# Bodhisattva vs. Arahant: An Analysis of Buddhist Traditions

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## Abstract

The question of whether the realization of a Bodhisattva is higher than that of an Arahant is a significant and complex issue in Buddhist philosophy. This paper explores the doctrinal differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, focusing on the contrasting ideals of the Arahant and the Bodhisattva. The Arahant represents the ideal of individual liberation, having achieved Nirvana in this life, while the Bodhisattva embraces a path of altruism, deferring personal enlightenment to assist others on their journey to liberation. This paper examines the philosophical underpinnings of these ideals and their implications for Buddhist practice. It argues that the debate over spiritual superiority is not about hierarchy but about differing emphases on the role of the practitioner in the larger context of the Buddha's teachings. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the diverse paths within Buddhist traditions and challenges the notion of spiritual supremacy between these two paths.

This essay also explores the spiritual landscape of ancient India prior to the emergence of Buddhism, focusing on the ascetic traditions that sought liberation through severe austerities, metaphysical speculation, and devotion to deities. It compares the beliefs and practices of these pre-Buddhist ascetics with the revolutionary teachings of the Buddha.

Key traditions such as the Vedic Brahmins, the Śramaṇa movement (including the Ajivikas, Jains, and Materialists), and the views of Siddhartha Gautama's early teachers are examined. The Buddha's rejection of extreme asceticism in favor of the Middle Way, along with his teachings on anatta (no-self), karma, and ethical responsibility, is highlighted as a radical departure from the prevailing spiritual norms. This analysis demonstrates how the Buddha's insights provided a balanced, accessible path to enlightenment that contrasted sharply with the deterministic and ritualistic approaches of his contemporaries, marking a transformative shift in the spiritual traditions of ancient India.

**Keywords:** Bodhisattva, Arahant, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Buddhist philosophy, Spiritual Liberation, Nirvana, Altruism, Self-Realization, Buddhist practice. Middle Way, Asceticism, Pre-Buddhist Traditions, karma, Anatta, Vedic Brahmins, Śramaṇa, Enlightenment, Ethical Responsibility, Indian Spirituality

**Bodhisattva vs. Arahant: An Analysis of Buddhist Traditions**
**Introduction**
The question of whether a Bodhisattva's realization surpasses that of an Arahant remains a subject of debate in Buddhist discourse. This issue has historically contributed to divisions within the Buddhist Sangha (community), reflecting fundamental doctrinal differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions. Following the Buddha's passing, Buddhist thought diversified into multiple schools, leading to the emergence of at least 18 sects, later expanding to over

30 different traditions [1]. These divisions underscore varying interpretations of the Buddha's teachings and differing spiritual ideals regarding the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

At the core of this debate is the divergence between the Theravāda ideal of the Arahant and the Mahāyāna ideal of the Bodhisattva. Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes the attainment of Nirvana in this very life, where an Arahant achieves complete liberation from suffering and the cycle of rebirth through wisdom and the eradication of defilements [2]. In contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhism elevates the Bodhisattva ideal, wherein a practitioner vows to postpone personal enlightenment to assist all sentient beings in attaining liberation. This altruistic path, characterized by profound compassion and boundless wisdom, is regarded as a superior realization in Mahāyāna traditions [3-5].

The historical and philosophical context of this division reveals the broader evolution of Buddhist thought. Some scholars argue that the distinction between Arahant and Bodhisattva ideals reflects cultural and institutional developments rather than fundamental contradictions within the Dharma [6]. Additionally, Ajahn Chah (2007) cautions against rigid conceptual identities, emphasizing that clinging to labels such as "Arahant" or "Bodhisattva" may itself be a form of attachment leading to suffering [7]. From this perspective, the debate over spiritual supremacy is not merely doctrinal but also shaped by historical, cultural, and interpretative differences within Buddhist traditions.

This study explores the philosophical underpinnings of the Arahant-Bodhisattva distinction, analyzing how these ideals shape Buddhist practice and self-realization, while exploring the spiritual landscape of ancient India prior to the emergence of Buddhism, focusing on the ascetic traditions that sought liberation through severe austerities, metaphysical speculation, and devotion to deities. By examining canonical texts, historical developments, and contemporary perspectives, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the spiritual significance and practical implications of both paths.

The question of whether a Bodhisattva's realization is higher than that of an Arahant is a complex and historically significant issue in Buddhist discourse. It is a question that has contributed to the division within the Buddhist Sangha (community). The fragmentation of Buddhist thought following the passing of the Buddha led to the emergence of 18 different schools and sects, which later expanded to over 30 different traditions [1]. This division reflects varying interpretations of the Buddha's teachings and different emphases on spiritual ideals.

