

The Way of the Bodhisattva

Background:

- Sanskrit name of text is **Bodhisattvacharyavatara**
 - enlightenment (*bodhi*) + heroic beings (*sattva*) + activities (*charya*) + entrance (*avatara*)
 - “An Entrance to the Activities of Bodhisattvas”
 - Commonly abbreviated as *Bodhicharyavatara*
- Written by **Shantideva**
 - 8th century Indian master in the **Madhyamika Prasangika** philosophical tradition
 - The son of a king
 - Attended *Nalanda*, a famous monastic university
 - Appeared unmotivated and indolent to his fellow monks, who set out to embarrass him by inviting him to comment on a Buddhist scripture
 - He offered to teach something new, and taught the *The Way of the Bodhisattva*
 - During the ninth chapter, he rose into the sky and disappeared from view, although his voice remained
- Influential in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism tradition

Organization:

- Divisions
 - Ten chapters
 1. The Excellence of Bodhicitta
 2. Confession
 3. Taking Hold of Bodhicitta
 4. Carefulness
 5. Vigilant Introspection
 6. Patience
 7. Heroic Perseverance
 8. Meditation
 9. Wisdom
 10. Dedication
 - Conduct versus view
 - Chapters 1–8 address vast and skillful conduct (*upaya*)
 - Chapter 9 addresses the profound view (*prajna*)
 - Bodhicitta (“awakening mind” – see below)
 - Dawning of bodhicitta (chapters 1–3)
 - Maintaining bodhicitta (chapters 4–6)
 - Intensifying bodhicitta (chapters 7–9)
 - **Six paramitas**
 - *Paramitas* are virtues that bodhisattvas are inspired to develop as transcendent perfections

- *Generosity* is implicitly covered in chapters 2 and 3 (e.g., making offerings)
 - *Ethical discipline* is covered in chapters 4 and 5, which emphasize carefulness, mindfulness, and vigilant introspection
 - The titles and content of chapters 6–9 are based on the next four paramitas (*patience, perseverance, meditation, and wisdom*), respectively
- Specific emphasis
- Chapters 1–4 emphasize inspiration, motivation, and liturgy
 - Chapter 6 is an influential chapter that addresses the paramita of patience
 - Chapter 8 includes the meditation practices of **equalizing and exchanging**
 - Chapter 9 is a complex philosophical chapter that defends the *Madhyamika Prasangika* view of emptiness

Pedagogical Devices:

- A poem in four-line stanzas
- Presented in the form of a personal meditation
- Dialogue with his own confused mind as a teaching device
- Shantideva inspires himself and his readers by alternately emphasizing:
 - Benefits of practice
 - Negative consequences of nonvirtuous mental activities, speech, and behavior
- An overall tone of strength, heroic confidence, and impartial compassion

Chapter 1: *The Excellence of Bodhicitta*

- A celebration of bodhicitta
- **Bodhicitta** (mind of awakening) is the wish to attain Buddhahood for the sake of freeing all sentient beings from the suffering of samsara
- The dawning of bodhicitta, which is based on merit and the Buddhas' aspirations, is compared to a flash of lightning in the dark

*As when a flash of lightning rends the night,
And in its glare shows all the dark black clouds had hid,
Likewise rarely, through the buddha's power,
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world. (1.5)*

- The main benefits of bodhicitta:
 1. Purifying evil
 2. Increasing virtue
 3. Causing one to attain Buddhahood
- Divisions of bodhicitta
 1. **Relative bodhicitta** is the aspiration to liberate all beings from suffering
 - a. *Bodhicitta in aspiration* (bodhicitta in intention) – a desire to pursue the bodhisattva path for the sake of others

- b. *Bodhicitta in action* (application bodhicitta) – actual engagement in the path (i.e., practicing the six paramitas)

2. **Ultimate bodhicitta** refers to a completely awakened mind that realizes emptiness

- Sentient beings desire happiness and freedom from suffering, but are ignorant with regard to their causes (i.e., the karmic principle of cause and effect)

*For beings long to free themselves from misery,
But misery itself they follow and pursue.
They long for joy, but in their ignorance
Destroy it, as they would a hated enemy. (1.28)*

Chapter 2: *Confession*

- Seven or eight activities are traditionally performed for the **accumulation of merit**. Four of these activities are addressed in chapter 2:
 1. **Veneration**, including prostrations (may - or may not - be included on reference lists)
 2. **Refuge** in the three jewels, from a Mahayana perspective (this item may not appear in “seven branch” lists):
 - a. Buddha – recall the wish for all beings attain perfect Buddhahood
 - b. Dharma – the path leading to direct realization of emptiness and freedom from craving
 - c. Sangha – consists of noble bodhisattvas
 3. **Offerings** (the first activity addressed by Shantideva in chapter 2)
 4. **Confession** of negative actions
 - In Buddhism, confession involves acknowledging and resolving to change unskillful patterns of behavior (rather than wallowing in feelings of guilt)
 - **Confession** has *four strengths* (aspects):
 - a. *Regret* (leads one to refrain from harmful conduct)
 - b. *Support* (from the Buddha and Dharma)
 - c. *Remedial action* (confession emphasizes virtuous actions that will purify - and serve as an antidote to - negativity)
 - d. *Amendment* (resolving never to repeat unwholesome actions)

Chapter 3: *Taking Hold of Bodhicitta*

- Commitment to the bodhisattva path
- Four more of the traditional activities for accumulating merit are emphasized in chapter 3:
 5. **Rejoicing in virtue**
 6. **Requesting teachings**
 7. **Requesting that teachers remain in the world** and not pass into nirvana
 8. **Dedication of virtue** for others’ benefit ...

Shantideva's Prayer

*May I become at all times, both now and forever,
A protector for those without protection,
A guide for those who have lost their way,
A ship for those with oceans to cross,
A bridge for those with rivers to cross,
A sanctuary for those in danger,
A lamp for those without light,
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter,
And a servant to all in need.*

(Abbreviated and adapted from stanzas 3.7 – 3.22)

▪ **Vow of bodhicitta**

*Just as all of the Buddhas of the past
Embraced the awakened attitude of mind,
And in the precepts of the bodhisattvas
Step by step abode and trained, (3.23)*

*Just so, and for the benefit of beings,
I will also have this attitude of mind,
And in those precepts, step by step,
I will abide and train myself. (3.24)*

▪ Shantideva's ode to joy!

*Today my life has given fruit.
This human state has now been well assumed.
Today I take my birth in the Buddha's line,
And have become the Buddha's child and heir. (3.26)*

Primary Resources:

Padmakara Translation Group. *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 1997 edition and the revised 2008 edition.

Kunzang Pelden. *The Nectar of Manjushri's Speech: A Detailed Commentary on Shantideva's Way of a Bodhisattva*. Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 2007.

Secondary Resources:

Edelglass, William. *The Bodhisattva Path of Wisdom and Compassion*. Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Barre, MA, 5/29 – 5/31/15.

Acharya Lhakpa Tshering. *The Way of the Bodhisattva by Shantideva*. Acharya Lhakpa Tshering. Nalandabodhi Connecticut, Bloomfield, CT, 8/4/13 – 9/29/13 (eight sessions).