

# **Introduction to the Oral Commentary on Shantideva's Bodhisattvacaryavatara (Entering the Conduct of The Bodhisattva)**

**by H.E. Dzogchen Khenpo Choga Rinpoche**

**The following text is an introduction to the study of the classic Mahayana text, Shantideva's Bodhisattvacarya (BCA), and acts as a preface to an exhaustive series of teachings given by Khenpo Choga Rinpoche that follow the BCA chapter-by-chapter and line-by-line. These teachings were originally given in the form of an oral commentary over the course of a sequence of teaching retreats, covering an interval of several years.**

**This oral commentary was translated from the Tibetan by Andreas Kretschmar, who retains copyright to the printed material.**



**H.E. Khenpo Choga Rinpoche and translator Andreas Kretschmar (left)  
working on the BCA commentary in Nepal.**

**This translation, to date covering Chapters 1-5 of the BCA in about one thousand five hundred pages of written text, has been published online and is available for download at:  
<http://www.dzogchenlineage.org/bca.html>**

# **Introduction to the Oral Commentary on Shantideva's Bodhisattvacaryavatara (Entering the Conduct of The Bodhisattva)**

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This famous Mahayana text, the Bodhisattva-caryavatara, 'Entering the Conduct of the Bodhisattvas', was composed as a teaching poem in the Sanskrit language by the the century master, Shantideva, at the great Buddhist university of Nalanda, one of the major centers of Buddhist learning and practice in ancient India. The main subject of the text is the motivation of bodhicitta and the practice of the six transcendental perfections. The precious bodhicitta and the six transcendental perfections are the very core of the path of the bodhisattva, the heroic practitioner who aspires to perfect enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

The precious bodhicitta is the unfailing seed which gives rise to Buddhahood. "With it you can attain Buddhahood. Without it you have no chance of attaining enlightenment at all." The Bodhisattva-caryavatara teaches how to generate bodhicitta and how to practice the six transcendental perfections, thus showing us how to attain the unexcelled level of perfect enlightenment. Whoever comes in contact with this text will benefit greatly.

At first it is important to understand that becoming a Buddha is the supreme attainment possible for any being. There is no state higher than that of a Buddha. A Buddha is someone who has attained supreme enlightenment and is, therefore, endowed with inconceivable wisdom, compassion and powers, with all possible qualities, as well as being devoid of all defects. A Buddha is free from any delusion or error. In all of samsara and nirvana, none is superior to a Buddha.

## **Bodhicitta, the Supreme Wish**

If we wish for someone to achieve even the exalted status of a world monarch, this is still a very limited wish. But, to wish for someone to become a Buddha, to attain perfect enlightenment, is the very greatest wish one can make. Wishing for all sentient beings to attain the level of Buddhahood is the ultimate, the highest of all wishes. This unexcelled wish is called the precious bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is most precious because it is directed toward the most precious of all achievements, Buddhahood itself.

Bodhicitta is the wish: "May I free all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment." Or, even better, it is the commitment: "I will free all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment." If, as a practitioner, you lack this wish or commitment, you will never reach enlightenment. Even when you practice meditation intensively, at some point your progress toward enlightenment will become impeded. Thus, even the progress of the sravakas, arhats and pratyekaBuddhas, who lack this wish and commitment, is limited.

Most Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists practice bodhicitta as an aspiration, wishing, “May I free all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment.” However, while they may give rise to this wish, they often lack the courage to develop the firm commitment: “I will free all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment.”

Practicing with that commitment is true bodhicitta. In order to develop that level of commitment and confidence, you must have some realization of the Buddha nature, profound emptiness. Unless you have gained some degree of realization of profound emptiness, genuine compassion for all sentient beings cannot truly arise in your mind.

Bodhicitta has two aspects, compassion and knowledge. With compassion you focus on the benefit for others by committing, “I will free all beings from their suffering.” With knowledge you focus on perfect enlightenment by committing, “I will establish all sentient beings on the level of perfect enlightenment.” Note that compassion and loving kindness are by themselves not what is known as bodhicitta; instead, they are the basis from which bodhicitta develops. Mind has a natural tendency to avoid suffering and accomplish happiness. If this natural tendency becomes vast and altruistic, it turns into bodhicitta. Instead of trying to accomplish personal happiness, a bodhisattva aspires to establish all infinite sentient beings on the level of the ultimate happiness of Buddhahood. Rather than freeing only himself from misery, he aspires to free all infinite beings from suffering and the root of suffering.

To understand suffering and the causes for suffering, a bodhisattva must understand the truth of suffering and the truth of its origination. To understand true happiness and the causes for happiness, a bodhisattva must understand the truth of cessation and the truth of the path that leads to cessation. In this manner bodhicitta encompasses the four noble truths. Among all thoughts and wishes, bodhicitta is the most noble.

### **Generating Bodhicitta**

Generating bodhicitta means ‘making your mind vast’ or ‘making your mind courageous’. In general, our minds are limited and restricted by ego-clinging. But the mind itself is as vast as space. A bodhisattva seeks to open his mind and to make it as vast as the reaches of space.

He contemplates the infinite number of sentient beings, the objects of his attention. He contemplates the infinite amount of suffering, which he wants to remove. He contemplates the infinite qualities of Buddhahood, which he wants all sentient beings to obtain. He contemplates the infinite time-span, as he has decided to free all beings from their infinite past karmas and to establish them forever on the level of complete enlightenment. Through these contemplations he breaks through the confines of a mind limited by ego-clinging. The precious bodhicitta is the antidote to ego-clinging. The feature of bodhicitta is to focus on others, while the character of ego-clinging is to focus on oneself.

