THE DEVELOPMENT AND ELABORATION
OF THE ARAHANT IDEAL
IN THE THERAVADA BUDDHIST TRADITION
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Since the nineteenth century, scholars of Buddhism have attempted to discern and describe the development of the Theravada Buddhist tradition as represented in the Pāli Canon. That the tradition developed seems certain, but exactly how this development occurred is difficult to determine because no completely reliable criteria for sorting out the various strata of material in the Pāli Canon have been devised. A previous generation of Buddhist scholars thought that an "early Buddhism" could be identified in the Pāli texts through etymological and doctrinal criteria. As we have pointed out elsewhere (1980), however, these judgments about "early Buddhism" usually were subjective at best and heavily biased at worst. Murti notes, "The chronological division of texts into primitive and later accretion is highly conjectural" (23).

The fate of former scholars' attempts to discover how the tradition developed makes one wary of venturing into this area. Nevertheless, the questions at issue here are too important for our understanding of Buddhism for us simply to ignore them. This scholarly reluctance has left unchallenged a number of theories about the development of the tradition, theories that seem rather clearly to need correcting. Thus, this article examines the development of a central aspect of Theravada Buddhism: the *arahant* ideal (*arahatta*). We do not intend to seek to differentiate "early Buddhism" from Theravada, but, rather, our limited intent is to investigate the way that the notion of *arahant* developed within the Theravada tradition. We shall suggest a probable course of development for this ideal and contrast our view of this development with the views of I. B. Horner, the scholar whose work on the subject of the *arahant* has stood as the standard.[1]

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[1] In addition to I. B. Horner, others such as Dayal, Johansson, and Warder have briefly

To state our thesis at the outset, the *arahant* concept seems to have developed from an ideal readily attainable in this life (*diṭṭhe va dhamme*) into an ideal considered remote and impossible to achieve in one or even many lifetimes. The evolution of this ideal, in turn, seems to reflect the basic evolution of the Theravada tradition from a cenobitic tradition to a broadly-based religious tradition, well-established in society.

Since the *arahant* represents the central ideal of the Theravada tradition, the canonical Pāli texts contain many and various teachings about arahantship. The non-canonical writings of the Theravada tradition add further conceptions to this literature on the *arahant*. All these various writings on the *arahant*, however, seem to fall roughly into three groups based upon their views of the ideal; and these views can be arranged in a probable order of their development within the Theravada tradition.[2]

EARLY CONCEPTIONS OF THE ARAHANT IDEAL

The texts in the first group of teachings about the *arahant* tell of ordinary people attaining this goal immediately and easily. The most common kinds of texts here are the accounts of the Buddha's early proclamations of the *dhamma*. Suttas such as the *Anattalakkhaṇa-Sutta*, tell of the Buddha's preaching to his five ascetic companions who became *arahant*s on the spot after hearing the *dhamma* (S.III.66f.). Hearing the supreme truth, the ascetics attained the liberation of the mind and were freed from the mental barriers to wisdom called *āsavas* (S.III.68). The *Mahāvagga* relates a series of similar incidents in the Buddha's early career. The young man Yasa became an *arahant* when the Buddha explained the *dhamma* to him (Vin.I.16). Then fifty friends of Yasa likewise became *arahant*s while being instructed by the Buddha (Vin.I.20). Another sutta describes the immediate attainment of arahantship by one thousand bhikkhus who were present at the Buddha's proclamation of the Fire Sermon (*Ādittapariyāya-Sutta*, S.IV.19f.; Vin.I.35).

Although the editors of the Pāli Canon provided few chronological distinctions between various texts, the suttas in this first group seem to be recounted as ancient events rather than as the then-prevailing situation vis-à-vis arahantship. From a critical viewpoint, we might say that these stories represent pious legends or hagiography intended to glorify the Buddha and the first disciples. For the Theravadins, however, these suttas conveyed an important belief about arantship: viz., in the time of

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investigated the concept of the *arahant*. Until Katz's work, however, Horner's book has been the only work exclusively on this topic, and as such it has been very influential.

