

Hinayan and mahayn

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



Introductory Comparison of Hinayana and Mahayana Alexander Berzin Berlin, Germany, January 2002 [edited transcript] The Terms Hinayana and Mahayana The terms Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle or Modest Vehicle) and Mahayana (Greater Vehicle or Vast Vehicle) originated in The Prajnaparamita Sutras (The Sutras on Far-Reaching Discriminating Awareness, The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras). They are a rather derogatory pair of words, aggrandizing Mahayana and putting down Hinayana. Alternative terms for them, however, have many other shortcomings, and so therefore I shall use these more standard terms for them here. See: The Terms Hinayana and Mahayana.] Hinayana encompasses eighteen schools. The most important for our purposes are Sarvastivada and Theravada. Theravada is the one extant today in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Sarvastivada was widespread in Northern India when the Tibetans started to travel there and Buddhism began to be transplanted to Tibet. There were two main divisions of Sarvastivada based on philosophical differences: Vaibhashika and Sautrantika. Hinayana tenet systems studied at the Indian monastic universities such as Nalanda, and later by the Tibetan Mahayanists, are from these two schools.

The lineage of monastic vows followed in Tibet is from another Sarvastivada subdivision, Mulasarvastivada. [See: A Brief History of Buddhism in India before the Thirteenth-Century Invasions.] Buddhas and Arhats There is quite a significant difference between the Hinayana and Mahayana presentations of arhats and Buddhas. Both agree that arhats, or liberated beings, are more limited than Buddhas, or enlightened beings, are. Mahayana formulates this

difference in terms of two sets of obscurations: the emotional ones, which prevent liberation, and the cognitive ones, which prevent omniscience.

Arhats are free of only the former, whereas Buddhas are free of both. This division is not found in Hinayana. It is purely a Mahayana formulation. To gain liberation or enlightenment, both Hinayana and Mahayana assert that one needs nonconceptual cognition of the lack of an impossible “ soul. ” Such a lack is often called “ selflessness,” anatma in Sanskrit, the main Indian scriptural language of Sarvastivada and Mahayana; anatta in Pali, the scriptural language of Theravada.

The Hinayana schools assert this lack of an impossible “ soul” with respect only to persons, not all phenomena. Persons lack a “ soul,” an atman, that is unaffected by anything, partless, and separable from a body and a mind, and which can be cognized on its own. Such a “ soul” is impossible. With just the understanding that there is no such thing as this type of “ soul” with respect to persons, one can become either an arhat or a Buddha. The difference depends on how much positive force or so-called “ merit” one builds up.

Because of their development of the enlightening aim of bodhichitta, Buddhas have built up far more positive force than arhats have. Mahayana asserts that Buddhas understand the lack of an impossible “ soul” with respect to all phenomena as well as with respect to persons. They call this lack “ voidness. ” The various Indian schools of Mahayana differ regarding whether or not arhats also understand the voidness of phenomena. Within Mahayana, Prasangika Madhyamaka asserts that they do. However, the four

Tibetan traditions explain this point differently regarding the Prasangika assertion.

Some say that the voidness of phenomena understood by arhats is different from that understood by Buddhas; some assert the two voidnesses are the same. Some say that the scope of phenomena to which the voidness of phenomena applies is more limited for arhats than it is for Buddhas; some assert it is the same. There is no need to go into all the details here. [See: Comparison of the Hinayana and Mahayana Assertions of the Understandings of Voidness by Arhats and Buddhas.] Further Points Concerning Buddhas and Arhats

The assertions of Hinayana and Mahayana concerning arhats and Buddhas differ in many other ways. Theravada, for instance, asserts that one of the differences between a shravaka or “ listener” striving toward the liberation of an arhat and a bodhisattva striving toward the enlightenment of a Buddha is that shravakas study with Buddhist teachers, while bodhisattvas do not. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, for instance, did not study with another Buddha. He studied only with non-Buddhist teachers, whose methods he ultimately rejected. In the fact that Buddha’s understanding and attainment did not arise from reliance on a Buddhist teacher, Theravada asserts that a Buddha’s wisdom surpasses that of an arhat. In addition, bodhisattvas work to become universal Buddhist teachers; shravakas do not, although as arhats they certainly teach disciples. Before passing away, Buddha himself deputed his arhat disciple Shariputra to continue “ turning the wheel of Dharma. ” According to Theravada, however, Buddhas excel arhats in being more

skillful in methods for leading others to liberation and in the breadth of their conduct of teaching.

