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The Development of the Arahant Concept from Early Buddhism to Mahāyāna



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ABSTRACT

Arahant was a simple and popular word in ancient Indian religions. The figure of *arahant* was regarded as practitioners who led a religious life to attain freedom from *samsāra* and some people who were in higher official status in society. Buddhism as a religion of the fifth century B.C. in India gave the concept of *arahant* new connotations. Since then, *arahant* was regarded as an important concept appearing in Buddhism. *Arahant* was respected as a highly realized practitioner, who had achieved the goal of the religious life, who had attained the state of Enlightenment, whose cankers were destroyed, for him, after this present life there was no beyond. It is obvious that the fruit of *arahant* was considered to be the highest and the final goal. As texts state, Buddhist disciples were encouraged to become *arahants* by the Buddha during the Buddha's lifetime and the attainment of *arahant* was seen as being almost identical with that of the Buddha. But as is well-known, the figure of the *arahant* is criticised by the so-called *Mahāyānists*. After different schools emerged within Buddhism, the belief in *arahant* started to change. *Mahāyānists* present a new ideal, that of the *Bodhisattva*, to replace the *arahant*. The figure of *arahant* is characterised by attachment and limitation. Compared with the *Bodhisattva*, the *arahant* is said to be inferior to the *Bodhisattva* because of his selfishness, and deficiencies in compassion, and wisdom. The attempt in this dissertation is to examine how the *arahant* concept developed from Early Buddhism to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism saw the *arahant* as being really selfish and in a hurry to enter *Nirvāṇa* for releasing himself without helping other beings to be free from suffering.