

The Cultivation of Bodhicitta and Taking and Sending

The main part of this teaching is based on a teaching of His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, given at the Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles in 1984.

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hen we look around us and see the great pain and anxiety of life lived without true understanding; when we reflect deeply on the fears that all beings carry hidden in the deep recesses of their hearts—which they are often unwilling to admit even to themselves for fear that doing so would sap the confidence or the false bravado that enables them to push forward blindly in life in the only way they know how—and especially when we reflect on the dangerous and painful vicissitudes of a world that in one moment is peaceful, and in the next full of violence, pain, and grief, full of lives shredded and torn apart by forces beyond one's control; when we reflect on the blood in the streets and the smashed skulls, or when we reflect on the ever-changing display of love and romance as it degenerates slowly into broken dreams, anger, strife, and hatred; when we reflect on the lonesome, the poor, the aging, cold and devastated, dying mass of sentient existence, and we remember that no ignorant being escapes this constant round of terror and that, if what sages and religious leaders of all ages have told us is true, there may even be worse to come, worlds in which our credit cards hold no sway, where there is not a friendly voice to call and no family to go home to— when we reflect honestly on all of this and stop ignoring and suppressing these thoughts, and when we apply these thoughts to ourselves and to our own particular situations, it gives rise to great renunciation of the vanity of confused existence and to the attendant willingness to quit chasing exclusively after unreliable baubles of happiness and enjoyment in the external world and to turn one's vision inward in order to find and extirpate the root of misery and suffering and to find the true and reliable source of peace and happiness.

When we think of all of this carefully with respect to ourselves, it gives rise to great revulsion and renunciation, but when we reflect on all of this with respect to others—realizing how blind and helpless sentient beings are in the face of such intolerable suffering—and quit ignoring and suppressing such thoughts, then it leads either to further ignorance and callousness, or it leads to great compassion. Further ignorance and callousness lead only to diminished intelligence, clumsy and vicious living, and in the end to great misery. Therefore, there is no advantage or merit in it for anyone.

On the other hand, in great compassion for suffering sentient beings there is great advantage and immense merit. Compassion based on affection for sentient beings and the pain of seeing them suffer leads one to generate the aspiration to liberate them from suffering, which in turn leads to the intention to do whatever is necessary to do that, even if it means turning the whole purpose of one's life around to becoming a support to the single project of attaining the wisdom and skillful means necessary to assist sentient beings to their own liberation. This generation of the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment leads to kind and compassionate activity in the service of those who suffer and, therefore, to the temporary amelioration of their condition and ultimately to their liberation. This leads to less ignoring and less turning away and narrowing of the focus of one's mind, and in turn to more expansive and less obscured awareness and hence to greater sensitivity and intelligence. Thus the generation of the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment and buddhahood—the generation of bodhicitta—is what the Dalai Lama refers to as enlightened self-interest, in which there is great benefit for everyone.

In fact, the generation of this altruistic intention to become enlightened and perseverance in the training that enables one to do so are the entire path of buddhahood. The aversion that we develop towards cyclic existence, the qualities of revulsion and renunciation that we cultivate, the refuge in the three jewels and the three roots, and the disciplines of moral conduct, meditation, and study that we accept and undertake are the foundation for the generation of and training in this altruistic intention. And all the stages of the paths and levels on the way to enlightenment and the development of mahamudra and dzogchen are nothing more than the fruition of this intention and training.

Sometimes, especially when there are rough spots in our path, we may find that our unspoken intention is really simply to escape the misery of cyclic existence, or in any particular situation, the misery of that situation. At those times, while continuing to practice the disciplines that lead to individual liberation, it is extremely important to continue to generate this enlightened intention and not to give up on sentient beings, not to give up or abandon the intention to assist all beings to liberation. For as the great Tsong Khapa wrote, “If the thought definitely to leave cyclic existence is not conjoined with the generation of a complete aspiration to highest enlightenment, it does not become a cause of the marvelous bliss of unsurpassed enlightenment. Thus, the intelligent should generate the supreme altruistic intention to become enlightened.”

What is an altruistic mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta? It actually consists of two aspects. The aspiration to bring about others’ welfare is the essential cause of the development of bodhicitta. The recognition that one can only bring about others’ permanent welfare by first removing all of one’s own ignorance through obtaining buddhahood—and the aspiration to do so—is the second aspect. Thus, a main mental consciousness that has as a cause an aspiration to affect others’ welfare which is accompanied by a wish for one’s own enlightenment is an altruistic mind of enlightenment.