This is the meaning of a Buddha's being omniscient. However, according to this presentation, a Buddha would not know everyone's address and would have to ask such information from others. According to the Vaibhashika school of Hinayana, Buddhas are actually omniscient in knowing such information, but they only know one thing at a time. According to Mahayana, omniscience means knowing everything simultaneously. This follows from its view that everything is interconnected and interdependent; we cannot speak of just one piece of information, totally unrelated to the rest.

Hinayana says that the historical Buddha achieved enlightenment in his lifetime and, like an arhat, when he died, his mental continuum came to an end. Therefore, according to Hinayana, Buddhas teach only for the rest of the lifetime in which they achieve enlightenment. They do not emanate to countless world systems and go on teaching forever, as Mahayana asserts. Only Mahayana asserts that the historical Buddha became enlightened in a previous lifetime many eons ago, by studying with Buddhist teachers. He was just demonstrated enlightenment under the bodhi tree as one of the twelve enlightening deeds of a Buddha.

The precursor of this description of a Buddha is found in the Mahasanghika School of Hinayana, another of the eighteen Hinayana schools, but is not found in either Sarvastivada or Theravada. [See: The Twelve Enlightening Deeds of a Buddha.] Concerning Buddhas, another major difference is that only Mahayana asserts the three corpuses or bodies of a Buddha – Nirmanakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Dharmakaya. Hinayana does not assert

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them. Thus, the concept of a Buddha is significantly different in Hinayana and Mahayana. [See: Identifying the Objects of Safe Direction (Refuge). The Pathway Minds Leading to Liberation and Enlightenment Hinayana and Mahayana both assert that the stages of progress to the purified state, or “bodhi,” of either an arhat or a Buddha entail developing five levels of pathway mind – the so-called “five paths.” These are a building-up pathway mind or path of accumulation, an applying pathway mind or path of preparation, a seeing pathway mind or path of seeing, an accustoming pathway mind or path of meditation, and a path needing no further training or path of no more learning.

Shravakas and bodhisattvas who attain a seeing pathway of mind both become aryas, highly realized beings. Both have nonconceptual cognition of the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths. [See: The Five Pathway Minds: Basic Presentation. See also: The Sixteen Aspects and the Sixteen Distorted Ways of Embracing the Four Noble Truths.] Both Hinayana and Mahayana agree that a seeing pathway mind rids both arya shravakas and arya bodhisattvas of doctrinally based disturbing emotions, while an accustoming pathway mind rids them of automatically arising disturbing emotions.

The former are based on learning the set of assertions of one of the non-Buddhist Indian schools, while the latter arise automatically in everyone, including animals. The list of disturbing emotions that shravaka and bodhisattva aryas rid themselves of is part of a larger list of mental factors. Each of the Hinayana schools has its own list of mental factors, while Mahayana asserts yet another list. Many of the mental factors are defined differently in each list. Both Hinayana and Mahayana agree that the course

of progressing through the five pathway minds entails practicing the thirty-seven factors leading to a purified state.

A “ purified state” or “ bodhi” refers to either arhatship or Buddhahood. These thirty-seven factors include the four close placements of mindfulness, the eight branches of an arya pathway mind (the eightfold noble path), and so on. They are very important. In anuttarayoga tantra, the thirty-seven are represented by Yamantaka’s thirty-four arms plus his body, speech and mind, as well as by the dakinis in the body mandala of Vajrayogini. The thirty-seven are a standard set of practices. The specifics of each practice, however, are often different in Hinayana and Mahayana. See: *The Theravada Practice of the Four Close Placements of Mindfulness*. See also: *The Four Close Placements of Mindfulness According to Mahayana*.] Both Hinayana and Mahayana assert that the scheme of stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner and arhat refers to stages of an arya shravaka’s path, but not to the path of an arya bodhisattva. Thus, stream-enterers have nonconceptual cognition of the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths, which include nonconceptual cognition of the lack of an impossible “ soul” of persons.