[2] This article complements my earlier chapter on the *arahant* (t.b.a.). There the focus was on the nature of arahantship, the characteristics and qualities of the *arahant*. Therefore, we shall not repeat that investigation here. The focus of this article is the development of the *arahant* ideal and the path to arahantship. For detailed treatment of the specific kinds of wisdom and qualities of the *arahant* see the previous chapter.

the Buddha some ordinary people became *arahants* in this very life. This represents what Theravada held to be the earliest teaching about the *arahant* ideal.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARAHANT IDEAL

A second group of teachings about arahantship presents a different view of the goal. These texts depict arahantship as a distant goal; they seem to say that it is still possible to attain the goal in one lifetime, but not easily or immediately. In these texts, the qualitative difference between the *arahant* and the ordinary person, *puthujjana*, is stressed. The *arahant* is described as a perfected being who, by virtue of his perfections, transcends the ordinary plane of existence in almost every way. Because a vast gulf of imperfection separates the *puthujjana* from the *arahant*, the immediate or sudden enlightenment described in the earlier texts finds no mention here. This gulf cannot be leaped in one bound, but can be traversed via a gradual path of development. This gradual path represents the new element in these teachings.

Characteristic of this second group of texts are a number of suttas in the Pāli *Nikāyas* that outline this path of development.[3] These "path suttas" recount what is supposed to have been the Buddha's description of the course of development an ordinary person must follow to become an *arahant*. By detailing the obstacles on the path and the level of perfection that *arahants* attain, these suttas make it clear that arahantship is a difficult goal.

The *puthujjana* must begin by abandoning completely the householder's life, making an irrevocable decision to leave the worldly life. The path suttas then detail three kinds of perfection that the person must begin to develop: perfection in higher morality (*adhisīla*), perfection in higher concentration or meditation (*adhicitta*), and perfection in wisdom (*adhipaññā*). Each of these perfections has many facets and presents formidable obstacles for the *puthujjana*. Higher morality or *adhisīla* comprises all aspects of life, from the ordinary precepts governing relationships with people to the virtues of nonattachment, extreme simplicity in life-style and control over one's senses.

Higher concentration or meditation (*adhicitta*) involves perfecting one's mental states and moving toward wisdom. Here the path suttas describe the attainment of mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*). Perfection in this sense entails conquering the mental imperfections called *nivaraṇas* or "hindrances." The ordinary person, plagued by these *nivaraṇas*, has sensual desire, ill-will, sloth or torpor, excitement and doubt; these hindrances must be eliminated in order to progress toward

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[3] See, for example, D.I.47ff.; M.III.33ff.; A.II.207ff.; and M.I.344ff.

arahantship. When the hindrances have been eliminated one enters the *jhānas*, the trance states representing complete *samādhi*, concentration.

Finally, having overcome all these obstacles on the path, the ardent Buddhist must bring to maturity perfect wisdom, *adhipañña*. This perfection again is complex, involving—in some accounts—six higher wisdoms, *abhiññās*.[4] The most important and highest of these six wisdoms entails elimination of the remaining, subtle, negative mental states called *āsavas*. Usually reckoned to be four, the *āsavas* include sensual desire, attachment to existence and rebirth, attachment to views, and ignorance of the ultimate truth (M.III.36; A.II.210). Only when the *āsavas* have been destroyed does the seeker achieve the liberating wisdom that establishes him as an *arahant*. Then he can be described in terms of the canon's stock description of an *arahant*: "The *arahant* who has destroyed the *āsavas*, who has fulfilled, who has done all that had to be done, who has laid down his burden, who has attained his own goal, who has destroyed the fetters of becoming and who having attained right knowledge is one who is liberated."[5]