### Pre-Buddhist Beliefs
Before the emergence of Buddhism, ancient India was home to various spiritual traditions, including the Vedic Brahmins and the Śramaṇa movement, each seeking liberation through different practices. The Brahmins emphasized ritualistic sacrifices and the pursuit of knowledge for union with Brahman, while the Śramaṇas, including groups like the Ajivikas, Jains, and Materialists, rejected Vedic authority and focused on individual effort to achieve liberation. Siddhartha Gautama, before becoming the Buddha, studied under several ascetics, each holding distinct beliefs, such as Makkhali Gosala's fatalism and Ajita Kesakambali's materialism.

The Buddha, after rejecting extreme asceticism, introduced the Middle Way a balanced path between indulgence and self-mortification. He also taught the doctrine of anatta (no-self), rejected ritualism, and emphasized ethical conduct, meditation, and personal responsibility in shaping one's destiny through karma. These teachings marked a significant departure from the spiritual norms of his time, offering a more accessible and practical approach to liberation.

### Research Methods
This study adopts a desk research methodology, focusing on a comprehensive review and analysis of existing literature. The research is conducted through a critical evaluation of peer-reviewed articles, books, policy reports, newspaper articles, TV discussions and official economic documents.

This approach is effective for synthesizing the findings of previous studies and drawing conclusions from established sources [8]. In this context, desk research is especially valuable for gaining insights into any theme or theory, as it provides access to a broad spectrum of secondary data and expert analysis, enriching the understanding of the subject.

To ensure a structured and focused review, the study adopts an integrated flexible approach as outlined by Saliya (2023a; 2023b; 2023c) [9-11]. This methodology provides a framework for combining diverse sources of literature and synthesizing findings in a way that highlights both theoretical and empirical insights. The research critically examines the academic discourse on Buddhism and its philosophical evolution within the contexts of India and Sri Lanka.

### Literature Review and Analysis
In the time of the Buddha, his teachings were known as Dharma (Dhamma in Pali), signifying "the true nature of existence," "reality," and "that which upholds all existence" [12]. Buddhism, in all its forms, focuses on cultivating the potential within the human mind, developing self-awareness, and overcoming defilements such as hatred, ill-will, craving, and ignorance [13]. Despite the shared goal of liberation, different Buddhist traditions conceptualize the path to enlightenment in distinct ways, particularly in relation to the roles of the Bodhisattva and the Arahant.

## The Difference Between the Bodhisattva and the Arahant

The primary distinction between the Bodhisattva and the Arahant is emphasized in the doctrinal differences between Mahayana and Theravāda Buddhism. Theravāda Buddhism focuses on the ideal of the Arahant, one who has attained Nirvana in this very life and is no longer subject to rebirth. The Arahant has gained insight into the true nature of existence and has extinguished all forms of craving and ignorance [2].

In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism elevates the Bodhisattva ideal, advocating the cultivation of compassion and wisdom across countless lifetimes for the benefit of all sentient beings. Mahayana scriptures are replete with discussions on the Bodhisattva principle, highlighting the importance of the Bodhisattva vows and the aspiration to attain Buddhahood not just for oneself, but for all beings [3]. Unlike the Arahant, who attains individual liberation, the Bodhisattva defers ultimate enlightenment to remain in the cycle of rebirth and assist others on the path [4,5]. As Saliya (2023) notes, the Bodhisattva embodies an altruistic commitment to the suffering of all beings, whereas the Arahant focuses on self-liberation and personal enlightenment [6].

## The Debate Over Spiritual Supremacy

The debate over whether the realization of a Bodhisattva is superior to that of an Arahant is often driven by sectarian differences rather than substantive philosophical divergence.

Mahayana Buddhists argue that the Bodhisattva embodies a greater level of selflessness, as they renounce personal Nirvana for the sake of all beings [14]. On the other hand, Theravāda Buddhists view the Arahant as having achieved the pinnacle of spiritual attainment by reaching Nirvana and eliminating all suffering.

Ajahn Chah, a renowned Theravāda monk, emphasized that such debates can be counterproductive: "Don't be an Arahant, don't be a Bodhisattva, don't be anything at all if you are anything at all you will suffer" [7]. This perspective suggests that clinging to conceptual identities, whether of Bodhisattva or Arahant, is itself a form of attachment that leads to suffering. Saliya (2023) further elaborates that these distinctions are a result of historical and cultural evolutions within Buddhist traditions rather than inherent contradictions in the Dharma itself [6].

