

# Arhantism, Buddha and Education

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## ABSTRACT

*For more than two millennia, Buddhism has been a powerful religious, political, and social force, first in India, its original homeland, and then in many other lands. It remains a powerful religious, political, and cultural force in many parts of the world today. There is every reason to expect that the appeal of Buddhism will continue far on into the future.*

**Keywords:** *Arhantism, Metteya, Non-returner.*

## Introduction

Arhat, (Sanskrit: “one who is worthy”), Pali arahant, in Buddhism, a perfected person, one who has gained insight into the true nature of existence and has achieved nirvana (spiritual enlightenment). The arhat, having freed himself from the bonds of desire, will not be reborn.

The state of an arhat is considered in the Theravada tradition to be the proper goal of a Buddhist. Four stages of attainment are described in Pali texts:

- (1) the state of the “stream-enterer”—i.e., a convert (sotapanna)—achieved by overcoming false beliefs and doubts regarding the Buddha, the teaching (dhamma), and the order (sangha),
- (2) the “once-returner” (sakadagamin), who will be reborn only once in this realm, a state attained by diminishing lust, hatred, and illusion,
- (3) the “nonreturner” (anagamin), who, after death, will be reborn in a higher heaven, where he will become an arhat, a state attained by overcoming sensuous desire and ill will, in addition to the attainments of the first two stages, and

- (4) the arhat. Except under extraordinary circumstances, **a man or woman can become an arhat only while a monk or nun.**

Mahayana Buddhists criticize the arhat ideal on the grounds that the bodhisattva is a higher goal of perfection, for the bodhisattva vows to become a buddha in order to work for the good of others. This divergence of opinion continues to be one of the fundamental differences between the Theravada and Mahayana traditions.

In China, as well as in Korea, Japan and Tibet, arhats (Chinese lohan, Japanese rakan) were often depicted on the walls of temples in groups of 16 (later enlarged to 18, or even 500). They represent 16 close disciples of the Buddha who were entrusted by him to remain in the world and not to enter nirvana until the coming of the next buddha, in order to provide people with objects of worship.

## Theravada and Teachings

Theravada (Pali: “Way of the Elders”), or Sthaviravada (Sanskrit), emerged as one of the Hinayana (Sanskrit: “Lesser Vehicle”)

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schools, traditionally numbered at 18, of early Buddhism. The Theravadins trace their lineage to the Sthaviravada school, one of two major schools (the Mahasanghika was the other) that supposedly formed in the wake of the Council of Vaishali (now in Bihar state) held some 100 years after the Buddha's death. Employing Pali as their sacred language, the Theravadins preserved their version of the Buddha's teaching in the Tipitaka ("Three Baskets").

During the reign of the emperor Ashoka (3rd century bc), the Theravada school was established in Sri Lanka, where it subsequently divided into three subgroups, known after their respective monastic centres. The cosmopolitan Abhayagiriviharavasi maintained open relations with Mahayana and later Vajrayana monks and welcomed new ideas from India. The Mahaviharavasi—with whom the third group, the Jetavanaviharavasi, was loosely associated—established the first monastery in Sri Lanka and preserved intact the original Theravadin teachings.

### **Beliefs, doctrines and practices Cosmology**

Like other Buddhists, Theravadins believe that the number of cosmos is infinite. Moreover, they share the near-universal Buddhist view that the cosmos inhabited by humankind, like all cosmos, has three planes of existence: the realm of desire (Pali and Sanskrit: kama-loka), the lowest of the planes; the realm of material form (Pali and Sanskrit: rupa-loka), which is associated with meditational states in which sensuous desire is reduced to a minimum; and the realm of immateriality or formlessness (Pali and Sanskrit: arupa-loka), which is associated with meditational states that are even more exalted.

The three planes are divided into various levels. The realm of desire is divided into heavens, hells, and the earth. It is inhabited by those suffering in the various hells—a species

of wandering, famished ghosts (Sanskrit: pretas), animals, hell beings, human beings, gods, and a sixth group that is not universally acknowledged, the asuras (Sanskrit: demigods). The entire cosmos is enclosed by a great Chakkavala wall, a ring of iron mountains that serves as a kind of container for the realm of desire. Mount Meru, the great cosmic mountain topped by the heaven of the 33 gods over which Indra (Sakka) presides, is surrounded by a great ocean where people live on four island continents, each inhabited by a different type of human being. (The southern continent, loosely correlated with South—and sometimes Southeast—Asia, is called Jambudvipa.) The material aspect of the realm of desire is made up of four elements: earth, water, fire, and air, held together in various combinations.