When generating bodhicitta, three levels of courage can be distinguished: the courage of a king, the courage of a boatman, and the courage of a shepherd. What is meant by the courage of a king? A king’s first priorities are to overcome all his rivals, to promote those who support him, and

to proclaim himself sovereign. Only once these aims have been secured does he turn to the care of his subjects. Similarly, the wish to attain Buddhahood for oneself first and then to bring others to Buddhahood subsequently is called the king's way of generating bodhicitta. This is the wish: "May I be liberated from suffering and obtain the level of perfect enlightenment."

What is meant by the courage of a boatman? A boatman aims to arrive on the other shore at the same time as all of his passengers. Likewise, the wish to achieve Buddhahood for oneself and all beings simultaneously is known as the boatman's way of generating bodhicitta. This is the wish: "May I liberate myself and all sentient beings from suffering and obtain the level of perfect enlightenment."

What is meant by the courage of a shepherd? A shepherd drives his sheep in front of him, making sure that they find grass and water, and are not attacked by wild beasts. He himself follows behind. In the same way, wishing to establish all beings of the three realms on the level of perfect enlightenment before attaining perfect enlightenment for oneself is known as the shepherd's way of generating bodhicitta, or the incomparable way of generating bodhicitta. This is the wish: "May I liberate all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment."

The king's way of generating bodhicitta is the least courageous of the three, the boatman's way is more courageous, and the shepherd's way is the most courageous of all. Practitioners of ordinary capacity, those who follow the way of the king, will reach perfect enlightenment within 'thirty-three countless aeons'; those of mediocre capacity, who follow the way of the boatman, will reach perfect enlightenment within 'seven countless aeons'; while those of highest capacity, who follow the way of the shepherd, will reach perfect enlightenment within 'three countless aeons'.

### **Bodhicitta of Aspiration and Bodhicitta of Application**

One must also distinguish between relative and absolute bodhicitta. Absolute bodhicitta refers to one's Buddha nature and only begins to be realized from the first bodhisattva level onward. Relative bodhicitta has two aspects: the bodhicitta of aspiration and the bodhicitta of application. Neither the bodhicitta of aspiration nor the bodhicitta of application refers to action. Instead, both are concerned with motivation and intention.

Both types of relative bodhicitta are concerned with motivation, rather than the actual application of the six paramitas, the six transcendental perfections. It is essential that one first give rise to the correct motivation; then, while maintaining this motivation, you can carry out any of the six transcendental perfections.

To commit oneself to the fruition, the state of perfect enlightenment, is what is known as 'the bodhicitta of aspiration'. It is the motivation: "I will liberate all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment."

To commit oneself to the causes of perfect enlightenment, which are the practice of the six transcendental perfections, is what is known as 'the bodhicitta of application'. This is the motivation to enter into the conduct of any of the six transcendental perfections: "In order to

liberate all sentient beings from their suffering and to establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment, I will practice generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and knowledge.” Again, at this stage, one is simply giving rise to the commitment to do so; one has not yet come to the actual application of any of the six transcendental perfections.

For example, the commitment, “In order to liberate all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment, I will study this text,” is the bodhicitta of application. The bodhicitta of application requires the bar]. This is called ‘the third countless (time period)’ [grangs med gsum pa]. Thus Buddha Sakyamuni needed ‘three countless great aeons’ [bskal chen grangs med gsum] to perfect the motivation of actually wanting to do something; you actually want to engage in the conduct of the perfections. When you then study the text with that motivation, you are already practicing the perfections. You have brought bodhicitta of application into the application of the perfections. Intention and application have come together.

Bodhicitta generates the highest degree of virtue, virtue that leads to the liberation of the greater vehicle, the attainment of complete enlightenment. This ultimate degree of virtue entails practice with the intentional focus or aim of reaching perfect enlightenment. Otherwise, the practice of the six perfections is reduced to a lesser degree of virtue, either the virtue that leads to the accumulation of worldly merit, or in the best case, the virtue that leads to liberation from samsara. On the other hand, to only give rise to the bodhicitta motivation without actually carrying out the six transcendental perfections will also fail to lead one to the state of perfect enlightenment.

Understanding the preciousness of Buddhahood and generating the wish to attain the state of fruition, complete enlightenment, is the bodhicitta of aspiration. Maintaining this motivation and wishing to bring this fruition about by practicing the causes that lead to it, the practice of the six transcendental perfections, is the bodhicitta of application.

Both of these types of bodhicitta are directly concerned with motivation rather than with action. These two motivations are what is called ‘relative bodhicitta’. To actually practice the six transcendental perfections of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom is the actual application itself. Finally, truly seeing one’s own Buddha nature is ‘absolute bodhicitta’.

### **The Six Transcendental Perfections**

For three countless aeons Buddha Sakyamuni was occupied with nothing other than cultivating the motivation of bodhicitta and practicing the six transcendental perfections. This practice alone led him to the attainment of perfect enlightenment. All the vast teachings of the Buddha are included within this central practice of the bodhisattva, cultivating the motivation of bodhicitta and practicing the six transcendental perfections. The six transcendental perfections are generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and knowledge.

Generosity:

The practice of generosity has the aim of cutting through all fixations and attachments such as clinging to the body, to material wealth and enjoyments, and finally even to whatever spiritual merit you may have accumulated. In order to practice generosity, you must develop a generous

mindset. With a generous mindset you are able to give away things that you are fond of, things you really wish to possess, as well as things that you truly need. To merely give up something that you neither like nor need is not what is meant by a generous mindset.

If your practice of generosity is embraced with the recognition of non-conceptual wisdom, then only can it truly be called ‘transcendental’ generosity. If your practice of generosity lacks the recognition of non-conceptual wisdom, it is still only conventional generosity. Enlightenment is only possible through the quality of transcendence. Transcendence means ‘to go beyond samsara’, ‘to go beyond ego-clinging’, ‘to go beyond worldly thinking’. In order to attain enlightenment, one must include the recognition of non-conceptual wisdom in the application of all six perfections. Then only are they ‘transcendental perfections’.

