



Rethinking the Bodhisattva Vow

Radical Availability Right Now

We are Embodied Beings

The germinating seed for an essay often arrives unbidden, usually when least expected. One of my most fruitful periods for insight is that liminal zone between sleep and waking – as if something that has been quietly metabolising below conscious thought finds its moment when the filters are not fully loaded, to pop into awareness and literally wake me up. I've started to recognise just how productive those moments can be, and I keep a notebook by my bedside for just that reason.

Today's Note: *What if the Bodhisattva Vow is not primarily about rebirth, but reflects a version of enlightenment that embraces embodiment? What does it mean to operate within the limits of manifestation from the perspective of no limitation? What does it mean to be a part serving the whole?*

For some time now, I have noticed a thread running through much of my writing. Initially my poems, and then subsequently my essays and books explore ideas about what it means to 'wake-up', how do we support our 'waking-up' and how do we live from that perspective in a world that rarely acknowledges that wisdom.

That lens has widened to include relational intelligence and what conditions support a mutual awakening through dialogue, through vulnerability, through listening and through risk in an intimate relational environment. This has resulted in essays on participation, uncertainty, coherence, authenticity/belonging and underlying them all, embodiment – the underlying substrate that is taken for granted but is implicit in all these other questions.

Awakening was not pointing away from the world.

It was pointing back towards it.

Again and again, I found myself drawn less to questions about transcendence and more to questions about participation.

Looking back, I can see that even the act of writing has been an expression of this movement. If awakening were merely a private realisation, there would be little reason to write at all. Yet something in me kept returning to dialogue, to relationship, to actively engaging in a community exploring the leading edge of these investigations – inhabiting





another liminal realm – between what we think we know and what might be possible that we don't yet know: to the possibility that understanding itself might emerge between us rather than within us alone.

I think that is why this question surfaced when it did – and as I often find – it came with an imperative to start to write about it – because writing is how I explore. It is my thinking edge – it is the place where connections are made and insight become available as I type – it is the interface between the not yet happened and the ink on the page.

So, let's dive into the historical record and revisit one of the central commitments of Mahayana Buddhism: the Bodhisattva Vow.

The Bodhisattva Vow.

Traditionally, the vow is often expressed in a form such as:

“However innumerable beings are, I vow to liberate them.”

That is quite a commitment to make. It is boundless – the universe is vast and endless- both physically and temporally – and many traditions observe the role of humility in undertaking a commitment like this – “Our role is not to complete the task but to play our part in the arena available to us”. Indeed, this approach is important because the risk of attachment to grandiosity is an ever-present temptation – “I am the one with the correct view.”

So, one interpretation that has emerged for many practitioners is that this vow extends across countless lifetimes. The Bodhisattva postpones final liberation until all beings have crossed to the other shore.

It is a beautiful image. Yet I sometimes wonder whether it can be misunderstood as a form of postponement. Like many spiritual ideas that incorporate time, it can subtly encourage the sense that awakening is always waiting somewhere ahead of us rather than asking something of us now.

What about the immediacy and intimacy of this present moment now – after all that is a key realisation – the only reality I can directly encounter is this moment. Does the bodhisattva vow carry a more immediate interpretation.

What if the vow was never primarily about future lives?

What if it was always pointing towards this moment?

What if the vow describes not a future commitment but the natural expression of awakening itself, a way of orienting ourselves as we engage with whatever life has in store for us?

Rebirth?

I do not know whether rebirth is real. It may be.

Many sincere practitioners and traditions have held rebirth to be true, and I have no basis from my own experience to dismiss their understanding.

Nor do I know that it is not true. I have not seen any evidence categorically proving its impossibility.

The question remains open.



Yet what strikes me is that my response remains the same either way. If there are future lives, then surely the invitation is to meet this one fully. If there are not, then surely the invitation is to meet this one fully.

The uncertainty changes surprisingly little.

The only life I can touch directly is the one appearing now.

The only suffering I can respond to is the suffering before me.

The only act of compassion I can offer is the one available in this moment.

For that reason, I find myself drawn to understanding the Bodhisattva Vow not primarily as a promise extending across countless future lifetimes, but as an orientation towards the life that is actually present.

A commitment to participation.

A commitment to availability.

A commitment to meeting the world from the deepest understanding one has right now, however incomplete that understanding may be.

Perhaps the Bodhisattva Vow begins not with a promise about the future, but with a simple willingness to be here.

To be here fully.

To be here for others.

To be here for whatever this moment asks of us.

And perhaps that is already enough.

Yet before assuming this is a novel interpretation, it is worth asking whether others have travelled similar ground. The Bodhisattva Vow has been contemplated by practitioners, philosophers and teachers for centuries. Perhaps the intuition emerging here is not a departure from the tradition but another way of entering its depths.

What does the Literature Say?

I have shared my perspective. But this is not a new question.

The Bodhisattva Vow has travelled across centuries, cultures and schools of Buddhism. How have others understood it? And does the historical record contain traces of this same movement—from awakening as transcendence to awakening as participation?

The earliest expressions of the Bodhisattva ideal centred on the arising of bodhicitta—the intention to awaken for the benefit of all beings. At its heart was not a theory about time but an orientation of consciousness: awakening was inseparable from concern for others.

As Mahayana Buddhism evolved, the Bodhisattva came to embody the union of wisdom and compassion. The question was no longer simply how to cross to the other shore, but how awakening expresses itself in relationship with a world still marked by suffering.

Zen often pushed this insight further. The final image is not ‘escape into transcendence’, but a ‘return to the marketplace’. Enlightenment is expressed through ordinary activity, suggesting that awakening finds its fulfilment not in leaving embodiment behind but in inhabiting it more completely.

What have I discovered?

When I read spiritual literature these days, I find myself less interested in accumulating knowledge and more interested in recognising truth. Certain passages seem to bypass the conceptual mind and land somewhere deeper, where understanding arrives not as information but as resonance.

That is how I have come to understand the Bodhisattva Vow. Not primarily through study, but through recognising something in my own experience that the tradition seems to be pointing towards.

One of the recurring themes that emerged when I began writing was something I called *Being Available*. Beneath the peace and stillness discovered in meditation, I sensed a realm of infinite possibility—a field of emergence waiting for each of us to say yes to participating in what might unfold. It is the threshold between what is and what may be. A place where we become participants in manifestation itself.

To be available in this way feels less like pursuing a personal goal and more like aligning with something larger than oneself. It is a movement towards wholeness—a recognition that the apparent parts have never truly been separate from the whole.

That intuition found expression in the Between-Us Groups, where the exploration centred on the transformation of both individual and collective through the dynamic tension of autonomy and belonging. It continues today through communities of inquiry where people come together not to defend conclusions, but to explore questions that matter.

Seen from this perspective, the Bodhisattva Vow feels less like a promise deferred to future lifetimes and more like a description of a way of being. A willingness to participate. A willingness to serve the whole from the place where one stands. A willingness to make oneself available to what is emerging.

Perhaps that is the living heart of the vow: not a commitment to some distant future, but an invitation to radical availability in this moment.

Image: Quan Yin, Bodhisattva (Creative Commons licence). I love this image because it seems to embody the spirit of the Bodhisattva Vow itself: grounded in stillness, yet poised for action. Contemplation and participation are not separate; one naturally flows into the other.