## Pre-Buddhist Ascetics and Their Beliefs Compared to Buddha's Teachings

Before the emergence of Buddhism, ancient India was home to a variety of spiritual traditions and ascetic practices. Many of these traditions sought liberation through severe austerities, metaphysical speculation, and devotion to deities. The Buddha, having initially engaged in such practices, later rejected them in favor of the Middle Way, a path that balances asceticism with practical wisdom. This essay examines the beliefs and practices of pre-Buddhist ascetics, comparing them with the Buddha's teachings, to highlight the revolutionary nature of his spiritual insights.

## Pre-Buddhist Ascetics and Their Beliefs

Several major spiritual traditions influenced the religious landscape of ancient India before the rise of BuddhismThe Vedic BrahminsThe Brahmins, adherents of the Vedic tradition, believed in the supremacy of the Vedas, which prescribed elaborate rituals and sacrifices to appease the gods and maintain cosmic order (ṛta: In the Vedic religion, Ṛta is the principle of natural order which regulates and coordinates the operation of the universe and everything within it). They upheld a hierarchical social structure based on caste (varna) and saw liberation (moksha) as attainable through knowledge of the eternal ātman (self) and union with Brahman, the ultimate reality [15].

Ṛta and dharma in Hinduism: Ṛta is the principle of sustainable harmony. Ṛta is that which is at it should be, for the overall good. Ṛta is when things are in balance; they are not falling apart or grinding harmfully against each other, but everything is functioning smoothly and properly, in the cosmos, in nature, the environment, the local ecosystem, a society, in an individual's own life, etc.

Dharma is action which promotes Ṛta. In any given context, a course of action which promotes, restores, and/or protects Ṛta is Dharma. A course of action which damages or threatens Ṛta is Adharma.

## Siddhartha's Early Teachers and Their Beliefs

Before attaining enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama studied under several renowned ascetics, each of whom held distinct philosophical views that contrasted with the Buddha's eventual realizations.

## The Śramaṇa Movement

The Śramaṇas were a diverse group of wandering ascetics who rejected Vedic authority and sought liberation through individual effort. Their teachings greatly influenced Siddhartha's spiritual journey.

## Sanjaya Belatthaputta (Skepticism and Agnosticism)

Siddhartha's early encounters included Sanjaya Belatthaputta, a skeptic who refused to take definitive stances on metaphysical questions. He promoted agnosticism (Ajñāna), avoiding speculation on matters beyond human understanding, such as the self, the afterlife, and karma. Siddhartha, however, found this approach unsatisfactory, as it did not provide a path to true liberation. Instead, he later emphasized direct realization through meditation and insight,

rather than avoiding philosophical engagement.

### Alara Kalama (Meditation and the Realm of Nothingness)
Siddhartha then studied under Alara Kalāma, a teacher specializing in meditative absorption (dhyāna). Alara taught him how to attain the state of nothingness (ākincaññāyatana)—a highly advanced meditative state. However, Siddhartha realized that this state alone did not lead to liberation from suffering. Feeling unfulfilled, he left in search of deeper wisdom.

### Uddaka Ramaputta (The Realm of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception)
Next, Siddhartha trained under Uddaka Ramaputta, who guided him to the even more refined meditative state of neither perception nor non-perception (nevasaññānāsaññāyatana). Despite mastering this practice, he concluded that such attainments were temporary and did not provide a lasting solution to suffering.

Dissatisfied, Siddhartha abandoned his teachers and sought truth through extreme asceticism.

### Mahavira (Nigantha Nataputta) and Jain Asceticism
Siddhartha then encountered Mahavira (Nigantha Nataputta), the leader of Jainism, who promoted extreme asceticism and non-violence (ahimsa). Mahavira believed that liberation could only be achieved by purifying karma through severe austerities.

Siddhartha practiced self-mortification for years but found it ineffective in achieving enlightenment. This experience later led him to develop the Middle Way, which balances effort with well-being.

### Makkhali Gosala (Ajivika Determinism)
Another influential teacher was Makkhali Gosala, founder of the Ajivika school. He preached strict determinism (niyati)—the belief that all events were predestined and personal effort had no role in spiritual progression. Siddhartha rejected this fatalistic view, realizing that ethical choices and mental cultivation (karma) actively shape one's future.

### Ajita Kesakambali (Materialism and Hedonism)
Lastly, Siddhartha encountered Ajita Kesakambali, a materialist who denied karma, rebirth, and consequences beyond death. He advocated a purely hedonistic worldview, asserting that life should be enjoyed without concern for spiritual liberation. Siddhartha found this perspective flawed, as it ignored the reality of suffering and the need for inner transformation.