Discipline:

Discipline means giving up all fixation on non-virtue. Due to our afflictions and our habitual patterns, we often react and behave in non-virtuous ways. Discipline is nothing other than letting go of fixating on negative thoughts, emotions and patterns. Instead, you make the firm resolve, “I will not allow myself to stray into non-virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind.” For instance, the thought, “I hate that person and I will hit him”, is a mental fixation on a negative emotion. Discipline means learning how to release this negativity.

Patience:

If afflictions and negative patterns arise in your mind and you do not act them out, you are practicing patience. For instance, anger may arise in your mind, causing you to think, “I want to harm this person.” However, if you refrain from acting on this fixation, on this negative impulse, you are practicing patience. Furthermore, patience means to actually release all fixation on the varieties of mental turmoil. You release your grasping at anger, greed, arrogance, jealousy, suffering, anxiety, and so forth. Finally, only if your practice is grounded in the recognition of non-conceptual wisdom may it truly be called ‘transcendental patience’.

Diligence:

Diligence means to endeavor joyously in virtue, to be happy to practice virtue. Diligence involves overcoming fixation on the lazy mind which fails to practice virtue, which fails to practice Dharma. Grounding your practice of diligence in the recognition of non-conceptual wisdom, it becomes ‘transcendental diligence’. Whenever you engage in study, contemplation, and meditation or any other virtuous action, you should undertake these tasks in a happy and inspired frame of mind. If you practice the Dharma when your mind is tainted by afflictions, you will only create non-virtue.

Meditation:

Meditation means letting go of all fixations which involve being caught up in distraction. The state of meditation refers to an undistracted mind, which is also a centered and relaxed state of mind. People are very attached to distractions. They must keep their minds occupied with something and find themselves unable to leave the mind in its natural state. When your meditation is grounded in

the recognition of non-conceptual wisdom, then only can it truly be called ‘transcendental meditation’.

Meditation here mainly refers to the two types of meditation practice: samatha, which means ‘calm abiding’, and vipasyana, which means ‘clear insight’. The beginner first trains his mind in ‘calm abiding’, free from analysis and mental distinctions. Once he has attained a certain stability in ‘calm abiding’, he then applies his knowledge of the Dharma to this state and sees the nature of the truth.

Knowledge:

The perfect bodhisattva has the knowledge and wisdom which enable him to maintain the recognition of the Buddha nature while he continues to practice generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, and meditation. Bodhisattvas are able to acquire this knowledge through studying, contemplating, and meditating according to the teachings of the Buddha. They apply this knowledge to all the other five perfections. Only by bringing the recognition of the Buddha nature, of profound emptiness, into the practice of the perfections do they become ‘transcendental’.

Knowledge in this case means ‘transcendental knowledge’. This knowledge goes far beyond the knowledge of what is visible and tangible via sensory perception alone. Rather, it is the knowledge that is able to recognize the Buddha nature, profound emptiness, non-conceptual wisdom. Within the recognition of non-conceptual wisdom, all thoughts, fixations, and attachments are naturally absent. This recognition must be applied to every situation in life. This recognition, the true meaning of transcendental knowledge, must be applied to the practice of each of the first five perfections. ‘Transcendental’ literally means ‘gone beyond’.

Transcendental knowledge is a knowledge that has gone beyond ego-clinging and ignorance. The knowledge that has recognized egolessness is transcendental knowledge. Genuine transcendence is only gained from the first bodhisattva level onward.

### **Karma and the Nature of Samsara**

Since time without beginning, all sentient beings have been circling about in the limitless ocean of samsara. Though all beings harbor an infinite variety of thoughts, hopes and fears, all have one common wish—all wish to achieve happiness. Our present situation results from our past actions, from our karma. Through the power of formerly accumulated causes, various experiences of happiness, of suffering, and of neutral states manifest.

While by nature we all aspire to happiness, nonetheless, we seem ignorant about the cause for happiness, which is the accumulation of merit through virtuous deeds. Through the power of our habits, we tend not to engage in virtuous actions but automatically tend toward non-virtuous actions. Virtuous actions often seem to require great struggle and effort, while non-virtuous deeds come quite easily to us.

Karma means action, which is the mind’s capacity to set into motion a virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral thought, emotion, or deed. Merit is a powerful mindset which grants us the

capacity to avoid conditions such as disharmony, suffering, obstacles, illnesses, and so forth. It is the power of the mind to create harmonious circumstances. Merit is something that each being must actively generate and accumulate.

The subtle workings of karma can only be understood by a perfectly enlightened Buddha. A Buddha clearly sees which action leads to which kind of result, even over aeons and aeons of birth upon rebirth. Based on this knowledge, a Buddha teaches the points of conduct, such as the ten virtuous actions, the behavior that one must adopt and the actions that one must avoid. If we want to achieve happiness in this and future lifetimes, we must practice the ten virtuous actions. If we continue to follow the ten non-virtuous actions, in spite of aspiring to happiness, our actions are opposed to our expectations, and we will end up in miserable states of existence.

All actions that give rise to harmony and positive conditions are called virtuous or wholesome actions. All actions that cause disharmony and negative conditions are called non-virtuous or unwholesome actions. Happiness and its causes are positive and virtuous. Suffering and its causes are negative and non-virtuous. Both virtue and merit, non-virtue and de-merit depend on the mind and are created by the mind.

The very fact that virtuous actions lead to happiness and non-virtuous actions to suffering is what is referred to as the law of cause and effect, the law of karma. At the very beginning, even before deciding that you want to become a Buddhist and take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, you must first understand and accept the law of karma. Without understanding and accepting the law of karma, and hence living a life which accords with the ethics of the bodhisattva, there is no chance of attaining enlightenment.

You are heir to your own past karma and in the present are actively creating your future karma. Buddhist practitioners assume complete responsibility for their own karma. They know they have created their own suffering as well as their own happiness, and they recognize that the process of freeing themselves from samsara's suffering also depends entirely upon themselves.