Although the path suttas never say that this path of perfection cannot be accomplished in one lifetime, they make clear that the goal is difficult, since it can only be reached by progressing through all of the stages. A sutta in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, for example, compares the monk's task in following the path to the farmer's task of planting and preparing his crop. The farmer cannot demand: "Let my crops spring up today. Tomorrow let them ear. On the following day let them ripen." For: "It is only the due season that make these things happen." So, in the same way, the monk is said not to be able to demand that the three perfections be accomplished overnight and the goal be attained immediately, for "it is just the due season that releases his mind, as he undergoes the three-fold training" (A.I.239). Other texts complement this picture of the gradual path of development by stating that few people were able to complete the path and attain the goal. A text in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (V.405) declares, "Few indeed are those monks who by destroying the *āsavas*, have for themselves in this life and by their own knowledge attained the liberation of the mind, the liberation by insight, and abide therein." In another *sutta*, Mahā-Kassapa asks the Buddha—presumably toward the end of the Buddha's career—why formerly there were fewer training rules and more *arahants* but now there are more training rules and fewer *arahants* (S.II.223; cf. M.I.444f.). The Buddha explains that this situation developed because people had become degenerate and the *dhamma* had been obscured.

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[4] See D.I.77ff.; A.III.16f.; M.I.34ff., etc.

[5] This statement occurs frequently in the texts; see D.III.83, 97; M.I.4f.; S.I.71; A.I.144 and elsewhere throughout the Pāli Canon.

Thus, this second group of texts presents arahantship as a difficult ideal attained by relatively few of those who undertook the monastic life. Kassapa's lament about the scarcity of *arahants* provides a remarkable contrast to the teachings in the first group that tell of an abundance of *arahants* at the outset of the Buddha's career. Arahantship seems to have become a remote norm fairly early in the history of the tradition. But although arahantship had become remote and difficult it still represented the goal of the tradition. When the goal came to be regarded as this distant, however, the path became increasingly important for providing a graduated series of stages on the way to arahantship.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE PATH AND THE IDEAL

The third group of teachings about arahantship continues this trend, extending the conception of the gradual path. These texts declare that *arahants* were few and the path long, requiring, it is said now, more than one lifetime to complete. Within the canon, this group of teachings is represented by the suttas detailing the four paths (*maggā*) or the four noble persons (*ariyā puggalā*). Katz sees these four persons to have been a development from an earlier distinction between adepts (*asekhā*) and learners (*sekhā*) (1979:136). Whereas during the earlier period, Buddhists were content to make only a two-fold distinction between those on the way and those who had reached the goal, at a later period Buddhists felt the need to distinguish much more carefully between persons following the way. These paths or persons denote stages on the gradual path to arahantship, stages that extend the path into the future lives of the individual. In one sutta (A.V.84f.), the Buddha teaches that if a follower practiced the way he would be destined to spend in future lives "a hundred years, a hundred times a hundred years, a hundred times a thousand years, a hundred times a hundred thousand years enjoying the highest happiness. And he would be a once-returner, or a non-returner or a stream-enterer, assured of the goal."

The standard explanation of the four paths in the canon describes them as four stages of the supramundane path (*lokuttara magga*, D.I.156; A.I.233; D.III.107; Vism.672-78). When one has advanced sufficiently on the mundane path (*lokiya*), one enters the supramundane by attaining the path of the stream-enterer (*sotāpatti magga*) by gaining a glimpse of the higher wisdom. Each of the four noble paths leads to a fruition (*phala*) or a complete attainment of that stage of the way. So when a person fulfills the path of stream-entry, he attains the fruit of stream-entry which carries assurance of becoming an *arahant* within seven more rebirths. Second is the path of *once returning* (*sakadāgāmi magga*), the fruit of which assures the Buddhist of becoming an *arahant* upon his next rebirth in this world. The path of non-returning (*anāgāmi*

magga), the penultimate stage, guarantees one who attains its fruit that he will be reborn in a heavenly realm or "pure abode" and there will reach arahantship. Arahantship, of course, stands as the fourth path, or, more properly, the fourth fruition, the completion of the supramundane path and the "flowing into *Nibbāna*."

