Introduction

The Way of the Bodhisattva

I received the transmission of the *Bodhicharyāvatāra* (The Way of the Bodhisattva) from Tenzin Gyaltsen, the Kunu Rinpoche, who received it himself from a disciple of Dza Patrul Rinpoche, now regarded as one of the principal spiritual heirs of this teaching. It is said that when Patrul Rinpoche explained this text, auspicious signs would occur, such as the blossoming of yellow flowers, remarkable for the great number of their petals. I feel very fortunate that I am in turn able to give a commentary on this great classic of Buddhist literature.

The Way of the Bodhisattva is one of the great classics of the Mahāyāna, the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle. Presented in the form of a personal meditation, but offered in friendship to whoever might be interested, it is an exposition of the path of the Bodhisattvas; those beings who, turning aside from the futility and sufferings of saṃsāra, nevertheless renounce the peace of an individual salvation and vow to work for the deliverance of all beings and to attain the supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood for their sake. As such, Shāntideva's work embodies a definition of compassion raised to its highest power and minutely lays out the methods by which this is to be achieved. It is an overwhelming demonstration of how concern for others, in a love that wholly transcends desire and concern for self, lies at the core of all true spiritual endeavour and is the very heart of enlightened wisdom.

The author of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* was a member of the monastic university of Nālandā, which, like the other great university of Vikramashīla, was one of the most celebrated centres of learning in ancient India. Little is known about him, although a number of colourful legends have come down to us over the centuries; tantalising half-lights that give us a glimpse of a highly unusual and independent personality. It would seem that Shāntideva was very much his own master, temperamentally impervious to social and ecclesiastical pressures, and able to pursue his insights irrespective of conventional expectations and public opinion. He was drawn at an early age to the wisdom teachings of the Mahāyāna, as embodied in the Bodhisattva Mañjushrī, and thus to the Madhyamaka or Middle Way school of Buddhist philosophy, renowned for its profundity and dialectic subtlety. Yet, as his work reveals, Shāntideva was by no means a dry academic. Like Nāgārjuna before him, he possessed to a remarkable degree the unusual combination of a powerful intelligence linked with a keen appreciation of the sufferings of the world and a deep sense of tenderness toward others.

It is impossible here to give an adequate description of Shāntideva's great poem, but it is hoped that with the passage of time it will be possible to make available translations of the commentaries of the great masters of the past. The following introduction is intended only as a guideline to help readers find their bearings, especially those who are unfamiliar with fundamental Buddhist ideas.

It is a frequent practice among commentators to divide The Way of the Bodhisattva into three main sections, along the lines of a famous prayer, perhaps traceable to Nāgārjuna:

> May bodhichitta, precious and sublime,
> Arise where it has not yet come to be;
> And where it has arisen may it never fail
> But grow and flourish ever more and more.

According to this scheme, **the first three chapters ("The Excellence of Bodhichitta," "Confession," and "Taking Hold of Bodhichitta") are designed to stimulate the dawning of bodhichitta in the mind. The following three chapters ("Carefulness," "Vigilant Introspection," and "Patience") give instructions on how to prevent the precious attitude from being dissipated, while the seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters ("Diligence," "Meditative Concentration," and "Wisdom") prescribe ways in which bodhichitta may be progressively intensified.** The tenth chapter is a concluding prayer of dedication.

Shāntideva composed this text in the form of an inner dialogue.[1] He turned his own weapons upon himself, doing battle with his negative emotions. Therefore, when we teach or listen to this text, **it is important that we do so in order to progress spiritually, rather than making it simply a subject of academic study.** With this in mind, we begin each session of teaching by paying homage to the Buddha and reciting extracts from the sutras.

> **Abandon evildoing;**
> **Practice virtue well;**
> **Subdue your mind:**
> **This is the Buddha's teaching.**

[1] Shāntideva was an eighth-century Buddhist master at the monastic university of Nālandā in India. It was to the monks of Nālandā that he first taught the Bodhicharyāvatāra.