### The Path to Enlightenment
After years of rigorous training and ascetic practices, Siddhartha realized that neither skepticism, meditation alone, determinism, asceticism, nor materialism provided a true path to liberation. Abandoning extreme approaches, he meditated under the Bodhi tree, attaining enlightenment and formulating the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path, which became the foundation of Buddhism.

### Buddha's Teachings and Their Differences
After experiencing extreme asceticism and finding it ineffective, the Buddha formulated a unique pathThe Middle WayThe Buddha rejected both indulgence and extreme asceticism, advocating the Middle Way as the optimal path to enlightenment. Unlike the Ajivikas, who believed in fatalism, the Buddha emphasized personal responsibility and ethical action (kamma in Pali, karma in Sanskrit).

### Anatta (No-Self) vs. Ātman (Self)
Vedic Brahmanism and Jainism held that an eternal self (ātman) existed, while the Buddha taught anatta, the doctrine of non-self, arguing that no unchanging, independent soul could be found within the five aggregates (khandhas) [1].

### Rejection of Ritualism
The Buddha opposed the Vedic emphasis on sacrifices and rituals, asserting that ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom led to liberation rather than external rites [13].

### Karma and Rebirth with Moral Accountability
Unlike the deterministic Ajivikas, who believed karma unfolded mechanically, the Buddha taught that karma was shaped by intention (cetana), emphasizing moral agency in determining future rebirths [2].

| Teacher/School | Core Philosophy | Siddhartha's Experience | Buddha's Response |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sanjaya Belatthaputta** | Skepticism (Ajñāna), agnosticism, avoidance of metaphysical claims | Offered no firm answers on karma, rebirth, or liberation | Rejected as unproductive; emphasized direct insight over avoidance |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Alara Kalama** | Meditative absorption (Dhyāna), attainment of Nothingness (Ākincaññāyatana) | Reached advanced meditative states, but found no lasting liberation | Valuable but insufficient; meditation must lead to insight and awakening |
| **Uddaka Ramaputta** | Higher meditative state: Neither perception nor non-perception | Mastered the state but found it temporary and unsatisfactory | Recognized impermanence; left to seek deeper realization |
| **Mahavira (Jainism)** | Extreme asceticism, non-violence (Ahimsa), purification through suffering | Practiced severe austerities for years, with no liberation | Rejected self-mortification; formulated the Middle Way balancing effort and wellbeing |
| **Makkhali Gosala (Ajivika)** | Determinism (Niyati), denial of free will or karma influence | Found deterministic view disempowering | Emphasized volition (cetana) and moral accountability |
| **Ajita Kesakambali** | Materialism, hedonism, denial of karma, rebirth, or spiritual consequence | Advocated pleasure-seeking; denied liberation as a goal | Rejected as nihilistic; emphasized the reality of suffering and the need for transformation |
| **Siddhartha's Realization** | Synthesized insights from all experiences | Recognized inadequacies in all extreme or singular approaches | Attained enlightenment through the Middle Way, leading to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path |
| **Distinct Teachings of Buddha** | Middle Way, Anatta (No-Self), rejection of Vedic ritualism, karma with intention | Contrasted with Vedic ātman, Jain self, Ajivika fatalism, and materialist hedonism | Taught ethical action, mindfulness, and wisdom as paths to liberation |

