Chapter 8 The Ceremony for Generating Bodhicitta

8.1 Introduction

To participate in the ceremony for affirming and enhancing your generation of the altruistic intention, first visualise that Shakyamuni Buddha is here in person, surrounded by such disciples as Maitreya, Manjushri, Nagarjuna, Arya Asanga and the other great Indian masters of the past, whose writings we continue to enjoy and derive benefit from to this day and which serve to open our eye of awareness. Reflect upon the kindness of these masters, as well as that of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas. Also imagine the presence of the great masters from all four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism—Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyü and Geluk—going back to when Buddhism first started to flourish in Tibet in the seventh to eighth centuries. Practitioners from other Buddhist traditions should visualise the lineage masters and historical teachers of their own traditions in the assembly.

Most importantly, visualise that you are surrounded by all other sentient beings. If this is difficult, simply reflect upon the fundamental equality of yourself and all other sentient beings insofar as the natural desire to seek happiness and overcome suffering is concerned. Just as you have the right and natural potential to fulfil this basic aspiration to be happy and overcome suffering, so too do all the other infinite sentient beings.

Then reflect on the fact that when you think of your own self-interest, regardless of your level of importance, you are simply thinking about the concerns of a single individual, but when you think of the interests of others, you are thinking about the welfare of an infinite number of beings. To sacrifice the welfare of countless others for the benefit of one, therefore, is not only foolish but also immoral. Furthermore, it is impractical, because it is a deluded way of trying to fulfil your own aspirations.

Next contemplate the idea that you have held this self-centredness and self-cherishing attitude at the core of your being since beginningless time, continually trying to fulfil your basic aspirations to be happy and overcome suffering from a self-centred perspective. But if you look at the situation you're in today, you'll see that actually, you haven't made any progress, even after this infinite number of lifetimes. If self-centredness really had the potential to bring you the benefits you seek, it should have done so by now.

Conclude, therefore, that under the control of self-cherishing since beginningless time, you have made one mistake after another, and now, it's enough. Generate the strong determination never to travel this deluded path again. Compare yourself with great beings such as the Buddha and the bodhisattvas on the path to enlightenment and realise that all their achievements have come from working for others instead of for themselves. Make this firm resolution: "As a Dharma practitioner, from now on, I must work for the benefit of all sentient beings. I will attain buddhahood for their

sake, to liberate them from suffering and lead them to enlightenment," and with that, participate in the ceremony for generating bodhicitta.

8.2 The seven-limb Practice[30]

In the eighth verse of *A Lamp for the Path*, Atisha recommends that the bodhicitta ceremony be preceded by the seven-limb puja. If you are participating in this ceremony in order to generate bodhicitta, don't simply listen to my explanations as a lecture, but fold your hands to your heart and pay attention with deep faith in the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Otherwise, you can just listen as normal.

8.2.1 Homage

The first of the seven limbs is the paying of homage. Reflect upon the qualities of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, particularly the qualities of the Buddha's enlightened body, speech and mind, such as his omniscient mind, his perfection of the altruistic aspiration and his perfection of the wisdom realising emptiness. Cultivate the aspiration to gain the wisdom of the Buddha yourself, and with reverence born from deep admiration and respect for the qualities upon which you have reflected, pay homage to the Buddha.

8.2.2 Offering

The second limb is that of making offerings. Imagine offering whatever you own, such as your body and resources, to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. You can also offer mentally everything else that exists in the universe. Most importantly, however, you should offer all your past virtuous actions of body, speech and mind. You can imagine these positive activities in the form of various articles of offering or you can reflect upon your entire collection of merit and, from the depths of your heart, offer it up to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

8.2.3 Confessing

The third limb is the practice of confession, or purification. Reflect upon all the negativities you have ever created through body, speech and mind and how they are all causes for future suffering. Each and every one of us confronts both physical and psychological problems and difficulties; we are beset with sufferings without end, like ripples on a lake, one after the other.