The distinction between the mundane path of ordinary folk and the supramundane path of the four noble persons is based upon perfection in the three trainings: ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom (*sīla, samādhi, paññā*). The texts spell out the criteria for attaining the four paths and four fruitions, and, although some variation can be found in these descriptions, the criteria always represent progress in the areas covered by the three trainings, progress primarily in eliminating the factors that block wisdom. The most common explanation recurring in the suttas differentiates the four paths by reference to the mental fetters (*saṃyojanāni*, e.g., D.I.156f.; D.III.132; M.I.34–36). The stage of stream-entry is said to be reached by destroying the first three fetters: the illusion of self (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*); doubt (*vicikicchā*); and belief in good works and and rituals (*sīlabbata parāmāsa*). Progressing to a higher stage, the once-returner not only eliminates the three fetters but also reduces lust, hatred and delusion (*rāga, dosa, moha*). The non-returner has conquered all of the first five, or lower fetters—the three above plus sensual desire (*kāma-rāga*) and ill will (*vyāpāda*). Reaching the highest stage and the culmination of the way in arahantship requires, on this explanation, destroying the five remaining, or higher, fetters: desire for material existence (*rūpa rāga*), desire for immaterial existence (*arūpa rāga*), conceit (*māna*), restlessness (*uddhacca*) and ignorance (*avijjā*).

Other texts distinguish the four paths on the basis of the perfection of other factors. The *Mahā-Satipaṭṭhana Sutta* declares that a person who perfected the four foundations of mindfulness would either become a non-returner or an *arahant* (D.II.314f.). Perfection of the five faculties (*indriyāni*)—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and insight—is described by other texts as the means for ascending the four stages (S.V.200ff.). Still another version teaches that to join the supramundane path as a stream-enterer, a person must perfect four qualities: faith in Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*; plus the virtue that comes from the moral trainings (S.V.375f.).

The descriptions of the four paths with their complex criteria for advancement reinforce the idea that arahantship is a distant goal. In some texts the four paths are even subdivided into a number of intermediate stages. The stage of stream-entry is said to be subdivided into three grades and that of the non-returner into five (Pu.37f.; A.I.233; A.II.133). The *Petakopadesa* describes these intermediate stages as appropriate to various kinds of learners (*sekhā*) (30). Because of their differing abilities, people progress through the stages at differing rates. Very intelligent

people, having become stream-enterers, reach the goal in one more rebirth; thus they are called "single-seeders" (*ekabīja*). People who are not quite so intelligent require two or three rebirths into good families (*kolaṃkola*) before completing the stream. People who are only "guid-able," however, need seven rebirths to fulfill the path (P.30f.).[6] The same kinds of differences in abilities are said to account for the five grades of non-returners and the nine kinds of *arahants* (P:32). These texts teach that the entire way with its many stages is difficult, for not only were *arahants* few but few beings stood on the higher levels of this path as well. One sutta describes the four paths in reverse order declaring, few are the *arahants* and more numerous the once-returners; and finally, few are the once-returners, more numerous the stream-enterers (S.V.407f.).

Despite the difficulty of the path, however, the scheme of the four paths or noble persons has significance because it offers hope to those who are on the way but have not yet reached arahantship. Instead of simply offering the two options, *puthujjana* or *arahant*, the tradition developed a whole series of intermediate stages along the gradual path. As I. B. Horner wrote, "Those who have progressed well are not ranked merely as non-arahans but are assigned a definite status on the way" (1936:206). Not reaching the goal in this life need not be a source of disappointment, for a person could look forward to continuing his prog-ress in future lives. The stream-enterer, for example, could be certain both that he would not be reborn in an inferior state, i.e., as an animal, a ghost or in hell, and that he would have the opportunity and ability to reach enlightenment in future rebirths (A.III.211). Nathan Katz observes that the four paths and four fruitions can be seen as a "chart of Buddhistically-understood spiritual growth" (1979:136).

