

## On Arhats

(*Arakan*)

**Translator’s Introduction:** The Sanskrit word ‘*arhat*’ means ‘one who is venerable’ or ‘one worthy of respect’. It is used in Buddhism to designate someone who has arrived at an advanced spiritual stage that is marked by being completely free of defiling passions. The term, however, has somewhat different meanings within the various traditions of Buddhism, ranging from the highest level of spiritual attainment (one who is a living Buddha) to one who is just on the brink of entering Buddhahood. While the concept of the arhat has occupied a central position in Southern Buddhist traditions, it tends to be given a secondary position in Mahayana traditions, with the bodhisattva ideal being primary. Dōgen’s discourse, however, covers much broader and varied applications of the term, thereby embracing a more universal perspective.

“With all their desires already completely spent and having gone beyond all defiling passions, they have succeeded in reaching what truly benefits them, and, having brought to an end the bonds to existence, their minds have been set free.”<sup>1</sup>

This describes what the great arhats are, for arhathood is the ultimate fruit of those who study the Buddha Dharma. These are the Buddha arhats who are called ‘Those of the Fourth Stage’.<sup>2</sup>

‘All their desires’ is equivalent to a wooden ladle with its handle broken off. Though, up to now, the ladle has been used many times, an arhat’s complete wearing out of self is the whole body of the Wooden Ladle springing forth. ‘Their having succeeded in reaching what truly benefits them’ is synonymous with Its whole Body emerging from the crown of their head.

‘Their having brought the bonds of existence to an end’ is the same as their never concealing anything anywhere in the universe. And we need to investigate thoroughly that the way in which their minds perceive the forms and characteristics of things, once their minds have been set free, is synonymous with ‘high places

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1. This is Shakyamuni Buddha’s definition of arhats found in the opening passages of the Lotus Scripture.

2. See the ‘Four Stages of Arhathood’ in the *Glossary*.

being naturally in balance up high, and low places being naturally in balance down low'. Because of this, they have their own tiles and stones for their walls and fences.<sup>3</sup>

'Being set free' is synonymous with their mind's manifesting all functions. Their not returning to their defiling passions is synonymous with defiling passions not yet arising, which is spoken of as 'defiling passions being obstructed by defiling passions'.<sup>4</sup>

Further, an arhat's marvelous spiritual abilities, wise discernment, meditative states, giving voice to the Dharma, leading others, and letting the Light of Truth shine forth are not to be likened to abilities discussed by non-Buddhists, quarrelsome bedeviling people, and the like. Teachings about an arhat's ability to see such things as hundreds of Buddha realms are never to be associated with the views and opinions of ordinary, worldly people. The principle of this is: "Although we have just said that a barbarian's beard is red, there is also the fact that a person with a red beard is a barbarian."<sup>5</sup> 'Entering nirvana' is an arhat's practice of getting inside his, or her, own Fist.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana is a place which an arhat does not turn away from or shun. Arhats who have entered their own Nostrils are those we call true arhats: those who have not entered their own Nostrils are not arhats.<sup>7</sup>



It was said in olden times in the *Lotus Scripture*, "We today are also true arhats, and, by our voicing of the Buddha's Way, we can help all to hear It." The main point of 'we can help all to hear It' is that we can help all things to be voices of Buddha. Why would anyone stop at just listening to Buddhas and Their disciples? When all those who are conscious of It and have knowledge of It, who

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3. That is, they have their own way of thinking about things.
  4. 'Defiling passions being obstructed by defiling passions' means that when an arhat sees defiling passions arise in others, he or she keeps defiling passions from arising in response, because the arhat sees the suffering that will arise from giving in to such passions.
  5. A saying by Meditation Master Hyakujō, referring to two ways of saying the same thing. In other words, a person who has such properties is an arhat, and an arhat is a person who has such properties.
  6. That is, operating from the place of enlightenment within.
  7. 'Someone entering his, or her, Nostrils' is a common Zen Buddhist metaphor for someone who has awakened to the Truth: such a one has gotten 'a whiff of It'.

have Its Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow, proceed to help others hear It, that is what I would call ‘helping all’. Our ‘being conscious of It and having knowledge of It’ is synonymous with the grasses and trees of our native land and with the tiles and stones of our walls and fences.\* What we hear is the rising and falling away of all these things, their flourishing and fading out, their births and deaths, their comings and goings. But the basis of helping all to hear the Buddha’s Way by means of our voicing It is not simply exploring through our training that the whole world is an ear.