But can it be established that we can even attain enlightenment? That which prevents the attainment of enlightenment are the veils, the kleshas or afflictive emotions, which are a kind of outer veil, and the cognitive obscurations of mind, sometimes referred to as the obstructions to omniscience, which consist fundamentally of the ignorance that conceives of inherent existence and the dualistic clinging that flows from that conception. It is in the nature of things that if you have two opposites—for instance, hot and cold—if you increase one the other will diminish. The same is true of our minds. Obscured ignorant consciousness that conceives of inherent existence and the wisdom consciousness realizing emptiness are opposites. Because the wisdom consciousness realizing emptiness has a valid foundation, as one increases one’s knowledge of the understanding of the emptiness of inherent existence, the obscured ignorance factors of one’s own consciousness diminish. Because this wisdom realizing emptiness can be increased limitlessly, finally overcoming ignorance entirely, it is established that enlightenment is achievable. Through taking this logic to heart and acting upon it, one develops a mind aspiring towards the enlightenment of a buddha.

The main aspect of this aspiration is to train in developing an attitude of mind that is seeking or aspiring to bring about others’ welfare. Tsong Khapa writes:

**(All ordinary beings) are carried by the continuum of the four powerful currents,
Are tied with the tight bonds of actions difficult to oppose,
Have entered into the iron cage of apprehending self (inherent existence),
Are completely beclouded with the thick darkness of ignorance,**

**Are born into cyclic existence limitlessly, and in their births
Are tortured ceaselessly by the three sufferings.
Thinking thus of the condition of mothers who have come to such a state,
Generate the supreme altruistic intention to become enlightened.**

Every sentient being—every being with mind—regardless of how small, including bugs and even microscopic animal life, wants happiness and wants to avoid suffering. Yet limitless numbers of sentient beings are bound in the sufferings of samsara due to actions that are motivated by emotional afflictions, which in turn are based on dualistic perception and dualistic clinging. Therefore, beings are carried by the four powerful currents of birth, aging, sickness, and death, which are brought about by the tight bonds of action (karma). Good and bad actions are brought about by the conception of oneself as inherently existent—the false view that takes what is transitory as a permanent “I.” This misconception of the nature of oneself comes about through the thick darkness of ignorance which conceives that other phenomena, one’s physical and mental aggregates, inherently exist. It is through this process of causation that beings are born in cyclic existence limitlessly and suffer. Thinking about this process of causation with respect to ourselves, we generate renunciation, the wish to get out of cyclic existence; thinking about it with regard to others, we generate compassion for others.

When bodhicitta—the altruistic intention to become enlightened—is cultivated in meditation, it is usually done so by two streams of teaching: the seven-fold cause and effect quintessential instructions and the instructions on equalizing and switching of self and other. When these two streams of instruction are combined, the meditation is particularly powerful.

The first step in this combined practice is to develop equanimity. Imagine three different sentient beings in front of you—a friend, an enemy, and a neutral person—and then intentionally generate the usual thoughts of desire, hatred, and a sense of neglect that you have for them. Then think about why you desire the friend, why you hate the enemy, and why you neglect the neutral person. In time it will become clear to you that you hold these attitudes because the friend helps you and the enemy harms. But if you think more carefully, you will see that a friend in an earlier part of one’s life can easily become an enemy at a later time, and vice versa. Moreover, in the course of a beginningless continuum of lifetimes, there is no certainty that particular beings have either been just friends or just enemies. Thus you will come to see clearly that your friend has been or could become your enemy and that your enemy has been or could become your friend, and that the neutral person can also have been or might become both friend and enemy. Thinking in this way, one comes to see that there is no reason to get too excited one way or another towards these beings, and in this way one accomplishes equanimity.

The next step then is to recognize all beings individually as the best of friends. Traditionally, it is taught that you should recognize all beings as having been your mother in previous lifetimes and as having been extremely closely connected to you.

