

The streamwinner, the true bodhisattva

From *Cūḷa Sārôpama Sutta* (M 30), SD 53.9 (1.2.2); previously published as fb180629b.

We do not really “follow” any religion, but more often than not, we attempt to shape the religion we follow according to our needs, desires and biases. If we are powerful or influential enough, then, we impose such revised and remodeled views and ways upon others. As our tribe grows bigger and our voice louder, and we fabricate more memes (such as buildings, books, rituals and uniforms), our ideology takes on a life of its own. We have created God in our own image—again.

This happens in Buddhism, too. Those who are either unwilling or unable to accept the Buddha’s death are driven to imagine him as some kind of more-than-human being, even an eternal God-like Being with his Paradises, and able to give us succour and save us—just like a theistic God. We have created Buddha in our own image.

The only religious difference is perhaps that the Buddhist theologians have fabricated a theology where we can become Buddha, we should become Buddha. This is neither Sakyamuni nor the lowly arhats who follow him. This is a far more compassionate and wiser Being than ever imagined before. Thus, we have Bodhisattvas who are more enlightened than the Buddha himself. The Bodhisattva path is declared the highest of religious paths.

A being bound for awakening

The Bodhisattva (Pali, *bodhisatta*) in early Buddhism is historically (in real life) the Buddha before he became Buddha, especially from his birth up to just before the great awakening. However, the word *bodhi,satta*, taken as it is, has a **technical** sense of “a being bound for awakening,” which is indeed who Siddhattha is from his birth up to the great awakening.

We can, in the spirit of early Buddhism, take *bodhisatta* or its anglicized term, “bodhisattva,” to mean just that—“a being bound for awakening.” Hence, all saints of the path, short of the arhat (or technically, the fully-fledged arhat, one who has attained the fruition of arhathood). Hence, the streamwinners, the once-returns, the non-returns and the arhats of the path are all “bodhisattva” in the sense that they are those who are bound for awakening.

Hence, we can say that to aspire for streamwinning is to aspire for bodhisattvahood in a non-technical sense—that is to reach the path of awakening and evolve towards awakening itself. This is not really an innovation, as the idea is inherent in the teachings of **the Mahā Sārôpama Sutta** (M 29), the greater discourse on the heartwood parable.

Permanent liberation

The Māha Sārôpama Sutta (M 29) and the Cūḷa Sārôpama Sutta (M 30) employ the same “parable of the heartwood.” A carpenter, who makes furniture and things with wood, works

best with heartwood, the solid core of a tree. In Buddhist practice, the branches and leaves, the outer bark, the inner bark, the sapwood and the heartwood respectively represent gains, honours and fame; moral virtue; samadhi; knowledge and vision of the path; and true freedom (awakening). The last is what we should aim for in this life itself.

The main difference between the two Suttas is in the way that each states its goal. While the Mahā Sārôpama Sutta states its goal generally as “the unshakeable freedom” (*akuppa ceto,-vimutti*), that is, the 4 paths, the 4 fruitions and nirvana, the Cūḷa Sārôpama Sutta calls it specifically “the permanent liberation” (*asamaya vimokkha*), which refers to the fruition of arhathood.

Essentially, both goals are the same, that is, awakening. The former defines the goal more broadly—as the whole path of awakening—the latter states it as the specific ultimate goal, the path’s end, nirvana—represented by the “attainment of the cessation of perception and feelings.”¹

True freedom

While the Mahā Sārôpama Sutta (M 29) simply speaks of permanent liberation² (that is, the 4 paths, 4 fruitions and nirvana),³ the Cūḷa Sārôpama Sutta lists those “other states higher and sublimer” than knowledge and vision, that is, beginning with streamwinning, and the states that follow (constituting the path of awakening).

The two presentations of teachings and goals are what we may call “practice packages” or “training alternatives.” The Mahā Sārôpama Sutta presents us with Package A or Training Alternative A—that is, the “general approach” of the path of awakening as whole: this is the approach suitable for the laity and those monastics who feel that they are unable to attain arhathood in this life itself. In short, this path starts with **streamwinning** (*sotāpatti*)—the minimum goal we should aspire to in this life itself.

The Cūḷa Sārôpama Sutta offers Package B or Training Alternative B—that is, the “specific approach” of the fruition of **arhathood**. This is the goal that can be easily attained if we diligently keep to the monastic training as laid down by the Buddha: cultivating moral virtue, mental concentration, wisdom and freedom. This is the highway, the straight path, to awakening.

Streamwinner as bodhisattva

In either case, the Buddha reminds us to progress to “other states higher and sublimer” than knowledge and vision. The significance of this statement is that that we should attain at least

¹ See Cūḷa Sārôpama S (M 30,20), SD 53.9.

² M 29,15.7 (SD 53.8).

³ The 4 paths are the streamwinner-to-be, the once-returned-to-be, the non-returned-to-be and the arhat-to-be; the 4 fruitions are, respectively, the full-fledged streamwinner, once-returned, non-returned and arhat. Collectively, they are called the 8 individuals (*aṭṭha, purisa, puggala*): see Aṭṭha Puggala Sutta 2, SD 15.10a(1.5).

streamwinning, which conduces to our attaining the other paths in due course. In the meantime, streamwinning (which is irreversible) prevents us from being reborn in any of the sub-human states where spiritual evolution is impossible.

As streamwinners, we are inspired and empowered to live a moral life of mental cultivation that brings us greater wisdom, helping us to move further up the path of awakening. We are, in fact, true **bodhisattvas**, bound for awakening, like the Buddha himself.

To aspire to streamwinning then is to aspire to the true bodhisattva path—the one bound for full awakening, just like the Buddha's.

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

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