



# Bodhicharya

AWAKEN THE HEART BY OPENING THE MIND

## 1: THE EXCELLENCE OF BODHICITTA

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## **Note on Part One: Chapters One, Two, and Three**

The first three chapters of the text explain how to generate bodhicitta, how to make it arise.

### **Explanation of chapter title**

Here we translate the title of the first chapter as “The Excellence of Bodhicitta.” In other translations, the title is called “Explaining the Benefits of Bodhicitta,” or “Praise of the Awakening Mind.”

In this chapter, Shantideva presents the excellence and benefits of bodhicitta, in order to inspire the reader to follow the bodhisattva path—to convince us that generating bodhicitta is the most worthwhile thing for us to do.

### **Chapter structure**

This chapter has two parts: the supporting basis necessary for developing bodhicitta, and the benefits of generating bodhicitta (that which is supported).

#### **I. The supports for bodhicitta**

This section explains the supporting basis necessary for developing bodhicitta. There is the support of the body, and the support of the mind.

##### **I.A. The supporting basis of the body**

So hard to find such ease and wealth<sup>1</sup>  
Whereby to render meaningful this human birth!  
If now I fail to turn it to my profit,  
How could such a chance be mine again. (4)<sup>2</sup>

[The supporting basis of the body is this precious human birth, which provides us with a rare opportunity to study and practice the dharma, and ultimately to reach enlightenment.] The importance of this precious human birth is explained in many different books, such as *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*<sup>3</sup> and so on, so we will not go into great detail here. This verse from the *Bodhicharyavatara* is often quoted in these later books.

##### **I.B. The supporting basis of the mind**

As when a flash of lightning rends the night,  
And in its glare shows all the dark black clouds had hid,  
Likewise rarely through the buddhas' power,  
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient in the world. (5)

Here, Shantideva uses the image of a pitch-black night to describe our current mind situation. Khenpo Kunpal explains that, of course, at night there is no sun. But sometimes even if the sun is not there, it can be quite light if the moon is shining. But here there is no moon either. But even if the moon is not there, if the stars are out, then there will be a little bit of light. But here again, the sky is completely covered by black clouds, so there are not even stars to be seen, and the sky is in complete darkness. On a night like this, if there is a flash of lightning, then for split second you can see things.

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<sup>1</sup> [The terms “ease and wealth” are usually translated as the “freedoms and advantages” that one possesses in this lifetime. So one considers the supporting basis of one’s body in this current lifetime in terms of what it is free from (freedoms), and what it possesses (advantages).]

<sup>2</sup> Note that verses 1-3 of Chapter 1 of the Padmakara translation are considered as Shantideva’s introduction to the root text; they are explained in the Introduction of this commentary.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala Publications, page 19

In the same way, at this moment, our current mind situation is like a night of complete darkness, where the Buddha is not there. We don't know what the good thing is to do, we don't know what is not a good thing to do. What causes what? We don't know. This "not knowing" is like darkness without even the moon. But in addition, our mind is completely overcome by the five mind poisons<sup>4</sup>, as if it's completely covered by dark clouds, and not even the stars are visible.

But even in that dark state of being, because of the blessings and the great aspiration of the buddhas of the past, and also because of our own good karma from our past actions—from these two forces coming together—then once in a while, for one moment, we have a flash of positive thoughts. A small glimpse of bodhicitta comes, such as a simple wish to practice positive things. This glimpse comes once, like a flash of lightning in this dark night. But it does not remain long. In one second it goes away.

This is to illustrate how difficult it is for us to get these positive thoughts and positive states of mind, such that we would like to do something really beneficial and positive for the rest of our life for all sentient beings. Therefore when this flash of light comes in our mind, when a positive thought or intention, this desire to practice bodhicitta, comes, we have to just completely jump at that chance and hold onto it and then completely go into it. If you think too much, if you wait too long, it will go away.

## **II. The benefits of generating bodhicitta**

This section has three parts: (A) the general benefits of generating bodhicitta; (B) the individual benefits of the bodhicitta of aspiration and the bodhicitta of application; (C) praise for the beings who have the continuous bodhicitta in their mind.

### **II.A. The general benefits of generating bodhicitta**

The general benefit of generating bodhicitta has three parts: (1) how positive deeds done with bodhicitta are much stronger and more beneficial than any other positive deeds; (2) when the bodhicitta arises in you, then your name and your status in life change; (3) examples or metaphors.

#### **II.A.1. The strength of bodhicitta**

As we have already discussed, bodhicitta is the mind, the intention, the strong aspiration, that "I want to help all sentient beings and lead them to complete enlightenment. Towards that end I will work and towards that end I will endeavor. That will be my real goal."

Bodhicitta is a very strong and a very determined forward-looking goal, from which you have no wavering of the path, because you have the goal completely set. Whoever has this long-term goal, this very strong direction, is regarded as a bodhisattva.

Thus behold the utter frailty of goodness!  
Except for perfect bodhicitta,  
There is nothing able to withstand  
The great and overwhelming strength of evil. (6)

The mind or the intention to practice positive deeds is very weak at first, and, like a flash of lightning, it lasts for a very short time. While at all times, the state of mind that wants to go the wrong way and practice the negative things is like the pitch black darkness of a night in which the sky is completely covered with thick clouds. These negative thoughts and

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<sup>4</sup> The five poisons are ignorance, attachment, aversion, pride, and jealousy. In other texts, these poisons are sometimes referred to as negative emotions, afflictive emotions, emotional obscurations, and so on.

emotions and influences are so strong and powerful that it is extremely difficult to reverse or get rid of them.

There is only one way that we can get out of that, and that is with bodhicitta, which is like the sun that dispels the darkness with its natural radiance. There is nothing other than bodhicitta that can completely devastate this darkness. The other positive deeds do not have the strength to do this.

Why is that? Why do you say that only bodhicitta has this power to completely dispel the negativity in our mind, which is so strong?

