



Buddhist
Practitioners
Program

Bodhicitta is the Essence of Dharma

April 17, 2025

Until enlightenment, I go for refuge
In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Noble Sangha.
By the merit of generosity and other virtues,
May I attain buddhahood for the benefit of beings.

Bodhicitta is awakening heart-mind, the spirit of awakening for the sake of all beings. “The essence of the cultivation of bodhicitta is the desire to achieve perfect, complete enlightenment for others’ benefit” (Gampopa). Bodhicitta is what distinguishes the Mahayana path, the way of the bodhisattva. “Bodhicitta is the be-all and end-all for every bodhisattva” (Khunu Rinpoche).

Ultimate bodhicitta is wisdom knowing the empty open nature of interdependent existence; it is “pervading emptiness endowed with the essence of compassion, clear, unmoving, and free from elaboration.”

Relative bodhicitta is compassion for ourselves and all sentient beings; it “vows to liberate all sentient beings from suffering through compassion.”

Aspiring bodhicitta is the mind that aspires to awaken. “I will achieve perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

Engaging bodhicitta is the mind that actively ventures to do so. “I will train in the six paramitas, which are the causes of enlightenment” (Gampopa).

With genuine bodhicitta, compassion arises naturally and fearlessly, not just for friends, and not just for those presently suffering from pain, but impartially, for all beings, who are all suffering from impermanence and from conditioned existence itself.

“If I wish to attain unsurpassable awakening, the basis for this is bodhicitta as stable as the king of mountains: compassion, which touches everything, and pristine wisdom, which does not rely on duality” (Nagarjuna).

The benefits of bodhicitta: One enters the Mahayana path of bodhisattva training. One eliminates the causes of suffering: self-grasping and self-cherishing. One gains confidence and genuine self-esteem. One is less swayed by the worldly phenomena of gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute, praise and blame. Negative karma will be uprooted and merit, virtue and goodness accumulate. Dharma practices come to fruition -- one attains full awakening, and becomes useful to sentient beings. “Every fine thing in samsara and nirvana is contingent on bodhicitta” (Khunu Rinpoche)

The causes of bodhicitta include seeing the suffering of sentient beings; seeing the benefits of bodhicitta; attending and being inspired by the buddha, bodhisattvas, and teachers; being part of the Mahayana family; cultivating compassion for all sentient beings; being fearless toward hardships; receiving and maintaining the bodhisattva vow. “A mind of compassion, nondual awareness, and bodhicitta--these are the causes of bodhisattvas” (Chandrakirti).

“[W]hatever accumulations of merit and wisdom we may have, the root of spiritual development in the mahayana, the six perfections, nonabiding nirvana, and so on, is simply the arousal of bodhicitta. It arises on the basis of love and compassion. Even when full buddhahood is attained, there is nothing to do except to work for the welfare of others with nonreferential compassion.

True ultimate bodhicitta will not arise in the course of experience of beginners, but relative bodhicitta will definitely arise if they train in it. With the development of relative bodhicitta, ultimate bodhicitta will be realized naturally. So... we must meditate energetically on relative bodhicitta at the beginning if we are to achieve any meaningful results with respect to bodhicitta...

[T]he basic method for training is, as Shantideva says: [Those] who desire shelter quickly for [themselves] and for all others should use this sacred mystery: exchanging oneself for others.”

~ Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Great Path of Awakening*

Twenty-two similes for bodhicitta

1. Earth. Accompanied by *the initial intention to attain buddhahood*, earth-like bodhicitta is the base upon which crops are grown. Earnest desire to achieve enlightenment is like the earth because it is the basis for all virtuous qualities.

2. Gold. Accompanied by *sustained intention to achieve buddhahood*, gold-like bodhicitta is utterly stable, pure and never losing its character.

3. Moon. Accompanied by *superior determination*, bodhicitta is like the waxing moon, gradually becoming brighter, progressing in the accumulations of method and wisdom, qualities and knowledge.

4. Fire. Accompanied by *earnest application*, fire-like bodhicitta unites calm abiding and insight to transform and illuminate, burning away obscurations to omniscience.

5. Treasury. Treasure-like bodhicitta is accompanied by the *perfection of generosity* like a vast storehouse able to fulfill the needs of all beings, whatever they want and need.

6. Jewel mine. *The perfection of ethics* is an inexhaustible mine, the source of all the jewel-like qualities and powers.

7. Great ocean. Accompanied by the *perfection of patience*, bodhicitta is like a boundless great ocean, undisturbed, still and tranquil beneath the turbulence of hardships.

8. Vajra. *The perfection of joyous effort* is an indestructible diamond.

9. King of mountains. *The perfection of samadhi* is stable and unmovable, undistracted by appearances, no matter what happens.

10. Medicine. *The perfection of wisdom* realizing emptiness is the medicine that cures all afflictive emotions and subtle obscurations.

11. Virtuous friend. *The perfection of skillful means* is the guide who is willing and able to help all beings no matter their needs.

12. Wish-granting jewel. *The perfection of aspirations, prayers, and resolve* is a wish-fulfilling gem that fulfills ones own and others' aims.

13. Sun. *The perfection of strength* is like the sun, the prime source of illumination, warming and fully ripening crops.

14. Song. *The perfection of pristine wisdom* is complete and in accord with the needs of beings, like a song that attracts and pleases and inspires all beings.

