

Arhat and Bodhisattva

Kogen Sunim

The human mind always thinks in pairs of opposites. Good and bad, gain and loss, high and low. Buddhist teachings use this dualistic instrument to point to mind before thinking, before dualism appears. It's like using one thorn to remove another thorn from our skin. But over the centuries, different teaching strategies have appeared in Buddhism. Sometimes, we get attached to one particular style, and so we fall into debates about which one is better.

Singapore, for example, is a very interesting place because there are many temples from all the Buddhist traditions here. So people often hear different teachings and get confused. For example, there are the two different ideals of the arhat and the bodhisattva. A Theravada monk in one temple says that the historical Buddha never taught about the idea of bodhisattvas, so therefore Mahayana is not true Buddhism. And a Mahayana monk in another temple says that an arhat seeking nirvana is selfish, and helping others is more important. Which one is correct?

It is easy to forget that all those teachings are just skillful means. Even though the historical Buddha didn't teach about the bodhisattva way, after his enlightenment he spent 45 years only helping others to liberate them from suffering—exactly like a bodhisattva. Meanwhile, on the other hand, many Mahayana teachers leave society behind and in seclusion they focus entirely on their practice—just like an arhat—in order first to wake up so that they have the wisdom and energy to devote to helping others.

So it seems to me that the arhat and the bodhisattva are like two wings of the same bird—both elements are necessary. Strong practice without clear direction might become a self-serving pursuit. But also compassion is not enough without wisdom and clarity.

Another way to look at it is that, in ancient times, most practitioners were monastics, and they often went to the monastery or into the mountains and practiced for many years like arhats seeking nirvana. "Returning to the marketplace" as a bodhisattva was the last stage of their practice. In contrast, these days most practitioners are laypeople, and also this world needs help, wisdom and compassion urgently, more than ever before. That's why practice now often starts and ends at the marketplace.

In 2020 the Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference will be held in Singapore and Malaysia. Hoeh Beng Temple in Kuala Lumpur is literally in the middle of the Malay market, and in the morning you can hear butchers chopping off chickens' heads. The Kwan Yin Chan Lin main Zen center in Singapore is located in Geylang, which is the red light district of the city and the center of its night life. We do our practice and make practice available for everyone in the middle of this suffering world where it's needed the most. Kwan Yin Chan Lin has offered by now more than 90 six-week-long meditation courses, free traditional Chinese medicine consultations, a children's class and other activities here in Geylang.

And at the same time, the Singapore sangha is lucky to have three retreat centers in Malaysia that are set in a more natural environment where people can focus on their practice 100 percent and then bring this energy back into society.

So, just as in nature everything follows the natural alternating rhythm of day and night, inhale and exhale, sleeping and waking, in the same way we also oscillate between the arhat and bodhisattva aspects of practice: our formal practice in the morning and evening and during retreats, and our moment-to-moment perceiving clearly correct situation, relation and function, as well as keeping a how-can-I-help-you mind in daily life.

So right now at Kwan Yin Chan Lin we have once again entered summer retreat to focus on our practice, and then with clear mind, refreshed and inspired, we go back to preparations for the WWSF 2020 conference and hopefully create a wonderful experience for the worldwide sangha and benefit all sentient beings! ♦

Kogen Sunim is from Poland, where he started practicing Zen in 2003. In 2008, he went to Bukkoku-ji Temple in Japan, where he received monastic ordination from Tangen Roshi-sama. Since then, he has practiced in several Buddhist monasteries in Korea. Kogen Sunim also served as head monk at Hwagyesa Temple from 2015 to 2016, and at Tosho-ji Temple from 2016 to 2017. More recently, he was also in-charge of Tahoma Zen Monastery and Enso House, a Buddhist Hospice in Washington State in the U.S. Over the years, Kogen Sunim often travels to Singapore to practice with Kwan Yin Chan Lin. He has given dharma talks at retreats and on Vesak Day celebrations.

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