The commentarial literature of the Theravada tradition provides many good examples of what we are describing as the third phase in the interpretation of arahantship. The commentaries expounded the four paths and elaborated upon the requirements and the gradations of them (Vism.672ff.). These works also lengthened the gradual path in other ways. Just as the formula of the four paths or four noble persons extended the gradual path into the future, so the Pāli commentaries projected the gradual path into the past as well. The commentaries to the *Therīgāthā* and the *Theragāthā*, for instance, provide not only the life story of each famous *arahant* but also an account of the previous lives of these *arahants*.[7] Each *arahant* is said to have begun the path of

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[6] Katz (1979:141–50) regards the "single-seeder" (*ekabījī*) and the "clan to clan" (*Kolaṃkola*) as forms of the Once Returner; the *Petakopadesa*, the *Puggalapaññatti* and other texts, however, place these two under the category of Stream Enterer (P.30f.; Pu.37–40).

[7] For details on these "previous lives" of *arahants*, see my "The Problem of Sainthood in the Theravada Tradition."

development countless aeons ago while he or she was still living as a householder. In these previous lives the *arahant*s-to-be advanced toward their future attainment of the goal by perfecting their ethical conduct (*sila*) and performing meritorious deeds. Mahā Kassapa, for example, is said to have earned merit by feeding five hundred Pacceka buddhas during one of his previous lifetimes (Thag.A.121f.). Other *arahant*s perfected their generosity and compassion by building Buddhist monasteries and temples. The female *arahant*, Khemā, attained her favorable rebirth by giving gifts to an exalted elder and by donating land and buildings to the *Sangha* (Thig.A.126f.). Similarly, the seven daughters of King Kiki of Kāsi built seven monasteries for the Buddha, and because of the merit from this gift they all became *arahant*s in subsequent lives (Thig.A.17). In general the commentaries relate that the great saints progressed toward arahantship by "heaping up merit of age-enduring efficacy in this and that rebirth." When this past dimension is added to the path, the present life appears to be only a small part of an immense existential process coming out of the past and running on into the future.

The commentarial literature also stressed that this protracted, gradual path was difficult. Buddhaghosa's view of the path was laid out in his great work, the *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaghosa's purpose in the *Visuddhimagga* was to explain in detail the course one must follow to reach perfection. His account reveals the complexity of the path as it was transmitted by the commentarial teachers of his day. As Buddhaghosa understood it, the path to purification comprised seven difficult stages (*satta visuddhi*) that one must master en route to enlightenment. We appreciate the length and complexity of the gradual path as it was understood by Buddhaghosa when we see that he held the first six stages, the accounts of which require twenty-one chapters in the *Visuddhimagga*, to be still on the mundane path, whereas the first stage of the supramundane path, the path of the stream-enterer, was not attained until one reached the seventh stage of purification. On this view, even stream-entry was a remote goal lying relatively near the end of an immensely long gradual path.

For the commentators, the path had become central and arahantship a remote but controlling ideal. This distance is reflected in the fact that the commentaries speak of great *arahant*s of the past but do not mention any contemporary *arahant*s (see Horner, 1936:105). Buddhaghosa says that few people reach the advanced stages of the path because "only one in a hundred or a thousand is able to reach even the intermediate stages" and of those who attain that much, "only one in a hundred or a thousand" progresses further (Vism.375).

Thus, from a belief that arahantship was attainable in this very life, the Theravada tradition came to regard arahantship as a distant ideal lying at the end of the gradual path of development that an individual

had to ascend over the course of many lifetimes. Although one might quarrel about the specific texts we have included in the three groups, the general pattern of development posited here seems undeniable and clear. It is improbable, for example, that the tradition first held the views described in group two—that the path was long and *arahants* few—and then somehow developed the views of group one—that arahantship was an immediate goal with saints abounding. Likewise it seems unlikely that the conception of arahantship and the path reflected in the third group preceded that of the second group where the path was neither as long nor as complex.

Therefore, we would argue for this general process as a description of Theravada's development of the concept of arahantship. This pattern of development can be supported, we believe, not only by examining the internal logic of the doctrines, but also by considering the sociological context in which the tradition developed. Before citing those arguments, however, we must consider an important, opposing view of this process of development.