The mighty buddhas, pondering for many ages,  
Have seen that this, and only this, will save  
The boundless multitudes,  
And bring them easily to supreme joy. (7)

The Buddha said that for three countless kalpas, all the buddhas have worked continuously for the benefit of all beings, and have thought only of their benefit, and they have seen that this bodhicitta is the strongest and most direct method to:

- Purify negative deeds of the past.
- Cut off any reoccurrence of negative deeds in the future.
- Counteract the mind poisons.
- Increase the strength of small positive deeds.

If even a small seedling of a positive deed is supported and inspired by the bodhicitta, it can increase in strength and spread wider and wider until it ultimately leads you to complete enlightenment. These benefits have been seen by the buddhas again and again, in all the sutras of the Mahayana.

This bodhicitta not only helps us to reduce our bad karma and mind poisons, but it also gives countless other beings a method to get both short-term temporary benefits, and the long-term benefit of becoming completely enlightened. Because of the strength of one's motivation and aspiration, one is able to achieve these things without too much strain or difficulty or hard work. Therefore:

Those who wish to overcome the sorrows of their lives,  
And put to flight the pain and suffering of beings,  
Those who wish to win such great beatitude,  
Should never turn their back on bodhicitta. (8)

Anybody who really wants to know a method to dispel the countless sufferings of individual existence, such as birth, old age, illness and death, and to dispel the sufferings of other people in the present and in the future, should completely hold onto this bodhicitta and never let it go. They should keep it in their mind always.

## **II.A.2. Your name and status change**

Should bodhicitta come to birth  
In one who suffers in the dungeons of samsara,  
In that instance, he is called the buddhas' heir,  
Worshipful alike to gods and men. (9)

Whoever has this bodhicitta arising in his or her heart is transformed into a bodhisattva. There is no distinction between male and female, between young and old, between high caste and low caste. At that very moment when the bodhicitta arises, even those who are completely bound in the prison of samsara and overwhelmed with all different kinds of sufferings will transform into the *sons and daughters of the buddhas*. They will be called the bodhisattvas: the brave beings, the courageous beings, who work for the benefit of all sentient beings, who are on the path to enlightenment.

The moment that this idea, this inspiration, this motivation arises in you, the transformation takes place. At that very moment when this bodhicitta is arising, that person who has been the lowest of the low in the human society immediately becomes somebody who is worthy of respect and prostration, even by the gods. That's how precious it is.

### **II.A.3. Examples**

Six examples are given to demonstrate the benefits of generating bodhicitta.

#### **II.A.3.1. Example of alchemy: demonstrating that bodhicitta leads to the attainment of buddhahood**

For like the supreme substance of the alchemists,  
It takes the impure form of human flesh  
And makes of it the priceless body of a buddha.  
Such is bodhicitta: we should grasp it firmly! (10)

An alchemist can take a tiny bit of a special chemical and put it on any metal, like iron, and it will immediately turn into gold. In the same way, the moment bodhicitta arises in a person, that person's body itself immediately becomes very precious. Unlike the Hinayana teachings, which say that your body is impure and to be abandoned, Shantideva says that your body itself—this very body in this lifetime—becomes like a priceless jewel. Because you have made this promise to use this body and this life in order to help all sentient beings, and to work on yourself so that you have the capacity and the knowledge and the wisdom to do that. Therefore, with this mind or intention, you immediately turn your impure body into a priceless, precious body.

#### **II.A.3.2. Example of jewels: demonstrating bodhicitta's great importance**

If the perfect leaders of all migrant beings  
Have with boundless wisdom, seen its priceless worth,  
We who wish to leave our nomad wandering  
Should hold well to this precious bodhicitta. (11)

[In the past, adventurer's used to go to sea in search of islands full of precious jewels and other treasures.] When you go to sea like this, you completely rely on the captain of the ship to guide you. While at sea, you rely on the captain even for your life. And when you reach your destination, you rely on the captain's judgement in determining the worth of the precious jewels that you find there—since the captain has the most experience, he is the one who can best judge the true value of these jewels.

In the same way, the Buddha is like a captain who has the knowledge and experience of bodhicitta. A good captain is somebody who has already been there and come back, and the more you have been there, the better captain you become. So the Buddha is somebody who has gone through this to the other side. He has the experience and the knowledge and also the capacity and the compassion to teach others. And the Dharma is the experience of the Buddha. He has examined all the teachings, and he has said that the teachings on

bodhicitta are the best, the most precious. Therefore those who want to reach the other side should hold this bodhicitta very dearly.

***Example of the student from Magadha: demonstrating that only those who go there will reach there***

The Buddha said that he is the one who gives the teachings and shows the way, because that is what he knows. For example, there was once a student who used to come to the Buddha's teachings all the time and listen and then go away. One day the student came up to the Buddha and said:

"Well, I find your teachings very interesting. But when I look at your students, I find that some of them really get transformed and become arhats and bodhisattvas and very great ones. And some of them become a little bit better and I can see some differences. But some of them haven't changed at all. The teachings don't seem to benefit them. Why is this?"

"Where do you come from?" the Buddha said.

"Well, I live here in this city, in Benares," the student said.

"But you don't sound like a person from Benares?"

"Actually, I come from Magadha, near Bodhgaya. But I have my business in Benares. So now I live here."

"Then you must go back to your place often?" the Buddha said.

"Yes, my family is there, so I go back often."

"Then you must know the way from here to Bodhgaya very well?"

"Of course, I know each detail as if it's on the palm of my hand."

"In that case, maybe other people know that you know the way to this place?"

"Of course, all my friends know that I go there often. Everybody knows that I know the way."

"In that case," the Buddha said, "if anyone wants to go to Bodhgaya, they might ask you the way?"

"Of course, lots of people ask me."

"Do you tell them the way?"

"Why not? Of course, I tell them the way, because there is nothing secret. There is nothing to hide."

"Does everybody who asks you the way, reach there?"

"Not really. Only those who really go there, reach there. Otherwise they don't reach there."

