

Correcting the Buddha?

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With the free access to education and information today, it is easier for us to learn Buddhism. However, without direct access to the early suttas or a sutta teacher, we are more likely to have fixed views and be caught up with them, instead of using them to free ourself from views and attain awakening in this life itself.

Buddha and arhats same awakening

Here, I will answer some challenges to early Buddhism from such preachers in our own time. Such preachers understandably look up highly to philosophers like Nagarjuna, who, for example (they claim, but without citations), think that it is wrong to consider the Buddha’s awakening is the same as that of the arhats.

However, in the Sambuddha Sutta (S 22.58), for example, the Buddha clearly states that there is no difference whatsoever between his awakening and that of the arhat. The only difference is that the Buddha “gives rise to the unarisen path ... and his disciples now dwell as followers of that path, accomplishing it afterwards [after him].”¹

Only one path to nirvana

The Mahayana, it seems, think of the “path” in substantial terms, that there is the Buddha path, the Pratyeka Buddha path, and the Śravaka Path. Such ideas apparently filtered into later Pali Buddhism, too. Although we can speak of such paths, they are merely named after the one awakened. But the awakening is the same in all cases. The idea of an enlightened hierarchy was invented after the Buddha, and should be rejected.

The path does not change for the traveler: it is the traveler who is transformed as he journeys to awakening. Everyone reaches the same ancient city, so to speak.²

Buddhahood from awakening, not merits

Another serious Mahayana misconception today is that the Buddha’s awakening or Buddhahood (capital B refers to the Mahayana conception) is the result of countless merits piled up over countless aeons. Merits may bring the best rebirths for us, but it does not bring awakening.

Merit is like the great wealth we have. We may use it to join the best university, but it does not make us pass exams: we have to study and train. Indeed, it is less about passing exams than it is about our studying, being trained and graduating as good scholars through diligence and wisdom.

¹ S 22.58 ([SD 49.10](#)).

² The ancient city: Nagara Sutta (S 12.65), [SD 14.2](#).

If we carefully study the key suttas of the 4 Nikayas, we hardly find the Buddha talking about any great merits he has accumulated that brings him his awakening. In the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta (M 26)—on the noble quest—the Buddha tells us how he gives up the quest for worldly thing, and goes instead in quest of what will free him from the world—the overcoming of birth, decay, disease, death, sorrow and defilement. Merits may bring good karma, but it also brings these worldly things.³

The Buddha teaches the Dharma

Another strange claim the Mahayana makes today is that Nagarjuna thinks that “the period of time during [which] Buddha Shakyamuni was able to work for the welfare of other sentient beings following his full awakening, which was his primary reason for accumulating merits and wisdom over three innumerable eons, was extraordinarily short,” lasting only a “few decades.”

This is a strange statement. Again, we have no sutta attesting the Buddha ever saying this. In fact, the Ariya Pariyesana (M 26, sections 18-19) records the Buddha as initially reluctant to teach the Dharma, considering its depth and the difficulty for the world to understand it.

Reluctant Jotipāla

However, we have evidence to the contrary: that the Buddha does not make any vows about becoming Buddha. The (Majjhima) Ghaṭikāra Sutta (M 81) records that our Buddha was the brahmin youth, Jotipāla, during the time of Kassapa Buddha (the Buddha just before Sakyamuni). Jotipāla was so reluctant to meet Kassapa Buddha that his friend, the potter Ghaṭikāra, had to force him to meet the Buddha!

This cannot be a meritorious deed! The point again is that our Buddha’s awakening is not the result of great past merits, but his present seeing the true reality of decay, disease and death, and then seeking and finding their answer in nirvana. Anyway, again Nagarjuna was obviously wrong.⁴

Consciousness and nirvana

Then, there is the most serious wrong view of all: the notion that “there is nothing that can bring about the total cessation of the continuum of consciousness.” Even after the Buddha has awakened, only his defilements are eliminated, but “the continuum of the mind itself remains endless”! This is a good example of the extreme view of eternalism (sassata, diṭṭhi).

In the Aggi Vaccha, gotta Sutta (M 72), when the question is asked about where an arhat’s consciousness arises, the Buddha replies that we cannot speak of it in any logical way, whether it arises or not, or both, or neither—there is no consciousness to talk about!⁵

³ M 26 ([SD 1.11](#)).

⁴ M 81 ([SD 49.3](#)).

⁵ M 72,19-20/1:487 ([SD 6.15](#)).

Arhat's consciousness not found

The Godhika Sutta (S 4.23) records an interesting incident where Māra tries vainly to locate the consciousness of the arhat Godhika who has just died. He is unable to do so, despite searching “above, below and across | In the 4 quarters and in between”

Finally, the preacher quotes Nagarjuna (without citation) as claiming that Sanskrit Mahayana tradition is “more profound than the teaching of the Pali tradition, but also that they do not contradict the Pali teachings.” Profound maybe, but only in a philosophical sense, not in a scriptural or spiritual way of teaching us to free ourself of views. Indeed, there seems to be an unhealthy sense of triumphalism here, rather than a spirit of open inquiry.

Why not return to the Buddha?

“In a sense,” the preacher almost apologetically concludes, “one could say that the Mahayana scriptures elaborate on themes presented there. In this manner, Nagarjuna argues the authenticity of the Mahayana teachings.” Why not simply return to the simple, clear and sufficient teachings of early Buddhism, then?

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

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