**Table 1: Siddhartha's Encounters with Śramaṇa Teachers and the Development of the Middle Way**
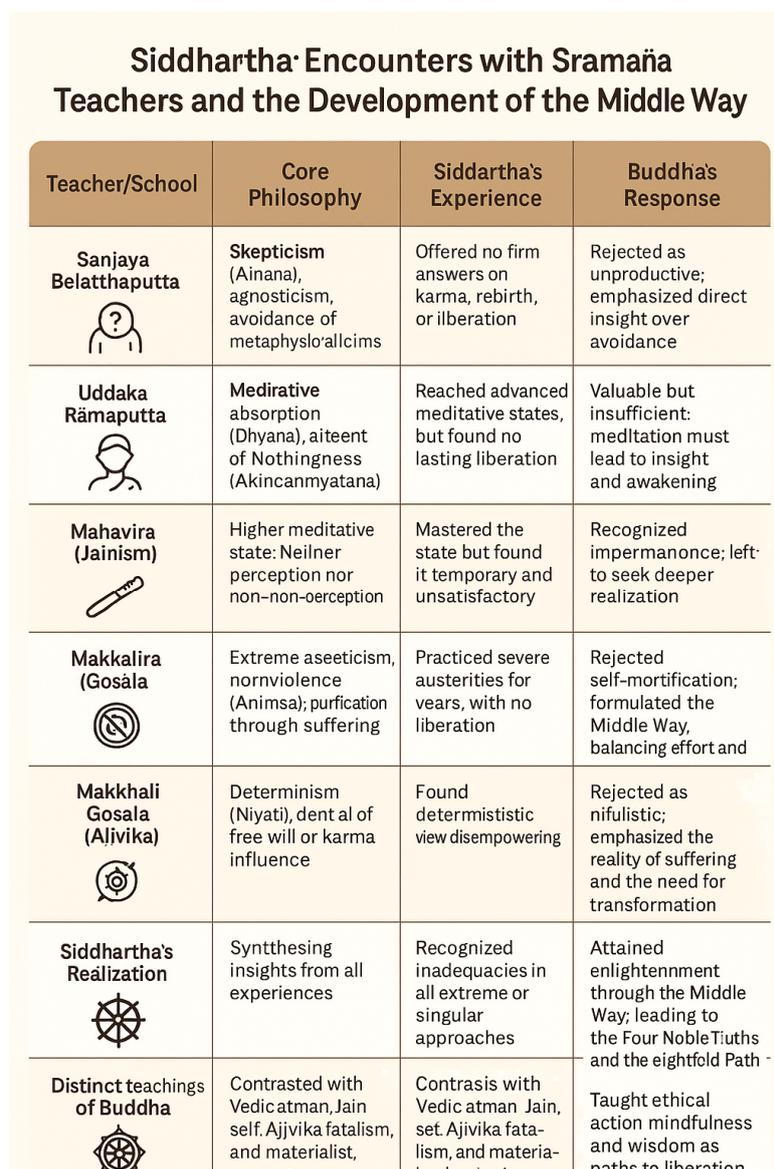


**Figure 1: Siddhartha's Learning Curve**

## Conclusion

The debate over whether the realization of a Bodhisattva is higher than that of an Arahant has significant implications for understanding the diverse paths to liberation within Buddhism. While Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism offer distinct ideals the Arahant's attainment of personal Nirvana and the Bodhisattva's commitment to the liberation of all beings— the underlying unity of these traditions is rooted in shared Buddhist principles such as the eradication of suffering and the cultivation of wisdom, ethical conduct, and compassion.

The Arahant represents the ideal of individual liberation, having overcome all defilements and achieved Nirvana in this life. On the other hand, the Bodhisattva embodies the path of selflessness, deferring their final enlightenment in order to help others attain liberation.

This divergence in focus does not necessarily imply a hierarchy of spiritual attainment, but rather reflects different emphases on the role of the practitioner in the larger context of the Buddha's teachings.

While some scholars argue for the superiority of the Bodhisattva's realization due to its greater altruism, others emphasize the Arahant's accomplishment as the culmination of personal spiritual effort and insight. As Ajahn Chah (2007) reminds us, clinging to these conceptual identities—whether as an Arahant or Bodhisattva can itself lead to attachment and suffering, thus hindering true liberation [7].

The division between these ideals reflects the historical and cultural evolution of Buddhist thought, with each tradition emphasizing different aspects of the Dharma. However, the ultimate goal of both paths remains the same: the cessation of suffering and the realization of the true nature of existence. This understanding invites a broader, more inclusive view of Buddhist practice that transcends sectarian differences and recognizes the diversity of approaches that lead to the same liberation.

In conclusion, the question of spiritual supremacy between the Bodhisattva and Arahant is not one of absolute hierarchy but a reflection of varying spiritual aspirations. The diversity of Buddhist thought offers a rich tapestry of paths to liberation, each with its unique emphasis on wisdom, compassion, and ethical practice. Acknowledging these different paths allows for a deeper appreciation of the breadth and depth of the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha's teachings represented a profound shift in the spiritual landscape of ancient India. While pre-Buddhist ascetic traditions, including the Vedic Brahmins and the Śramaṇa movements, emphasized extreme practices or fatalistic beliefs, the Buddha introduced the Middle Way as a balanced approach to liberation. His rejection of both extreme asceticism and indulgence, along with his teachings on anatta (no-self) and the transformative power of ethical actions through karma, provided a fresh perspective on the path to enlightenment. By emphasizing personal responsibility and inner wisdom, the Buddha's philosophy offered an accessible and practical path to spiritual liberation that resonated deeply with individuals seeking a more balanced, transformative approach to life. His teachings continue to inspire and influence spiritual traditions worldwide, marking a revolutionary departure from the ascetic practices of his time [16-21].

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