"It's the same with me," the Buddha said. "I know the way, and when people ask me the way, of course, I tell them. Why not? There is no secret. But only those people who go will reach there. Otherwise they don't reach there."

Those who value the teachings of the Buddha as something very precious, and really take the teachings to heart, will reach other side.

***II.A.3.3. Example of a fruit-bearing, wish-fulfilling tree: demonstrating bodhicitta's inexhaustible and ever-increasing root of virtue***

All other virtues, like the plantain tree,  
Produce their fruit, but then their force is spent.  
Alone the marvelous tree of bodhicitta  
Will bear its fruit and grow unceasingly. (12)

The plantain tree gives fruit only once, and then the tree is finished—it does not yield fruit again. In the same way, the result of an ordinary good action (that is not supported by bodhicitta) will ripen once, but then that merit is finished. Even the merit of the shravakas and pratyekabuddhas is limited; they will reach the state of arhat, but after that, their merit is exhausted.

But a positive deed that is done with the support of bodhicitta becomes like a wish-fulfilling tree, because you have dedicated this deed not only for yourself, but for all sentient beings so that they may become enlightened. This deed gives fruit whenever there is any kind of wish or need. Not only that, but its result is never finished (inexhaustible) and always growing (ever-increasing).

This is what we are talking about when we speak of setting the aspiration or motivation for a practice session or other activity. For example, when you dedicate a practice session, then the positive merit or energy from that practice is never exhausted (inexhaustible) and it becomes more and more multiplied (ever-increasing) the wider you dedicate, the higher the purpose you dedicate with. The positive energy doesn't remain limited by the size of your action or the length of time that you practiced.

In the same way, if you have this great heart of bodhicitta which is limitless in its object (for all sentient beings) and limitless in its result (wanting them to attain buddhahood)<sup>5</sup>, then the fruit of all your positive actions will also be limitless, increasing all the time and never exhausting.

#### **II.A.3.4. Example of the helpful hero: demonstrating how bodhicitta outshines negativity**

As though they pass through perils guided by a hero,  
Even those weighed down with dreadful wickedness  
Will be instantly freed through having bodhicitta.  
Who then would not place his trust in it? (13)

Some of the worst negative deeds are: giving up the Dharma; causing harm towards the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; and accumulating the five heinous deeds, such as killing your father, killing your mother and so on. Here, Shantideva says that even if you have committed the worst of these negative deeds—the worst negative deeds that you can imagine—and you have these results coming to you, if you take the help of bodhicitta, then immediately you get the bodhicitta into your mind stream, and it is as if you are going through a very dangerous place where there are lots of robbers and other people who want to harm you, and you immediately find a very strong, brave person to help you. So then you can go through these very dangerous places without any harm because you have this strong guard. It is said that even if you meet the vengeful son of a man you have murdered, you will be protected from the son's vengeance by having this strong guard.

In the same way, if you go through lots of difficulties and bad karma, having bodhicitta not only protects you from falling into lower states, but it also prevents you from taking the negative karma that you experience in a negative way. With bodhicitta, you can even transform the negative experience so that it actually becomes positive.

#### **II.A.3.5. Example of the all-consuming fire: demonstrating how bodhicitta totally eradicates negativity**

Just as by the fires at the end of time,

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<sup>5</sup> See page 10 (verse 20) for further explanation of the limitless aspects of the nature of bodhicitta.

Great sins are utterly consumed by bodhicitta. (14, first half)

It is said that when the world ends, seven suns will come causing a great fire so powerful that it will burn away everything until nothing remains, and the world will be utterly destroyed. In the same way, when bodhicitta arises in our mind, it is so strong and powerful that no negative things, no negative karma, can remain in our mind, or in our heart, or in our being. Everything is completely purified. Bodhicitta is the one thing that is the real cause for our complete happiness; it is the only way to eradicate all the causes of our sufferings. So why don't we try to generate that?

### **II.A.3.6. Examples in other sutras**

The sixth example refers to the benefits of bodhicitta described in other sutras:

Thus its benefits are boundless,  
As the wise and loving lord explained to Sudhana. (14, second half)

In the *Flower Garland Sutra*<sup>6</sup>, given by Maitreya to the bodhisattva Kumara Sudhana, Maitreya gives two hundred and thirty examples on the benefits of bodhicitta and the greatness of bodhisattvas. You will find these examples in the last chapter of this sutra.<sup>i</sup>

### **II.B. The individual benefits of the bodhicitta of aspiration and the bodhicitta of action** [2:20]

This section has three parts: (1) the difference between the bodhicitta of aspiration and the bodhicitta of action; (2) the differences in benefit; (3) establishing the benefits by means of scriptures and reasoning.

#### **II.B.1. The difference between the bodhicitta of aspiration and the bodhicitta of action**

Bodhicitta, the awakening mind,  
In brief is said to have two aspects:  
First, aspiring, *bodhicitta in intention*;  
Then, *active bodhicitta*, practical engagement. (15)

So far we have just been talking about the benefits of bodhicitta. Now, Shantideva says, there are two aspects of bodhicitta: the aspiration bodhicitta and the action bodhicitta. So what is the aspiring bodhicitta and what is the active bodhicitta?

Wishing to depart and setting out on the road,  
This is how the difference is conceived.  
The wise and learned thus should understand  
This difference, which is ordered and progressive. (16)

If we want to go somewhere, the wishing to go, the intention to go, is like *aspiration bodhicitta*; and the actual act of going is the *active bodhicitta*. Khenpo Kunpal says there have been many different philosophical ways of defining these two<sup>ii</sup>. Of these views, the Nyingmapa way follows the view of Longchenpa and of Atisha Dipankara, which is that to make the promise or the commitment for the result is aspiration bodhicitta, and to make a commitment towards the cause or the path is the active bodhicitta.

[T1, 2:30] It is said that as long as it is in the mind, it is aspiring bodhicitta; when it becomes action, it is active bodhicitta.

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<sup>6</sup> Skt. *Avatamsaka-sutra*.

