

The Anarchist Sangha

A New Take on Community

Mx. Flow

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The Historical & Contemporary Sangha

When looking at the setup and present organization of the Buddhist sangha (community) I think it's important to consider the historical context of the sangha and the milieu in which it 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 monastic rules (The Vinaya) many of them (important to note, not all) 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.

One way in which the monastic community made itself both approachable by supportive powers, as in the state, (see: Ashoka) was by maintaining a hierarchy within the monastic community. While this is not necessarily a facet of the monastic community per-se it is effectively how most Buddhist organizations function. Senior monks have more control over more novice monks. Because we do not live in a society that functions on needs-based justice, leaving the monastic order effectively 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, especially for orders which prohibit the holding of money. Is this the reality? I don't know.

In Ajahn Lee's biography he talks about this relationship he had with one of his teachers, one of utter servitude. There was a clear hierarchy between himself and the master. He'd list at 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, the whole thing comes off to me as stupid. It's not a relationship founded on mutual aid, it's one person begging at the feet of another.

Relationships like this are ultimately ineffective in training for most people. Most people don't want to act like a servant or a slave. I'm proposing that the teaching dynamic between student and teacher be one of mutual aid, cooperation and voluntary contract. Likewise the relationship between laity is often similarly servile. The reasoning for this, as I understand it, is 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 rules and practices. That kind of effort deserves a kind of respect and that respect can in turn motivate the monastics themselves to live up to it. I imagine 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 I'm going to contend that a greater connection to the teachings and greater benefit can be had if this dynamic of respect is made less *worshippy* or reverential. If the relationship were one more of friendship and community, mutual aid, where lay is supporting monastic out of compassion, with the love that someone is able to live a monastic lifestyle of practice and teaching, there could be more benefit for both parties. Less alienation between the two parts of the community. More openness for questions and engagement, less fear.

The organizational framework of both monastic and lay community could also institute consensus decision making, where each voice in the community is made equal.

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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 circumstances. Essentially pointing out how the circumstances into which we are born do actually 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, 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.

There's practice of generosity in creating living communities which reduce or eliminate these painful circumstances and allow people the context in which to grow as practitioners. Communes, basically. In those communes 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.

Emma Goodman, Anarchism: What It Really Stands For

Teaching relationships between monastics and laity can be founded on mutual aid and cooperation, the reciprocation of dhamma and material support. Less worship of monastics, more cooperation and communion.

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