems. However, beyond describing how we got where we are, the sutra also describes where we are going. Let's see:

“There will come a time, mendicants, when these people will have children who live for ten years. Among the people who live for ten years, girls will be marriageable at five. The following flavors will disappear: ghee, butter, oil, honey, molasses, and salt. The best kind of food will be finger millet, just as fine rice with meat is the best kind of food today.

The ten ways of doing skillful deeds will totally disappear, and the ten ways of doing unskillful deeds will explode in popularity. Those people will not even have the word ‘skillful’, still less anyone who does what is skillful. And anyone who disrespects mother and father, ascetics and brahmins, and fails to honor the elders in the family will be venerated and praised, just as the opposite is venerated and praised today.

There'll be no recognition of the status of mother, aunts, or wives and partners of teachers and respected people. The world will become dissolute, like goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, and dogs and jackals.

They'll be full of hostility towards each other, with acute ill will, malevolence, and thoughts of murder. Even a mother will feel like this for her child, and the child for its mother, father for child, child for father, brother for sister, and sister for brother. They'll be just like a deer hunter when he sees a deer—full of hostility, ill will, malevolence, and thoughts of killing. Among the people who live for ten years, there will be an interregnum of swords lasting seven days. During that time they will see each other as beasts. Sharp swords will appear in their hands, with which they'll take each other's life, crying, ‘It's a beast! It's a beast!’

But then some of those beings will think, ‘Let us neither kill nor be killed! Why don't we hide in thick grass, thick jungle, thick trees, inaccessible riverlands, or rugged mountains and survive on forest roots and fruits? So that's what they do.

When those seven days have passed, having emerged from their hiding places and embraced each other, they will come together and cry in one voice. Fantastic, dear foe, you live! Fantastic, dear foe, you live!

Then those beings will think, It's because we undertook unskillful things that we suffered such an extensive loss of our relatives. We'd better do what's skillful. What skillful thing should we do? Why don't we refrain from killing living creatures? Having undertaken this skillful thing we'll live by it. So that's what they do. Because of undertaking this skillful thing, their lifespan and beauty will grow. Those people who live for ten years will have children who live for twenty years."

Capitalism is an unsustainable system, promoting hatred and extreme individualism. Within the capitalist system, people's living conditions only worsen, the destruction of nature increases incessantly, and a social explosion in the face of these conditions is inevitable, as described in the sutra.

Capitalism, through its own policies, brings its own destruction. This is what we call the inevitable collapse. We cannot make the revolution with our own hands because we cannot do anything from our self power. All historical change, every end of the world: everything is built from karmic conditions that are beyond our reach, that we cannot control. There cannot be a vision of human supremacy over existence, we are part of the process, but we are not the leaders. Therefore, capitalism is an entity in itself, no longer controlled (if it ever was) by humans, but has become a being whose only ultimate goal is its own annihilation, and in this process destroys everything it sees ahead.

In this sense, we can see that communism is also not a human work, but a work that operates beyond humanity, that builds itself despite our will. Communism is Amida manifesting as Maitreya for our Salvation. Communism is both messianic and eschatological. It can only exist after this collapse that signifies the end of the world as we know it, but also the birth of a completely new world, free from all the chains imposed by Mara. Amida is both the destruction of things as we know them and the construction of the New.

As described in the sutra, after this social collapse, we will build a better society together. Only through a social collapse, and not a "classic" revolution directed by a party or revolutionary groups, can we exercise a true ethic of consequence. An ethic that arises spontaneously through compassion, contrasting with an ethic of result, which is selfish. Only then can we recognize the limitation of our own power and be grateful for all this karmic structure beyond our control and understanding.

Witnessing all this suffering is what allows the birth of compassion, the birth of a collective movement that cares for the life and well-being of our brothers and sisters. Suffering is the spark of compassion, and without one, the other does not exist. This collapse, although horrible, is what will allow mutual cooperation and the coming of Maitreya, who will return with Primordial Communism and finally dissolve the State and all the social chains of the maraist system.

The sadness of seeing the worsening of existence is inevitable, but we must transform this sadness into joy, see that the worse things get, the closer we are to the end of all pain, the closer we are to the end of the End, the coming of Maitreya, and communism. Within this collective suffering, there is the Light of Amida, for this Light reaches everywhere we can look. Within social or personal suffering, there is a spark of hope for a better future. Thus, suffering becomes compassion, which becomes love, which becomes joy, which becomes gratitude. Thank you, Amida,

for showing us your Light. Thank you, Mara, for self-destructing. Thank you, Maitreya-Amida, for saving us at the end of times! Thank you for the collapse! In this logic of contradictions, we affirm: the worse, the better!