A Buddhist acknowledges the law of cause and effect. If one does not believe in the positive or negative consequences of one's actions and does not follow the ten virtuous actions and the conduct of the bodhisattva, the practice of the genuine Dharma is simply not possible. Believing one can cause harm to others and still progress on the path to enlightenment is delusion.

### **The Two Accumulations of Merit and Wisdom**

The very essence of the Buddhist teachings, the Buddha Dharma, is to cut through fixation. Fixation and attachment are the roots of samsara; they bind us to samsara. Mind has the capacity to generate powerful thoughts which can serve to loosen up our fixations on samsara. Thoughts that carry such power are known as 'conceptual merit'.

The purpose of accumulating conceptual merit is to change our negative patterns into virtuous ones, to loosen up our habitual fixation on negativity. Eventually, the gathering of conceptual merit brings fixation to an end, allowing wisdom to dawn. Once grasping and fixation



have gone, the Buddha nature is revealed and can be recognized. The power of merit ultimately leads to the dawn of wisdom, the recognition of our Buddha nature.

To attain enlightenment one must gather the two accumulations, the 'accumulation of conceptual merit' and the 'accumulation of non-conceptual wisdom'. One truly possesses relative bodhicitta only through having gathered considerable conceptual merit. Therefore, the Bodhisattva-caryavatara teaches many methods for generating conceptual merit.

When relative bodhicitta has firmly taken root in your mind, you are able to generate a power of merit through which absolute bodhicitta, non-conceptual wisdom, can arise.

Non-conceptual wisdom is none other than the recognition of the Buddha nature, egolessness, profound emptiness. This recognition is beyond thoughts; it utterly cuts through all fixation on samsara.

The practice of relative bodhicitta furthers the accumulation of merit; the practice of absolute bodhicitta furthers the accumulation of wisdom.

In addition to gathering the two accumulations, one must also purify the two obscurations. These are the obscurations of afflictions and the obscurations of cognition. To attain enlightenment one must both perfect the two accumulations and purify the two obscurations.

Generally, one can say that the two accumulations are the remedies for the two obscurations. The accumulation of conceptual merit remedies the obscuration of the gross afflictions, and the accumulation of non-conceptual wisdom remedies the remaining subtle levels of afflictions and the obscurations of cognition.

Furthermore, practicing the first five perfections gathers the accumulation of merit, while practicing the perfection of wisdom gathers the accumulation of wisdom. If a bodhisattva has the transcendental knowledge to maintain the recognition of nonconceptual wisdom while simultaneously practicing the other five perfections, then both accumulations are being gathered together. This is called practicing the unity of merit and wisdom. The practice of merit enhances the wisdom practice, and the wisdom practice enhances the merit practice.

The accumulation of merit alone leads to rebirth in the higher realms and to the perfect conditions necessary to practice Dharma. When a practitioner has gathered great merit, transcendental knowledge may dawn in his mind. Without sufficient merit, people will not be able to recognize transcendental knowledge.

Buddha Sakyamuni practiced the accumulation of merit on its own for one incalculable aeon, an inconceivably long time. During the second incalculable aeon he was able to recognize wisdom and hence practiced the union of the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. In this way, he traversed the first through the seventh bodhisattva levels. Finally, during the third incalculable aeon, he continued to practice the union of merit and wisdom, traversing the eighth through the tenth bodhisattva levels.

Having thus completed the five paths and the ten levels, he was able to transcend even the realization of a tenth level bodhisattva and thus attain perfect enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, becoming a fully enlightened Buddha. A practitioner must understand the connection between merit and wisdom. Only when great merit has been gathered will wisdom dawn in the practitioner's mind. As it is said in the Vajrayana teachings:

As far as the ultimate, the co-emergent wisdom, is concerned, Know that it is foolish to rely upon any methods other than Practices for gathering the accumulations and purifying obscurations, As well as the blessings of the glorious root guru.

As is said:

don dam lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes ni  
tshogs bsags sgrib pa dag pa'i lag rjes dang  
dpal ldan bla ma'i byin rlabs kho na las  
thabs gzhan brten pa rmongs par shes par bya

Gathering the accumulations, purifying the obscurations, and receiving the blessings of the guru all lead to the same point. Gathering the accumulations leads to the creation of harmonious circumstances. Purifying the obscurations causes all disruptive circumstances to be dispelled. When all harmonious circumstances have been established, all disruptive circumstances have naturally vanished. 'Blessing' is the energy through which this transformation is brought about. When you have gathered great merit your mind will change, and wisdom will dawn. This transformation is known as the blessing of the master. Through the master's blessing, the practitioner's mind is ripened, and wisdom dawns.

Thus, we can see that these three aspects of purifying the two obscurations, perfecting the two accumulations, and ripening one's mind through the blessing of the master all occur simultaneously. The rising of the sun, the dispelling of darkness, and the illumination of the world happen all at once.

A beginner should start out with practices for gathering the accumulation of conceptual merit. He should practice going for refuge, developing relative bodhicitta, practicing visualization, as well as the practice of the seven branches. The seven branches are: offering prostrations, presenting offerings, making confessions, rejoicing in merit, requesting the Buddhas not to pass into nirvana, supplicating the Buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma, and dedicating the merit. Once these teachings have been received, a beginner has the perfect tools for generating great conceptual merit without needing to undergo any hardships.

One must also practice the accumulation of wisdom at the same time as engaging in these practices. A practitioner should receive the teachings on how to recognize Buddha nature from a truly qualified master. Although the beginning student might still be thoroughly caught up in dualistic mind, nonetheless, he would make some progress toward wisdom practice.

Wisdom can only be recognized by transcendental intelligence or transcendental knowledge. The ordinary conceptual mind can never recognize wisdom. Thoughts always need an object, hence

the dualistic mind is forever bound to know, understand, and function within the confines of a fundamental subject-object dichotomy. Wisdom is beyond thoughts, beyond the subject-object dichotomy, beyond the grasp of dualistic mind. As Shantideva said in the 9th chapter: Since the ultimate is not within the reach of intellect, The intellect must be described as the relative.