We should not think that stream-enterer is a beginner level. So if someone claims to have achieved the state of a stream-enterer, be suspicious. Hinayana does not provide an extensive explanation of the bodhisattva pathway minds. Mahayana, however, explains that an arya bodhisattva’s path to enlightenment entails progressing through the development of ten levels of bhumi-mind. These levels of mind do not pertain to the path of shravakas. Both Hinayana and Mahayana agree that traversing the

bodhisattva path to enlightenment takes more time than traversing the shravaka one to arhatship.

Only Mahayana, however, speaks of building up the two enlightenment-building networks - the two collections - for three zillion eons. "Zillion," usually translated as "countless," means a finite number, though we would be unable to count it. Shravakas, on the other hand, can attain arhatship in as short as three lifetimes. In the first lifetime, one becomes a stream-enterer, in the next lifetime a once-returner, and in the third lifetime, one becomes a non-returner, achieves liberation, and becomes an arhat. This is quite tempting for many people.

The assertion that arhats are selfish is like bodhisattva propaganda. It is basically meant to point out an extreme to avoid. The sutras record that Buddha asked his sixty arhat disciples to teach. If they were truly selfish, they would not have agreed to do so. Arhats, however, can only help others to a more limited extent than Buddhas can. Both, however, can only help those with the karma to be helped by them. Bodhisattvas It is important to realize that the Hinayana schools do assert that before becoming a Buddha, one follows the bodhisattva path.

Both Hinayana and Mahayana have versions of the Jataka tales describing the previous lives of Buddha Shakyamuni as a bodhisattva. Starting with King Siri Sanghabodhi in the third century CE, many Sri Lankan kings even called themselves bodhisattvas. Of course, this is a little tricky to untangle because there was some Mahayana present in Sri Lanka at the time. Whether this idea of bodhisattva kings preexisted a Mahayana influence is

hard to say, but it did happen. Even more surprisingly, in the fifth century CE, the elders at the

Sri Lankan capital Anuradhapura declared Buddhaghosa, a great Theravada Abhidharma master, to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva Maitreya. Mahayana asserts that there are a thousand Buddhas in this “fortunate eon” who will start universal religions, and there have been and will be many more Buddhas in other world ages. Mahayana also asserts that everyone can become a Buddha, because everyone has the Buddha-nature factors that enable this attainment. Hinayana does not discuss Buddha-nature. Nevertheless, Theravada does mention hundreds of Buddhas of the past.

One Theravada sutta even lists twenty-seven by name. All of them were bodhisattvas before becoming Buddhas. Theravada asserts that there will be innumerable Buddhas in the future as well, including Maitreya as the next one, and that anyone can become a Buddha if they practice the ten far-reaching attitudes. The Ten Far-Reaching Attitudes Mahayana says that the ten far-reaching attitudes are practiced only by bodhisattvas and not by shravakas. This is because Mahayana defines a far-reaching attitude or “perfection” as one that is held by the force of a bodhichitta aim.

According to Theravada, however, so long as the ten attitudes are held by the force of renunciation, the determination to be free, bodhichitta is not necessary for their practice to be far-reaching and act as a cause for liberation. Thus, Theravada asserts that both bodhisattvas and shravakas practice ten far-reaching attitudes. Aside from the different motivating aims behind them, the other main difference between a bodhisattva’s and a shravaka’s practice of the ten is the degree of their intensity.

Thus, each of the ten far-reaching attitudes has three stages or degrees: ordinary, medium, and highest. For example, the highest practice of generosity would be giving one's body to feed a hungry tigress, as Buddha did in a previous life as a bodhisattva. The list of the ten far-reaching attitudes also differs slightly in Theravada and Mahayana. The Mahayana list is: * generosity * ethical self-discipline * patience * joyful perseverance * mental stability * discriminating awareness * skill in means