I. B. HORNER'S INTERPRETATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARAHANTSHIP

We refer, of course, to the view set forth by I. B. Horner in her book, *The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected: A Study of the Arahan* (1936). One of the few scholars to investigate this subject, Miss Horner gave the world a remarkable exposition of the *arahant* ideal. To a great extent we accept her conclusions regarding the nature of arahantship in the canon and we cannot but admire the depth of her scholarship and mastery of the texts; we disagree completely, however, with her notion of the development of the *arahant* ideal in the Theravada tradition. Since her book has been regarded as the standard work on the subject, our differences seem worth noting here.

Horner contends that the earliest meaning of the *arahant* in the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha's intention in this teaching, was that of "a man growing up to perfection as he ran on and fared on, his thought, word and deed becoming finer and purer in each new rebirth" (1934:786). She declares that "a great Teacher would not have seen perfection as realizable under physical conditions," but would have held that arahantship meant a state of infinite becoming, a kind of gradual path of perfection without end (1934:786). The *arahant*, she maintains, "was regarded as having some bourn beyond, when this life was over" which "fit in with the essentially Indian belief in the running on and faring on of beings" (1934:796).

To explain the development of the doctrine of the *arahant*, Horner employs the notions—developed by her mentor, C. A. F. Rhys Davids—of

Sākya and monastic Buddhism. According to these notions, the development of the Buddhism reflected in the Pāli Canon should be seen as having had two major periods: a pure, early period under the Buddha and a later period that reflects "the views and tenets of the monks who lived two or three centuries after Gotama's death" (1934:785). As a theory of the development of the tradition, these two periods seem reasonable and in keeping with what we know of the history of Buddhism. As Horner employs the theory, however, there is one additional premise implicit: she believes that during the second of these periods the monks perverted and distorted the original intention of the religion. She refers to "the mass of depraved, evil *bhikkhus* who figure so largely in the *Vinaya*, and who are accountable for the framing of the rules" (1936:114). In this view she reflects the work of C. A. F. Rhys Davids, who wrote that with regard to the Pāli texts, "We have to get rid of the notion, if we have it, that in them we are reading what the first Sakyans said or would have said" (387). The texts as we have them today represent, she contended, "the altered ideals of the monk" and "monastic distortions" of the original teachings (4, 105).

Thus, with reference to the development of the *arahant* idea, Horner maintains that monastic Buddhism completely changed the original meaning. From a state of infinite becoming, infinite perfecting, arahantship came to mean a state to be won in this very life, a state of cessation rather than becoming. "Under monastic Buddhism this goal of arahantship, of perfection to be won here and now, was the goal held up to every zealous *bhikkhu* and *bhikkuni*" (1934:786). The four paths (*ariyā maggā*), were employed in this development "not for holding out the hope of a number of rebirths, but holding out the hope of limiting the number of rebirths in this world to a few more (seven at most), to one more, or to not one more" (1936:209–10). Instead of indicating a gradual path to be followed over countless rebirths, the four paths and arahantship came to be seen as immediate goals to be realized in this physical existence. She continues: "The way, in a word, was no longer for becoming but for shrinking. This is hardly a view that would have been propounded by any great teacher" (1936:210). Or again: "Man's supreme destiny, the utmost which he could ever achieve for himself was shrivelled and confined to that which he could achieve here and now in this, the last of his opportunities" (1936:311).

This interpretation of the development of the notion of arahantship within the Theravada tradition clearly runs counter to the interpretation we have proposed above. She sees the gradual path to have been the original idea with arahantship here and now (*diṭṭhe va dhamme*) to be the later idea developed by the tradition. With all respect for I. B. Horner and her scholarship, we suggest that her view represents a misinterpretation stemming from false presuppositions imposed on the material.