### **Buddha Nature and its Qualities**

All sentient beings are endowed with the perfect Buddha nature. The infinite qualities of the perfectly enlightened Buddha, such as knowledge-wisdom, love-compassion, and sheltering power are completely present in the essence of the mind of all sentient beings. The enlightened basis with which every being is endowed has many names, such as Buddha nature, essence of mind, profound emptiness, non-conceptual wisdom, primordial purity and so forth.

Khenpo Kunpal comments: “Since the absolute, the natural state of things, is beyond all extremes—of ‘existence’, of ‘non-existence’, of ‘both existence and non-existence’, and of ‘neither existence nor non-existence’—it is not within the reach of the intellect. Consequently, the intellect and verbal expressions conceptualizing (positions) such as ‘existence’ and ‘nonexistence’ must be described as being the relative and therefore not as being the absolute”

This enlightened basis is also called the ground. Every being is primordially endowed with this ground. All enlightened qualities are unchangingly present in the Buddha nature of all beings from a tiny insect up to a perfectly enlightened Buddha.

No being is ever separated from its Buddha nature, not even for a single instant. Through the power of delusion, ego-clinging, obscurations, habitual patterns, and karma, the enlightened qualities are not manifest but remain hidden. Ego-clinging collapses, and enlightened qualities gradually manifest as a practitioner of Buddha’s teachings develops a virtuous mind, gathers the two accumulations, and purifies the two obscurations.

Enlightenment is only possible because all beings are primordially endowed with the Buddha nature. The practice of the Dharma can lead to enlightenment for this reason alone. The very nature of every being is wisdom and compassion. A deluded mind, bound by ignorance and ego-clinging, is not abiding in accordance with the wisdom of its own essence, the Buddha nature. Nor is a mind suffused with anger and hatred in accord with the compassion that is its very essence.

Certain things, such as light and darkness, cannot exist simultaneously and are thus exclusive of one another. For example, a person cannot be loosely relaxed and yet tense and uptight at the same time. The more people are able to let go of fixations and attachments, the more they will experience relaxation and the happiness that follows.

This is because when fixations and attachments loosen up, the peaceful, blissful, and compassionate qualities of the Buddha nature are finally able to begin shining through. All beings naturally tend to strive for happiness because their very nature, the Buddha nature, is itself endowed with happiness. However, beings lack the knowledge with which to uncover this nature. All beings want to attain a level of peace for themselves because their nature, the Buddha nature, is

peaceful. All beings dislike pain and suffering because their nature, the Buddha nature, is itself free from suffering. Unfortunately, beings are generally unaware of this.

### **The Buddha Nature: Ground, Path, and Fruition**

All beings have as the essence of their minds the perfect state of peace and happiness. That state is empty, cognizant, and free from all fixation. It is naturally-existing wisdom, endowed with all enlightened qualities. The more a person can let go of fixations and attachments, the more the qualities of that person's enlightened essence are able to manifest. Although all beings already possess this enlightened ground, sentient beings, being lost in the delusion of samsara, are utterly unaware of their own perfect essence.

The teachings of the Buddha show us how we can reconnect with the Buddha within and so gain enlightenment. This is the path. If we want to reach enlightenment, from the very beginning of our journey we must strive to develop the precious bodhicitta. Once we are totally free from fixations, and the natural state of the Buddha nature has been completely actualized, we have attained enlightenment. We have become Buddhas. That is the fruition.

A good example describes the relationship between sentient beings and the Buddha nature at the time of the path. The Buddha nature is likened to the sun; ego-clinging, delusion, fixations, attachments, and obscurations are like clouds covering the sun. To the degree that clouds fade away, to that degree will the sun's brilliance naturally shine forth. The sun itself is always present, whether or not it is covered or obscured.

Likewise, the Buddha nature is always present, regardless of whether it is obscured or not. However, in the general experience of sentient beings it is as though they are cut off from the Buddha nature. In the case of practitioners, on the other hand, they sometimes come into contact with the Buddha nature and sometimes lose it. This is the experience of delusion on the one hand and of glimpses of enlightenment on the other.

In the end, the process of uncovering the Buddha nature comes down to letting go of fixations. It is fixation which solidifies the cloud banks of obscuration; letting go of fixation reveals the sun of Buddha nature.

Because this Buddha nature is already perfectly present in the essence of the mind of every sentient being, the wish and commitment, "I will free all sentient beings from their suffering and establish them on the level of perfect enlightenment," is in accord with the true potential of every being. If beings lacked the Buddha nature, bodhicitta would be totally meaningless, mere wishful thinking without any inherent basis in the individual.

Developing the bodhicitta of aspiration and of application is still considered relative bodhicitta. Once we begin to get glimpses of our Buddha nature, our primordially pure essence, we begin to realize absolute bodhicitta. At the time when the Buddha nature has been fully revealed, we will have reached perfect enlightenment; we will have reached the fruition.

All of samsara, nirvana, and the path to perfect enlightenment must be understood within the framework of ground, path, and fruition. The Buddha nature is called the ground or basis. This is the primordial Buddha, endowed with all qualities and devoid of all defects. Unaware of this essence, beings live their lives in delusion. The teachings of the Buddha show the way out of this delusion; they teach beings how to reconnect with their Buddha nature. This is the path. Once this Buddha nature has been completely realized, one is a fully awakened Buddha. This state is called the fruition.

The Bodhisattva-caryavatara teaches us how to follow the path to enlightenment. It teaches us how to develop bodhicitta and how to practice the six transcendental perfections. It teaches us how to realize the view of Buddha nature and how to let this view mature into complete enlightenment.

