Concept of Arahanta in Buddhism

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Arhat (arahanti), in Buddhism, signifies a spiritual practitioner who has realized certain high stages of attainment. The implications of the term vary based on the respective schools and traditions.

1. Etymology

The exact interpretation and etymology of words such as arahanta and arhat remains disputed. In the Theravada tradition, and in early PTS publications, the word arahanta or arhat is interpreted to mean the "worthy one."\(^1\) This has been challenged by more recent research, resulting from the etymological comparison of Pali and early Jain Prakrit forms (arihat and arahanta).\(^2\) The alternative etymology is "foe-destroyer" or "vanquisher of enemies," which corresponds to the Jain definition.\(^3\) The latter challenges the assumption that the root of the word is Pali araha (cf. Sk. arha); Richard Gombrich has proposed an etymology of ari + hanta, bringing the root meaning closer to Jina (an epithet commonly used of both the leaders of the Jain religion and Buddha).\(^4\)

The term arahanta was translated into East Asian languages phonetically as a transliterated term, exemplified in the Chinese 阿羅漢 (Ch. 阿羅漢), often shortened to simply 阿羅漢 (Ch. 羅漢). However, the Tibetan term for arhat was translated by meaning from Sanskrit. This translation, dgra bcom pa, means "one who has destroyed the foes of afflictions."\(^5\) This Tibetan translation of the meaning conforms to the Jain definition as well.

Arahanta occurs as ‘arahatta’ in the Rig Veda (Hopkins, P. 202 The Great Epic of India) and as the first offer of salutation in the main Jain prayer Navakar Mantra. The latter word occurs mostly in Buddhist and Jain texts, but also in some Vaishnava texts, such as the Bhagavata Purana.\(^6\) Arahatta also occurs in the Vaishnava Srî Narada Pancharatnam (Vijnanananda, P. 203 Srî Narada Pancharatnam).

2. Concept of Arahant in the early Buddhist schools

A range of views on the relative perfection of arahantas existed amongst the early
Buddhist schools. In general, the Mahāsāṃghika branch, such as the Ekavyāvahārikas, Lokottaravādins,\textsuperscript{7} Bahuśrutiyas,\textsuperscript{8} Prajñāaptivādins, and Caitikas\textsuperscript{9} schools, advocated the transcendental and superabundance nature of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the fallibility of arahantas.\textsuperscript{10} The Caitikas, for example, advocated the ideal of the bodhisattva (bodhisattvayāna) over that of the arhat (śrāvakayāna), and they viewed arahantas as being fallible and still subject to ignorance.\textsuperscript{11}

According to A.K. Warder, the Sarvāstivādins held the same position as the Mahāsāṃghika branch regarding arahantas, considering them to be imperfect and fallible.\textsuperscript{12} The Kāśyapiya school also held the doctrine that arhats were fallible and imperfect, similar to the view of the Sarvāstivādins and the various Mahāsāṃghika sects.\textsuperscript{13} The Kāśyapiyas believed that arahantas have not fully eliminated desires, that their "perfection" is incomplete, and that it is possible for them to relapse.\textsuperscript{14}

3. Concept of Arahanta in Theravāda Buddhism

In Theravāda Buddhism, it means anyone who has reached the total Awakening and attained nirvana, including the Buddha. An arahanta is a person who has destroyed greed, hatred, and delusion - the unwholesome roots which underlie all fetters - who upon decease will not be reborn in any world, having wholly cut off all fetters that bind a person to the samsara. In the Pali Canon, the word is sometimes used as a synonym for tathāgata.\textsuperscript{15}

After attainment of nibbana, the five aggregates (physical forms, feelings/sensations, perception, mental formations and consciousness) will continue to function, sustained by physical bodily vitality. This attainment is termed the nibbana element with a residue remaining. But once the Arahanta pass-away and with the disintegration of the physical body, the five aggregates will cease to function, hence ending all traces of existence in the phenomenal world and thus total release from the misery of samsara. It would then be termed the nibbana element without residue remaining.\textsuperscript{16} Parinibbana occurs at the death of an arahanta.

In Theravāda Buddhism the Buddha himself is first identified as an arahanta, as are his enlightened followers, because they are free from all defilements, without greed, hatred, delusion, ignorance and craving, lacking "assets" which will lead to future birth, the arahanta knows and sees the real here and now. This virtue shows stainless purity, true worth, and the accomplishment of the end, nibbana.\textsuperscript{17}

In the Pali canon, Ānanda states that he knows monastics to achieve nibbana in one of four ways:

One develops insight preceded by serenity (Pali: samatha-pubbangamān vipassanā),
One develops serenity preceded by insight (vipassanā-pubbangamān samathā),
One develops serenity and insight in a stepwise fashion (*samatha-vipassanam yuganaddham*),
One’s mind becomes seized by excitation about the dhamma and, as a consequence, develops serenity and abandons the fetters (*dhamma-uddhacca-viggahitaM mānasaM hoti*).\(^\text{[14][19]}\)
In Theravada, although the *arahantas* have achieved the same goals as the Buddha, there are some differences among *arahantas* due to the way of their practice.
In the Pali Canon, the word "tathagata" is sometimes used as a synonym for *arhanta*, though the former usually refers to the Buddha alone.\(^\text{[20]}\)
These three awakened beings are classified as *arhanta*:
*Sammasambuddha*, usually just called Buddha, who discovers the truth by himself and teaches the path to awakening to others.
Pacekabuddha, who discovers the truth by himself but lacks the skill to teach others, and Savakabuddha, means who receive the truth directly or indirectly from a *Sammasambuddha*.
For those that have destroyed greed and hatred (in the sensory context) with some residue of delusion, are called *anagami* (non-returner). *Anagamis* will not be reborn into the human world after death, but into the heaven of the Pure Abodes, where only *anagamis* live. There, they will attain full enlightenment.