As you think about this, understand that suffering does not arise without reason; every problem has its own cause, the root cause being your own negative actions of body, speech and mind. Imagining that you are in the presence of the noble assembly of buddhas and bodhisattvas, fully disclose

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[30] **Seven-Limb Prayer**

1. Reverently, I prostrate with my body, speech, and mind;
2. I present clouds of every type of offering, actual and imagined;
3. I declare all my negative actions accumulated since beginningless time
4. And rejoice in the merit of all holy and ordinary beings.
5. Please, remain until the end of cyclic existence
6. And turn the wheel of Dharma for living beings.
7. I dedicate my own merits and those of all others to the great enlightenment.

all your negative actions and, cultivating a heartfelt sense of regret for them, commit yourself to purifying them.

8.2.4 Rejoicing

Next is the limb of rejoicing. Reflect upon the wonderful enlightened qualities of the buddhas, particularly those of the historical Buddha. We all know that Shakyamuni Buddha was not a fully enlightened being right from the start. Initially, he was just like us—an ordinary being struggling on the path, with the natural weaknesses and limitations that we all have. What distinguishes the Buddha from us, however, is that he took the practice of bodhicitta to heart. He then embarked upon the path and, as a result of his efforts, eventually attained the fully enlightened state.[31]

Therefore, in this practice, rejoice in the Buddha's enlightened qualities and the entire path to enlightenment. Then focus your attention on the bod-

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[31] In Mahayana Buddhism, the "**ten bodhisattva grounds**" represent the stages of development that a bodhisattva progresses through on the path to full enlightenment or Buddhahood. These stages are described in several key Mahayana texts, including the "*Daśabhūmika Sūtra*" and the "*Avataṃsaka Sūtra*." Each ground is associated with specific qualities, practices, and realisations that help the bodhisattva develop perfect wisdom and compassion.

The Ten Bodhisattva Grounds

1. **The Joyful Ground (Pramuditā-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva experiences great joy upon realising that they are on the path to enlightenment.
   - **Qualities**: Generosity and the practice of giving (dāna).
   - **Key Practice**: Overcoming attachment to material possessions and practicing generosity with pure intentions.
2. **The Ground of Stainlessness (Vimalā-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva attains purity by overcoming all forms of moral defilement.
   - **Qualities**: Pure ethical conduct (śīla).
   - **Key Practice**: Maintaining impeccable moral discipline and ethical behaviour.
3. **The Luminous Ground (Prabhākarī-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva's wisdom shines brightly, illuminating the nature of reality.
   - **Qualities**: Patience and tolerance (kṣānti).
   - **Key Practice**: Cultivating patience and enduring hardships without anger or resentment.
4. **The Radiant Ground (Arcismatī-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva's wisdom burns away all remaining defilements.
   - **Qualities**: Vigorous effort (vīrya).
   - **Key Practice**: Engaging in energetic and enthusiastic practice to overcome obstacles.
5. **The Difficult to Overcome Ground (Sudurjayā-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva develops great power and strength to overcome challenges.
   - **Qualities**: Deep meditation (dhyāna).
   - **Key Practice**: Attaining higher states of meditative absorption and stability.
6. **The Manifest Ground (Abhimukhī-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva directly perceives the true nature of phenomena.
   - **Qualities**: Insight and wisdom (prajñā).
   - **Key Practice**: Developing profound insight into emptiness and interdependence.
7. **The Far-Reaching Ground (Dūraṅgamā-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva travels far beyond ordinary concepts and views.
   - **Qualities**: Skilful means (upāya).
   - **Key Practice**: Using skilful methods to benefit others and adapt teachings to their needs.
8. **The Immovable Ground (Acalā-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva's wisdom becomes unshakable and unwavering.
   - **Qualities**: Immovability in the face of challenges.
   - **Key Practice**: Maintaining steadfastness and stability in practice and realisation.
9. **The Good Intelligence Ground (Sādhumatī-bhūmi)**
   - **Description**: The bodhisattva attains mastery of all aspects of the Dharma.
   - **Qualities**: Great intelligence and wisdom.
   - **Key Practice**: Teaching the Dharma effectively and comprehensively to others.
10. **The Cloud of Dharma Ground (Dharmameghā-bhūmi)**
    - **Description**: The bodhisattva's wisdom and compassion pervade like a cloud, benefiting all beings.
    - **Qualities**: Perfection of all virtues and the attainment of Buddhahood.
    - **Key Practice**: Completing the path and becoming a source of teachings and blessings for all sentient beings.

hisattvas on the last three of the ten bodhisattva grounds,[30] who have totally overcome their afflictive thoughts and emotions and are on the threshold of buddhahood. Reflecting upon such beings, develop a deep sense of admiration for their realisations and other spiritual attainments.