Shakyamuni Buddha once said the following, “If any among My disciples would call themselves arhats or pratyekabuddhas,\* but have not heard or realized the fact that the Buddha Tathagatas only instruct bodhisattvas,\* they are not the Buddha’s disciples, nor are they arhats, nor are they pratyekabuddhas.” The Buddha’s saying that He only instructed bodhisattvas means “I, along with the Buddhas in the ten quarters, know this well, for each Buddha on His own, together with all Buddhas, has been able to exhaustively explore the True Form of all things, which is what supreme, fully perfected enlightenment is.” Thus, to consider oneself to be a bodhisattva or a Buddha must accord with considering oneself to be an arhat or a pratyekabuddha. And why is this? Because to think of oneself in this way means that one has heard and recognized the fact that all the Buddha Tathagatas only instruct bodhisattvas.



Long ago it was said, “In the Scriptures of the shravakas,\* arhat is the name given to those who have realized Buddhahood.” What is said here is confirmation of what the Buddha said. It is not simply the preaching of some faint-hearted scholastic commentator, but expresses a universal principle in the Way of the Buddha. You need to explore through your training the principle of calling an arhat someone who has realized Buddhahood, and you need to explore through your training the principle of calling someone who has realized Buddhahood an arhat. Apart from the effects of arhathood, nothing else remains, not even a single mote of dust or a single thought or thing—still less does fully perfected enlightenment remain as something separate from arhathood! Apart from supreme, fully perfected enlightenment, again, nothing else remains, not even a single mote of dust or a

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\* See *Glossary*.

single thought or thing—still less do the four stages and four results of arhathood remain as something separate from supreme, fully perfected enlightenment!<sup>8</sup> At the very moment when an arhat is carrying all thoughts and things upon his shoulders, all these thoughts and things are truly beyond being ‘eight ounces or half a pound’.<sup>9</sup> And they are beyond mind, beyond Buddha, and beyond material things. Even the Eye of a Buddha cannot see them, look as It will. So, we need not get into discussions about eighty thousand eons before and eighty thousand eons after. All that remains to such a one is just the complete Dharma.



Shakyamuni once said the following:

If any of these male and female monks should tell themselves, “I have already realized arhathood and am in my final embodiment, which is ultimate nirvana,” and therefore give up their intention to seek supreme, fully perfected enlightenment, you should, by all means, know that such as these are all braggarts. And why? Because if there were monks who had truly realized arhathood, they would not have arrived at such a state unless they trusted this Dharma of Mine.

What is said here confirms that those who are able to trust in supreme, fully perfected enlightenment are arhats. To have trust in this Dharma, of necessity, is to depend on It. One who has truly realized arhathood is beyond such statements as “I have already realized arhathood and am in my final embodiment, which is ultimate nirvana,” because such a one is intent on seeking supreme, fully perfected enlightenment. To aspire to seek supreme, fully perfected enlightenment is to take delight in one’s Eye, to sit there facing a wall, and, in facing the wall, to open one’s Eye. Though we may say that fully perfected enlightenment encompasses the whole world, it is ‘gods appearing and demons vanishing’, and though we may say that it extends over all of time, it is ‘the mutual throwing of self and other into the moment at hand’.<sup>10</sup> We call one who is like this someone who is intent on seeking

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8. The four results of arhathood refer to the results that arise from attaining each of the four stages.
  9. That is, they are beyond our ability to measure.
  10. The two quotes are from a poem by Meditation Master Engo, which Dōgen quotes on page 293 of Discourse 22: On the Everyday Behavior of a Buddha Doing His Practice (*Gyōbutsu*)

supreme, fully perfected enlightenment. Thus, such a one is intent on seeking arhathood. Aspiring to seek arhathood is being satisfied with gruel and being satisfied with rice.



