

# Bodhicaryāvatāra: Teaching Methods & Overview

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## The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in East Tibet (Kham)

In Kham, Eastern Tibet, the followers of all four schools—Sakya, Gelug, Kagyü and Nyingma—studied the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, this classic text of the great bodhisattva Śāntideva, in which the teachings on the way of the bodhisattva are compiled and explained. In fact, especially in Kham, this text was so popular and so widely taught that it became as widespread, it is said, as the very stones and earth—and this was particularly true during the time of Dza Patrul Rinpoche.

If we take the example of the Sakya School, in the most important teaching centre of Kham, which was the incomparable Dzongsar shedra, and also in Önpö Gar, the residence of Öntö Khyenrab, and in other places, the teaching of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was extremely popular. These Sakya teachers relied especially upon the ‘interlinear commentary’ (*chendrel*) of Khenpo Shenga, and then added to that the special oral teachings of Dza Patrul Rinpoche.

In the great Kagyü monasteries too, such as Palpung, they also followed Patrul Rinpoche’s tradition.

Then, if we consider the Gelug monasteries, one of the main Gelug centres in Kham was Dza Sershul Gön, where all the genuine traditions of sūtra and mantra were taught, and of the four great debate manuals (*yikcha*), they followed that of Sera Je. They too would follow Patrul Rinpoche’s tradition when teaching the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

In Minyak there was one very famous scholar known as Minyak Khenpo Kunzang Sönam, who wrote a great commentary on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. (In Derge they call this the ‘Hūṃ commentary’, but the only reason for this seems to be that when they carved the woodblocks to print it, they wrote a Hūṃ on them. There doesn’t seem to be any other reason!) In this commentary, the first eight chapters follow Dza Patrul Rinpoche’s approach exactly, but the ninth chapter follows the Gelug approach, because Kunzang Sönam was connected with this Dza Sershul monastery, and so he was told by Patrul Rinpoche that he should write this part according to his own tradition, and especially that he should follow the commentary of Gyaltsab Darma Rinchen (known as the Dar Ṭik). So this chapter is a little different from the Nyingma commentaries and follows more of a purely Sarma approach, but all the other chapters follow Patrul Rinpoche’s own teaching tradition very strictly.

The tradition of teaching the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was incredibly widespread throughout Kham. To give an example, consider the case of Öntö Khyenrab, who, after the great Khenpo Shenga, was the most important khenpo at Dzongsar. In most

shedras, they would teach the thirteen great texts one after another from one class to the next, but Öntö Khyenrab would teach the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* all the time—throughout the whole year, summer and winter—and whenever he finished the text, in that same session he would go back and start again at the beginning of the text. In fact, it is said that he taught the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* continually throughout his entire life.

In Minyak, the main tradition for teaching the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was to follow the commentary of Khenpo Kunpal. Sometimes they would also use the commentary of Gyalse Tokme Zangpo, which is of just the right length, neither too elaborate nor too brief.

## Patrul Rinpoche's Tradition

Patrul Rinpoche's tradition, of course, includes a thorough commentary on the text, as you find in the commentary of Khenpo Kunpal. But it is not just an explanation of the words of the text; the main characteristic of his approach was to teach the text in the manner of a pith instruction, by relating it to experience.

According to this approach, the meaning of the entire text from beginning to end can be summarized in the famous four line prayer:

O precious, sublime bodhicitta:  
May it arise in those in whom it has not arisen;  
May it never decline where it has arisen;  
May it go on increasing further and further!

The whole text can be summarized entirely and without error in these four lines. So the meaning of the text is basically bodhicitta—to cause bodhicitta (both relative and absolute) to arise where it has not arisen, to prevent it from declining where it has arisen, and to cause it to go on increasing further and further. Then there is the dedication of whatever merits have been gained. So the ten chapters of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* can be grouped into four parts.

- There are three chapters for causing relative and absolute bodhicitta to arise where they have not arisen. Firstly there is the chapter on the benefits of bodhicitta to inspire us, secondly there is the chapter on the confession of negative actions, which are not conducive to arousing bodhicitta, and thirdly, there is the chapter on fully taking hold of, or adopting, bodhicitta.
- Then there are three chapters which prevent bodhicitta from declining where it has arisen. There is the chapter on carefulness, which is a meticulous concern in carrying out positive actions and avoiding negative ones. Then there is the chapter on vigilance, which means continually keeping watch over the state of our minds. Then there is the chapter on

- patience.
- Then there are three chapters for increasing bodhicitta further and further: diligence, meditative concentration and wisdom.
  - Finally, there is the chapter on dedication, dedicating for the sake of others the benefits of increasing bodhicitta in this way.

This way of including the ten chapters within these four points is the tradition of Patrul Rinpoche.

Bodhicitta is extremely important. There is no way we can attain buddhahood if we lack the means of great compassion. So the special unique feature of the Mahayana is the mind of bodhicitta, which is the union of love and compassion. Generally we define bodhicitta as:

For the sake of others, longing to attain complete enlightenment.