The aspiration is, "I will liberate all sentient beings from all the sufferings of this world, from both samsara and nirvana, and bring them to complete enlightenment!" That aspiration, that mind, that motivation, and the commitment or the promise that I will do that, is the aspiration bodhicitta.

And for that purpose, "[I will train in the six paramitas, in order to gain the capacity, the knowledge, the wisdom, and the power to achieve this goal". So making the commitment to work on the six paramitas, and the process of practising the six paramitas, is active bodhicitta.

## II.B.2. The differences in benefit

[2:33]

Now we come to the difference in the benefits of these two aspects of bodhicitta:

Bodhicitta in intention bears rich fruits  
For those still wandering in samsara.  
And yet a ceaseless stream of merit does not flow from it;  
For this will rise alone from *active bodhicitta*. (17)

Just having the bodhicitta of aspiration brings great results. So that even if you do not get out of the samsaric state of mind, or the samsaric state of being, you will still become like a Chakravartin king—somebody who is very fortunate and has few troubles and lots of merit. But even this doesn't have as much benefit as active bodhicitta.

What benefit does *active bodhicitta* have? Once you have active bodhicitta, there is a continuous benefit, *a ceaseless stream of merit*.

For when with irreversible intent,  
The mind embraces [active] bodhicitta,  
Willing to set free the endless multitude of beings,  
At that instant, from that moment on, (18)

A great and unremitting stream,  
A strength of wholesome merit,  
Even during sleep and inattention,  
Rises equal to the vastness of the sky. (19)

The moment that you make the promise, "For the sake of all sentient beings, I commit myself to train in the six paramitas, the bodhisattva's way of life," then it becomes active bodhicitta. From that time onwards, because you are committed towards that goal, there is a continuous flow of positive merit whatever you do.

If you do something, there is a continuous flow of good merit; and even if you don't do anything, there is a continuous flow of good merit. Even when you are sleeping there is a continuous flow of good merit. Even if you are distracted and you are just playing, if you go to the beach or whatever you do, there is always a flow of great merit—a never-stopping stream. And a big stream also, not a small one. *A strength of wholesome merit, even during sleep and inattention, rises equal to the vastness of the sky*. As big as the sky, which is limitless.

### **II.B.3. Establishing the benefits by means of scriptures and reasoning**

The benefits of bodhicitta are established by means of the scriptures and reasoning.

#### **II.B.3.1. Establishing the benefits by means of scriptures**

[2:39] This section establishes the benefits of bodhicitta by means of the scriptures, which are Buddha's own words.

This the Tathagata,  
In the sutra Subahu requested,  
Said with reasoned demonstration,  
Teaching those inclined to lesser paths. (20)

In the *Sutra Requested by Subahu*<sup>7</sup>, the Buddha taught that if one can get active bodhicitta to arise in their mind, then the resulting merit will have no limit. Why is it limitless? The Buddha gave four reasons for this, citing four limitless aspects of bodhicitta:

- 1) *Limitless field of action*: Your field of action, or the object of your compassion, is limitless, because you are working for *all sentient beings*—not just one, or two, or a group, but for all sentient beings. All the beings are in your mind.
- 2) *Limitless suffering to be dispelled*: You want to completely dispel *all the suffering* of all the beings—not just one or two small problems, but all the sufferings of all beings.
- 3) *Limitless qualities (to be obtained)*: You want all beings to get *complete enlightenment*. You don't want them to get something small, something temporary, something good for the time being, but you want all the beings get the highest, best thing that is ever possible, which is complete enlightenment.
- 4) *Limitless time-span*: You want this to be accomplished *no matter how long it takes*. You do not want this to happen within one kalpa, or two kalpas, or within one hundred kalpas; but you are committed to work towards this goal for a completely unlimited time-span.

Therefore, because of this limitless nature of your aspiration, the resulting positive merit is also limitless. This is not just something that is said to guide *those inclined to lesser paths*, such as the shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas. But it is an actual fact, which is taught so that everyone might understand and be certain about the qualities and benefits of bodhicitta. As the Buddha said in this sutra:

If I don the armor (of courage) in order to bring benefit and happiness to boundless masses of sentient beings, I thus have boundless thoughts that bring benefit and happiness to all sentient beings. Consequently, the roots of virtue are boundless.  
(PKT translation)

#### **II.B.3.2. Establishing the benefits by means of reasoning**

Through our own reasoning and inference we can gain a little bit more understanding and conviction.

##### **II.B.3.2.1. Establishing the benefits of *aspiration* bodhicitta by means of reasoning**

Khenpo Kunpal says that, in general, the details of karmic cause and effect are too difficult for ordinary beings to fully comprehend; they can only be fully understood by the Buddha or someone with complete omniscience. This does not mean that we should not try to use

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<sup>7</sup> Skt. *Subahu-paripriccha-sutra*

reasoning to analyze the laws of karma; it just means that we at our level shouldn't expect to fully understand all the details.

But since the benefits of bodhicitta are so great, and they have been taught by the Buddha so many times, we should be able to understand this. Again and again, the Buddha taught and praised the benefits of bodhicitta; it became one of his main teachings. But this is not just the teachings of the Buddha and the experience of the Buddha. The benefits are so obvious, that it should be possible to establish these benefits through reasoning and inference. Even in our current state of mind, with our own limited understanding and intelligence, if we look carefully and try to analyze and see, then maybe there is a way to establish these benefits for ourselves.

If with kindly generosity  
One merely has the wish to soothe  
The aching heads of other beings,  
Such merit knows no bounds. (21)

[Just the wish to be helpful, even if it is not supported by bodhicitta, has boundless merit. Even if you just want to cure a few headaches, the merit is unlimited.]

No need to speak, then, of the wish  
To drive away the endless pain  
Of each and every living being,  
Bringing them unbounded virtues. (22)

[If a simple kind wish to benefit a few beings brings limitless merit, then what need is there to mention that a wish endowed with the limitless aspects of bodhicitta will also bring limitless merit? The limitless aspects of bodhicitta are four-fold: limitless field of action ("each and every living being"); limitless suffering to dispel ("to drive away the endless pain"); limitless qualities to obtain ("bringing them unbounded virtues"); and limitless time-span.]

