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Arahant in Theravāda and Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna: A Comparative Study



By

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Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis is to eliminate the misperceptions that prevail among scholars and practitioners with the reference to the two ideals viz., Arahant and Bodhisattva mentioned in the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna traditions respectively. In this study, the original texts of both traditions and the modern scholarly works are analyzed to show the similarities and dissimilarities that exist regarding these two ideals. The concepts of Arahant and Bodhisattva are studied by referring to the original Pāli texts and Mahāyāna texts. The major ways of practice, e.g., Bodhipakkhiyādhammā, Pāramitās, etc., which are regarded as the paths to the attainment of Arahant and Bodhisattva status are investigated as well.

By analyzing the path to Arahantship, it clearly presents that an Arahant has cut ten fetters mainly through cultivating the Bodhipakkhiyādhammā and obtained complete freedom out of Saṃsāra. Similarly, a Bodhisattva through the cultivation of the Ten Pāramitās has eliminated enormous conflicts that prevent him from being liberated.

According to Pāli texts, it is very clear that Arahants are continually encouraged by the Buddha to spread Dhamma to others for their benefit and welfare. The concept of Mettā is emphasized as well. Bodhisattvas on the other hand demonstrate themselves as saviors by making vows in which they are willing to postpone their own liberation so as to help other living beings get rid of sufferings.

Some Mahāyānists make the accusation against Arahants by saying they are selfish and set the escape out of Saṃsāra as their only primary goal is theoretically inappropriate. As a matter of fact, it is the group of people called Śrāvakas is the objective that Mahayana criticizes because of their selfishness and inconsiderateness for others.

Therefore, it concludes that either the Arahant in Theravāda or the Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna is the ideal. The paths to these two ideals may differ from each other, but the final goals are the same; these two are only different in terms of depth, not in terms of kind. There is but one vehicle in this world and all the Buddha's teachings are alike and equal for all.