

BUDDHISM TABLE 4

THE THREE TYPES OF PRACTITIONER IN MAHĀYĀNA THOUGHT

1. The “unenlightened practitioner” is one who engages in religious practices for the purpose of gaining this-worldly ends (e.g., the practitioners of **Vedic sacrifice**), e.g., wealth, cattle, long life, etc. Such a person has not yet seen through the enticements of saṃsāra and is still attached to this world.
2. The “lesser practitioner” (=Hīnayāna) is one who has realized the truth of suffering (dukkha) and in response has generated the intention to break free from saṃsāra and attain nirvāna through the path of the arhat. This is the Hīnayāna Buddhist. However, by pursuing nirvāna, this kind of practitioner practices for his or her own liberation only, having failed to see that all other beings are also engulfed in suffering and needed help to break free from saṃsāra (i.e., salvation).
3. Hence, the “great practitioner” (=Mahāyāna) is the one who, having seen how all beings are suffering, and not just himself or herself alone, rejects nirvāna as a lower, selfish goal of the “lesser practitioner” and vows to undertake religious practice to relieve all beings equally. This is the path of the bodhisattva. Unconditional compassion (**karuṇā**) for all sentient beings becomes the motivation for choosing the path of bodhisattva rather than the path of arhat-hood, and is chosen not for one’s own sake, but for the sake of the salvation of all sentient beings. The 8th century CE Mahāyāna poet-philosopher, Śāntideva articulates the Mahāyāna ideal of compassion as follows:

So long as transmigrating beings suffer, may I become their medicine, their doctor, and their nurse until everyone is healed. ... In order to attain the goals of all beings, I shall give up without reserve my body, and all my accumulated virtue of the past, present and future, to be used towards this end.