This is bodhicitta with its two aspects.

For the first aspect, the objects of focus are all sentient beings, and the attitude is one of compassion, which is the wish that they might be free of suffering, and love, or the wish that they have happiness.

In the second aspect the object of focus is complete enlightenment.

We can illustrate this further. The focus is on all sentient beings, but when we have all sentient beings as our focus, what do we do? We focus on all beings and say to ourselves: “I will ensure that you are freed from suffering and its causes, and that you have happiness and its causes, and that you all reach the precious level of enlightenment.” This is bodhicitta complete with the two aspects: the aspect of focusing on sentient beings with altruism, and the aspect of focusing on perfect enlightenment with wisdom.

This is the general definition of bodhicitta, especially relative bodhicitta. This is what we cultivate when we meditate on equalizing ourselves and others, exchanging ourselves and others, and considering others as more important than ourselves. The crucial point here is that all sentient beings have been continuously circling in samsara throughout beginningless time as a result of our self-cherishing. So when we arouse bodhicitta we need to reverse completely our usual pattern of thinking, and the way that we can bring about such a radical shift is by slowly transforming our self-cherishing into an attitude of cherishing others. This is like the life-pillar of bodhicitta.

In order to eradicate our self-cherishing we will also need to generate the wisdom of selflessness. This wisdom is extremely important. Of course, usually we talk about the importance of the wisdom of realizing emptiness. First of all, we need to study,

reflect and meditate on selflessness and then arrive at some certainty about it. Then we bring this certainty to mind again and again, so that the wisdom which realizes selflessness arises. Through this, our usual way of thinking, which is based on the view of self, and on the strong notion of ‘self’ and ‘other’, will gradually grow weaker.

At the same time as this ego-centric view loses strength, we will appreciate more and more that if we really want to attain enlightenment, we cannot do so without the support of all sentient beings. We will arrive at a genuine and uncontrived realization of the extraordinary importance of all sentient beings. Quite naturally, we will begin to cherish others just as we currently cherish ourselves. When this happens, as soon as we see others suffering—either undergoing blatant suffering or gathering the causes for future suffering—we will feel unbearable compassion in our minds. When we feel this compassion, and recognize their suffering, we won’t simply feel a passive wish that they might be freed from suffering; we will feel a deep urge to do whatever we can to free them from their pains, and we will long to take upon ourselves the task of bringing about their welfare.

When we arouse this kind of bodhicitta and grow more and more familiar with it, the wisdom which realizes selflessness and the great compassion focused on others work together and combine as the union of skilful means and wisdom. This is what it means in the texts when it says:

Emptiness of which compassion is the very essence  
Is only for those who want enlightenment.

The dawning of this kind of bodhicitta, which is the union of emptiness and compassion, is also the dawning of absolute bodhicitta. After this has arisen, whenever we practise the bodhisattva’s actions—the trainings in generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation and wisdom—it will cause this bodhicitta that is the union of emptiness and compassion to increase further and further. In other words, our actions will enhance our bodhicitta. Then eventually we will reach complete and perfect enlightenment.

In this, as we have said, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is extremely important, because if we are seeking enlightenment we will need to cultivate the inseparable union of the wisdom which realizes selflessness and great compassion. The way that we put this inseparable unity of wisdom and compassion into practice is through generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation and wisdom. So all the necessary teachings are included here, completely, without error, and all written in an incredibly practical way, so that if we look into the text, each and every word can readily be applied to ourselves. If we really examine each word of the text, using the four principles of reasoning, we can see that everything it says is completely true.

Since the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* includes all these crucial points of the teachings it is

extremely important. We say that bodhicitta is “the single path followed by all the buddhas of the three times—the path which was taken by all the buddhas of the past and which will be followed by all the buddhas of the future, the essence of the practice of all the buddhas of the present, and the ground of the path of the mahāyāna.” If we want to arouse bodhicitta, then we can rely on this text just as blind people might rely on a guide in order to walk along a particular path. Just like that, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is incredibly important for us.

The text clearly explains all the points of the practices of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation and wisdom. Of these, the chapter on patience is especially important. It clearly describes the reason for practising patience, the objects of patience, the actual practice itself, the benefits of patience, and the dangers of not practising patience and of being angry, and so on. It is incredibly clear and extremely crucial. Then the chapter on meditation explains very clearly and elaborately the practices for cultivating precious bodhicitta which I mentioned earlier, equalizing and exchanging ourselves and others.

The wisdom chapter is all about establishing the truth of selflessness: the selflessness of the individual and the selflessness of phenomena. When this is taught in terms of philosophy, the views of non-buddhist schools are presented and then refuted, and then the tenets of the four main schools of buddhist philosophy are presented and the faults of the lower views are pointed out from the perspective of the higher schools. In particular, the text describes how the view of selflessness is established from the perspective of the Prāsangika Mādhyamika, and how it is cultivated in meditation and so on. This is extremely important.