Meditation Master Engo of Mount Kassan once said the following:

After those of old had caught the drift, they would go off into remote mountain areas, living in huts fashioned of mallows or thatch, or in rock caves. For ten or twenty years they would dine on rice boiled in a broken-footed pot. For the most part, they would forget human society, having taken their leave of its defiling domains forever. In our present age, I dare not aspire to live like that, so I simply conceal my former name, cover my tracks, and keep to what I ought to do, which is to become an old monk, all skin and bones, living in accord with what I have realized, and making use of what I have received as it accords with my abilities. Wearing away my old karma,\* I would adapt myself to the age-old ways. Had I any strength to spare, I suppose I would extend it to others, creating conditions for the development of wise discernment, and training myself to stand on my own two feet and to ripen naturally. It would be as if in some wilderness covered deep in tall grasses, I set about to hack out one whole real person, or at least half a one. Then, knowing that I too have It, together with all others, I would rid myself of birth-and-death, ever benefiting more and more those who are to come in the future, that I might repay my deep indebtedness to the Buddhas and Ancestors.

However much I may restrain myself, I suppose I cannot prevent the frosts and dews of my years from ripening the fruits of my karma. And so, I will need to reenter the world and adapt myself to accord with circumstances, opening up and entrusting myself to ordinary people and those in lofty positions, but without letting my mind manipulate me into seeking for gain. And how much less could I possibly enslave myself to the influence of the nobility only to become a mediocre, fawning teacher who acts to deceive the common folk, who scorns the saintly, who courts gain, who contrives to win a

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*Igi*). The first describes the arbitrary way that thoughts and things arise and disappear, and the second describes how arhats function.

name for himself, and thereby creates for himself the karmic consequence of living in an Avichi hell of unremitting suffering! If only I could go through the world in such a manner as to produce no karmic wake—though I may not have the chance—would I not then be an arhat who has left behind the defiling world?

Accordingly, a genuine monk here and now is an arhat, one who has left behind the defiling world. If you would know what an arhat is, know that it is like this. Do not let yourself be led astray by the words of Indian scholastics. Meditation Master Engo of China was an Ancestor of the Buddha who had inherited the True Transmission.



Hyakujō Ekai in Hungchou Province once said, “When our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, each and every one of them, no longer covet and are no longer tainted by thoughts and things, either material or immaterial, we call this ‘accepting and keeping to a four-line verse’, as well as ‘the fourth stage.’”<sup>11</sup> It is impossible for any of us to change our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind into something different from what they are, for they are completely, from top to toe, beyond our fathoming. As a consequence, such a one’s whole being is naturally beyond covetousness or stain, and the whole of all thoughts and things, material and immaterial, is beyond covetousness or stain. It means that one’s accepting and keeping to a four-line verse is naturally beyond coveting or staining anything, and we call this ‘the fourth stage’. And the fourth stage is that of an arhat. Thus, the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind that fully manifest before us here and now are what an arhat is. From beginning to end, such a one will be naturally free from delusion. ‘Arriving immediately at the barrier gate’ is synonymous with accepting and keeping to a four-line verse.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, it is the fourth stage. Right from the crown of his head to the bottoms of his feet, his, or her, whole body fully manifests It and there is not the slightest thread or hair that has been omitted.

In short, were I to express the Matter,\* how would I word it? I might put it this way: When an arhat is in a worldly state of mind, all thoughts and things serve

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11. ‘A four-line verse’ is a common reference to Scriptural Teachings given in verse by Shakyamuni Buddha.

12. ‘The barrier gate’ is a common Zen Buddhist metaphor for the unobstructed gateway into realizing enlightenment.

to obstruct him. When an arhat is in a saintly state of mind, all thoughts and things serve to liberate him. By all means, you must realize that an arhat and all thoughts and things are fellow trainees. When an arhat has already awakened, he is restricted by 'being an arhat'. This is why, since before the time of the Lord of Emptiness, arhats have been Old Fists.<sup>13</sup>

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*Copied by me on the sixteenth day of the sixth lunar month in the first year of the Kenji era (July 11, 1275).*

*Ejō*

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13. The Lord of Emptiness refers to the first of the Seven Buddhas, the One who lived during the Age of Emptiness, that is, before duality had first arisen. 'Old Fists' implies that arhats, from beginningless time, have been embodiments of Ultimate Reality.