Chapter 7 Cultivating the Altruistic Intention of Bodhicitta

Lamp for the Path: Verse 5

> Those who, through their personal suffering,
> Truly want to end completely
> All the suffering of others
> Are persons of supreme capacity.

This verse refers to those practitioners who generate compassion and loving kindness towards others on the basis of **a deep understanding of the nature of their own suffering**. They understand that **suffering comes into being as a result of the mental afflictions[4,15 & 27] rooted in fundamental ignorance** and recognise that as long as they are under the control of these afflictions and the underlying ignorance, sufferings will continue to arise ceaselessly, like ripples on a lake.

Once you understand the nature of suffering in relation to your own existence in this way, you can extend your understanding to see that all sentient beings suffer from bondage by the afflictions. Reflecting on their suffering, you then cultivate the insight that just as you yourself want to be free from suffering, so do they. This is how you begin to cultivate great compassion. When you generate the wish for all sentient beings to be happy, this is the start of loving kindness.

On the basis of compassion (wishing others to be free of suffering) and loving kindness (wishing others to be happy), you then generate a sense of special responsibility. Your compassion does not remain simply at the level of a wish or aspiration. You generate a sense of commitment: "I myself shall liberate all beings from suffering." Eventually, this extraordinary sense of responsibility leads to the realisation of bodhicitta—the altruistic intention of one who aspires to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. Thus, there are two kinds of aspiration in the realisation of bodhicitta: 1) the aspiration concerned for the welfare of all sentient beings and 2) the aspiration to attain buddhahood for their sake.

The spontaneous intention to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings occurs when these two aspirations are complete. This is the realisation of bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment. Then, the student has become a practitioner of the highest capacity and all activities and practices motivated by bodhicitta are those of the Greater Vehicle, the Mahayana.

Lines of Experience: Verse 14

> Ever-enhancing your enlightened motive of bodhicitta is the central axle of the Mahayana path. It is the basis and foundation for great waves of (enlightening) conduct. Like a gold-making elixir, (it turns) everything (you do) into the two

> collections[29], (building up) a treasure of merit gathered from infinitely collected virtues. Knowing this, bodhisattvas hold this supreme precious mind as their innermost practice. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

The first sentence describes bodhicitta as the central axle of the Mahayana path. Bodhicitta is a truly courageous and remarkable sentiment and the basis of the entire bodhisattva practice. The terms "basis" and "foundation" in the next sentence mean that the moment you have realised bodhicitta, you have become a Mahayana practitioner and are on the path to complete enlightenment but the moment your bodhicitta degenerates, you fall outside the fold of the bodhisattvas. Without bodhicitta, no matter how advanced you are in other practices—even if you have a direct realisation of emptiness or have attained nirvana—nothing you do becomes the conduct of a bodhisattva or the cause of enlightenment.

The third sentence refers to an elixir that transforms base metals into gold. This means that with bodhicitta, even a seemingly insignificant act of virtue, such as giving food to an ant, is transformed into a condition for attaining full enlightenment. It then mentions "infinitely collected virtues,"

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[29] In Buddhism, particularly within the Mahayana tradition, the "**two collections**" (also known as the "**two accumulations**") refer to the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. These collections are essential components on the path to enlightenment and are cultivated simultaneously by practitioners.

The Accumulation of Merit

The accumulation of merit refers to the positive karmic potential generated through virtuous actions, which include acts of generosity, ethical conduct, and other wholesome deeds. This accumulation supports the development of a favourable rebirth, a conducive environment for practice, and the conditions necessary for progressing on the spiritual path. The primary aspects of merit accumulation include:

1. **Generosity (Dāna)**
   - Giving material gifts, offering service, and sharing knowledge or teachings.
2. **Ethical Conduct (Śīla)**
   - Observing moral precepts and maintaining discipline in one's actions, speech, and thoughts.
3. **Patience (Kṣānti)**
   - Developing forbearance and tolerance in the face of difficulties and harm.
4. **Diligence (Vīrya)**
   - Cultivating energetic perseverance in virtuous activities and spiritual practice.
5. **Meditative Concentration (Samādhi)**
   - Practicing meditation to develop a calm, focused mind.
6. **Skilful Means (Upāya)**
   - Applying wisdom to perform virtuous actions in the most effective way.

The Accumulation of Wisdom

The accumulation of wisdom involves the development of profound insight into the true nature of reality. This wisdom is primarily concerned with understanding emptiness (śūnyatā), the absence of inherent existence in all phenomena. The main aspects of wisdom accumulation include:

1. **Hearing (Śruta)**
   - Studying and listening to teachings on the nature of reality, particularly the teachings on emptiness.
2. **Reflection (Cintā)**
   - Contemplating and analysing the teachings to gain a deeper intellectual understanding.
3. **Meditation (Bhāvanā)**
   - Meditating on the nature of reality to gain direct experiential insight into emptiness.
4. **Right View (Samyak-dṛṣṭi)**
   - Developing a correct understanding of the nature of existence, free from conceptual distortions.