Could our fathers or even our mothers  
Ever have so generous a wish? (23, first half)

Our fathers and our mothers are the ones who gave birth to us, who spent their whole life to bring us up and to try to help us in whatever way they could, to the best of their capacity. They are the most kind and most generous to us, but even they do not have this limitless wish for us. They may have the wish that my child may have a long and healthy life, or possibly to have wealth and power and so on, but their wish cannot go much further than that. They do not know how to wish for us to have complete enlightenment, because they couldn't even wish that for themselves. They can't because they don't understand it.

Do the very gods, the rishis, even Brahma  
Harbor such benevolence as this. (23, second half)

So parents are not very learned or skilful and that's why they can't wish it. But then even the gods with their supernatural perception, and the rishis with their great knowledge, cannot have these wishes. You might say, "Well, all right, I understand that the gods and rishis don't have that much compassion, so that's why they can't wish that. But the Brahma possesses the four states of Brahma<sup>8</sup>, which are love, compassion, joy, and impartiality." But even the Brahma cannot have this strong wish that all the sentient beings may obtain complete enlightenment.

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<sup>8</sup> For an explanation of the states of Brahma, see *Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Shambhala Publications, page 135.

For in the past they never,  
Even in their dreams conceived  
Such profit even for themselves.  
How could they have such aims for others' sake? (24)

All these beings are kind to you—your father and mother, the very learned rishis, the powerful gods, and the compassionate Brahma—yet all of them could not have this strong and far-reaching attitude and aspiration. They can not even dream of having these benefits even for themselves. How could they wish it for others? Therefore this bodhicitta is so precious.

For beings do not wish their own true good,  
So how could they intend such good for others' sake?  
This state of mind so precious and so rare  
Arises truly wondrous, never seen before. (25)

Bodhicitta is not something that happens to everybody. It is something very uncommon. It is so valuable, so precious, and very difficult to generate. All these beings, even the gods, do not have this great far-reaching aspiration even for themselves, much less for the sake of others. This bodhicitta is such an extraordinary, precious thing, which I didn't have before, but now I have at least an idea of it. This great wonderful thing has come to me by listening to the teachings of the Mahayana and by the kindness and the benevolence of the sangha and the spiritual friend. Even to have a little bit of bodhicitta is much more beneficial for me than acquiring a wish-fulfilling tree.

The pain-dispelling draft,  
This cause of joy for those who wander through the world—  
This precious attitude, this jewel of mind,  
How shall it be gauged or quantified? (26)

Bodhicitta is the cause that will lead to bringing complete happiness and well-being to all the countless beings, wherever they are throughout the space. It's the great medicine that completely dispels all the sufferings of all the sentient beings.

How can we measure or quantify the benefits of this precious bodhicitta? [Its *field of action*, all the sentient beings, is limitless. The *qualities to be obtained*, complete enlightenment, is limitless. The *suffering to be dispelled*, all the suffering of all sentient beings, is limitless. Therefore, its positive merit is beyond measure; it is as limitless as space itself.]

In the *Sutra Requested by Viradatta*<sup>9</sup>, it is said that:

If the merit of bodhicitta  
Were to take physical form,  
It would fill the entire realm of space  
And more besides.

#### **II.B.3.2.2. Establishing the benefits of active bodhicitta by means of reasoning**

In the *King of Meditation Sutra*<sup>10</sup>, it says:

If every day you continuously offer to all great beings  
All the good things that exist in the billions of buddha-fields,

<sup>9</sup> Skt. *Viradatta-grhapati-paripriccha-sutra*

<sup>10</sup> Skt. *Samadhiraja-sutra*, Tib. *Tingdzin Gyalpo*

This merit does not compare  
To the merit from generating loving kindness.

Loving kindness is much more powerful than making countless offerings to all the great beings in these billions of realms. Making offerings doesn't even come near the good karma of having a kind heart.

For if the simple thought to be of help to others  
Exceeds in worth the worship of the buddhas,  
What need is there to speak of actual deeds  
That bring about the [welfare] and benefit of beings. (27)

According to Buddha, even just wanting to help some beings, having that aspiration, is better than making the offerings of the seven jewels of the king<sup>11</sup> to all the buddhas. If that is the case, then what can you say about going into action and trying to practice the six paramitas in order to help all the sentient beings throughout space? If that kind of endeavor is even started, how can the merit that comes out of that be compared to anything else?

For beings long to free themselves from misery,  
But misery itself they follow and pursue.  
They long for joy, but in their ignorance  
Destroy it, as they would a hated enemy. (28)

This is how it is goes, Shantideva is saying. All beings want to get rid of their suffering: they don't want to have a short life, they don't want to have lots of illnesses, they don't want to have poverty, they don't want to have any suffering in this life or in other lives. That is their utmost intention: "I don't want any sufferings. I don't want any problems." But their wishes and their actions are contradictory.

In order to avoid suffering, beings do bad things, like killing, stealing or the other ten negative actions. In their ignorance, they unknowingly do things that cause themselves more suffering, like a moth jumping into a flame. They don't want unhappiness, but they don't know what is the cause. So they actually do the opposite.

In the same way, all beings want a long life with good health. They want all the good things in this life and in the next, but because of their ignorance, they actually don't do any of the deeds that would cause happiness. Instead they do all the negative things, and therefore they actually smash the causes for their happiness as if they met their most *hated enemy*. This is the way samsaric beings usually function.

But those who fill with bliss  
All beings destitute of joy,  
Who cut all pain and suffering away  
From those weighed down with misery, (29)

Who drive away the darkness of their ignorance—  
What virtue could be matched with theirs?  
What friend could be compared to them?  
What merit is there similar to this? (30)

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<sup>11</sup> The seven jewels of the king (or seven precious attributes) are the seven possessions of a Chakravartin: the precious golden wheel, the precious wish-fulfilling jewel, the precious queen, the precious minister, the precious elephant, the precious horse, and the precious general. These objects symbolize: faith, discipline, generosity, learning, a sense of moral conscience, and wisdom.

