

**All-ranging & all-outreaching compassion:
its meditative ancestors of ‘comprehensive omniscience’ & ‘great compassion’ in
Indian Buddhism**

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Abstract

Buddhist-inspired and Buddhist social work, relief actions and service to the society rely on the Buddhist notions of ‘compassion’ and ‘great compassion’ as their source of inspiration and the foundation of engagement. The extent of physical suffering and other forms of afflictions in the contemporary world and compassionate resolve and activism seem to be naturally resonating with the traditional “four encompassing vows” of the bodhisattva (四弘誓願) in the East-Asian Buddhist traditions.

These four great vows – known in a number of textual formulations and modern adaptations – have indeed become part of the popular discourse of so-called ‘engaged Buddhism’ both in Asia and in the West, along with several other selections of Mahāyāna and bodhisattva constructs and aphorisms. The four vows involve saving all immeasurable multitudes of beings, wiping out all inexhaustible anguish and hatred, learning all the immeasurable gates to the teachings of the Dharma, and realising unsurpassable Buddhahood. Such vows appear truly infinite, inexhaustible and boundless in terms of (a) the gnoseological range they entail and of (b) their ethical implications and practical actualisations.

The scholastic tradition has struggled to reconcile their logical inconceivability and the ethical non-sequitur of making ‘inconceivable’ vows by recurring to various rhetorical strategies revolving around the interplay of emptiness, ultimate non-existence of beings, ultimate non-existence of the self/other boundary, and compassion.

This paper takes a step back. It looks, from the viewpoint of their genesis in Indian Buddhist thought and meditation history, at the twin aspects of omniscience and all-encompassing great compassion these vows and the emerging contemporary discourse rely on philosophically and ideologically. In particular, by surveying significant texts and passages, it gives a close look at the meditative and soteriological dynamics that stand behind the hendiadys of ‘great compassion’ (*mahākaruṇā*) as a veritably ‘boundless’ development beyond the earlier scheme of the four ‘immeasurables’ (*apramāṇas*) and ‘comprehensive omniscience’ (*sarvākarajñātā*) over reality as a new form of insight on all counts.