There are said to be four modes of birth: birth from a womb, birth from an egg, birth from heat and moisture, and instantaneous birth, as when one is born in a pure realm. It is necessary to have a mother to be born from a womb or from an egg, and since one’s birth has been cyclic and beginningless, and therefore infinite in number, it is necessary to have had an infinite number of mothers. Thinking in this way, reflect on the three beings that you are visualizing in front of you, realizing or thinking that both the enemy and the neutral being have acted, therefore, over the course of many lifetimes, as one’s own mother and/or best friend, and that they have been extremely close to you. If it is not absolutely logically certain, it is at least more likely that over the course of lifetimes they have been in such close friendly relationships with you.

The third step is to develop mindfulness of their kindness—the friend’s kindness, the enemy’s kindness, the neutral person’s kindness— when they were your mothers. For this, imagine your mother in this life in front of you and reflect on how she took care of you with such great care and kindness and sustained you when you were a little child: how she bore you with discomfort in her body, suffered the pangs of birth, nursed you, cleaned you, dressed you, taught you to walk and to talk, introduced you to the world and educated you, and loved you in so many unthinkable ways, valuing you as much as or more than she valued her own life, willing even to give her own life for you if necessary. Then extend the understanding of this kindness to every other sentient being.

The fourth step is to develop special mindfulness of kindness. This is to reflect that sentient beings have been kind to us and are kind to us not only when they have been our friends, but that, irrespective of being our friends, they have been either directly or indirectly extremely kind. For instance, in our ordinary lives, no matter what we use to sustain our life— food, clothing, shelter, and so forth, medicine, educational opportunities, protection, etc.— these all come to us by way of the kindness of other sentient beings. When one considers the immense amount of intelligence and care that has gone into crafting all the things we use and live amongst, down to the finest details—the intelligence that created the washers, the spigots, the light bulbs, the garden hoses, the refrigerators, elevators, computers, the air traffic routes, and so forth—when we consider all of this intelligence and care, one sees that limitless numbers of people have been indirectly very kind to us.

In order to attain happiness, liberation, and buddhahood for ourselves and others, it is important to accumulate merit, which is done in relation to other sentient beings, especially when we help other sentient beings. Thus it is in dependence on other sentient beings that we accumulate great merit, and without other sentient beings it would be impossible to do so. For instance, with regard to generosity, gifts must be given to someone else. The ethics of refraining from harming others must be observed in relation to other sentient beings. This training that we are now engaged in, one-pointedly generating and strengthening an altruistic attitude, must be done in relation to and dependent upon other sentient beings. And of course, other sentient beings are needed for the practice of patience. In this regard, of course, enemies especially provide a great service for us. This is explained very beautifully in Shantideva’s *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*.

Moreover, the great effort and exertion of bodhisattvas come about as a consequence of their taking cognizance of the limitless types of suffering of limitless sentient beings. Thus it is on the basis of other sentient beings that they develop their great effort.

Similarly, the concentrated meditation and wisdom of bodhisattvas is dependent upon their concern for others. The fact that their meditative concentration and their wisdom become so powerful is due to their being conjoined with the force of one-pointed altruism toward other beings. The great practitioners, the arhats and arhatis, of the lesser vehicle—the hinayana—are said to develop extraordinary meditative stabilization, which is a union of calm abiding and superior insight, of shamatha and vipashyana. However, through that union they can achieve liberation from cyclic existence only for themselves. Why is that? Because their wisdom consciousness is not enhanced with the factor of altruism, of one-pointed dedication to the welfare of others. Because the motivation of hinayana practitioners is confined to self-liberation, it does not take into account the totality of existence, and therefore it is impossible for them to develop omniscience with respect to all phenomena. Thus, other sentient beings are extremely kind and extremely valuable in developing samadhi and wisdom.

Thus, without other sentient beings as objects of one's observation and activity, it would be impossible to engage in these powerful forms of virtue. But then one might object that these other beings do not necessarily have any motivation to be kind or to help one, and that, therefore, there is no reason for developing a sense of their kindness. However, if that were the case, then, since the dharma—the dharma of realization, which is the cessation of suffering, and scriptural dharma, which outlines correct paths to enlightenment—has no motivation to help one, then it would be inappropriate to cherish the dharma, to value it, and to make offerings to it. Therefore, whether the other person or sentient being has a motivation to help one does not make any difference. If it helps one, then that being or thing is to be valued as being kind, and we should be mindful of that kindness.