15. Great king. *Directly realizing emptiness and the superknowledges*, clear and confident, with the power to achieve the benefit of beings according to their various dispositions and needs.

16. Treasury. Accompanied by the *accumulations of means and wisdom*, treasury-like bodhicitta provides whatever is needed.

17. Great path. Completing the *37 branches of enlightenment* is a great highway that accommodates all the vehicles of individual liberation and bodhisattva.

18. Great vehicle. *Compassion and insight together* avoid the extremes of samsara and nirvana, like a great vehicle that can take one to the final destination, full enlightenment.

19. Spring. *Accompanied by recollection and confidence*, fountain-like bodhicitta teaches and supports with no sense of exhaustion, like water gushing endlessly from a spring, refreshing and rejuvenating.

20. Sweet sound. *Realizing the four seals*, bodhicitta is profound and elegant like a song, harmoniously attracting and delighting those who wish to achieve liberation.

21. River. Flowing naturally and without interruption, stream-like bodhicitta, with the *realization of the nonduality of subject and object* spontaneously offers benefit to all beings.

22. Great cloud. In the space-like mind of a buddha, the cloud of bodhicitta appears and showers *teachings and activities, emanating in various forms* to benefit beings, like a great cloud bringing rain that allows seeds to grow.

Verses from *Vast as the Heavens, Deep as the Sea*:

Remember bodhicitta when you feel down.
Remember bodhicitta when you are scared.
Remember bodhicitta when you suffer.
Remember bodhicitta when you feel joy.

If you start something, start it with bodhicitta.
If you think of something, let the thought be of bodhicitta.
If you analyze something, analyze it in the light of bodhicitta.
If you investigate something, investigate it in the light of bodhicitta.

[The paramitas of] giving, morality, patience, vigor,
and concentration, as well as
the wisdom that realizes the ultimate --
bodhicitta makes them all perfect.

What is the use of working to grow a shoot
if you are without a seed? What is the use
of working to obtain complete buddhahood
if you are without bodhicitta?

Having obtained this precious life of freedom, so hard to obtain,
having met with the Buddha's teaching, which is so hard to meet,
yet not to hold bodhicitta in the palm of one's hand,
what greater misfortune than that could there be?

The practices for the supreme conventional bodhicitta
are exchanging self for others and so on.
The practice for the supreme ultimate bodhicitta
is meditation on emptiness.

Having taken up supreme bodhicitta,
with remembrance, introspection,
and conscientiousness, follow the training,
practice the training, and keep to the training.

If one does not have bodhicitta,
one will not become enlightened
even if one has other spiritual practices.
Gaining supreme unsurpassable enlightenment
Is contingent on bodhicitta.

~ Khunu Rinpoche, *Vast as the Heavens, Deep as the Sea*

From the Array of Stalks (Gandhavyuha) Sutra:

The awakening mind is the seed of all the qualities of a Buddha.

Bodhicitta is a field in which all the bright qualities of living beings can grow.

Like the earth, bodhicitta supports the whole world.

Like a parent, bodhicitta protects all bodhisattvas.

Like the god of wealth, bodhicitta puts an end to all poverty.

Like wish fulfilling gems, bodhicitta causes all goals to be fully accomplished.

Like the magic wishing vase, bodhicitta causes all intentions to be filled.

Like power, bodhicitta defeats the enemy, the reactive emotions.

Like armor, bodhicitta shields against inappropriately directed attention.

Like a sword, bodhicitta cuts off all the heads of the reactive emotions.

Like an ax, bodhicitta cuts down the tree of the reactive emotions.

Like a weapon, bodhicitta protects against all harms.

Like a fish hook, bodhicitta takes you up out of the water of cyclic existence.

Like a tornado, bodhicitta tears up and scatters the grass of the distortions and hindrances to attention.

Like a summary, bodhicitta collects together all of the bodhisattva practices and aspirations.

Bodhicitta is like a holy shrine for the worlds of gods, humans, and titans.

The awakening mind is endowed with all these advantages, and has innumerable other special advantages and virtues.

[Wisdom] that reaches to the limits of the knowable,
love that extends to every living being,
and power that is like lightning:
these have their origin in bodhicitta.

If one investigates to find the supreme method
For accomplishing the aims of oneself and others,
It comes down to bodhicitta alone.
Being certain of this, develop it with joy.

~ Khunu Rinpoche

Verses from *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

Those who long to triumph over life's distress,
And wish to put an end to others' sorrows,
Those who seek to experience abundant joys
Let them never turn their back on bodhicitta.

Like the alchemists' supreme elixir
It takes this ordinary, impure human form
And makes of it a buddha's priceless body --
Such is bodhicitta: let us grasp it firmly!

From the moment we genuinely take up
This irreversible attitude—
The mind that aspires to liberate entirely
The infinite realms of beings,

From then on, even while asleep,
Or during moments of inattention,
A plentiful, unceasing force of merit
Will arise, equal to the vastness of the sky.

~ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*

Sources for study and reflection on bodhicitta

Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, *In Praise of Great Compassion*.

Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*.

Geshe Tashi Tsering, *The Awakening Mind*.

Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Great Path of Awakening*.

Khunu Rinpoche, *Vast As the Heavens, Deep As the Sea*.

Maitreya, *Ornament of Clear Realization (Abhisamayalamkara)*.

McDonald, *How to Meditate on the Stages of the Path*.

Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva (Bodhicaryavatara)*.
