

The Last Blade of Grass? Universal Salvation and Buddhism (2)

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to tease out the meaning and philosophical implications of the Bodhisattva Vow after it escalated in the context of some Mahāyāna teachings from a simple aspiration to become a Buddha in order to show many other beings the path to liberation into a promise to save all sentient beings in the world ‘down to the last blade of grass.’ This amounts to a promise of bringing about universal salvation. The paper investigates whether this promise and the very notion of universal salvation fit at all into the body of mainstream Buddhist doctrines and can be accommodated within Buddhism’s ultimate message of liberation. The paper is not a research paper in the strict sense, it is rather a piece of individual philosophising on the given theme, albeit based on scriptural evidence. It should fit, within the context of the academic discipline known as ‘History of Religions’ or ‘Study

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International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture September 2012, vol. 19, pp. 7-22.

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The day of submission: 2011.11.29 / Completion of review: 2012.1.5 / Final decision for acceptance: 2012.1.9

of Religions,' under the label of 'Philosophy of Religion.'

It first investigates briefly the origin of the notion of universal salvation as it appeared in Zoroastrianism and in early European thought, and whether it is relevant to the three monotheistic religions. It then looks at the main traditions of Asia to see if the notion is applicable to them. The core part of the paper is then concerned with the emergence of the idea of liberation for all, 'down to the last blade of grass,' as expressed in some formulations of the Bodhisattva Vow in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and whether it is in any way foreshadowed in early Buddhism. Finally I ponder the apparent absurdity of the vow's claim and, in an attempt to make sense of it, suggest a novel philosophical interpretation which might appear 'unorthodox' and contentious to some. But is it?

Key Words: Bodhisattva Vow, Three *Yānas*, Buddhayāna, 'Permanent' Bodhisattvahood, Ālaya Vijñāna.

(Continued from previous article)

VI. The Great Bodhisattva Vow – its genesis

The earliest instances of a Bodhisattva Vow whose aim is the liberation of all beings can be found in different texts of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature in many variations. This complex of texts of different lengths may have started emerging in the first century BCE, but it was subject to frequent reformulations and additions for a few centuries thereafter. It is therefore reasonable to regard the formulation of the full Bodhisattva Vow (to save all beings) as later than its various forms taken by the Bodhisattvas vowing never to enter *nirvāṇa* and to render continuous assistance to suffering beings without promising to save all of them. But eventually the vow culminated in formulae explicitly expressing the wish to save all sentient beings. That no doubt amounts to the aspiration for universal liberation (Pagel 1995, 131).

The variegated vows of Bodhisattvas who promised to save all beings

before they themselves would enter *nirvāṇa* became in time very numerous and are scattered in a considerable number of Mahāyāna texts. Their study and analysis could provide material for a large research paper or even a book. Some are very simple and some very elaborate. Some are vague and ambiguous and others are very definite in how they are going to go about their task. In one of the simplest the Bodhisattva makes a resolution for the sake of highest enlightenment, as he ‘...must liberate all sentient beings’ (Pagel 1995, 106–7). ‘Sentient beings’ include plants (Schmithausen 1991), so this vow is as potent as the one containing the famous phrase ‘down to the last blade of grass.’ The problem is that in some texts Bodhisattva Vows are combined with ‘the Metaphysic of *Śūnyatā*’ (Oldmeadow 1997, 188). It starts already in the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts and that is where the problem of the meaning of the vow is placed outside the sphere of rationality. It enables, e.g. in the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, contradictory formulations such as “...all beings I must lead to Nirvana...and yet, after beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana” (Conze 1958, 57). This trend has continued throughout the centuries and through different texts to culminate eventually in the paradoxical formulations of Zen Buddhism which perhaps represents, from the point of view of Western rational philosophical tradition, the highest form of relativism.

The accounts and explanations of sympathetic Buddhologist scholars do not provide an adequate assessment of the possible common sense meaning of these Bodhisattva Vows. In the attempt to explain the ‘insider’ position they sometimes provide interpretations which resemble the irrational excesses of postmodernism. Oldmeadow (ibid.), whose paper is partly responsible for my preoccupation with the idea of universal salvation in Buddhism, follows the irrational tendency of adopting explanatory criteria from the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts when he says: “Clearly any adequate understanding of the *bodhisattva* ideal rests on an understanding of *śūnyatā*.” He then walks perilously close to monism in utilising as an aid for interpretation the equation of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* with which one can explain everything, yet which in reality explains nothing. The thrust of his paper is expressed not really by his Conclusion, but

by a preceding quotation he took from the work of a prolific writer on comparative religious and philosophical topics with no true scholarly credentials (Schuon 1968, 144):

