

Mahāyāna as religious fiction

Excerpt from *SD 60.3: Pilinda Sutta* © Piya Tan 2023.

3.1.6.1 When, as a young Buddhist (the 1980s), I was learning Mahāyāna Buddhism from western teachers, I was often told to “suspend our belief (or disbelief)” and lose ourselves in the “Mahāyāna drama.” Taken that way, I did find studying the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa, the Amitābha Sūtras, and so on, very engaging and interesting. In other words, it was enjoyable to read or listen to Mahāyāna teaching without having to believe them. It is just like enjoying great secular literature, or watching Star Wars and similar movies.

In fact, Mahāyāna, we now know, was not a monolithic movement, but disparate currents of local teachers and elites who reacted to Buddhism with their own imagination and agenda. Mahāyāna flourished as a written and book-based Buddhism (unlike early Buddhism, which was an oral tradition to begin with). It is not difficult to imagine Mahāyāna writers and their readers freely fictionalizing the Buddha and the great arhats as literary figures, parodizing, even ridiculing them, and promoting more socially engaging, even worldly, yet magical figures of Eternal Buddhas and Cosmic Bodhisattvas. We may even see this as the beginnings of Virtual-Reality RPG, with the Mahāyāna devotees role-playing as Bodhisattvas. One can thus imagine how Mahāyāna became popular.¹

3.1.6.2 In 2014, during a Lotus Sutra Seminar in a Singapore temple, I was the lone representative for early Buddhism. Trying to share how I see Mahāyāna, I spoke of how it is full of colourful uses of words, symbols, metaphors, parables and stories. However, when I mentioned that I enjoyed Mahāyāna stories and teachings like Star Wars fans enjoy the series, there was a woman heckler in the audience who loudly protested, “How dare you compare Mahāyāna to the movies!” No one came to my defence; clearly, there were no Star Wars fans in the audience. I realized that the metaphor did not work for the local Mahāyāna audience.

A young local Mahāyāna zealot who openly championed Pure Land Buddhism even believed that the discovery of the Gandhara texts “proved” that “Mahāyāna was earlier than Theravāda.” I tried to put across to him that I’m more interested in “early Buddhism,” but he was adamant in promoting not just Mahāyāna, but “Chinese Mahāyāna.” To claim that Mahāyāna is right and true, he often proclaimed this Chinese saw:

不可思议者 *bùkě sīyìzhě* “The unbelievable is not always the improbable.”
不一定不可能 *bùyídìng bùkěnéng* “The inconceivable is not always the impossible.”

I simply could not resist putting across to him that a Western philosopher had already warned us of such summary and dangerous claims:

“Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.”
(Voltaire, translation of passage from “Questions sur les miracles,” 1765)²

¹ A Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, 2nd ed Windhorse, 1997, 2013:101-112. G Schopen, “Mahāyāna,” (ed) R E Buswell, *Macmillan Ency of Buddhism* 2004:492-499. J Walser, *Genealogies of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Routledge, 2018.

² On a light, no less insightful, note: “Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said: ‘one *can’t* believe impossible things.’ ‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’” (Lewis

3.1.6.3 In the name of intrafaith tolerance and compassion, we must accept that the Mahāyāna have created their own Arhats and vested them with their own hagiographic and narrative details, as with their Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Since none of these creations, as described and devised by the Mahāyāna masters exist in early Buddhism, these karmic formations remain with their creators and with those who game these creations.

Although almost none of these Mahāyāna cultures have survived history, their virtual worlds still exist today, resurrected as religious and academic realities by professional priests and scholars. In a profoundly sombre way, we are reminded how fortunate we are to still have access to **early Buddhism**, indeed, be its custodians. We should not take this difficult but liberating task for granted because, like the Mahāyāna, we too may be plagiarized and plundered again, this time by our own karmic history.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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Carroll, *Alice through the Looking Glass*, London: Macmillan, 1871, dated 1872). Thanks again, Matt Jenkins, for this lovely literary recall. Also, a misquote attr theologian Tertullian of Carthage (c160-225), who, in defence of the paradoxical character of certain Christian doctrines (as in Mahāyāna), wrote: *prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est* ("it is immediately credible—because it is silly" [*Flesh*, Tertullian Project] or "it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd" [*Flesh*, *New Advent*]), commonly paraphrased as *credo quia absurdum*, "I believe it because it is absurd." (Put simply: "... the more improbable an event, the less likely is anyone to believe, without compelling evidence, that it has occurred; therefore, the very improbability of an alleged event, such as Christ's resurrection, is evidence in its favour. Thus far from seeking the abolition of reason, Tertullian must be seen as appropriating Aristotelian rational techniques and putting them to apologetic us" (D C Lindberg, "Science and the Early Church," edd Lindberg & Numbers, *God & Nature: historical essays on the encounter between Christianity and Science*, Berkeley & LA: Univ of California Press, 1986:26).