Buddha nature, 'the enlightened essence', is also called, among many other names, 'the root of Buddha', 'the pure essence, the core of Buddha', or 'the heart-drop of Buddha'. Buddha nature actually means 'the real Buddha'. The term Buddha nature indicates that all of us sentient beings are endowed with the real Buddha within. This true Buddha is no different from your own mind; in fact, it is your mind's true essence.

This internal Buddha is the ground. When fully realized, this ground is the fruition. Between the ground and the fruition there is not the slightest difference. The ground is the true and real Buddha, endowed with all qualities and devoid of all defects. Due to our delusion we are not aware of this true Buddha within us. We must embark on the path to eliminate our delusion. The teachings of the Buddha are the perfect remedy to remove delusion and lead us to our true nature.

On the path we learn methods for removing obscurations, for gathering the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. We learn how to recognize our Buddha nature in the ninth chapter of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara and how to let this recognition ripen into full realization. This is the framework in which to understand 'Entering the Conduct of the Bodhisattvas'.

Until we reach the ultimate fruition, the Dharma is our true refuge, since it is the Dharma that teaches us how to attain enlightenment. If from the very beginning you direct your mind to attaining perfect enlightenment, your mind will open up. As bodhicitta develops in your mind, your delusion will gradually fall away, and the genuine view of the Buddha nature will begin to dawn. Eventually, you will reach the ultimate fruition, perfect enlightenment.

Delusion means to be mistaken in your mind. If you see a piece of rope and think it is a snake you are mistaken, but your mistaken perception stirs up anger and fear. These afflictions disappear the moment your mistaken perception collapses, and you clearly see the rope for what it is, just a rope. The collapse of delusion is related to the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. Merit has the power to pacify your negative thoughts, afflictions, habitual patterns, and to transform your negative karma. The Bodhisattva-caryavatara teaches many methods for gathering merit such as taking refuge, presenting prostrations, offering confessions, and so forth. The accumulation of merit leads to the dawning of wisdom.

The idea of purifying your mind of delusion does not imply that your mind has somehow become dirty and therefore must be cleaned. Do not think of your mind as dirty, but rather think that your mind is mistaken and deluded. Once your error is pointed out you will realize the truth. After someone shows you that the rope is just a rope and not a snake, you see it as it actually is. You have realized the truth about the rope. That is what the phrases 'delusion has collapsed' or 'obscurations have been purified' mean. When realization dawns, obscurations vanish. Since you have realized the truth, your mistaken view has ceased.

First, practitioners must gain a theoretical understanding of the true nature of reality. Next, they must gain direct experience, and eventually they will reach true realization. Only then will delusion truly and permanently collapse. Mere theoretical understanding does not lead to the collapse of delusion.

### **Entering the Bodhisattva Path**

Within the Mahayana system, even for the most gifted practitioners such as Buddha Sakyamuni, traversing the path to complete and perfect enlightenment takes a minimum of three incalculable aeons, an incredibly long time-span. A bodhisattva, however, is not at all discouraged by the time-span, the difficulties, hardships, and sacrifices that must be endured. Bodhisattva means 'courageous being'. Khenpo Kunpal describes the bodhisattva in the following way: "Bodhisattva means a hero whose mind does not shy away from accomplishing enlightenment, through developing supreme bodhicitta as the motivation and through endeavoring in the practice of the six transcendental perfections as the application."

If one lacks the courage of a bodhisattva, one cannot become a perfectly enlightened Buddha. A bodhisattva is a fearless hero. Though Buddha Sakyamuni taught the way of the bodhisattva to his students, many preferred not to aim for Buddhahood but rather aspired to become arhats, to attain merely a state of peaceful cessation of samsara's suffering.

The Mahayana practitioner is aware that he has already been circling in samsara since time without beginning and that he will continue to circle endlessly if he does not attain enlightenment. When one compares three incalculable aeons with the endlessness of samsara, three incalculable aeons seem only as long as three days in an ordinary human being's lifetime.

Once bodhisattvas have reached the first bodhisattva level, the path of seeing, they can easily handle any situation. Starting out on the path of accumulation and the path of application, a beginning bodhisattva might at times perceive the journey as difficult.

Therefore, at the beginning, bodhisattvas are advised to stay close to their teachers and mingle only with good friends who support their quest for enlightenment. When reaching the first bodhisattva level, bodhisattvas become true heroic beings and will never again be so discouraged as to deviate from the bodhisattva path. Before attaining the first bodhisattva level, a bodhisattva could still possibly stray from the path due to the influence of negative circumstances or negative friends. Therefore, relying on a true master is extremely crucial until attaining at least the first bodhisattva level.

If a beginner feels the Dharma is too difficult to practice, this is a sure sign of not yet understanding the main points of the teaching. Once a beginning bodhisattva has gained a profound understanding of the main points of the Dharma, he will have the confidence that he will be able to proceed on the blissful path of bodhicitta to the level of unexcelled Buddhahood. The more one fully understands and practices the Dharma, the less will one fear the difficulties of life; negative as well as positive situations will have less power to influence us.

Ordinary persons with no knowledge of the Dharma always experience difficulties and hardships in their lives without knowing how to handle them. Instead of being intimidated by the enormous time-span required to reach complete enlightenment, one should rather be frightened by the unending suffering that lies in wait if one fails to practice the Dharma at all. Without the Dharma, freedom from suffering can never be attained, and there will be no chance of ever reaching enlightenment.

The bodhisattva traverses the ten bodhisattva levels [sa bcu; skr. dasabhumi] and the five paths [lam lnga; skr. pañcamarga] toward enlightenment. The five paths are: ) the path of accumulation [tshogs lam; skr. sambhara-marga], ) the path of application [sbyor lam; skr. prayoga-marga], ) the path of seeing [mthon lam; skr. darsana-marga], ) the path of meditation [sgom lam; skr. bhavana-marga] and ) the path of no more learning [mi slob pa'i lam; skr. asaikḥa-marga]. The first four are subsumed as the path of learning [slob pa'i lam]. The first bodhisattva level is attained when reaching the third path, the path of seeing.