“And the Blessed One named Metteyya (Maitreya) will arise in the world—perfected, a fully awakened Buddha, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, holy, knower of the world, supreme guide for those who wish to train, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed just as I have arisen today. He will realize with his own insight this world—with its gods, Māras and Brahmās, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, gods and humans—and make it known to others, just as I do today. He will teach the Dhamma that’s good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, meaningful and well-phrased. And he will reveal a spiritual practice that’s entirely full and pure, just as I do today. He will lead a Saṅgha of many thousand mendicants, just as I lead a Saṅgha of many hundreds today.

Then King Saṅkha will have the sacrificial post once built by King Mahāpanāda raised up. Having reigned, he will abdicate, offering charity to ascetics and brahmins, paupers, vagrants, nomads, and beggars. Then, having shaved off his hair and beard and dressed in ocher robes, he will go forth from the lay life to homelessness in the Buddha Metteyya’s presence. Soon after going forth, living withdrawn, diligent, keen, and resolute, he will realize the supreme end of the spiritual path in this very life. He will live having achieved with his own insight the goal for which gentlemen rightly go forth from the lay life to homelessness.”

4. So what to do now?

“The worse, the better” does not mean that we should actively “worsen” the situation. The collapse and the coming of Maitreya are already scheduled and independent of our actions. Precisely because of this, we must do our utmost to alleviate these sufferings. Since we cannot accelerate this process, we must make it the least worst for all beings. Much less should we stand still doing nothing, otherwise why would the Buddha have encouraged us to be bodhisattvas working for the liberation of beings?

Our movement, contrary to nihilism, is an affirmative movement, not negative. This affirmation does not arise from us, it arises spontaneously, as a form of gratitude after having contact with Amida’s Light, either through suffering or compassion. These affirmative movements are not the action of our own power, it is Amida acting through us. At the moment we act with compassion, we also become an image like that of Maitreya, bringing a bit of the communist future into our present. In this way, we improve our lives and those of our equals. This is what Shinran did by teaching the Dharma to the marginalized people of Japan.

We live in challenging times, where the practice of the Dharma is increasingly difficult and society is in constant deterioration. However, this does not mean we should give up. On the contrary, we must redouble our efforts to live according to the teachings of the Buddha, build supportive communities, and prepare for the inevitable collapse of capitalism.

Buddhist anarchism, though it cannot fully materialize in the Dharma-Ending Age, offers a path of resistance and hope. It is a practice of compassion and love, seeking to alleviate suffering and prepare the ground for the coming of Maitreya and the construction of a new society.

We must always fight, even knowing of our victorious defeat. The struggle, even if it does not bring a “victory,” helps us advance with the Dharma, bring the Buddha’s teachings to more people, and allow the Light to be perceived more and more. “One cannot be human without fighting, but it is not here that one wins. Here, one can only fight. Accommodation to attachment drags us to even greater suffering,” says Rev. Gustavo Shogyo in his text on Rennyō Shōnin.

We must take action to build radical Sanghas, spaces willing to accept all people and offer better material conditions now that provide the cultivation of spirituality, no matter the cost. We need to have communist-Buddhist islands within this capitalist-Maraist sea. Acting with compassion is acting radically, sometimes even aggressively. Acting with compassion is confronting this system, building inclusive alternatives, and not allowing persecution of us and our equals. The article “Buddhist-Anarchist Praxis” by Mx. Flow gives us a good horizon of what we can do here and now. We must propagate the Dharma through just struggle, defending the marginalized and realizing that we are all part of them. We should not see ourselves as an external movement that will bring salvation, but as the people collectively saving themselves. And we must always have Buddhism as the guide for this compassionate construction.

Accepting that the Dharma-Ending Age makes it impossible to build our socialist-Buddhist utopia does not mean giving up all forms of action, nor does it mean giving up the Buddhist Revolution. We should not even put this horizon aside, for only the struggle for this society can allow the construction of real alternatives in the current society. It means simply seeing a broader horizon where we are already saved. It means being able to see new and more creative ways to conduct this constant revolution and enable the experience of anarchism now, through the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. For, as we have nothing to do, we can do everything. Just let Amida’s compassion act through you.

Namu Amida Butsu.

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