The major false presupposition is that Sākya, or early Buddhism, held views radically different from those of later Buddhism, views that

determined the Sākya understanding of arahantship. A primary differ-
ence between Sākya and monastic Buddhism, she argues, was that
"Sākya retained the essence of the Upaniṣadic doctrine" (1936:150). She
finds this kinship with the *Upanishads* principally in the notion of the
self, for "the self (*attā*) as both divine and human was no more repudi-
ated by early Sākya than were either the Ātman as Brahman, or ātman
as the self of man by the *Upaniṣads*" (1936:41). Along with the notion of
self, Sākya taught self-becoming, that a person "becomes Brahma-like as
he becomes more developed" (1936:151). Horner summarizes her reason-
ing about Sākya's view of the *arahant* in this passage: "The whole arahan
theory is based upon the belief in the perfectibility of man, either here
and now, or in some future state. To think of human perfectibility is
meaningless unless there is a self which is held to be perfectible"
(1936:42).

Presupposing that the Buddha originally taught a doctrine of a self
that must be developed over infinite periods of time, Horner is forced to
assume that monastic Buddhism subverted this doctrine. But why would
it? Because monastic Buddhism, limited in its perspective, had "a great
dread of renewed becoming" (1934:786). She writes of "the violent oppo-
sition of Sutta and Commentary to further worlds and rebirths as oppor-
tunities" (1936:248). Thus, whereas *saṃsāra* originally had signified "the
promise of infinite opportunities for progress," the monks regarded it as
dukkha, suffering (1934:789). When this view took hold, the monks rein-
terpreted other doctrines to cohere with it. Instead of infinite becoming,
the goal of the *arahant* now was said to be cessation (*nirodha*) and
release (*nibbāna*). "The view that arahantship could be attained here and
now in physical conditions is the logical outcome of the dread of
renewed becomings" (1936:223). The *dhamma* became a "gospel in
which 'stopping' (*nirodha*) was taught as a cure for ill (*dukkha*)"
(1936:27). The doctrine of no-self (*anatta*) developed when the tradition
changed the goal from becoming to cessation. "The new meanings and
changed values imposed on the earlier connotation of these concepts, left
no room for the self of man" (1936:317). Cessation here and now was to
be desired even at the cost of annihilation of the self (1936:211). In keep-
ing with these changes, monastic Buddhism took the four paths also as a
means for stopping the process of becoming.

This interpretation of the development of Buddhism seems to have
too many axes to grind to be probable. Beginning with a fanciful image
of Sākya as a system akin to the *Upanishads* in its notion of the soul,
Horner goes on to contend that later Buddhism completely reversed the
original intention of the tradition. Her presuppositions about Sākya are
based upon unsupported and unwarranted speculation. They can only be
made to square with the textual evidence by assuming that the Buddhist
tradition underwent not development, but complete transformation. As

Murti has written of C. A. F. Rhys David's version of the Sākya idea, this complete falsification of the original teaching seems implausible. "Either the monks were too stupid to grasp the master's basic teaching, or they were so clever that they fabricated and foisted on him an opposite doctrine. Neither of these alternatives can be seriously entertained" (25).

If we return now to our original question about the development and elaboration of the *arahant* ideal in the Theravada tradition, two reasons can be given for preferring the process of development we have outlined over that proposed by I. B. Horner. First, the textual evidence makes better sense on our interpretation. As we have seen, Horner has to go through numerous speculative contortions in order to explain away the straightforward meaning of the texts. Her belief that "a great teacher would not have seen perfection as realizable under physical conditions" (1934:786), and would not have taught a no-soul doctrine, prevents her from entertaining the possibility that the direction of development was from an immediate enlightenment to a gradual enlightenment, rather than vice versa.

