

Theme 2C The Nature of Ultimate Reality – Arhat and bodhisattva – Theravada and Mahayana teachings

Key concepts

- One general accepted theory is that by the end of the first century CE, a distinct form of Buddhism emerged that was different from what is known as Theravada. This new form is termed Mahayana (Greater Vehicle).
- Mahayana is a developed form of Theravada. Key differences include: new sutras (writings), a focus on both karuna (compassion) and prajna (wisdom), and belief that everyone has the tathagatagarbha (Buddha-nature) within.
- Mahayana Buddhism viewed Theravada as being based **only** on the Buddha’s teaching for his original audience. Mahayana’s teachings had prajnaparamita (perfect wisdom) – that is deeper truths available for more people.
- A major difference between Theravada and Mahayana concerns the ultimate spiritual status of a Buddhist. In Theravada, it is to be an arhat (noble/worthy one) and in Mahayana it is to be a bodhisattva (enlightened being). In Mahayana, the best-known bodhisattvas are Avalokitesvara and Manjushri.
- Bodhisattvas are Buddha but continue to assist sentient beings in samsara. Mahayana’s complex cosmology describes multiple universes with multiple Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

- In becoming a bodhisattva, a person will demonstrate that they have paramitas (perfections). Six of these are generally noted in Mahayana: (1) dana (generosity), (2) sila (morality), (3) kshanti (patience), (4) virya (energy), (5) dhyana (meditation), (6) prajna (wisdom).
- At the same time as developing the paramitas a person goes through 10 bhumis (stages/ foundations) of spiritual development. With each stage, prajna grows alongside karuna with the focus on bringing all sentient beings to Awakening/enlightenment. Thus, the 1st bhumi involves understanding sunyata (emptiness) and giving everything away to develop dana.
- At the 6th bhumi, whilst the person can achieve nibbana, they decide to remain in the world to assist sentient beings. The 10th bhumi is when jnana (knowledge) is complete and when the person, having received rays of light from innumerable Buddhas, arises from their meditation as a Buddha.

Key quotes

‘Nibbana is not situated in any place nor is it a sort of heaven where a transcendental ego resides. It is a state which is dependent upon this body itself. It is an attainment which is within the reach of all.’ (Narada Thera)

‘The Bodhicitta is present in the hearts of all sentient beings. Only in Buddhas it is fully awakened and active.’ (Suzuki)

‘The bodhisattva vow is the commitment to put others before oneself. It is a statement of willingness to give up one’s own well-being, even one’s own enlightenment, for the sake of others.’ (Trungpa)

- In Theravada, a bhikku following the Eightfold Path goes through four stages in their spiritual progress: (1) sotapanna (stream-enterer), (2) sakadagami (once-returner), (3) anagama (non-returner) and (4) arhat.
- Each stage is marked by the bhikku becoming increasingly free of “chains/fetters”, which limit spiritual progress such as ignorance, ill will, pride, craving, attachment to rituals.
- Ultimately this is a solitary path and may take a number of lifetimes to complete. Once a bhikku becomes an arhat, he has attained nibbana in this life, which means that his mind is detached from his body and bodily experiences such as pain and his actions are free from karma.

Key words

karuna	prajna	paramita	bhumi	sotapanna
sakadagami	anagama	bodhicitta	tathagatagarbha	

- In Mahayana, a person already has tathagatagarbha, but to begin their spiritual progress they need to awaken their bodhicitta (Buddha consciousness) through reflection on things such as Buddhas, dukkha, material existence, etc.
- Spiritual progress is complex and involves: making 10 vows with the focus on remaining in samsara and gaining personal prajna and karuna, which can then be used for the good of all sentient beings to help them move out of samsara through awakening their bodhicitta (enlightened mind).

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on the arhat or bodhisattva in Theravada/Mahayana being a helpful role model for Buddhists.

Key questions

To what extent is the arhat status a selfish one when compared to the bodhisattva status?

Is the goal of the arhat and the bodhisattva the same or different?