So all these beings who are completely ignorant and misguided, who try to get the good things but instead go and get the bad things, have become completely *destitute of joy*. Rather than gaining happiness, they have accumulated all the causes and results of suffering. All these sentient beings are in such a bad state.

Who is it that, with a heart of kindness, wants to give the complete satisfaction of all the happiness, now and in the long run, to all these sentient beings? With great compassion, [those with bodhicitta] want to completely eradicate all the sufferings and all the problems, and with great wisdom they know how to do that. They want to dispel this ignorance from beings, to teach them how to do the right thing so that they can get the right result. How can there be any positive deed stronger than that?

Even if you are just starting, if you are trying, even if it is a little bit [of an] intention, even if you are training yourself for that, what can be more purposeful, more great, more wonderful than that? There cannot be anything more positive than that, or even anything that compares to that.

Can there be a better friend than those who have that intention toward sentient beings? One who has this bodhicitta is a real friend, because they don't just wish other beings something good for the time being, but they also want to dispel their ignorance, to help them overcome this madness [which causes such confusion, that even though] beings always try to do good things they end up doing negative things. The ones with bodhicitta want to take this misunderstanding away and give beings the right path so that they could get rid of all the problems and reach the complete enlightened state.

A friend is somebody who helps you when you are in deep trouble, who really gives you the right instructions, and completely helps you to get out of the problem. Therefore, there can't be any better friend than those people who have bodhicitta. So there can't be a stronger virtuous deed than generating this bodhicitta or actually acting on this bodhicitta.

So with this, the benefits of bodhicitta have been shown. The purpose of knowing and understanding these benefits is to [develop] the resolution in our mind that this bodhicitta, which is so unknown to most people, is so precious, so wonderful, such a magnificent and unlimited way of feeling. One must have this feeling arise in ourselves and others, [with the thought that], "Whatever happens, I will try to generate this bodhicitta because it is so wonderful." If we can gain this kind of intention through these teachings, then the teachings have been successful.

### **[Example of the negative spirit: demonstrating the importance of bodhicitta in Vajrayana practice]**

Bodhicitta is the basis for all the Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings and practices. Without bodhicitta, there is no Vajrayana. It is said that if you practice Vajrayana without bodhicitta, not only you don't get any real benefit, but it is even possible that you can be reborn as a very wrathful ghost.

It's said that once a lama was in a retreat and he was doing Vajrayana practices. Then one night an apparition appeared—a very strange, spooky ghost came up in the darkness. It was a night of complete darkness, complete silence, and all was calm, nothing dangerous, and then this strange thing comes up, very fearsome.

The lama realizes that this is an evil spirit, a negative apparition. So he says the mantra, *Om Ah Hung Vajra Guru Pema Siddhi Hung*, and it doesn't work. Then he tries, *Om Mani Pema Hung*, and that doesn't work. Then the lama recites the wrathful mantra, *Om Vajra Kili Kilaya Hung*; that doesn't work either. Then he visualizes himself as a wrathful deity with lots of

heads and arms, and still it doesn't work. Then he becomes even more wrathful, and he is appears like Vajrakilaya in his most wrathful form. And still nothing works.

Then the lama thinks, "Oh, this spirit must have been a very powerful lama who did lots of mantras and practices. What a sad thing that someone who spent so much time practising all these mantras didn't do it properly, and then completely got lost and was reborn as this terrible ghost." In this way, the lama spontaneously lost his fear. A strong feeling of compassion arose in him, and he said, "My I always remember the great compassion of my masters."

"That I didn't do," the apparition said. And it disappeared.

So if you don't have bodhicitta, then reciting mantras isn't much use.

## **II.C. The greatness of those who have the bodhicitta in their mindstream**

### **[Bodhisattvas freely benefit the world]**

If they who do some good in thanks  
For favors once received are praised  
Why need we speak of bodhisattvas—  
Those who freely benefit the world? (31)

Someone who is grateful for a good deed that someone has done for them and wishes to return the kindness is generally considered to be good person. Nagarjuna said: "Somebody who appreciates and repays the kindness of others, will always have great lords and protectors looking after them." Such a person is generally considered to be praise worthy.

But in the case of a bodhisattva, it is not like that. If you are a bodhisattva, then you want to help even if nobody helped you or gave you anything. Nobody has to ask "Please, can you help me?" A bodhisattva wants to help by his or her own will.

So these bodhisattvas not only help when people ask, but even when they don't ask. Whoever they are—whether they are friends or not friends or even enemies—they will want to help. They want to give not just a little help here or there, but they want everyone to have the best forever. So [what need is there to mention] how much we should praise [these bodhisattvas], how much we should appreciate them and value them?

Those who scornfully with condescension,  
Give, just once, a single meal to others—  
Feeding them for only half a day—  
Are honored by the world as virtuous. (32)

If somebody gives some food to people, even if he distributes the food without much respect, scornfully looking down on others, even then, we usually look upon this kind of person as very kind and beneficent. Yet when you eat a single meal, what happens? You can only be filled and go without hunger for half a day. [So if such a person is considered good and virtuous], then:

What need is there to speak of those  
Who constantly bestow on boundless multitudes  
The peerless joy of blissful buddhahood,  
The ultimate fulfillment of their hopes? (33)

The objective of the bodhisattvas is not just to give a little help to a few people for a day or two; but to provide limitless help to all sentient beings in all of samsara until they become enlightened. They try to give not just one or two meals a day, but complete enlightenment. They help without looking down on others with scorn or condescension, but with humility and respect for others, with compassion and kindness, and with a completely benevolent mind. [What need is there to speak of the greatness of] the bodhisattva's way of being? [How can we measure the greatness] of their intentions and actions?