...the *bodhisattva* realising the “emptiness” of things, thereby realises on the same showing the nirvāṇic quality of *Samisāra* as such ...expressed in the sentence “Form is void and Void is form.” The *Samisāra* which seems at first to be inexhaustible, so that the *bodhisattva*’s vow appears to have something excessive or even crazy about it, becomes “instantly” reduced—in the non-temporal instantaneity of *prajñā*—to universal enlightenment (*Sambodhi*); on this plane, every antinomy is transcended and as it were consumed. “Delivering the last blade of grass” amounts, in this sense, to beholding it in its nirvāṇic essence or to apprehending the unreality of its non-deliverance.

This hardly makes any sense at all. Schuon, a gifted poet and a charismatic speaker with a kind of cult following, flourished at the time of the proliferation of New Age type literature to which he contributed with his eclectic writing in the spirit of *religio perennis* and which, surprisingly, had some appeal even for some newly appointed academics during the expansion of new universities and religious studies within them.

Surely, it is the task of scholarship to present a critical historical account of a religious topic and if a scholar is assessing it also as a philosopher of religion, to do so on a rational basis and in terms of conceptual clarity without totally bypassing logical criteria. When no definite conclusion can be reached on some issue, the best approach is to apply at least the principle of logical probability.

On this basis my starting point is to regard the Pāli Canon, and in particular the *Suttapiṭaka*, as the reasonably reliable source of our knowledge of the Buddha and his teachings, especially where its contents are corroborated by parallel texts of the partially preserved Sanskrit Canon, some of it known only from Chinese and/or Tibetan translations. Some of it requires critical assessment, but the overall picture of early Buddhism which we possess can be accepted as originating from the missionary activities of an historical

personality known as the Buddha. He was by all accounts originally a member of the aristocratic class and destined to become a ruler, but was probably well versed in the religious and philosophical ideas of the time, including rebirth, and became at some point of his life convinced of the basic futility of temporary aims, such as ruling a country. Being aware of the tradition held among ascetics and wandering philosophers that there is a possibility of finding the final liberating truth, he renounced his worldly career to pursue this goal. He eventually experienced what he regarded as total enlightenment (*sammāsambodhi*) with confirmation of the truth of rebirth and his own total liberation from it into a transcendental dimension of *nibbāna* (*nirvāṇa*) during his lifetime which made him into a teaching Buddha, revered by many, for the greater part of his life. He died of a combination of illness and old age and, while being remembered as a charismatic teacher of a path to liberation, he became also the focus of a following which developed into a massive movement and, besides generating a religious tradition with devotional practices and elaborate rituals, branched out into numerous sects with specific teachings and philosophical schools of thought, all of them claiming authenticity or some justification for their innovative teachings.

These innovations obviously go beyond what the historical Buddha taught. Some of the new doctrinal texts use bombastic and contradictory language, claim new revelations by the Buddha obtained in meditative states or in dreams and set their followers impossible tasks. However, it is also possible to look for the meaning of the new and startling teachings on the basis of the canonical texts of early Buddhism, only regarding them as being expressed in a different, perhaps symbolical, idiom. Some new texts may be just reformulations of the early teaching for a new audience in a different time and culture. In interpreting them, however, one must not adopt their style or jargon, but rather attempt to explain them in a logical and conceptual framework. As to philosophical schools of thought, at least two of them, Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamika and the Yogācāra or Vijñānavāda systems, may be regarded as logical developments from formulations or attitudes contained in canonical texts which were probably those of the Buddha himself.

VII. Pertinent Questions

From this point of view I wish to look at the Bodhisattva Vow in which the Bodhisattva promises to practise in order to achieve the highest state of development up to the threshold of liberation, but to postpone his final entry into *nirvāṇa* until all other beings are saved—“down to the last blade of grass.” That, if anything, would certainly amount to the aim of bringing about universal salvation.

This is the core issue of this paper. As a European educated in the Western academic tradition and a student of philosophy in the old-fashioned (Socratic) way geared to questions of the meaning and goal of existence, I cannot rest content with insiders’ explanations or sympathetic scholarly interpretations and even less with bypassing the problem of the vow’s actual meaning, e.g. in the explanation of the late abbot of Drepung monastery, Kensur Pena Gyaltzen. According to him, “if a text states or implies that a Bodhisattva postpones *nirvāṇa*, it is not to be taken literally. It does not embody the final truth. It may be that it embodies a form of exhortatory writing—the Bodhisattva adopts a position of complete renunciation. In renouncing even Buddhahood the Bodhisattva precisely attains Buddhahood.” (Williams 2009, 58–59).