Shantideva raises the further objection that, though it might be the case that beings or objects with no motivation to help us should still be cherished as being very kind to us, an enemy surely does not have a motivation to help and does surely have a motivation to harm. So how could one reflect on the kindness of enemies? Shantideva answers that it is because a person has harmful intent toward us that they get the name of “enemy,” but that it is precisely because of that harmful intent and the actions that arise out of it that we have something with which to cultivate patience. Thus the enemy is very helpful to us and provides a great service to us. If we did not have enemies in the natural course of our lives, in order to learn to practice patience, we would have to go out and hire some enemies. Therefore, the enemy should be thought of as being very kind to us.

That is how we develop special mindfulness of kindness.

If sentient beings are helpful to us even when they are enemies, then what need is there to say that they are helpful when they are kind? If even enemies are kind when they cause harm, what need is there to say that friends are kind when they are helping us?

Now, it is always the better mode of behavior to repay the kindness one has received from others—to return something for their kindness. Thus the fifth step is to develop the intention to repay the kindness of all sentient beings.

Then the next step is to equalize self and other. This equalizing is the realization that others are equal to us in wanting happiness and in not wanting suffering. Within this context of both self and others' wanting happiness and not wanting suffering, what is the difference? We as individuals are only one, whereas others are infinite in number. Thus, for anyone with true intelligence, the greater number of sentient beings is more important than the smaller number. Thus, it would be completely unsuitable for one to use others for one's own purposes, while it would be completely and entirely suitable and most correct to use oneself for others' welfare. Thinking in this way, we begin to cherish others.

Then the next step is to reflect on the disadvantages of cherishing oneself. The state of ruination that we are currently in is due to the fact that our conception of inherent existence of ourselves and self-cherishing work together, the one influencing and strengthening the other. It is these two that ruin us and spoil our lives. There is no one who does not consider himself or herself to be important. This is natural in samsara, but we need to consider and reflect on the state that this type of self-cherishing, self-centeredness, and self-importance has led us into. What a mess it has created. If from beginningless cyclic existence until now, we have engaged in self-cherishing and it has brought us into such a mess, is it not then a terrible mistake to continue this self-cherishing? Would it not be better to do something else? Especially when we know that if we cherish others, we will achieve limitless great merit, through the power of which we can achieve great exertion for the benefit of others, which always redounds to our own benefit indirectly?

Shantideva wrote that Gautama Buddha and we ourselves were equal in the past in being ordinary sentient beings. If we look into the reasons why we in our present state are caught in the mess that we are in—mentally, emotionally, politically, socially, economically, environmentally—while Gautama Buddha has gotten rid of all faults and become a special being endowed with all good qualities, the reason that one finds is that Gautama Buddha at a certain point gave up selfcherishing and began cherishing others and thereby proceeded to such a high and evolved state, whereas we continue to do the opposite. We neglect others' welfare, while principally seeking only after our own, thereby propelling ourselves into further cyclic existence. When one reflects in this way on the disadvantages of selfcherishing and the advantages of cherishing others, one proceeds to the next step of the actual thought of switching self and other.

The name “exchanging self and other” or “switching self and other” is given to the process of switching one's own attitude of cherishing oneself into an attitude of cherishing others and the attitude of neglecting others into an attitude of neglecting oneself. So we begin to train our selves to do that. This is called exchanging self and other.

The next and tenth step is to take others' suffering within oneself, emphasizing compassion. When we think again and again about the sufferings of sentient beings, all of whom we now consider to be extremely dear to us, we naturally develop a wish to relieve them of their suffering and the causes of their suffering. It is helpful at this point to imagine all of these sufferings and causes of suffering of other sentient beings and to draw them into oneself in the form of black light, poison, weapons, or beings of whom one is particularly afraid. One draws them into oneself and absorbs them fearlessly down into the very basis of one's life.

The next step is to reflect on these sentient beings who want happiness but are bereft of happiness, and through being moved by that situation to develop an attitude of giving to other sentient beings all of one's own happiness and causes of happiness in the form of physical happiness, resources, and roots of virtue that will bring happiness. One imagines that one is giving other sentient beings one's own good body, resources, potential for wealth, good health, and long life, and all of one's roots of virtue. This giving of happiness can be done in the form of imagining light going out from oneself, or as Shantideva suggests, in the form of imagining whatever they want going out from oneself to them. If a person wants a lamp, in the form of a lamp; if a person needs clothing, in the form of clothing; and so on with food, shelter, whatever.

