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Why I Walk Two Paths

Mahayana is "heretical" and Theravada is for "devils"—at least that's how they see each other sometimes. In reality, they go hand-in-hand.

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Once a month,* Tricycle *features an article from the* Inquiring Mind *archive. Inquiring Mind*, a Buddhist journal that was in print from 1984–2015, has a growing number of articles from its back issues available at www.inquiringmind.com. This month's selection is from the Fall 2011 "Bodhisattva" issue.*

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When I began my Buddhist training at the age of 21, I had no interest in liberation or compassion. The great Buddhist ideals of the arhat [one who has attained enlightenment], bodhisattva and buddha held no attraction for me. Rather, having discovered how satisfying meditation felt when I became settled in the present moment, I took up Buddhist practice as a way to have a more calm presence in my life. As a new practitioner of Buddhism, I began to find a peacefulness that was more

Eventually I learned that Buddhist practice involves more than simple presence and peacefulness. I came to find great meaning in the Buddhist goals of liberation and compassion. I also came to appreciate the different idealized portrayals of people connected to these goals—arhats, bodhisattvas and buddhas. An arhat is someone who is liberated by following the teachings of a buddha; a bodhisattva is someone training to become a buddha; a buddha is someone who discovers the path to liberation. Now, after years of practice, my approach to these ideals has become somewhat idiosyncratic. Rather than focusing on their literal meaning, I view the arhat as representing our capacity for liberation, the bodhisattva our ability for compassion, and the buddha how liberation and compassion work together in partnership. To the degree that I distinguish the arhat and the bodhisattva, I prefer to see them as walking hand-in-hand.

My approach is in stark contrast to that of people who emphasize one practice ideal at the expense of the other. It is also in contrast to the historical tendency to use the bodhisattva/arhat distinction to separate from and condemn other Buddhists. I experienced this when I practiced in Asia. After practicing Zen in Japan on the bodhisattva path, I practiced vipassana in Thailand, where the focus is on the arhat path. In Thailand, I was told that the Japanese bodhisattva path was heretical. When I returned to Japan, my Zen teacher told me that in Thailand I had been practicing with Mara, the Buddhist devil.

The traditional understanding is that one can follow either the path of the arhat or the path of the bodhisattva. But one cannot follow both. A practitioner on the arhat path learns and follows the Buddha's teachings to liberate him or herself, ideally in this lifetime. A practitioner on the bodhisattva path aims to become, in some future lifetime, a buddha, or someone who in one's final rebirth discovers the path of liberation for oneself and makes it available to the world. According to this divided schema, one can either be motivated to attain liberation for oneself or one can be motivated by compassion to help others become liberated.

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As I was not initially motivated by either liberation or compassion, I was surprised when

compassion came first, seemingly through a side door. Having tasted a degree of peace early on, which came from the simple practice of present-moment awareness, I took up intensive Zen training. But I soon found that this peace was elusive, as I encountered deep guilt, insecurity, and suffering. I was shocked at how self-centered I was and how painful that self-centeredness could be. Because the only practice I knew was to be mindfully present, I spent a lot of time, both in formal practice and in my daily life, trying to have a settled presence with my suffering. Years later, I realized that in doing this I was slowly being "compassioned." My resistances and defenses gradually relaxed, and in their place grew tenderness and kindness. It was a process that seemed to soften a crust around my heart.

An important rite of passage into experiencing this compassion was the monthly Bodhisattva Full Moon Ceremony at the Zen center where I practiced. I remember well the first time I participated in the ritual, in the dim light of the Buddha hall, with 50 others practicing the deep, slow, resonating chanting and synchronized bowing. I was moved by something that seemed to well up from the depths of the earth. That ceremony helped me recognize the tenderizing of my heart that was beginning in the depths within me.

The central ritual of the Bodhisattva Full Moon Ceremony is the recitation of the four bodhisattva vows. The first vow expresses the intention to live for the benefit of others: "Beings are numberless, I vow to liberate them all." Perhaps because this is so impossibly ambitious, it bypassed my logical mind and resonated with something that felt truer than my self-identity or desires. This something came with a feeling of warmth, ease, and openness in my chest. With time, I came to identify this with a compassion that did not seem personal or mine.

For me, this vow and the bodhisattva ideal came to represent the compassion emerging from the practice. It was a compassion intimately linked to the inner freedom that came as the practice loosened up my fears, insecurities, and attachments. Over time, the bodhisattva ideal became increasingly important to me, not as something to believe in or adopt from outside myself, but as a meaningful way of expressing the way my open heart was responding to suffering in the world. Caring for the suffering of others

Some of my Zen teachers taught that the bodhisattva's impossible dedication to save all beings is a metaphor for relating to others with a liberated mind. As this mind frees one from attachment to personal identity, a bodhisattva helps others without attachment to being a helper. With a liberated mind, bodhisattvas have no need to even consider themselves bodhisattvas. In fact, to be preoccupied with seeing oneself as a bodhisattva actually limits freedom and compassion.