I have to pause and think about this vow. It is too far-reaching to be treated only as a topic within the history of the Buddhist religion without attempting to make sense of it philosophically. So I have to ask several pertinent questions. Is it meant seriously? Is it meant literally? Is it a nonsense? Is there a metaphorical meaning behind it?

For Aurobindo the problem of salvation for all appears to have been a straightforward realistic prospect if the conditions for it were fulfilled as explained above. We must here leave aside the question whether it is philosophically sound to regard a spiritual élite as being sufficient to bring about the salvation of the rest of mankind ‘in tandem.’

To do justice to the Buddhist texts promising *nirvāṇa* or salvation for all on the basis of a *bodhisattva*’s vow, we have to consider it carefully and

try to make it in some way accessible to conceptual understanding, to interpret it somehow. Let us ask a few more questions.

How is it possible to save all beings “down to the last blade of grass”? That means, put another way, how is it possible to bring the whole universe into a state of liberation or blessedness? Is it a practical proposition within the framework of Mahāyāna teachings from where the notion emerged? Can it be fitted doctrinally into mainstream Buddhism? Does it lend itself at all to philosophical analysis and interpretation?

There is a hint in the early Buddhist scriptures on how to approach the problem. It is akin, I think, to modern academic methods. It is clearly stated in the well-known discourse in which the Buddha gives advice to Kālāmas, the citizens of the town Kesaputta in Kosala, who asked the Buddha whether they should believe various brahmins and wandering teachers extolling their own doctrines while denigrating teachings of others (AN I, 189). Similar advice is given by the Buddha to Bhaddiya, a Licchavī prince who wished to know whether he should give some credence to rumours other ascetics were spreading about the Buddha (AN II, 191; cf. also SN II, 115). In his replies the Buddha urges everybody to investigate, to examine, to judge, rather than to accept views on hearsay or doctrines on faith because a teacher or a sacred text asserts them. He obviously encourages the use of one’s thinking ability and intelligence to work out what is wrong and what is right and demonstrates his analytical method expressed in a language understandable on the conceptual level which makes sense to anybody with average intellectual capacity.

The first question to answer is this: is it realistic to promise to save the whole world—not only all beings but the whole so-called physical world as well? Can it be meant literally? The world exists now as it existed in the time of the historical Buddha and in the time of presumed Buddhas of previous ages and world cycles, from a time whose beginning cannot be ascertained. If the vow is taken literally, there has been enough time for *bodhisattvas* who took the vow to accomplish it. But in our experience the world still appears to be here. *Samisāra*, as defined in early Buddhist sources,

still rolls on and is seemingly inexhaustible. So the proposition that the vow is meant literally is untenable. This kind of vow appeared in texts written down hundreds of years if not a thousand years after the historical Buddha, possibly in Central Asia or China. In the meantime the language of newly composed texts moved on and developed a metaphorical idiom, adopted paradoxical logic and often used a bombastic style. Besides, several schools of Buddhist philosophy evolved which attempted to present a wider picture of the world than the Buddha regarded as necessary for the practice of the path to individual liberation and to wisdom or direct knowledge enabling accomplished personalities to see things ‘as they really are’ (*yathā-bhūta-ñāna-dassana*, Vis. XXII). Clearly, the natural tendency of the human mind to anticipate what might be the final knowledge and formulate theories prior to experiencing it could not be stopped. It was even seen by the followers of the Buddha’s teachings as necessary for the sake of engaging in discussions with rival (Hindu) schools of thought which presented their own comprehensive pictures of reality on a cosmic scale.

One of the theories which had developed into a comprehensive philosophical world view can be enlisted as help for the purpose of interpreting the vow. It is the *Vijñānavāda*, or ‘mind only’ school. It developed in India over a long period starting in the third century and continued developing in Central Asia and China in the wake of the return of Faxian (Fa-hsien) and Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang) from India (414 and 645 CE). It developed several viewpoints, some dangerously near to solipsism from which it was rescued by the notion of *ālaya vijñāna* (Williams 2009, 92ff.; Harvey 1990, 107-10; cf. Schmithausen 2007). Its later stages allow us to summarise its implications as follows:

The world which we experience as individuals is not an independent and external reality, but a projection of our mind or consciousness. This means that, in a way, each one of us has his own *saṃsāra*, his own universe and that there are as many worlds as there are individuals. But these individual worlds projected by each individual consciousness are not isolated from each other, they are inter-subjective or overlapping because of their

linkage to the collective—or dare we say cosmic—storehouse consciousness (*ālaya vijñāna*). That is why we can, to some extent, communicate meaningfully with each other as if we shared the same world, although this sharing is only partial. In certain details even our everyday experience confirms that our respective worlds are subjective because of the individual angle from which we perceive them; this accounts, for example, for differing descriptions of the same event by different witnesses. The late Vijñānavāda innovative and elaborate picture of reality could have been evolved, in fact, on the basis of a stance exhibited by the Buddha himself in his discourses. He never referred to the existence of the so-called objective or external world outside human perception. In keeping with his ‘noble silence’ about metaphysical questions which were not conducive to progress on the path, but would be only a distraction, he left the problem of the nature of both perceived and presumed unperceived reality open, to be resolved by every individual for himself on reaching the final goal. However, the followers of the Vijñānavāda school of thought would no doubt have regarded their solution as a logical development from the original Buddha’s stance. Besides, they would claim its confirmation by direct vision of it achieved by the practice of meditation which was an integral part of their movement as its other name, Yogācāra, testifies.

Can we look, on the basis of this Vijñānavāda philosophical and yogic vision of reality, at the Buddha’s experience during the night of his enlightenment (described, for example, in MN 4; 19; 26 or 36)? Let us summarise the descriptions of his experiences during that decisive night: first, he gradually recovered memories of innumerable past lives of his (*pubbenivāsānussati*) with all the past universes that he had experienced during those lives. Then he developed the knowledge of destinations according to individual actions in the process of rebirth (*yathākammūpagañāna*), not only of himself, but also of other beings through his newly opened clairvoyant eye (*dibbacakkhu*). This means that he could perceive the saṃsāric worlds of other beings as they were personally experiencing them and saw also the individual backgrounds to them within their minds and saw, further, the

interconnections. He also understood that if he continued being reborn he would not experience anything else than what he had already gone through many times before in his past lives in different variations and what he could see as being experienced by other beings in their present projected saṃsāric worlds. This repetitive outlook prompted in him the abandonment of any desire for future saṃsāric experiences. This culminated in his knowledge of the destruction of cankers or inflowing mental obstructions in him (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*), which resulted in his total and perfect enlightenment (*sammāsambodhi*).

Now if he were not thus fully liberated from the desire to experience himself in new lives, which would nevertheless repeat in different configurations the experiences of his past lives, he would go on being reborn life after life as an individual within an individually experienced universe. He would be experiencing his particular world in each subsequent life. So by saving himself he has saved virtually all those future individuals with their continuously recreated egos. In early Buddhism it is said that there is no substance to the individual, that the reborn individual is changing all the time and therefore is not the same as before, but he is not someone else either (*na ca so', na ca añño*) already within his one lifespan and also in his successive lives. So there would be a virtually infinite line of future beings that would follow each other from birth to birth. And at each instance of rebirth there would be a whole experienced surrounding for it, a projected world with all its natural phenomena, including grass, which is, of course, just a metaphor for the whole world. Thus when one individual liberates himself, he actually liberates the indefinite number of future individuals who would have followed if he had kept being reborn, as well as their individually experienced universes with all the grass in them. They would no longer take place; they would have reached liberation.

If we grant this interpretation, which has its inner logic within the Buddhist system of thought, can it be regarded at least as a kind of universal salvation? Certainly not. It is, in essence, just the good old notion of individual liberation from *saṃsāra* resulting in arahatship as taught in early

Buddhism. It is only expressed in a new, fancy idiom. Of course, early Buddhism does not explicitly describe the so-called external world as a projection of the mind, but neither does it assert its independent existence. It invariably refers, let it be repeated, to the objects of the world in terms of what is perceived or experienced; early Buddhism never expresses what, if anything, objectively exists behind what is perceived. We all know that experiences of the world, being subjective, are not quite identical even though they are shared, so every individual lives in a slightly different 'private' world which would, of course, vanish on his liberation.

When we now come to assessing the actual meaning of the 'last blade of grass' vow we can therefore regard it as a novel, metaphorical expression for achieving individual liberation as a *buddha* or as an *arahat*, the difference between the two being mainly in the superior wisdom and skill of a *buddha* to show the way to liberation to others, and in some other unique qualities. The notion of the *arahat*, though originally basically equivalent to the notion of the *buddha*, at least in the achievement of final liberation, became for various reasons, including false claims and self-deception, somewhat discredited in the confusing sectarian disputes in the time of the Mahāsaṅghika schism. So it gave way to the term *bodhisattva* which was originally reserved for those who trained to become future Buddhas as in the case of Metteyya/Maitreya. In the developing doctrines of Mahāyāna the notion of the *bodhisattva* no longer necessarily possessed the implication of having to assume the role of a teaching Buddha in the future after achieving enlightenment and therefore liberation. The difference between the early Buddhist notion of *arahat* and the developed Mahāyāna (and Vajrayāna) notion of *bodhisattva* and even *buddha* is thus demonstrated to be only in language and imagery, not in status or achievement.