Then focus your attention on the bodhisattvas on the first seven grounds. Although they have yet to overcome the power of their afflictions, they are still **arya bodhisattvas**—bodhisattvas who have a realisation of emptiness. Reflecting upon their qualities, develop a deep sense of admiration for them. Next, shift your attention to the bodhisattvas on the first two of the five paths,[32] the paths of accumulation and preparation. They are almost at the same level as us, particularly those on the first path. (Note: four stages

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[32] In Mahayana Buddhism, the "**five paths**" describe the stages a practitioner progresses through on the journey to enlightenment. These paths outline a gradual process of deepening realisation and cultivation of wisdom and compassion. Each path involves specific practices and realisations that build upon one another.

1. Path of Accumulation (Sanskrit: saṃbhāramārga)
- **Description**: The practitioner begins to accumulate the two collections[28] of merit and wisdom.
- **Practices**: Engage virtuous activities, study the Dharma, and develop the foundation for deeper meditative practices.
- **Key Features**: Generating the aspiration for enlightenment (bodhicitta) and committing to the bodhisattva path.

2. Path of Preparation (Sanskrit: prayogamārga)
- **Description**: The practitioner prepares for direct realisation of emptiness.
- **Practices**: Deepening meditative concentration and analytical meditation on emptiness.
- **Key Features**: Progressing through four stages of increased understanding: heat, peak, forbearance, and supreme mundane qualities.

3. Path of Seeing (Sanskrit: darśanamārga)
- **Description**: The practitioner attains the first direct, non-conceptual realisation of emptiness.
- **Practices**: Directly perceiving the true nature of reality through meditative insight.
- **Key Features**: Entering the first bodhisattva ground and experiencing a profound shift in understanding.

4. Path of Meditation (Sanskrit: bhāvanāmārga)
- **Description**: The practitioner continually meditates on the direct realisation of emptiness.
- **Practices**: Stabilising and deepening the realisation of emptiness and removing subtle obscurations.
- **Key Features**: Progressing through the remaining bodhisattva grounds (second to tenth) and perfecting the qualities of a bodhisattva.

5. Path of No More Learning (Sanskrit: aśaikṣamārga)
- **Description**: The practitioner attains full enlightenment or Buddhahood.
- **Practices**: Manifesting perfect wisdom and compassion to benefit all sentient beings.
- **Key Features**: Completing the path and achieving the ultimate state of Buddhahood, characterised by omniscience and boundless compassion.

of increased understanding.)[33] In a sense, the bodhisattvas right at the beginning of the path are even more amazing than those who are more advanced, because despite being under the control of afflictions such as attachment and hostility, they still have the courage to commit themselves to the ideals of bodhicitta.

We should therefore feel the delight that parents do when their child takes its first faltering steps or speaks its first few words. They don't criticise their child's clumsy gait or limited vocabulary but instead are full of wonder. We can view bodhisattvas struggling at the beginning of the path in the same way, as amazing, awe-inspiring beings.

Having developed a deep sense of admiration for all bodhisattvas, next rejoice at the achievements and qualities of the arhats, who have gained complete freedom from samsara. Also feel a deep appreciation for the attainments of practitioners on the path to liberation.

Finally, rejoice at the all virtue accumulated by your fellow sentient beings and reflect particularly upon your own collection of merit. The fact that you have received a human rebirth endowed with the opportunity to practice Dharma is clear evidence that you have created much merit in the past—encountering the precious, sacred teachings of the Buddha and having an interest in practicing them can only be consequences of past virtuous acts. You have also engaged in many positive, altruistic activities in this life, so, recalling all this virtue, dedicate it to the welfare of all sentient beings and rejoice in the opportunities you have had to create all this merit.