When one develops familiarity with this visualization and has practiced it for some time, one can coordinate the visualization with the breath. When one inhales, one imagines that one is inhaling others' suffering and the causes of their suffering, and when one exhales, one imagines that one exhales one's own happiness and the causes of happiness. In the process of these visualizations, one thinks that the sufferings of all sentient beings are in this way relieved, and that they are thereby enriched and established in states of happiness and liberation, and one does so with great joy.

Now at this point, this meditation is just imagination. If one wonders whether it is actually possible to bring about others' welfare in this way, then one should know that what one is doing now is just imagination. But according to the Dalai Lama, at the point of actually developing bodhicitta it is possible to actually bring about the welfare of others.

At this point one generates a special resolve to take upon oneself, and oneself alone, the burden of bringing about others' welfare and of relieving their suffering. One develops here a fantastic, strong, and unusual altruistic attitude, which is the willingness to take upon oneself the burden of freeing all sentient beings from suffering and of joining all sentient beings with happiness. One takes this upon oneself alone, so that if there were not another bodhisattva in all

the world systems of existence, one would still be resolved to bring about the liberation of all sentient beings single-handedly.

Developing this vast and unusual altruistic attitude with great force induces the intention to become enlightened for the benefit of all others, which is the actual altruistic mind generation, the actual generation of bodhicitta. One does this because, as the Buddha Shakyamuni said, “The buddhas do not cleanse the ill deeds of sentient beings with water nor relieve the suffering of sentient beings through touching them with their hands, and the buddhas do not transfer their realization to others. Sentient beings are liberated through being taught.” Sentient beings eventually escape cyclic existence through their own effort through being taught the truth. Thus one needs to prepare oneself to teach others. But if the meaning, the doctrines, and the skillful means that we need to understand in order to teach others are obscured to us, we cannot possibly teach others. Furthermore, what is to be taught to others must be something that is going to help them and be of assistance to them personally and individually. Therefore, one needs to know the interests, the dispositions, the capabilities, and so forth of other beings, both in groups and individually, in fine detail.

That which prevents one from knowing in fine detail what needs to be taught to others, and that which prevents one from knowing others’ interests and dispositions in subtle detail, are the obstructions to omniscience, the cognitive obscurations of mind. Thus bodhisattvas identify as their real enemy their own obstructions to omniscience. Without overcoming the obstructions to omniscience there is no way to bring about the vast amount of help that is needed by the vast ocean of sentient beings afflicted with suffering. It is not sufficient to overcome the kleshas, the afflictive obstructions to liberation from cyclic existence; but, in order to overcome the subtler predispositions that are established in the mind by the afflictive obstructions, it is necessary to overcome those afflictive obstructions themselves first. This establishes the procedure of the path of first overcoming the afflictive obstructions and then overcoming the obstructions to omniscience.

When the obstructions to omniscience have been removed, the next moment, which is a state of being devoid of the obstructions to omniscience, is the state of omniscient awareness of a buddha. Therefore, it is through this type of thought that one generates an attitude, a deep feeling or a deep thinking, that there is no other way for oneself but to overcome the obstructions to omniscience and become a buddha. This mind, this attitude is called bodhicitta, the altruistic mind of enlightenment.

When one meditates in this way on these two streams of instruction, over and over again, and reflects on their meaning over and over again from the very depths of one’s heart, one will naturally generate a mind that wishes from the bottom of one’s heart, day and night, to liberate all beings from suffering and to establish them in the state of buddhahood, and one will definitely generate the indomitable intention to attain buddhahood in order to do so.

When one cultivates one’s mind in this way in meditation, one cultivates it over the course of months and months, years and years, even over the course of many lifetimes. Though it may seem to take a great deal of time, it is definitely the case that as this meditation is gradually cultivated, the mind is gradually transformed. When one generates even a slight portion of this altruistic attitude, one establishes a cause that will bring about permanent happiness in the future. Even in this lifetime, one’s strength of mind, one’s will, and one’s peace of mind will increase. Therefore, the cultivation of bodhicitta is something that is helpful not only in the long run, but also in the short run. So it is really worthwhile to make the attempt to cultivate bodhicitta, and to bend one’s efforts to this attempt.