As I understood the bodhisattva ideal through Zen teachings, a bodhisattva's practice is to liberate oneself and at the same time to care for others. To liberate yourself without any empathy for others would mean your heart has not opened fully. It would be like trying to open your fist while some fingers remain tight in your palm. Trying to liberate others without having experienced some spiritual freedom yourself would mean you didn't have firsthand experience of what you most wanted for others. It would be like trying to teach others a language you hadn't even learned.

After ten years of following the bodhisattva path through Zen practice, I continued meditation practice in Thailand and Burma, countries where the arhat path is emphasized. Practicing there, I had the opportunity to go on long vipassana retreats, on which I could continue to develop the basic practice of mindful attention to the present moment that I had started at the age of 21. Nonetheless, studying vipassana meant I crossed the great historical Buddhist divide between the Mahayana and the Theravada traditions, the former based on the bodhisattva ideal and the latter mostly focused on the arhat ideal. In crossing this divide, I was aware of some of the Mahayana critiques of those on the arhat path: that they are selfish and they lack compassion, and that the liberation arhats attain is inferior and perhaps even misguided.

My encounter with Theravada Buddhists in Thailand and Burma showed these criticisms to be unjustified. I did not encounter selfish Buddhists. Rather, I met many practitioners on the arhat path engaged in helping others. Theravada temples are often involved in supporting their surrounding communities. In addition to being places that offer spiritual guidance and teachings, Theravada temples can function as community and medical centers, schools, orphanages, and homes to the homeless. In fact, Theravada temples are often more involved in serving their local communities than

My longest silent Theravada retreat was eight months long, with most of the time spent alone in a small room. I can well imagine someone thinking that this was a selfish thing to do. After all, it entailed months of focusing only on myself, with little connection to helping others. But vipassana meditation is a practice of liberation that can carry one beyond selfishness. One cannot progress along any path of liberation if one is selfish; to be selfish is to be enslaved in attachment. As mindfulness develops, one will become acutely aware of the suffering and limitation of self-centeredness—a natural motivation to overcome it grows. Liberation is the end of selfishness.

It was true that during the long vipassana retreats, we were not supposed to focus on compassion. My Burmese teacher was quite explicit about this. He didn't want us to add anything extra to the direct mindfulness practice we were cultivating. However, the consequence of doing intensive vipassana practice was the rise of a powerful sense of compassion. This is partly because one learns how deep and subtle human suffering can be. One discovers an underlying layer of suffering that is not personal and does not arise from the stories and events of our particular life. To thereby realize the pervasiveness of how people suffer, while at the same time having an open and relaxed heart, evokes empathy and compassion for others. The ability to see suffering grows as a person is liberated from self-centeredness and attachments, much as one may only see how hazy the air has been when there is a day without haze.

So with practicing vipassana on the Theravada arhat path, my capacity for compassion continued to increase. As I practiced vipassana, I found that my heart was freed from some of the greed, hatred, and delusion that obscured my capacity to be sensitive and empathetic. This growth of compassion was also supported by the Theravada practice of cultivating lovingkindness, something I had not been taught in my years of Zen practice.

Having engaged in practices associated with the arhat path, and with practices associated with the bodhisattva path, I look upon both with great gratitude. For me, both have been paths of liberation and compassion. The rhetoric of the arhat ideal may emphasize liberation while the rhetoric of the bodhisattva ideal may emphasize

hand. Clinging, attachment and mental bondage are like clenching the hand into a fist. When the fist is opened, liberation and compassion are both there. Now that I have been practicing Buddhism for over 35 years, I am less and less inclined to use the categories of arhat, bodhisattva, or even buddha. I don't see much need for them. My Buddhist practice is now guided by my heart's capacity for liberation and compassion. Increasingly, I look at the world through eyes informed by these two qualities.

Everything I have learned about Buddhism teaches me to loosen my attachment to all things. This includes concepts such as bodhisattva and arhat, the Mahayana and the Theravada. I have found these concepts useful when they help free me from clinging or help me help others. I find them harmful when they are what I cling to. And when I am not attached, I find I am happy to let these concepts go. I have no need to see myself, or others, through these categories. Instead, with this non-attachment comes my wish that all beings may be free of suffering.

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