**[Any interaction with a bodhisattva is very powerful]**

And those who harbor evil in their minds  
Against such lords of generosity, the Buddha's heirs,  
Will stay in hell, the mighty one has said  
For ages equal to the moment of the malice. (34)

Because the bodhisattvas are so great and benevolent and their intention is so good, therefore any kind of interaction we have with the bodhisattvas is very strong and powerful. It is said by the Buddha that if we hate the bodhisattvas or if we do negative things towards the bodhisattvas, it has a very negative effect. In the same way, if you have good thoughts and good contacts and good relationships with the bodhisattvas, it's even more fruitful and more great. This is said here:

By contrast, good and virtuous thoughts  
Will yield abundant fruits in greater measure.  
Even in adversity the bodhisattvas  
Never bring forth evil—only an increasing stream of goodness. (35)

Khenpo Kunpal says that if one makes any type of contact or karmic connection with a bodhisattva, whether it is good or bad, it always brings something good. There is nothing bad at the end.

So how it is that first you say that if you do bad things towards the bodhisattvas, then you have a very bad effect and you can go into the hell realm; but then you say that if you have any contact with the bodhisattvas, it will always bring something good. What does this mean? This means when you make a negative connection with a bodhisattva, of course, it has a strong negative effect. But that connection will eventually end up bringing something good. Because the bodhisattvas have the intention to help all the sentient beings, even the worst.

**[Example of Kaundinya: demonstrating that any connection with a bodhisattva will bring great benefit]**

When the Buddha gave his first teachings to the five ascetics in Saranath, India, the first one who saw the truth and was liberated was one of these five, called Kaundinya<sup>12</sup>. Afterwards people asked the Buddha "Of all the people, why was Kaundinya the first one to realize your teachings?"

Buddha said that a long, long time ago, in one of his previous lives, he was a rishi named Patient Immortal, who lived as a hermit in a forest, where he meditated on compassion and forgiveness. At that time, there was a king who lived nearby who liked to go hunting. One day the king rode into the forest with a large entourage, including his queens, his ministers

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<sup>12</sup> Kaundinya was the first of the five ascetics to understand and realize the teaching; Ashvajit was the last. All eventually became arhats.

and other attendants. They set up a camp and the king and his men went out into the forest to hunt.

While he was away, his queens became restless and wandered into the forest to pick flowers, and they happened upon the hermit. The queens were very impressed with the hermit, so they sat around him and asked him to give teachings. The hermit agreed and began to teach them.

Meanwhile, the king returned from his hunting expedition, and he looked around and saw that none of his queens were present.

“Where are my queens?” the king shouted.

“Oh, they have all gone into the forest,” his aides said.

“What are they doing in the forest?” the king said angrily.

The king jumped on his horse and rode into the forest, and he soon found all of his queens lying around this hermit in very compromising ways.

“What is this?” the king said. “You have taken all my queens away! Who are you? What are you doing?”

“I am just a hermit,” the hermit said. “I meditate on patience.”

“Oh, I’ll see how patient you are!” the king said. And he took out his sword and cut off the hermit’s hands.

“Are you still patient?” the king asked.

“Yes, I’m still patient,” the hermit said.

Then the king cut off his legs and other parts of his body.

“Are you still patient? Are you not angry with me?”

“No, I’m not angry with you.”

Then, as he was dying, the hermit said, “Just as you have now cut off my limbs with your sword, when I become enlightened, may you become my first disciple so that I may cut away all your mind poisons and liberate you from samsara.” With that prayer, the hermit passed away.

The Buddha said that of course, the king went into many different kinds of negative realms and suffered the consequences of his actions. But because of that strong connection, eventually, after the Buddha became enlightened, that king became the first person to realize his teachings and become liberated. That is what is called the bodhisattva’s connection. So this is what Shantideva means here.

### **[Establishing a connection by means of prayer]**

Khenpo Kunpal says that if you have any kind of connection with the bodhisattvas, then your positive deeds naturally increase and negative karma naturally decreases. So it is important to try to generate bodhicitta in ourselves as much as possible, but even if we cannot generate that much bodhicitta in ourselves, then we should try to appreciate those who have generated a little bit of bodhicitta in themselves. And try to be more connected and closer to these beings, so that we can be influenced by them and also we get the good karma and eventually get the benefits of this.

Towards this end, we are not talking about just living bodhisattvas but also any bodhisattvas. So by making prayers and saying, “To all the bodhisattvas throughout all the worlds, and all the space, I praise and worship them, I appreciate them, I make offerings to them, and I take bodhisattva vows from them. May I always be of help to them. May I always be able to have the opportunity to support their positive deeds. May I always be able to finish their work.”

Making these kinds of prayers and intentions is a way of connecting with the bodhisattvas, and this helps us to generate the bodhicitta in ourselves. Because whatever it is that we really value, whatever it is that we appreciate, we become closer to, and we become more and more connected with that. Whatever is uppermost in our mind, that becomes the most important thing, it becomes a strong connection in us.

So this is the main purpose of these teachings: first, to understand what bodhicitta is, and then to get a positive idea about it so that you want to generate it in yourself. To realize how beneficial that is for ourselves, and how beneficial that is for others, because all of us want to do something that is most beneficial for ourselves and for others.

Therefore, if we can understand that bodhicitta is the most helpful and beneficial thing for ourselves and others, then generally we will like to do that. It may not be possible for us to completely change ourselves just instantly. We may not become a great bodhisattva just now or tomorrow. But that doesn't matter. We can slowly, slowly, try to generate this bodhicitta—slowly increase it, slowly work on it. Slowly, but steadily. That is the most important thing. Sometimes if you start off too enthusiastically, that is not of much use.

**[Example of the enthusiastic bodhisattva: demonstrating the need for proper training]**

Once there was a very enthusiastic bodhisattva who said, "From today onwards I give up saying no to anybody. So anybody who comes and asks anything from me, I give it." And he made a big advertisement of this. I don't think there were radios and televisions back then, but he made sure that everybody heard about it. So then, of course, people started coming. Some wanted money, some wanted food, some wanted clothes—they wanted all different kinds of things. And without any hesitation, he gave to them all. And he was a rich man also. So it went on, and on, and on. He became more and more famous, and then more and more people came.