Like a star, an optical illusion, or a flame,
A magical illusion, a dewdrop, or a bubble,
Like a dream, a flash of lightning, or a cloud—
So should one consider all compounded things.

While reciting these words, **we should reflect on impermanence and the lack of reality in phenomena** and conclude with a prayer of dedication:

By this merit may we attain omniscience
And overcome our enemy, our harmful deeds,
And may beings, buffeted by the waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death,
Be liberated from the ocean of existence.

Next we should recite the *Heart Sutra*, the *Praise to Manjushri*, and the offering of the mandala.[2] Those of you who cannot recite these should simply think of the Buddha's kindness and reflect on the view of emptiness, which is the meaning of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*.

Finally, we should renew our vows, taking refuge and generating *bodhichitta* three times.

In the Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha,
We take refuge until we attain enlightenment.
By the merit of practicing generosity and the like,
May we attain Buddhahood for the benefit of beings.

We will now begin our study of the *Bodhicharyavatara*.

The master of these teachings, the Buddha, began by generating the wish for enlightenment. He then accumulated positive actions through many lifetimes over a period of three great uncountable *kalpas*. Finally, in the age when the average human life span was one hundred years, he entered this world and attained enlightenment on the Vajra Throne at Bodh Gaya in India. In the twenty-five centuries since he first turned the Wheel of Dharma of the vast and profound teachings, the Buddhist path has been one of the most important of the world's spiritual traditions.[3]

I usually consider the teachings of the Buddha under two headings: **activity and view. *Activity* means refraining from harming others. This is something that is universally helpful, something that all people appreciate, whether they are religious or not. *View* refers to the principle of interdependence. Happiness and suffering, and the beings who experience them, do not arise without cause,** nor are they caused by some eternal creator. In fact, **all things arise from causes corresponding to them.** This idea is upheld by all schools of Buddhism, and so I usually say that our view is that of interdependence.

The view of interdependence makes for a great openness of mind. In general, instead of realising that what we experience arises from a complicated network of causes, we tend to attribute happiness or sadness, for example, to single, individual sources. But if this were so, as soon as we came into contact with what we consider to be good, we would be automatically happy, and conversely, in the case of bad things, invariably sad. The causes of joy and sorrow would be easy to identify and target. It would all be very simple, and there would be good reason for our anger and attachment. When, on the other hand, we consider that everything we experience results from a complex interplay of causes and conditions, we find that there is no single thing to desire or resent, and it is more difficult for the afflictions of attachment or anger to arise. In this way, the view of interdependence makes our minds more relaxed and open.

By training our minds and getting used to this view, we change our way of seeing things, and as a result we gradually change our behaviour and do less harm to others. As it says in the sutras:

Abandon evildoing;
Practice virtue well;
Subdue your mind:
This is the Buddha's teaching,

We should avoid even the smallest negative actions, and we should perform even the most insignificant positive actions without underestimating their value. The reason for this is that the happiness we all want and the suffering we all try to avoid are produced precisely by our actions, or *karma*. Everything we experience is programmed by our actions, and these in turn depend on our attitude. Whatever we do, say, and think in our youth is the cause of the happiness and suffering we experience in our old age. Moreover, what we do in this life will determine the happiness and

[2] The Heart Sūtra is the most concise form of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras and contains the essence of the teachings on emptiness. The Praise to Mañjushrī is a prayer to the Buddha of Wisdom, often recited before studying a Buddhist text. A mandala, a symbolic representation of the universe, is offered to the teacher along with the request to give the teachings.