### 4. Concept of Arahanta in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Mahāyāna Buddhists see the Buddha himself as the ideal towards which one should aim in one’s spiritual aspirations. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, a hierarchy of general attainments is envisioned, with the attainments of *arahats* and *pratyekabuddha* being clearly separate, and below that of fully-enlightened buddhas (Skt. *samyaksambuddha*), or *tathāgatas*, such as Gautama Buddha.\(^\text{[21]}\)
In contrast to the goal of becoming a fully-enlightened Buddha, the path of a *śrāvaka* in being motivated by seeking personal liberation from *saMsāra*, is often portrayed as selfish and undesirable.\(^\text{[22]}\) There are even some Mahāyāna texts that regard the aspiration to *arhatship* and personal liberation as an outside path.\(^\text{[24]}\) Instead of aspiring for *arhatship*, Mahāyāna Buddhists are urged to instead take up the path of a bodhisattva, and to not fall back to the level of *arahats* and *śrāvakas*. Therefore, it is taught that an *arhat* must go on to become a *bodhisattva* eventually. If they fail to do so in the lifetime in which they reach the attainment, they will fall into a deep *samādhi* of emptiness, thence to be roused and taught the bodhisattva path, presumably when ready.
According to the *Lotus Sūtra* (Skt. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*), any true *arhat* will eventually accept the Mahāyāna path.\(^\text{[24]}\)
The Mahāyāna teachings often consider the śrāvaka path to be motivated by fear of saMsāra, which renders them incapable of aspiring to buddhahood, and that they therefore lack the courage and wisdom of a bodhisattva. Novice bodhisattvas are compared to śrāvakas and arhats at times. In the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, there is an account of 60 novice bodhisattvas who attain arhatship despite themselves and their efforts at the bodhisattva path, because they lacked ability in prajñā-pāramitā and skillful means to progress as bodhisattvas toward complete enlightenment (Skt. Anuttarā SamyakṣaMbdhi). This is because they are still viewed as having innate attachment and fear of saMsāra. The Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra compares these people to a giant bird without wings that cannot help but plummet to the earth from the top of Mount Sumeru.

Mahāyāna Buddhism has viewed the śrāvaka path culminating in arhatship as an lesser accomplishment than complete enlightenment, but still accords due respect to arhats for their respective achievements. Therefore, buddha-realms are depicted as populated by both śrāvakas and bodhisattvas. Far from being completely disregarded, the accomplishments of arhats are viewed as impressive, essentially because they have transcended the mundane world. Chinese Buddhism and other East Asian traditions have historically accepted this perspective, and specific groups of arhats are venerated as well, such as the sixteen arhats, the Eighteen arhats, and the five hundred arhats. The first famous portraits of these arhats were painted by the Chinese monk Guan Xiu (Chinese: 慶休; pinyin: Guānxīu) in 891 CE. He donated these portraits to Shengyin Temple in Qiantang (present day Hangzhou) where they are preserved with great care and ceremonial respect.

5. Conclusion

In some respects, the path to arhatship and the path to complete enlightenment are seen as having common grounds. However, a distinctive difference is seen in the Mahāyāna doctrine pushing emotional and cognitive non-attachment to their logical consequences. Of this, Paul Williams writes that in Mahāyāna Buddhism, "Nirvāṇa must be sought without being sought (for oneself), and practice must be done without being practiced. The discursive mode of thinking cannot serve the basic purpose of attainment without attainment."

References:
1. An authoritative Pali-to-English translation of "arahant" can be found in Rhys Davids & Stede (1921-25), p. 77.
3. See Mitra, Rajendralala (ed) 1877 *LalitavistAra or Memoirs of the Early Life of Sakya
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Sinha, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, English appendix page 10(658).
18. Ânanda’s teaching on achieving arhantship can be found in AN 4.170. Translations for this sutta can be found in Bodhi (2005) pp. 268-9, 439, and Thanissaro (1998).
19. Bodhi (2005), p. 268, translates this fourth way as: "a monk’s mind is seized by agitation about the teaching." Thanissaro (1998) gives a seemingly contrary interpretation of: "a monk’s mind has its restlessness concerning the Dhamma [Comm: the corruptions of insight] well under control.” Thus, it appears possible to interpret the excitement (Pali: uddhaca, see Rhys Davids & Stede, 1921-25) as either something that the future arahant uses to impel their pursuit of the path or something that the future arahant controls in order to pursue the path.
20. Peter Harvey, The Selfless Mind. Curzon Press 1995, page 227: "Before focusing on key passages on the tathAgata, it is first necessary to clarify which persons the word refers to. The Buddha often used it when talking of himself as an enlightened being, rather than as the individual Gotama. In general, ‘tathAgata’ is used specifically of the Buddha, the one who discovers and proclaims the path to nibbana (A.II.8-9, S.III.65-6), with the ‘tathAgata, arahat, perfectly and completely enlightened one’ being contrasted with a ‘disciple of the tathAgata’ (D.II.142). Nevertheless, ‘tathAgata’ is sometimes used of any arahat. S.V.327, for example, discusses the ‘dwelling of a learner’ and that of a tathAgata, and explains the second by describing the qualities of an arahat. At M.I.139-140 and 486-7, moreover, there is a switching between talk of a ‘tathAgata’ and of ‘a monk whose mind is freed thus’, as if they were simple equivalents. TathAgata literally means ‘thus-gone’ or ‘thus-come’, probably meaning one who is ‘attained-to-truth’ or ‘whose-nature-is-from-truth’.
2008. p. 36.