
Are the Vows unrealistic?

Mondo with Roland Yuno Rech - Grube Louise, Mai 2014

Question: *When I read the translation of the Four Vows of the Bodhisattva, I think it is not realistic ...*

R.Y.R: It's true! It is not realistic at all! These Vows express an ideal that is completely impossible to reach (and this is why it is an ideal), and which only gives a direction. If we think deeply about the First Vow, "to save all the sentient beings", it is obvious that it is impossible for an individual to make such a Vow. So, what does it mean to make this Vow despite everything, despite the impossibility of realizing it?

First of all, it means that we will not believe that we are able to save all beings, but that we can help them to break free from their suffering. We can help them to get on the path of practice, which will then allow them to free themselves of their own suffering. (Secondly), when we hear "all beings", it means that we should not discriminate between the people we love, who are close to us or whom we find sympathetic, and the others. We tend to be easily compassionate and kind towards people we like. But the Bodhisattva has an universal love: it means that he does not discriminate between the people or beings.

We will be able then to see what our limits are in the realization of this Vow, and it is very interesting! In my opinion, this is one of the best criteria of Enlightenment: to see how I am able to have compassion, benevolence, towards people I do not know, or even towards the people who are hostile to me, if any. Can I really make this Vow "to help all beings" without choosing? This is a very good practice and a good observation of "how far we are" on the path of Realization. And at that point, we will quickly find our own limits ... But it is also important not to feel guilty about this ...

And this is valid for all the Vows in general: they are so enormous that – inevitably - compared to the Vows, our own practice will always seem inadequate. But this must not generate guilt and we should not tell ourselves: "I'm a bad Bodhisattva, I'm completely useless". It would not be right, because all feelings of guilt are self-hatred, feelings that go against Buddhist Precepts "Do not hate" ... We must also be benevolent towards ourselves. So, the conclusion is that, in fact, the Vow will lead us to do our best every day, to follow that direction, to the extent of what we are able to do.

On the other hand, when we talk about "to save all beings," what does "salvation" means? In Buddhism, it means "Awakening." But no one can awaken anyone. Even Buddha cannot give Enlightenment to someone else. We can help the beings to awaken themselves, that's all. Finally, I quote - each time this kind of question occurs - Master's Eno words (the Sixth Patriarch), words that impressed me a lot when he says: "I, Eno, am unable to save anybody". Yet it was a great Master ... "I, Eno, I cannot save anyone, but beings can be saved by their own Buddha Nature." And this means that even he, a Great Master, had a limited power to awaken this Buddha Nature, to stimulate each being to contact his own Buddha Nature. What is then the best way to do it? This is zazen itself. So finally, the role of a Bodhisattva is to share the

practice of zazen with others and to inspire others to practice, stimulate in others what is called Bodaishin, the aspiration to Enlightenment that encourages us to do zazen.

The other three Vows are connected to the first and are the normal consequence of the First Vow. Because to achieve the first Vow, which is the fundamental Vow, we need to find the root of all bonno, of all causes of suffering, through self-experience. When we talk about bonno, the best testing ground is ourselves, because we all have attachments, more or less developed, and if we focus on curing our own bonno it is a good example for the others, it stimulates others to do the same. But above all, it gives us a relative wisdom of the so called "skillful means" to guide others on this path, to solve their own attachments.

Then, when we talk "to study all Dharma's, all the teachings of the Buddha" is obviously not to become an expert in Buddhism or some kind of "Bouddhologist", an encyclopedia, but to draw on the immense wisdom of Buddha, expressed through its many and varied teachings, and find there the means to develop our own wisdom to help others.

And finally: "As perfect as the Buddha Way is, I make the Vow to realize it" : the point here is that Way is not only the Way, it is the Way as Bodhi, as Realization, as Awakening ; but not just for ourselves, because it is only by achieving enlightenment that we will be better able to guide others.

And there's a difference between what is called the "Enlightenment of a Buddha" and the "Enlightenment of a Bodhisattva": there are some kind of degrees in Awakening. There are "small Awakenings": every time we clarify an illusion and let it go, it is a form of enlightenment. And to understand ourselves more deeply is also to awaken. But the "Awakening of a perfect Buddha" is an enlightenment which includes what is called omniscience (or knowledge of all and everything). The Buddha, because he is omniscient, understands the entire reality and is entirely at ease to help beings.

This reminds me of Master Deshimaru, who had received as a gift the Encyclopedia Britannica in 20 volumes and who always said: "You must be aware of everything; there is no need to become a specialist in each subject, but you must be somewhat aware of everything". Indeed, a Bodhisattva, a Zen Master, must know many things to be able to dialogue with others. A Bodhisattva must be able to understand the different problems that people experience in the different social groups, the different professions, etc. etc. The more one develops one's knowledge, the more one will be able to understand the world and the other beings.

That is the practical reason, but there is also a mystical reason: it is the fact that a perfect Buddha is actually one with the entire universe. So, it is literally the entire universe. So, his omniscience is that he is everything.

I hope this will not discourage you from taking the Bodhisattva's Vows. Do what you can, every day ...