

## To be Bodhisattva, be arhat first<sup>1</sup>

If we care to spend some time studying the early Buddhist texts, we would notice that, contrary to common Mahayana belief, arhats can be as compassionate as, if not more than, Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Take, for example, Sāriputta, the wisest of the arhats after the Buddha.<sup>2</sup> He is well known for his great compassion and deep humility just as he is truly wise.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, we must say that arhats are compassionate in the real sense of the word, while the Bodhisattvas do not exist (historically) like the arhats. Mahayana Bodhisattvas, as we know, do not exist like you and I exist. They are embodiments of various qualities of the Buddha, such as compassion (Avalokitevara) and wisdom (Manjusri). They serve as objects of meditation.

In later times, as Buddhism grew farther from India and further from the Buddha, such Bodhisattvas became practically gods who are said to be able to respond to our prayers. This of course only made Buddhism more popular, but such teachings are not found in early Buddhism. They are cultural (race-based) Buddhisms and magical (ritualistic) Buddhisms.

Yes, prayers to Bodhisattvas do get “answered,” as do prayers by millions other non-Buddhists in other religions. No religion has the exclusive right to answering prayers: even the prayers of non-religious people get answered. This has to do with the psychology of prayer and statistics of probability, than whether a religion is true or not. The problem is that people rarely ever talk about their prayers that are not answered.<sup>4</sup>

Mahayanists, as we know, distinguish arhats from Buddhas or Bodhisattvas in that the arhats do not vow to save all sentient beings, but are “only” concerned with their own buddhahood. Professor Gomez wondered if this is a kind of “Mahayana joke.” In fact, he said, rather than seeking to be a Bodhisattva, it would be better to be an arhat because it’s much easier. We should think twice before we take the Bodhisattva vows: we have to save all sentient beings!

In the Mahayana approach, there must be a strong quest for inner peace at the same time. Furthermore, because we live in a messy world, there must also be a strong commitment to be of service to others. We have to carefully examine if this is really what we see happening amongst the Mahayana priests and followers. Proclaiming noble ideals is one thing, actually practising them is another.

One of the most important aspects of the Mahayana Bodhisattva is that they don’t stay either on “this shore” of our everyday world or on the “other shore” of enlightenment. The Mahayana texts tell us that they move back and forth in their efforts to save all sentient beings. In order to do so, they must adapt to others’ needs.

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection is inspired by a lecture by Prof Luis O Gomez on “Mahayana Buddhism: Images of Liberation, Acceptance, and Adaptation to the Needs of Others,” at the Higashi Honganji Betsuin, Honolulu, Hawaii, on 12 June 2010: <http://www.livingdharma.org/Living.Dharma.Articles/MahayanaBuddhism-Gomez.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See also Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 ch 5.10-36: <https://sites.google.com/site/dharmafarer/home/books-by-piya-tan>

<sup>3</sup> See eg **Vuṭṭha Vass’āvāsa Sutta** (A 9.11/4:373-378) = SD 28.2a: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/28.2a-Vuttha-Vassavasa-S-a9.11-piya1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See **Iṭṭha Sutta** (A 5.43/3:47-49) = SD 12.4 (2). See also “**Prayer without words**,” *Simple Joys 2*, 2011 ch 44: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29-Prayer-without-words-101215.pdf>.

What does it mean to adapt to others' needs? Part of the answer is in the later Buddhist tradition of having so many different kinds of images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities and demons. Take the example of a mother, suggests Prof Gomez: what does a mother do when her infant cries? If the mother merely says, "Shhh ...," it is not likely to work. Instead, the mother would look at her baby in the eye and say in gentle baby talk, "Ohhh...what's the matter?..." The baby might not understand her words, but it would surely get the sense that "Mom cares and is listening to my needs." This is adapting to others: it is actively listening and caring for others.

Wouldn't it be wrong if we talked about wise Buddhas and compassionate Bodhisattvas, but we do not actively listen or really care for others? We do not unconditionally accept others, like the mother her child? Or worse, we simply use these ideas to make people serve and support us. It only shows that we do not ourselves even believe in the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas.

So how do we, as true Buddhists, adapt ourselves to exemplify the wisdom of the Buddha and the compassion of the Bodhisattvas? Surely, we need to calm ourselves first, and with that calmness, to go on to cultivate wisdom. We do not really become calm, wise and compassionate simply by chanting the Buddha's names or worshipping Bodhisattva images.

We need to emulate their qualities. We become calm and wise by recollecting the virtues of the historical Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (that is, his saints, including the arhats). We cultivate calm and wisdom through lovingkindness and breath meditations. This way, we are at peace with ourselves and can unconditionally accept all beings (even those we do not like).

In other words, we need to be like the arhats. The ancient arhats emulated the Buddha. They knew the difficulties that the Buddha went through in the many lives he spent as a bodhisattva. The small "b" means that the Buddha really lived as a historical person cultivating bodhisattva qualities of charity, moral virtue, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom. The Buddha was not a Mahayana Bodhisattva.

Before we even think of liberating "all" beings, indeed, even of helping a single person in need, we must prepare ourselves with wisdom and compassion. We should be wisely kind to the people around us before we try to save the world, or all beings. In other words, we need to practise what the arhats have practised: the Buddha's teachings. We need to be an arhat first before we even think of becoming a Bodhisattva.<sup>5</sup> After all, even the Buddha is an arhat, too, before becoming Buddha.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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<sup>5</sup> See Reflection, "[Do Bodhisattvas exist?](#)" R327, 2014. On a simpler level, if we aspire to become buddha, we need to meet a future buddha to affirm this: see Reflection, "[I will wait for you](#)," R362, 2014.