

## To be Bodhisattva, be an 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 humility just as he is greatly 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 (Avalokiteśvara) and wisdom (Mañjuśrī). They serve as objects of meditation.

In later times, as Buddhism grew farther away, as well as further away, from India, 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 Buddhisms and magical 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, than whether a religion is true or not. The problem is that people often never 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 but 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.

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

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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>.

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 other's needs.

What does it mean to adapt to other's 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 says 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. 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.

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

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