The Mahavihara ("Great Monastery") school became dominant in Sri Lanka at the beginning of the 2nd millennium ce and gradually spread through mainland Southeast Asia. It was established in Myanmar in the late 11th century, in Thailand in the 13th and early 14th centuries, and in Cambodia and Laos by the end of the 14th century. Although Mahavihara never completely replaced other schools in Southeast Asia, it received special favour at most royal courts and, as a result of the support it received from local elites, exerted a very strong religious and social influence.

In this cosmos, as in all others, time moves in cycles of great duration involving a period of involution (destruction of the cosmos by fire, water, air), a period of reformation of the cosmic structure, a series of cycles of decline and renewal and, finally another period of involution from which the process is initiated once again. Five buddhas are destined to appear in the cosmos in which humans live, including Gotama (Sanskrit: Gautama), who is to be the fourth, and Metteyya (Sanskrit: Maitreya), who is to be the fifth.

Human existence is a privileged state, because only as a human being can a bodhisattva become a buddha. Moreover, according to Theravada, human beings can choose to do good works (which will result in a good rebirth) or bad works (which result in a bad rebirth); above all, they have the capacity to become perfected saints. All these capacities are accounted for in terms of a carefully enumerated series of dhammas (Sanskrit: dharmas), the elements' impermanent existence. In continual motion, these changing states appear, age and disappear.

### **The Stages Leading to Arhatship**

Theravadins maintain that the ideal Buddhist is the “one who is worthy” (Sanskrit: arhat; Pali: arahant), the perfected person who attains nirvana through his own efforts. Although the Theravadin arhat “takes refuge in the Buddha,” his focus is on the practice of the Buddha's dhamma (Pali).

According to the Theravadins, true insight is achieved by passing through four stages. The first stage is that of the “stream winner” or “stream enterer,” the individual who has seen the truth, has experienced the first real intimations of nirvana, and will undergo no more than seven additional rebirths. Next is the stage of the “once-returned,” who will endure no more than one additional rebirth before achieving nirvana. The third stage is that of the “nonreturner,” who will achieve release in the present life or, at the very least, before another rebirth occurs. One who has reached this stage has broken free from the lower bonds of doubt, belief in a permanent self, faith in the results generated by rituals, sensual passion and malice. The fourth and final stage is that of the arhat, who has attained complete freedom. The arhat is free from the bonds of ignorance, excitability, ambition and the desire for existence in either the formed or formless worlds.

### **The Buddha**

The state of the Buddha, the perfectly Enlightened One, is nirvana (Pali: nibbana). Beyond death—neither caused, born, nor produced—nirvana transcends all becoming and is devoid of all that makes up a human being. Three kinds of nirvana are particularly associated with Buddhahood. The first, the nibbana of the kilesas (Pali: “defilements”), is achieved by the Buddha when he attains enlightenment and leaves behind all defilements. The second kind, the nibbana of the khandas (Pali: “aggregate”), is achieved when the Buddha “dies” and leaves behind the aggregates that have constituted his identity as a person. Finally, at the time when the Buddha's religion becomes extinct, his relics return to Bodh Gaya (the place of his enlightenment) or, in some texts, to Anarudhapura (the ancient capital of Sri Lanka), where they will reassemble into the body of the Buddha, who then preaches one last sermon before completely disappearing. At this point the Buddha attains his final nibbana, the dhatu (Pali) or relic nibbana.

The Buddha has been given many other names, the most common of which are Arahant and Tathagata (“He Who Has Thus Attained”). According to Theravada scriptures, previous buddhas (mostly those who met Gotama in one of his past lives) are recognized by name, and there is a single mention of the future buddha Metteyya (Sanskrit: Maitreya). The Theravadins came to believe that Metteyya is presently in the Tusita heaven and will come into the world in the distant future to reestablish the religion.

### **Basic teachings**

#### **The Buddha: divinization and multiplicity**

In the Mahayana tradition the Buddha is viewed as a supramundane being. He multiplies

himself and is often reflected in a pentad of buddhas—Vairochana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi—who reveal various doctrines and elaborate liturgies and sometimes take the place of Shakyamuni.

As the tradition developed, there emerged new texts that were considered by Mahayana adherents to be Buddhavachana (“the word or words of the Buddha”). This new literature went far beyond the ancient canons and was believed to be the highest revelation, superseding earlier texts. In this literature the teaching is thought to operate on various levels, each adapted to the intellectual capacity and karmic propensities of those who hear it.