Then at last a very crooked man came to see him.

"Is it really true that you give everything that everybody asks?" the crooked man said.

"Yes, of course! I am a bodhisattva!"

"In that case," the crooked man said, "could you please give me your right hand?"

So the bodhisattva had no doubt about it. He just took his sword and cut off his right hand, and then he offered it to this crooked man. But the crooked man refused to accept it. In the Indian tradition, it's impolite to offer something with the left hand. So the crooked man said, "This is not respectful, you are giving it with your left hand and the left hand is dirty."

So that was it! No more bodhisattva. "How can people be so ungrateful! So petty!" he said. "This is too much. I'm not going to give anything anymore. I'm not a bodhisattva anymore." So he gave up the bodhisattvas' vows.

So that is not the way. First one has to train oneself. It's good to have a great aspiration. But it is also actually part of the bodhisattvas' vows that you try to see whether something that you give or something that you do is actually beneficial or not. To have the bodhisattvas' attitude or compassion is not just to be nice. That's important to understand. Sometimes people think that to be compassionate is to be nice. It's not necessarily just to be nice. To be nice is that I want to be liked, so I'm nice to you. This is not the way of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva's attitude is to be helpful. That does not always mean being nice. The main thing is to see whether an action will be helpful or not.

Another important point is, from this action, how much is helpful to others and how much is harmful to yourself. This also has to be weighed. If it gives great help to lots of people and at

the same time if it is a little bit uncomfortable, a little bit harmful to yourself, then, if you are ready for that, then alright. You can go forward. That's a very great thing.

But if you do something that is little helpful to a few people, or not helpful at all, and it harms yourself a great deal and is not helping yourself, then you should not do it. It's not skilful. It's not right to do that kind of thing.

The wisdom always has to be there to see whether what you are doing is helpful, and how helpful it is. So it is not just that you try to do whatever everybody asks you to do. That is not necessarily a bodhisattva's activity. If somebody asks you to do something, you must first see whether that is really going to help or really harm. If you are completely certain that it is helpful and it is also not harmful to others, including yourself, then maybe you do it. But if you see that it is not that helpful or even that it may be harmful to others including yourself, then you should not do it. In this case, if you do something like this, then that is a breakage in the bodhisattvas' vow. So this is something that has to be understood.

### [Paying homage to the bodhisattvas]

To them in whom this precious sacred mind  
Is born—to them I bow!  
I go for refuge in their source of happiness  
That brings its very enemies to perfect bliss. (36)

To the bodhisattvas *in whom this precious sacred mind is born*, to all those beings—whether that being is in a higher realm or in a lower realm, wherever they are, whatever status— whoever has this precious thought, whoever has this sacred heart, whoever has this bodhisattvas' intention, to them all I bow down. I completely honor them and respect them. I bow to all the bodhisattvas, all those who have even a little bit of this thought rising in their hearts. I go for refuge in that, which is the source of all the happiness.

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<sup>i</sup> The *Flower Garland Sutra* (Skt. *Avatamsaka-sutra*) describes the sacred island realm of Avalokiteshvara, who has forsaken enlightenment to help human beings attain salvation. The story of the boy pilgrim Sudhana is in the "Gandhavyuha", or "Entering the Dharma World," chapter that relates his journey to fifty-three deities in search of ultimate truth. The following English translation is available: *Flower Ornament Scripture*, by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala Publications. The title of this sutra is also translated as *Flower Adornment Sutra* or *Flower Ornament Sutra*.

<sup>ii</sup> [2:22] Khenpo Kunpal describes different view points on the difference between aspiration and active bodhicitta. (1) Lopon Acharya Yeshe Shyap expressed the view that these aspects can be related to two stages: the *soso kyewo* (Tib.) and *pakpa* (Tib.). *Soso kyewo* is like us, who are still completely deluded, and without any insight or understanding of the ultimate truth. *Pakpa* is one who has first insight into the complete truth; they have reached the first Bhumi. [This also relates to] the five stages on the path of a bodhisattva: the accumulation stage, the joining stage, the seeing stage, the meditation stage, and then the no more learning stage. When we first begin, we enter accumulation stage, and we have aspiration bodhicitta. When you reach the seeing stage, then it turns into the active bodhicitta. In the seeing stage there is no return, there is complete insight, so the wisdom is very strong. It's almost you can say that it's the first seeing of the ultimate bodhicitta. (2) Other Indian pandits, such as Abiyakara and Yeshe Drakpa, say that at the accumulation stage, bodhisattvas have aspiring bodhicitta, and then from the joining stage onwards, is called the active bodhicitta. (3) Another group, including Shantipa and Ratnakara (Tib. Rinchen Jungné), say that as long as you have just the aspiration but you haven't received the bodhisattva's vows, then it is aspiring bodhicitta. Once you have actually taken the

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bodhisattvas vows, then it becomes the active bodhicitta. (4) Sherab Jungne says that if your bodhicitta is just aspiring and is not put in action, then it is aspiring bodhicitta, and the moment you put into action, that becomes the active bodhicitta. (5) Atisha Dipankara's view, which is well accepted among Tibetans, is that aspiration bodhicitta is aspiring for the result: that everybody may get enlightened, everybody may get happiness. When that aspiration turns into the actual path, then it becomes active bodhicitta. Active bodhicitta is when you make your promise or your commitment to a practical thing, such as: "In order to achieve that result, I will practice giving, I will practice patience," and so on. The difference is to make the commitment towards the result or towards the cause. Commitment towards the result is the aspiring bodhicitta, and commitment towards the cause or the path or practical [activity] is called the active bodhicitta. (6) There are also other views, like some people said as long as this bodhicitta is still training, that is called aspiring, and then the moment it becomes completely certain and trustworthy and unreturnable, then it becomes the active bodhicitta. So there are many different views. Most of them actually depend on the quotation given by Shantideva, but it is explained in different ways.

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