The ten bodhisattva levels are: ) Joyful [rab tu dga' ba; skr. pramudita], ) Immaculate [dri ma med pa; skr. vimala], ) Illuminating [’od byed pa; skr. prabhakari], ) Radiant [’od ’phro ba; skr. arcḥmati], ) Difficult to Conquer [sbyang dka' ba; skr. sudurjaya], ) Manifest [mngon du gyur pa; skr. abhimukhi], ) Far-Reaching [ring du song ba; skr. duraḡgama], ) Unmoving [mi g.yo ba; skr. acala], ) Excellent Intelligence [legs pa'i blo gros; skr. sadhumati] and ) Cloud of Dharma [chos kyi sprin; Dharma-megha].

### **Shantideva and the Bodhisattva-caryavatara**

The vast array of teachings that the Buddha himself presented are called ‘the direct words of the Buddha’. The words of the Buddha have the hallmark of being true and beneficial. The recorded volumes of Buddha’s words are so numerous and vast that, unless one is a great scholar, reading, studying, and understanding them all in one lifetime is virtually impossible. Therefore, Shantideva extracted the most important points regarding the practice of the bodhisattvas from the entirety of the Buddha’s vast teaching and compiled this treatise, ‘Entering the Conduct of the Bodhisattvas’. The Bodhisattva-caryavatara is classified as ‘a treatise that has gathered what was scattered’, as well as ‘a treatise on the practice of meditation’.

The Bodhisattva-caryavatara represents the three types of genuine treatises in one text: ‘a treatise that is meaningful’, ‘a treatise that leads to the overcoming of suffering’, and ‘a treatise concerned with the application of practice’.

The word 'treatise' translates the Sanskrit word sastra, which is derived from sasti, to overcome, and from trayate, to protect. A true Buddhist treatise must possess the two qualities of overcoming and protecting. It must teach how to overcome the five afflictions of attachment, aversion, ignorance, arrogance, and jealousy, and thus protect one from the causes leading to rebirth in the three lower realms.

The Bodhisattva-caryavatara owes its great influence and power to the fact that Shantideva was an enlightened and accomplished master. The son of an Indian king, he renounced the throne in his youth due to a visionary experience of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Mañjusri, and entered the great Buddhist monastery of Nalanda, where he studied and practiced the tripiṭaka, the scriptures of sutra, vinaya, and abhidharma with his teacher, Jayadeva. Shantideva met the Bodhisattva Mañjusri in various visions and received many teachings from him. To summarize his vast knowledge of the Buddha Dharma, he composed three books: the Śikṣa-samuccaya, the Sūtrasamuccaya, and the Bodhisattva-caryavatara.

Shantideva composed the Bodhisattva-caryavatara as his personal meditation manual, his daily recitation text. In the Bodhisattva-caryavatara he condensed all the knowledge and wisdom he had gained by studying and practicing. Therefore, the Bodhisattva-caryavatara is also a 'record for his personal recollection', a mnemonic poem composed so that he himself could remember all he had learned and studied.

He wrote this text mainly so he could repeatedly cultivate the motivation of bodhicitta and the practice of the six transcendental perfections. Shantideva kept all his compositions secret, hiding them in the rafters of his room at the Nalanda monastery.

Outwardly, he gave the impression of being utterly disinterested in any scholastic studies or monastic duties. He spent his days eating, wandering around and sleeping. His fellow monks felt that he was not worthy to live in their community and planned to expel him. Considering him an unlearned fool, they conspired to force him to give a public recitation of the scriptures, hoping that he might flee Nalanda to avoid embarrassment.

To everyone's surprise, Shantideva accepted the challenge and recited the Bodhisattvacaryavatara in front of all the great scholars of Nalanda. Everyone was stunned, and all were moved to heartfelt devotion during the course of his recital. When he came to a particular verse from the wisdom chapter that expresses the most profound view of all the Buddhist teachings, he miraculously levitated from his throne and vanished into the sky, while the audience continued to hear his voice resounding from above until the end of the recital.

The scholars within the audience recorded his words from memory, composing texts of varying lengths. Later, to clarify their doubts about the length of the text, they searched for Shantideva and requested him to decide which was the authentic version of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara. At the same time, Shantideva alerted the scholars to the existence of his other writings, still hidden in the rafters of his old room at Nalanda.



The Bodhisattva-caryavatara teaches the actual methods for journeying toward enlightenment on the path of the bodhisattva, just as Shantideva himself practiced them. In this way the text reflects Shantideva's own personal practice. His life story tells us that he had kept his knowledge of the way of the bodhisattva secret throughout his many years of practice. Thus, it is an eminently practical text written by a great master for all Dharma practitioners, both those of his time and of the future. Ordinary scholastic works written by intellectuals can never approach the powerful impact and blessing of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara.

Even until the present day, no treatise ever written on the way of the bodhisattva, neither in India, Tibet, nor elsewhere, can compare to the Bodhisattva-caryavatara. It is said that in India alone more than one hundred commentaries were written on the Khenpo Chöga's Advice on the Study of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara

Many renowned Tibetan scholars and masters wrote commentaries on this book. To this day, scholars and practitioners in Tibet maintain an unbroken lineage of the study and practice of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara. It is the most effective and popular treatise on the practice of bodhicitta.

Whoever intends to study the Bodhisattva-caryavatara with any teacher should initially pose a few questions to his new teacher in a tactful and polite manner. First, ask from whom he received the teachings on the Bodhisattva-caryavatara. Next, ask how often and for how long he received teachings on the Bodhisattva-caryavatara. Then ask how many times and how much he has read, studied, and practiced the teachings of the text. Finally, ask whether he has truly understood the entire text or if he still has unresolved questions.