### **The bodhisattva ideal**

The purpose of the bodhisattva is to achieve enlightenment and to fulfill the vow to become a buddha. The bodhisattva also foregoes entrance into nirvana in order to remain in the world as long as there are creatures to be saved from suffering.

Beginning with the vow to become a buddha, the career of a bodhisattva, according to some texts, traverses 10 stages or spiritual levels (bhumi) and achieves purification through the practice of the 10 perfections (paramitas). These levels elevate the bodhisattva to Buddhahood. The first six levels are preliminary, representing the true practice of the six perfections (generosity, morality, patience, vigour, concentration and wisdom). Even though further purification and fortification must be achieved in the following stages, irreversibility occurs as soon as the seventh stage has been reached and the bodhisattva has assumed the true buddha nature. This is the moment when he engages in activity aimed at fulfilling the obligations of a bodhisattva. The difference between this and the preceding six stages is that now the activity

is explained as an innate and spontaneous impulse manifested with conscious constraint and therefore not subject to doubt. Everything is now uncreated, ungenerated; thus, the body of the bodhisattva becomes identified more and more completely with the essential body (dharmakaya), with Buddhahood and with omniscience.

### **The Three Buddha Bodies**

The three bodies (trikaya; i.e., modes of being) of the Buddha are rooted in Hinayana teachings concerning the physical body, the mental body, and the body of the law. The theory of the three bodies was a subject of major discussion for the Mahayana, becoming part of the salvation process and assuming central significance in doctrine. The emanation body (nirmanakaya) is the form of the Buddha that appears in the world to teach people the path to liberation. The enjoyment (or bliss) body (sambhogakaya) is the celestial body of the Buddha to which contemplation can ascend. In the heavenly regions, or Pure Lands, the enjoyment body teaches the bodhisattva doctrines that are unintelligible to those who are unenlightened. The unmanifested body of the law (dharmakaya) already appears in the Saddharmapundarika, or Lotus Sutra, a transitional text of great importance to Mahayana devotional schools. In many Mahayana texts buddhas are infinite and share an identical nature—the dharmakaya.

As anticipated in ancient schools, the Buddha is the law (dharma) and is identified with an eternal dharma, enlightenment (bodhi), and nirvana. In later schools real existence is opposed to the mere appearance of existence, and voidness, the “thingness of things,” an undefinable condition, present and immutable within the Buddhas, is stressed. All is in the dharmakaya, the third body and expression of ultimate reality; nothing is outside it, just as

nothing is outside space; transcendence and immanence come together. Other schools posit a presence that is innate within all human beings, even if it is not perceived. It is like a gem hidden in dross, which shines in its purity as soon as the veil of ignorance has been removed.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

The condition of contemporary Buddhist communities and the challenges they face differ radically from area to area. There are a number of countries, for example, where previously well-established Buddhist communities have suffered severe setbacks that have curtailed their influence and seriously sapped their vitality. This situation prevails primarily in countries that are or once were ruled by communist governments that worked self-consciously to undercut Buddhist institutional power and influence. This has happened in the Mongol areas of Central Asia, in mainland China and Tibet, in North Korea, in Vietnam, in Cambodia, and in Laos. By the end of the 20th century, the pressure on Buddhist communities in many of these areas had eased, though conditions varied from country to country and from time to time. In Cambodia, Buddhism has been officially reinstated as the state religion.

In these areas older Buddhist traditions have mixed and interacted in ways that have generated rapid changes in ways of thinking and in modes of practice. Many indigenous converts place greater emphasis upon the practice of meditation than upon monastic life and since the mid-20th century a steady stream of books and other media have reflected this trend. Many other North American-born Buddhists of non-Asian descent have studied in traditional Buddhist countries, become ordained, and returned to the United States to lead and even found monasteries and Buddhist community centres. Some practicing Buddhists and scholars

of Buddhism believe that the process of accommodation and acculturation in the West and particularly in North America, is leading to a “fourth turning of the Wheel of the Dharma,” a new form of Buddhism that will turn out to be quite different from the traditional forms of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana while incorporating aspects of each.

### **Conclusion**

For more than two millennia, Buddhism has been a powerful religious, political and social force, first in India, its original homeland, and then in many other lands. It remains a powerful religious, political, and cultural force in many parts of the world today. There is every reason to expect that the appeal of Buddhism will continue far on into the future.

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