[3] The Wheel of Dharma is the symbol of the Buddha's teaching. Turning the Wheel of Dharma is synonymous with expounding the teachings. Further explanation is given later in this chapter.

suffering of the next life. And the actions of this kalpa will result in the experiences of future kalpas. **This is what we mean by the law of karma, the law of cause and effect.**

On this basis, **an action is called negative if it results in suffering**, which is something we wish to avoid. **It is called positive or virtuous if it results in happiness**, which is something we want. **We consider an action positive or negative not on its own account but according to whether it leads to joy or sorrow.** This all depends on motivation, and so the text says, **"Subdue your mind." A mind that is not disciplined will experience suffering, but a mind that is under control will be happy and at peace.**

It is important to know all the methods for subduing the mind through the instructions of the vast and profound path. **The antidote to *hatred* is meditation on love. To overcome *attachment*, we should meditate on the ugliness of what attracts us. The antidote to *pride* is meditation on the *skandhas*, or aggregates.[4] To counteract *ignorance*, we should concentrate on the movement of the breath and on interdependence. The root of the mind's turmoil is in fact *ignorance*, on account of which we fail to understand the true nature of things. The mind is brought under control by purifying our mistaken notion of reality.** This is the teaching of the Buddha. **It is through training the mind that we can transform the way in which we act, speak, and think.**

It would be helpful at this point to say something about the Buddha's teaching in general. **According to the Mahayana, after attaining enlightenment, the Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma, setting forth his teaching in three stages. First he taught the Four Noble Truths, on which the entire Buddhist doctrine is based. These are the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path. With the second (or middle) turning, he gave the teachings on emptiness and the profound and detailed aspects of the path, which make up the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras.* With the third turning of the wheel, he presented the teachings on emptiness in a more accessible fashion. In sūtras such as the *Sūtra of Buddha Nature*, he spoke of an absolute nature that is devoid of the dualistic concept of subject and object. This is also the subject of the *Sublime Continuum*.[5]**

The **origin of suffering (namely, negative emotions) may be understood with varying degrees of subtlety, and this requires an understanding of the nature of phenomena.** In the second turning of the wheel, the Buddha explained in detail **the truth of the cessation of suffering**. He showed that an increasingly subtle analysis of phenomena leads to a greater understanding of the negative emotions and finally to an ever more refined insight into the nature of emptiness. This in turn leads to more profound understanding of the truth of the path.

In the third turning, we find a detailed explanation of the path for attaining enlightenment. It emphasises the potential that we all have for future enlightenment. This potential, called *Tathāgatagarbha*, or Buddha nature, is something we have always had, from time without beginning. When we talk about the truth of the path, we are not talking about something completely foreign to our nature, which might suddenly appear like a mushroom, as though without a seed or cause. It is because we have this foundation or capacity for ultimate omniscience that we are able to attain enlightenment.

The texts belonging to the second turning demonstrate the empty nature of phenomena, while the *Sūtra of Buddha Nature* and other teachings relating to the third turning emphasise wisdom, the clear and luminous aspect of the mind.

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths first, as the foundation of his whole doctrine. As he elaborated his teachings, he adapted his words to suit different needs and mental capacities. The way he taught varied considerably, and what he said was more or less profound, depending on those he was addressing. It is important, therefore, to know which teachings express the ultimate sense and which have been adapted to the particular capacities of his disciples. If, on analysis, we find that the Buddha's words, taken literally, appear illogical or lead to contradictions, we should understand that such teachings are a relative expression of the truth necessarily adapted to the comprehension of particular beings. On the other hand, if his words can be taken literally and are without any contradictions or flaws, we can accept these teachings as expressing the ultimate truth.

Faith is very important in Buddhism, but wisdom is even more so. True faith has to be based on reasoning. Simply to say, "I take refuge," or "I am devoted," blindly and without reflection, is of no value. Without rational investigation, it is impossible to distinguish whether the Buddha was speaking in an adapted, or relative, sense or whether his words are to be taken literally as expressing the ultimate meaning. This is why the sutras mention the *four reliances*:

> Do not rely on individuals, rely on the teachings.
> Do not rely on the words, rely on the meaning.
> Do not rely on the adapted meaning, rely on the ultimate meaning,
> Do not rely on intellectual knowledge, rely on wisdom.