Despite her attempt to defend her thesis by explaining all incongruities as the distorted ideas of monks, Horner has difficulty explaining several aspects of the texts, aspects that make perfect sense on our interpretation. For example, recognizing that the *anatta* doctrine probably had "contemporary existence" with the *arahant* concept, she suggests that the early Buddhists held a notion of self at the same time as they held the doctrine of no-self. She puzzles over the "discrepancy of running the *anatta* doctrine alongside a theory which depends for its rational working out on belief in the reality of self" (1936:42). In another instance, she has difficulty explaining the four paths on her interpretation, for they simply do not represent an ideal of arahantship here and now. The four paths, as we have shown above, extend the path of development into future lives. Her conclusion, however, is that the four paths represent an early idea that the monks were unable to change sufficiently to make it cohere with their scheme. She writes, "The inclusion of the third Way (the non-returner) is out of place if it is thought that the attainment of arahantship here and now is the ideal of those on the Way of No-Return" (1934:791). Instead of recognizing that the non-returner with his destiny to be reborn in the pure abodes and beyond suggests a different pattern of development for the *arahant* ideal, she sees it as a kind of backhanded support for her view. "In spite of having striven hard in many and various passages to detract from becoming, to condemn it as being nothing but lamentation and ill, the Commentator is unable to eliminate entirely other lives and other worlds from the scheme of things" (1936:256). She concludes her explanation of this point with a view of the four paths that agrees perfectly with our interpretation: "they are essential to those who are not arahants, providing them

with . . . opportunity for their further development, for their possible achievement of arahantship, after the cessation of this earthlife" (1936:256). On our model these paths can be seen as a logical development; on her model, however, she must say that the four paths were earlier than the developed *arahant* ideal but the monks failed to see the contradiction.

With reference to the textual evidence, probability seems to rest with the view that arahantship developed from an early notion of immediate enlightenment to a later notion of very gradual enlightenment. When we consider the path suttas, the suttas describing the four paths, and the detailed descriptions of the gradual path in the commentaries and the *Visuddhimagga*, we can say that it simply was not the case that "under monastic Buddhism this goal of arahantship, of perfection to be won here and now, was the goal held up to every zealous *bhikkhu* (monk) and *bhikkhuni* (nun)" (1934:786). On the contrary, as we have seen, the later texts describe the path to arahantship as long and difficult, not something to be won here and now. The later the text, e.g., the commentarial literature, the longer the path and the fewer the *arahant*s.

Finally, a second kind of reason that can be given for this view, in addition to the textual, is the contextual. Mary Douglas observes that "anthropologists habitually interpret changes in beliefs and values by reference to changes in the social institutions and ecological systems" (1982:12). With regard to the Buddhist tradition, we should be able to suggest possible changes in the institutional structures and the social context that explain or at least support our views about the development of beliefs such as arahantship. Although Horner's interpretation does provide an explanation of the context of development—the shift from Sākya to monastic Buddhism—her view of the development is skewed by unnecessary presuppositions as we noted above. The interpretation we have suggested has plausibility if we recognize that the Theravada tradition developed from a monastic sect into a religion with a firm foothold in society. In a monastically oriented tradition, an emphasis upon renouncing the world and achieving enlightenment in this life would make sense. But as the social base of the tradition became broader, there would have been a need for goals and means of salvation open to the monks and laity who were involved in society, viz., a gradual path. The householders, especially, required a way of participating in the tradition and found it in the teachings about the great works of merit performed by *arahant*s during previous lives as lay persons.

This seems to be the context in which the development of the notion of arahantship took place. The shift in emphasis from arahantship itself to a gradual path of perfection stretching over many lifetimes represents a shift that would have been congenial to the laity's participation in the tradition. An interesting sutta supports this interpretation by showing

that even the four paths were at times construed to offer hope to the laity. In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (V.375f.) we read that the Buddha declared to his monks that Sarakani, a not very pious layman, had become a stream enterer inasmuch as he had for a long time affirmed the threefold refuge of Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*. The text proclaims that even the great Sal trees could become stream enterers if they could understand the *Dhamma*. Other texts also state that lay persons attained one of the four paths (A.III.212; A.V.86).

To put the contextual argument another way, we can ask who in the Buddhist context held the early and later views of arahantship. Here again we see that the development would have been toward a gradual path as a view that provided a place for the laity and for village *bhikkhus* who served the laity in the tradition. The placing of arahantship in the distant future, at the end of a long series of rebirths in this and other worlds, would be consistent with the needs of a popular religion to stress mundane goals and rewards rather than supramundane perfections. The development of the *arahant* ideal was concomitant with the development of the tradition in its social context.

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