If your teacher has studied and practiced the teachings of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara under qualified masters, this will inspire in you faith and trust. If your teacher cannot answer these questions in a way that satisfies you, you should skillfully avoid requesting teachings from him.

You have to read the Bodhisattva-caryavatara and Khenpo Kunpal's commentary again and again. Every time you read it and ponder the meaning, you will gain some new insight. Unlike reading a magazine where one time through is enough, you need to read and study this text many times to begin to penetrate its profound meaning. The more you study it, the more profound and vast will your understanding become. In the best case, a practitioner should study this text one or two hundred times. You should aim to achieve a degree of understanding whereby the text and its meaning are indelibly engraved in your mind.

When I was studying at Sri Singha Shedra, I lived in a cave above the valley. At the beginning of my studies, I learned the root text of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara by heart. I got up every morning at a.m. and for two hours I read out loud all the texts I had to learn by heart. The teachings at the shedra began at a.m. and continued until p.m. In the morning, on the way down to the shedra, I would recite half of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara by heart, and in the evening, on the way up to my cave, I would recite the rest of the text. Back in the cave I would practice meditation until late at night. In this way I recited the Bodhisattva-caryavatara for two years every day. It is my experience that the early morning hours are most suited to learn texts by heart.

For students who did not grow up in a Buddhist environment such as the Sri Singha Shedra, it is difficult to study all the important sutras and textbooks. I truly believe that by focusing on the Bodhisattva-caryavatara and Khenpo Kunpal's commentary alone and making this text part of your life, in conjunction with your yidam practice, you will become a true scholar and practitioner.

I further believe that, in this day and age, 'Khenpo Kunpal's commentary on the Bodhisattva-caryavatara', the 'Life Story and Songs of Milarepa', and Paltrül Rinpoche's 'Words of My Prefect Teacher' are all the reading and studying a practitioner of the Nyingmapa School needs. If you do not aspire to become a khenpo, a preceptor of the monastic tradition, or a teacher of sutra and tantra, but aim to become an excellent practitioner of the Dharma, then these three books and the oral meditation instructions of your root guru are all you need. Following this advice, you are neither in danger of going astray into stupid meditation nor of becoming a mere scholastic intellectual.

Therefore, read the root text and Khenpo Kunpal's commentary again and again, allowing fresh insights to continually ripen in your mind. When reading the root text, you will inevitably come to sections you do not fully comprehend, about which you are uncertain. Let these difficult passages remain with you, and an understanding or insight may surface in your mind when you least expect it, perhaps while eating, while taking a walk, or while talking to a friend. Such insight comes about through the blessings of the Buddha. Through the blessing of the Buddha, insight into the sublime Dharma arises in the minds of beings. When such an insight arises, remember it again and again, allowing it to become part of your being. Also, perceive any new insight that you gain to be nothing other than the Buddha's blessing.

This is the genuine technique by which you may become a true scholar. If you have some kind of understanding on your first reading of the text and you think that your initial insight is sufficient, you are really only deluding yourself. It would be of great benefit if you could truly try to read this text one hundred times. Then your understanding will definitely deepen.

Such intense study and meditation on the Bodhisattva-caryavatara will affect your whole being. Slowly ego-clinging will lessen and your mind will open up. Gradually the qualities of bodhicitta will manifest in your mind. Many practitioners in Tibet defeated their pride, arrogance, jealousy, attachment, and aggression through the subtle workings of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara. You should always strive to bring study and meditation together.

If you do not understand certain passages in the text, even upon intense reflection, you must ask your teacher. If you truly want to internalize the teachings of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara, you do need a qualified teacher. Only through the guidance of a real master will you be able to transform yourself from an ordinary worldly person into an exalted being who can truly help others. When you read this text or listen to teachings on the Bodhisattva-caryavatara, it is of paramount importance to develop respect toward the teacher, his lineage, and the teaching of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara itself. If you receive teachings from a qualified master but do not respect him as your teacher, the teaching cannot benefit you.

Buddha's cousin Devadatta had known the Buddha all his life and had received his teachings, but his jealousy kept him from gaining any benefit. Likewise, Buddha's cousin

Sunak?atra served the Buddha for twenty-five years as his attendant and knew all his teachings, but he was unable to see any good qualities in the Buddha.

In the best case your teacher will be a qualified master, his teaching a perfect teaching like the Bodhisattva-caryavatara, and you will regard him with perfect faith and devotion as the Buddha in person. In such a case you will realize the teachings very quickly and attain perfect results. Even if your teacher is not a perfect master, if his teachings and lineage are perfect, and you regard him as your teacher with heartfelt respect, you will benefit greatly from his teaching. In case your master is not qualified, however, and if his teachings also are not properly presented, then even if you believe in him and his teachings, you will not benefit very much.

Paltrül Rinpoche said that the followers of his tradition never aim to reach high positions in this life, nor do they seek approval and praise from other people. Likewise, they are not affected by unjust criticism from others. I advise interested students to let the teachings of the Great Perfection infuse their point of view and to let the teachings of the Bodhisattva-caryavatara guide their conduct.

The Bodhisattva-caryavatara includes all the important teachings on view, meditation and conduct of the Mahayana path. Those students who want to go into further details should study the most important manual on view, meditation, conduct and fruition: The most important manuals on Mahayana view [lta ba] are the Prajñā-mūla [rtsa ba shes rab] by Nagarjuna [klu sgrub] and the Madhyamakavatara [dbu ma la 'jug pa] by Candrakīrti [zla ba grags pa]. The most important manual on Mahayana meditation [sgom] is the Abhisamayalankāra [mngon rtogs rgyan] by Asaḍga [thogs med]. The most important manual on Mahayana conduct [spyod pa] is the Bodhisattva-caryavatara [spyod 'jug] by Shāntideva [zhi ba lha]. The most important manual on Mahayana fruition ['bras bu] is the Uttara-tantra [rgyud bla ma] by Asaṅga [thogs med].

End