The Interdependence of the Two Collections

The accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Merit provides the necessary conditions and support for the cultivation of wisdom, while wisdom ensures that actions performed are grounded in a deep understanding of the nature of reality, making them more effective and transformative. Together, these two accumulations lead to the attainment of Buddhahood, characterised by perfect compassion and perfect wisdom.

which indicates the expansiveness of this altruistic intention. Bodhicitta is a mind concerned with the welfare of infinite sentient beings. It enables us to commit to working for their benefit for infinite eons and motivates us to engage in an infinite variety of skilful means to help them.

Thus, bodhisattvas are referred to as enlightened "heroes" or "warriors." They are highly altruistic beings who have the wisdom to realise that by dedicating themselves to the welfare of other sentient beings, the fulfilment of their own self-interest comes automatically as a by-product. They are also heroic in the sense that they have dedicated their lives to attaining total transcendence and victory over the four obstructive forces. The verse concludes, "Knowing this, bodhisattvas hold this supreme precious mind as their innermost practice. I, the yogi, have practiced just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate your- self in the same way."

Lamp for the Path: Verse 6

For those excellent living beings
Who desire supreme enlightenment,
I shall explain the perfect methods
Taught by the spiritual teachers.

This verse refers to practitioners who have gained a degree of experience of compassion and bodhicitta and participate in ceremonies in order to affirm and stabilise these qualities. Verses 7 through 18 describe the entire ceremony for reinforcing and affirming the generation of the altruistic intention of bodhicitta.

Lamp for the Path: Verses 7 to 18

7. Facing paintings, statues and so forth
   Of the completely enlightened one,
   Reliquaries and the excellent teaching,
   Offer flowers, incense—whatever you have.
8. With the seven-part offering
   From the *[Prayer of] Noble Conduct*,
   With the thought never to turn back
   Till you gain ultimate enlightenment,
9. And with strong faith in the Three Jewels,
   Kneeling with one knee on the ground
   And your hands pressed together,
   First of all take refuge three times.
10. Next, beginning with an attitude
   Of love for all living creatures,
   Consider beings, excluding none,
   Suffering in the three bad rebirths,
   Suffering birth, death and so forth.
11. Then, since you want to free these beings
   From the suffering of pain,
   From suffering and the cause of suffering,

Arouse immutably the resolve
To attain enlightenment.
12. The qualities of developing
Such an aspiration are
Fully explained by Maitreya
In the *Array of Trunks Sutra*.
13. Having learned about the infinite benefits
Of the intention to gain full enlightenment
By reading this sutra or listening to a teacher,
Arouse it repeatedly to make it steadfast.
14. The *Sutra Requested by Viradatta*
Fully explains the merit therein.
At this point, in summary,
I will cite just three verses.
15. If it possessed physical form,
The merit of the altruistic intention
Would completely fill the whole of space
And exceed even that.
16. If someone were to fill with jewels
As many buddha fields as there are grains
Of sand in the Ganges
To offer to the Protector of the World,
17. This would be surpassed by
The gift of folding one's hands
And inclining one's mind to enlightenment,
For such is limitless.
18. Having developed the aspiration for enlightenment
Constantly enhance it through concerted effort
To remember it in this and also in other lives,
Keep the precepts properly as explained.

7.1 The Importance of Bodhicitta

The highest perfection of altruism, the ultimate altruism, is bodhicitta complemented by wisdom. Bodhicitta (the aspiration to bring about the welfare of all sentient beings and to attain buddhahood for their sake) is really the distilled essence, the squeezed juice, of all the Buddha's teachings, because ultimately, the Buddha's intention is to lead all sentient beings to perfect enlightenment, complete omniscience. Since it is bodhicitta that determines whether or not our practice becomes the path to enlightenment, bodhicitta is truly the heart essence of all the teachings of the Buddha. All 84,000 discourses of the Buddha can be seen as either preliminary to the practice of bodhicitta, the actual practice of bodhicitta, or precepts and activities in which we must engage as a result of taking the bodhicitta pledge.

When we come to recognise all this, we will really appreciate the preciousness of our human existence, which gives us the ability to reflect on and express the limitless qualities of bodhicitta. Similarly, when we reflect upon the kindness of the spiritual teacher who introduces us to bodhicitta and explains its nature and benefits, we will develop a deep sense of admiration and gratitude towards our Dharma guide.

The altruistic intention is important not only at the beginning of the path but also while we are on it and even after we have attained full enlightenment. As Shantideva pointed out, even before we have entered the path and do not have a genuine realisation of bodhicitta but only an intellectual understanding of it and admiration for what it represents, this alone brings us immediate benefit. Regardless of how much we are under the control of the afflictions, we receive this benefit the moment we are able to appreciate the value of bodhicitta. However, the joy and serenity we experience come mixed with a sense of sadness for the fate of other sentient beings.

