

Turning the Buddha on his head

Source: **Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta** (M 123), SD 52.2 (3.6.2.4). Previous published as fb180219.

Mahāyānists see **the Bodhisattva** just as enlightened as the Buddha himself, even “more” enlightened than the Buddha. This is a new ideology, a teaching not found in early Buddhism. Such an innovation implies 2 grave consequences, both of which strongly go against the spirit of early Buddhism and the possibility of awakening through self-effort.

(1) The 1st consequence of *the idea that the Bodhisattva was enlightened like the Buddha* implies that the Bodhisattva was already at birth destined to become a Buddha, no matter what challenges he might face. Apparently, in such an ideology, either the Bodhisattva was enlightened “all the time” (eternal) or that he was beyond the working of karma (transcendental)—or both.

In effect, we have turned the Bodhisattva into an omniscient God-like figure—and thrown out the Buddha. For, even the Buddha who appeared on earth is not human, but a mere projection of some cosmic essence. This is, in fact, a well-known teaching in Mahāyāna.

(2) The 2nd consequence of *the idea that the Bodhisattva was as awakened as the Buddha* implies that the Bodhisattva did not really make any effort to gain awakening. All the stories of his spiritual prowess as a child and youth up to his awakening, are merely a “play” or pretence to project to us that he was a “human.” There was no spiritual quest, as we understand it in the early suttas.

This is a problem of self-effort. If the Bodhisattva were already awakened, then, he did not need to or did not actually make any human or spiritual effort in his quest. The Buddha-refuge, then, is neither an exemplar nor a goal that we can attain. Since the Bodhisattva did not really walk the path himself, we cannot say that there is a path to awakening, certainly not one to Buddhahood. There is no way that we can awaken and be liberated through self-effort. ¹

It is not difficult to see how such a transcendental notion of the Bodhisattva in due course diminished the state and status of the Buddha from being fully enlightened to being *unenlightened*, and that he needed to go on to gain full enlightenment. The Mahāyāna had denied the Buddha his enlightenment!

In due course, in post-Buddha Buddhism, we see the Bodhisattva as an enlightenment-candidate going before a Buddha to get his endorsement for enlightenment—like the modern certification of enlightenment in the Zen tradition.

This is as if the Bodhisattva Sumedha, for example, upon meeting Dīpaṅkara Buddha, became at once enlightened or he was already enlightened long before that. If such were the case, then, we have a theological notion of **grace**—that enlightenment or Buddhahood was not attainable by

¹ [1] On the natural necessity of self-effort, see [Atta,kārī Sutta](#) (A 6.38), SD 7.6:.

self-effort but was a “gift” by the grace of some eternal God-like Buddha! The apotheosis of the Buddha was now complete.

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

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