This development culminated after Buddhism reached China. In India, for example, the *Lotus Sūtra*, while somewhat downgrading the status of the *arahat*, still insists that not only he and the *pratyekabuddha*, but also every *bodhisattva* must become a Buddha of some future world period and possibly in a different universe or 'Buddha field' (*buddhakṣetra*). In China there are

many translations of original Indian texts and many of those whose originals have been lost are genuine. However, *sūtras* which formulated various fantastic Bodhisattva Vows and have been treated as translations of Sanskrit originals are suspect and were most likely composed in China. Some may be translations of originals in vernaculars composed in Central Asia.

VIII. Conclusion

According to the early Buddhist teachings which originated with the historical Buddha himself, when a monk, a disciple of the Buddha or a follower of his teachings, realises the eightfold path, becomes an *arahat* and is liberated, there is no trace of him, when he dies, in the perceived subjective universes of those who have been, so to speak, left behind. For them *saṃsāra* goes on and they carry on with their lives. When a *bodhisattva* reaches the tenth *bhūmi*, which means full enlightenment, he also liberates himself from any future *saṃsāric* egos and all the possible future worlds he would otherwise experience. But of course, according to the developed Mahāyāna teachings, he is then able to project his influence from his transcendental condition of freedom into the subjective worlds of the other beings who go on living in their perceived *saṃsāric* universes, perhaps worshipping him under some name and praying for his assistance, which he is supposedly able to give by entering or projecting his influence into their perceived worlds. But this is a matter of religious faith which does not lend itself to rational analysis and is not, therefore, a topic for philosophical investigation.

My interpretation might be regarded as an ‘unorthodox’ one, an ‘outside’ solution, not from within the trends of Mahāyāna thought patterns as understood by historians of religions, but it is a feasible philosophical explanation of the truly fantastic Great Bodhisattva Vow and *it makes sense*. I like to think that there must have been, in the course of centuries, some individuals in the fold of Mahāyāna Buddhism who understood the vow in this way and aspired for their own liberation, thus following the historical Buddha’s guidance, knowingly or by intuition. They would have been a minority among the mass of worshippers and followers of sectarian teachings.

But so were ardent practitioners of the path to arahatship, partly even during the Buddha's lifetime and especially after his demise, to say nothing about the present situation within the Theravāda fold.

It has been my experience when studying post-canonical developments within the wider Buddhist tradition that every novel or seemingly novel idea can be traced to a germinal canonical statement, usually put into the mouth of the Buddha himself, from which it may have been developed or by which it may have been inspired. I maintain that this holds true also for my interpretation of parallel multiple and overlapping universes experienced within individual beings. The particular universe experienced by one particular individual vanishes when that individual reaches liberation. In conversation with a lower deity (*devaputta*) by the name of Rohitassa the Buddha made, among others, the following proclamation:

Api cāhami āvuso imasmi yeva byāmamatte kalebare saññimhi samanake lokañ ca paññāpemi lokasamudayañ ca lokanirodhañ ca lokanirodhagāmini paṭipadan ti.

And I even, friend, declare (that) within this very body of the size of a fathom possessing perception and being endowed with a mind there is the world, the arising of the world and the cessation of the world and (likewise) the means of reaching the cessation of the world. (AN II, 48; cf. SN II, 62)

So my interpretation of the Great Bodhisattva Vow may not be as unorthodox as may appear at first glance. In any case, an important implication of it is that it asserts the basic unity of the Buddhist message, pointing out that the differences between early Buddhist and subsequent Mahāyāna formulations of the spiritual path and its goal are only of a terminological nature, and not, philosophically viewed, of substance. It further means that the Buddhist message is about individual liberation and that the notion of a final universal salvation does not have any place in the scheme of mainstream Buddhist eschatology.

Abbreviations

AN	Āṅguttara Nikāya
BCE	Before Common Era
BU	Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad
Bv	Buddhavaṁsa
CE	Common Era
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
P.	Pāli
RV	Ṛg Veda
Skt.	Sanskrit
SN	Saṁyutta Nikāya
Sn	Sutta-Nipāta
SnA	Sutta-Nipāta Aṭṭhakathā
Vis.	Visuddhi-magga

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