8.2.5 Requesting

Fifth is the limb of requesting the buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma. This practice is associated with the Buddha in his nirmanakaya form. Direct your attention to those newly enlightened buddhas who have not yet started to teach Dharma and beg them to turn the wheel of Dharma in order to fulfil

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[33] In Mahayana Buddhism, particularly within the context of the **Path of Preparation** (Prayogamārga), the "f**our stages of increased understanding**" represent progressive stages that prepare a practitioner for the direct realisation of emptiness. These stages help deepen one's understanding and stabilise meditative insight.

1. Heat (Sanskrit: ūṣmagata)
- **Description**: The initial stage where the practitioner generates intense interest and enthusiasm for the realisation of emptiness.
- **Key Features**: The mind becomes "heated" with the energy and focus required to perceive the nature of reality. This stage marks the beginning of deeper meditative insight and increased clarity.

2. Peak (Sanskrit: mūrdhan)
- **Description**: The practitioner reaches the peak or summit of mundane understanding.
- **Key Features**: This is characterised by achieving the highest level of ordinary conceptual understanding of emptiness before direct non-conceptual realisation. It represents the culmination of intellectual and contemplative efforts.

3. Forbearance (Sanskrit: kṣānti)
- **Description**: The practitioner develops patience and tolerance towards the profound and often challenging insights into emptiness.
- **Key Features**: This stage involves enduring the difficult truths and experiences encountered on the path. The practitioner learns to accept and integrate these insights without retreating or becoming discouraged.

4. Supreme Mundane Qualities (Sanskrit: laukikāgradharma)
- **Description**: The final stage of the Path of Preparation, where the practitioner attains the highest possible qualities within the realm of ordinary experience.
- **Key Features**: This stage signifies the practitioner's readiness to transition to the Path of Seeing, where they will have the first direct, non-conceptual realisation of emptiness. It represents the peak of preparatory practices and the stabilisation of profound understanding.

their pledge to work for the benefit of all sentient beings.

8.2.6 Beseeching

The sixth limb is that of appealing to the buddhas not to enter final nirvana. This is mainly directed at buddhas in their nirmanakaya form, who have turned the wheel of Dharma and performed many enlightened deeds. Beg them not to enter final nirvana but to remain serving sentient beings.

8.2.7 Dedication

The seventh and final limb is that of dedication. Dedicate all the merit you have ever accumulated, particularly that of taking the bodhicitta vow, to the well-being of all sentient beings and to the attainment of enlightenment for their benefit.

8.3 The Actual Ceremony for Generating Bodhichitta

The actual ceremony for generating the mind of enlightenment can be conducted on the basis of reading the following three verses. The first presents the practice of taking refuge in the Three Jewels; the second is the actual generation of the altruistic intention; the third helps enhance the mind that has been generated, to sustain it without degeneration.

Kneel on one knee, if that is convenient; otherwise, remain seated. While reciting these verses, contemplate their meaning. Remember that as bodhisattva practitioners, when you take refuge in the Three Jewels, you are taking Mahayana refuge, engaging in this practice for the benefit of all sentient beings, and are motivated by the thought of attaining enlightenment for their benefit.

Repeat the following verses three times:

With the wish to free all beings
I shall always go for refuge
To Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Until I reach full enlightenment,
Inspired by wisdom and compassion,
Today, in the Buddha's presence,
I generate the mind of full awakening
For the benefit of all sentient beings.

As long as space remains
As long as sentient beings remain
Until then may I too remain
And dispel the miseries of the world.

In this way, generate the altruistic intention of bodhicitta. Although you have not taken a formal pledge, since you have generated bodhicitta here today, it would be helpful to ensure that your practice of bodhicitta does not degenerate. Therefore, it would be very beneficial for you to recite and think about the meaning of these three verses on a daily basis.