On the path, the practice of bodhicitta helps expedite our accumulation of merit. It also serves as the basis for the successful development of all the subsequent practices. It is like an all-in-one method, enabling us to purify quickly all our accumulated negative karmic imprints. Finally, when we become buddha, it is bodhicitta that sustains the never-ending continuity of our enlightened activity dedicated to the welfare of all sentient beings. Reflecting on this, we will truly appreciate the importance of bodhicitta, which benefits us at all stages of our spiritual path, and will clearly understand why it is compared to a wish-granting jewel.

In the Vajrayana tradition, there are unique methods for attaining the two enlightened holy bodies of rupakaya and dharmakaya. The main method for attaining the rupakaya, the buddha-body of form, is the perfection of skilful means, the method aspect of the path. This primarily refers to the altruistic intention to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, particularly the intention to attain the form body of a buddha in order to benefit and serve others. Without this aspiration, we cannot realise the full profundity of the Vajrayana path in cultivating the conditions for attaining the rupakaya.

Also, without the altruistic aspiration, the wisdom realising emptiness does not have the potency to prepare us to cultivate the conditions for attaining the dharmakaya, the buddha-body of reality. Thus, the entire Vajrayana path can be seen as a series of practices arranged to enhance the ideals and aspirations of bodhicitta. Without bodhicitta, the Vajrayana path has no depth.

Leaving aside the issue of Buddhism or religious faith, we can see even from our own day-to-day experiences that the more we cultivate altruism and a sense of caring for others, the greater the immediate benefits we ourselves receive. Not only do we sleep better at night but also, regardless of whether we believe in the law of karma or not, the actions we create become more positive, constructive and virtuous.

If, on the other hand, we harbour ill-will, are self-centred and lack concern for others, not only do we suffer immediately by experiencing turbulent thoughts and emotions, but also, again regardless of whether we believe in karma or not, the actions we create tend to be negative, destructive and non-virtuous. Therefore, the more we cultivate altruism and a sense of caring, the greater will be the benefit that we ourselves enjoy.

Neither is this phenomenon confined to the human realm; affection and a sense of caring also play a role in the animal kingdom. Animals that are cruel and aggressive seem to get ostracised from the social group while those that are more accommodating and gentle tend to be much more accepted.

Even within cyclic existence, much of our happiness and satisfaction actually derives from altruism and sense of caring. These qualities offer us unlimited benefit, even in everyday life. Therefore, we should share the sentiments expressed by Shantideva in his *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, where he stated that we should wish to be of service to and utilised by all other sentient beings, just as are the earth, mountains and trees. When we think about altruism in such depth, we will realise that independent self-interest, the interests of the individual I, are totally meaningless, and will truly understand what Shantideva meant in that beautiful verse towards the end of his Guide, which I quoted before but will mention again:

> For as long as space exists,
> For as long as sentient beings remain,
> Until then, may I too remain
> And dispel the miseries of the world.

When you dedicate your entire being, your body, speech and mind, to fulfilling the single goal of being of benefit to others, you can say that true happiness has begun and you have entered the path to full enlightenment.

You will also appreciate the sentiments expressed by Atisha Dipamkara, when he said that you should not become discouraged even if you spend eons pursuing the practice of the two bodhicittas—the conventional bodhicitta of the altruistic intention and the ultimate bodhicitta of the realisation of emptiness. His point was that no matter how long it takes you to develop bodhicitta, once you have single-pointedly dedicated yourself to this goal, you will never harbour the thought that you are wasting your time in any part of your mind. Bodhicitta is the sole pursuit in which you should engage. As Atisha said, "What else can you do in your quest for enlightenment other than practice bodhicitta?" Regardless of how long it takes, any time spent trying to develop bodhicitta is time spent in the most meaningful way.

When you are happy and things are going well, you should practice bodhicitta, because it will protect you from becoming inflated with ego and from disparaging or insulting others. When you are suffering and facing adversity or misfortune, you should also practice bodhicitta, because it will protect you from losing hope and feeling depressed. As long as you are alive, you should practice bodhicitta, because it will make your existence meaningful

and full of purpose. Even when dying, you should still practice bodhicitta, because it is the one thing that will never deceive you or let you down.

Having contemplated how, on the basis of his own experience, the Buddha taught this ideal of bodhicitta, how it contains the entire essence of all his teachings and how fortunate you are to have been introduced to this great principle, you should cultivate the thought, "I shall now dedicate myself exclusively to the practice of bodhicitta. For me, as a practitioner, this is the sole task that lies ahead." Generate within yourself a deep sense of joy and fulfilment mixed with sadness towards the suffering of other sentient beings. Along with all these emotions, generate the strong determination, "I shall never abandon this altruistic intention." It is with such thoughts that you should participate in the ceremony for affirming the generation of the mind of enlightenment.