---

[4] Five Aggregates: form, feeling, discrimination, attitude and views, primary consciousness. See Buddhism Glossary advanced

[5] See Book '*Sublime Continuum' (could not download) Available from Wisdom as ebook.*

In contrast to ordinary intellectual understanding, the true nature of the mind is clear and knowing and has never been veiled by obscurations. The practice of the Mahayana is entirely based on this understanding.

In Tibet, all the teachings of the Buddha, from the Four Noble Truths up to the highest yoga *tantras*, have been preserved, and are practiced in the following traditional order. **The first stage is the Shrāvakayāna, or Fundamental Vehicle, the path of the Four Noble Truths. Beginning with the Vinaya,[6] which teaches the training of discipline, one progresses through the thirty-seven practices leading to enlightenment, thereby developing the two trainings of concentration and wisdom. These three trainings (discipline, concentration and wisdom) are the basis for the two other vehicles.**

The second stage is the Mahāyāna, or Great Vehicle, and consists of the practice of the six *pāramitās*: generosity, discipline, patience, endeavour, meditative concentration, and wisdom. The third stage is the Vajrayāna, the vehicle of the secret mantras, which sets out the extraordinary means for realising profound concentration through the union of mental calm and clear insight (*shamatha* and *vipashyana*) and for progressing through the four tantra classes: kriya, upa, yoga, and anuttara.

Buddhism has flourished for centuries in many countries, but it was in Tibet that all three paths, the Shravakayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayāna, were preserved completely. It is, in fact, possible to go through all these stages of practice in the course of a single session. Moreover, Tibetan scholars never ignored the practice aspect, and experienced practitioners did not neglect to study. This seems to me a very good way of doing things.

In the course of time, different lineages appeared within this complete tradition, influenced by extraordinary masters who, at different times and in different places, expressed the teachings in slightly different ways.[7] We therefore have the ancient tradition of the Nyingma and the newer traditions of the Kadam, Sakya, and Kagyu. The present Gelug tradition evolved from the Kadam lineage. Despite the differences between these lineages, they all incorporate the Buddha's teachings in full, combining the practices of the Sūtrayāna and the Mahāyāna. The Bon tradition, which had existed in Tibet before the arrival of Buddhism, also came to possess a complete set of the Buddha's teachings.

The *Bodhicharyāvatāra* is highly regarded by teachers of all the Tibetan schools, and perhaps as many as a hundred of them have written commentaries on it. When I received the teaching on the *Bodhicharyāvatāra* from Kunu Rinpoche, he often mentioned an excellent commentary written by Minyak Kunzang Sonam, a disciple of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo.

The *Bodhicharyāvatāra* condenses the three turnings of the wheel of Buddha's teachings. I will read it aloud so that you receive the spiritual transmission, which is a source of blessing. I shall not explain the text word by word, but rather I shall comment on the essential points.

When receiving the teachings, it is important to have the correct attitude. It is not practicing the Dharma properly to listen with the intention of gaining material advantage or reputation. Neither should our goal be higher rebirth in the next life, as, for example, a celestial being or a powerful human being. Nor should we be wishing only for our own liberation from saṃsāra. These are all attitudes we should reject. Instead, let us listen to the teachings with the determined wish to attain the state of omniscience for the sake of all beings, who are infinite in number. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to practice the profound and vast path described in this text. If we can maintain this motivation, whatever positive actions we do will become the cause for supreme enlightenment. Even if such a wish does not come to us spontaneously, we can at least try to develop a positive attitude as we listen.

---

[6] Vinaya is the section of the Buddha's teachings that deals with moral conduct, in particular the vows and precepts for ordained monks and nuns and the Buddhist laity.

[7] A lineage is a line of Buddhist teachers who transmit to their spiritual heirs the teachings they have themselves received and inherited from their own teachers. A lineage can be related to one particular text or to a group of teachings. Most lineages can be traced back ultimately to the Buddha himself. The Dalai Lama's lineage for the *Bodhicharyāvatāra* runs from Shāntideva through a continuous line of Buddhist masters to Patrul Rinpoche, then to Khenpo Shenga (1871–1927), Kunu Rinpoche, and the Dalai Lama himself.