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Buddhism ATE

*What is the nature and significance of Theravada Buddhism: “Way of the Elders” (original form)?*

Theravada Buddhism, with over one hundred million followers mainly in Southeast Asia, considers itself the first and most original branch of Buddhism, and it calls itself “the Way of the Elders” accordingly. It is also called the “Lesser Vehicle”, because it is difficult for a Theravada Buddhist to believe that a layperson can become an arhat, making it much harder for most to attain nirvana. This is in contrast Mahayana Buddhists, which have less stringent requirements or guidelines to attain nirvana, and thus is called the “Greater Vehicle”.

For Theravada Buddhists, the goal is to become an arhat or arahant, literally translated as “worthy one”. Arhats are those who have achieved individual enlightenment, freeing himself from suffering within the cycle of life and death and the cycle itself. Thus, an arhat will never be reborn, having effectively reached nirvana. The first arhats were Buddha’s companions, and Theravada Buddhists model themselves after these first arhats, though “Theravada teaches there is one Buddha in each age or aeon, and this is the person who discovers the dharma and teaches it to the world. Other beings of that age or aeon who realize enlightenment are arahants” (O’Brien). The path to becoming an arhat is thus grounded in the sangha, or the community of monks, also known as bhikkus, and nuns, also known as bhikkunis. The highest virtue of Theravada Buddhism is wisdom, or prajna, which is why the monastic tradition and the emphasis on Buddha’s teachings is central to the sangha’s goal of becoming an arhat.

Theravada Buddhism only accepts the Pali Canon, with its three parts, as a sacred text. The first section of the Tripitaka is called the “Discipline Basket” and deals primarily with rules for the monastic Buddhist community, the specific incident or incidents that called for the rule, and the exceptions for the rule ("Scriptures & Texts."). The second section, the Sutta or “Discourse Basket”, contains the main teachings of the Buddha and is further divided into five collections, including the long teachings, medium length teachings, shorter teachings on common subjects, a collection divided into certain specific subjects, and a collection of stories on the Buddha’s previous incarnations in verse and in prose. The third section, also known as “Further Teaching” or Abhidharma, “consists of seven books called the higher or further teaching. This is a philosophical analysis and systematization of the teaching and seems to be the scholarly activity of the monks” ("Scriptures & Texts.").

Works Cited

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