Whenever we do any practice, it is crucial that we apply the three noble principles. If these three principles are present then that is sufficient for attaining enlightenment, but without them, there is no way we can become enlightened. In the beginning we need to apply the noble principle of bodhicitta, in the middle, the main part has to be free from conceptual reference, and at the end, we must dedicate the merit. So in the tenth chapter we dedicate our merits, not only so that they do not go to waste, but so that they increase further and further. As it is said:

Just as a drop of water that falls into the great ocean  
Will never disappear until the ocean itself runs dry,  
Merit totally dedicated to enlightenment  
Will never disappear until enlightenment is reached.

So dedication of merit is of crucial importance, and the tenth chapter shows how to dedicate and how to make prayers of aspiration.

Altogether the text shows the entire path to the achievement of buddhahood clearly and without error, so it is extremely important—perhaps, you could say, the most important of all.

## Experiential Instruction (*Nyam Tri*)

If the text is taken as an experiential instruction, then when it explains the benefits of bodhicitta, we don't leave the explanation as something written in the book, but really apply it to ourselves. First of all, in order to arouse bodhicitta we need to have the necessary support or basis on which to do so—the physical support and the mental support. The physical support is what we usually refer to as the 'precious human body complete with the eighteen freedoms and advantages', which is shown, by means of cause, examples and numerical comparisons, to be difficult to obtain. This is something we need to contemplate and meditate on again and again. It is only a single verse in the text, but we must meditate on it repeatedly.

Then there is the mental support, which is the basis within the mind that is necessary in order for us to arouse bodhicitta:

Like a flash of lightning on a dark and cloudy night,  
Which sheds its brilliant light for just an instant,  
Every now and then, through the buddhas' power,  
A mind of virtue occurs briefly to people of the world.

We have found the right kind of physical support, and sometimes we do feel compassion, but we need to recognize how amazingly beneficial this is and how rare it is for such things to occur.

Then, when it comes to the benefits of bodhicitta, there is the explanation of the change in name and status, and the explanation by means of examples. Through studying these benefits, we come to be inspired, and think to ourselves, "If I have not cultivated this bodhicitta, which has all these wonderful qualities and advantages, I must do so!"

If we want to cultivate bodhicitta, we need to know the different types of bodhicitta. So the text explains bodhicitta in aspiration and in action, by saying:

Understand that, briefly stated,  
Bodhicitta has two aspects:  
The mind aspiring to awaken,  
And bodhicitta that's enacted.

Then the text explains the specific benefits of the bodhicitta in aspiration and then the specific benefits of the bodhicitta in action.

After reading this, you think to yourself, "How wonderful it is that I have read this first chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. bodhicitta has such incredible benefits! From now on, I will check my mind every instant to see whether or not bodhicitta has arisen." This is how to inspire and encourage ourselves.

When we have developed this inspiration, we consider how all sentient beings throughout beginningless time, up until the present, face many obstacles to the practice of Dharma—outer obstacles, inner obstacles and secret obstacles. Where do these obstacles really come from? They come about because of all the actions that we have accumulated in the past, our negative harmful acts and all our destructive emotions. We need to acknowledge and confess these actions. It wouldn't be right if we failed to do so. So then the text explains the confession of negative actions, which are incompatible with arousing bodhicitta.

This chapter on confession begins with offering. This includes offerings of things that we possess and things that are not owned by anyone, as well as the offering of our own body, and mentally created or imagined offerings. Then there is the offering of prostration and homage. This is all part of the seven-branch offering. Then there is refuge.

In the practice of confession itself, we need to ensure that all four powers are present: the power of support, power of regret, power of resolve and power of action as an antidote.

Having confessed the negative harmful actions which are incompatible with bodhicitta, we come to the chapter on fully taking hold of bodhicitta itself. This includes taking the vows of the bodhicitta of aspiration and action. Before this, there are the branches of rejoicing, requesting the buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma, requesting the buddhas to remain, and the dedication in which we dedicate our body, possessions and merits to others. Then, when all the incompatible factors have been confessed and purified and the more conducive positive factors have been assembled through the seven branches, we come to the actual generation of bodhicitta and the taking of the bodhisattva vow.

When we have taken the bodhisattva vow, we say to ourselves, "From now on, I have entered the ranks of the bodhisattvas!" And then we make a promise or a commitment to all sentient beings, saying: "From now on, I will devote myself entirely to being of service to you and to benefitting you all!" Having done this, we encourage all others to rejoice in what we have done. This is what it means to take hold of bodhicitta.

It won't be sufficient to do this just once or twice, because our minds have grown thoroughly habituated to negative patterns throughout beginningless time. So it is extremely important that we keep constant watch over our minds. At all times and in all situations, we need to practise carefulness and to be meticulous about what we do and what we avoid. We need to make sure that we carry out the positive actions that are to be adopted and that we shun all negative actions that are to be avoided. That is covered in the chapter on carefulness or conscientiousness.

If we are not constantly vigilant and watchful, we might incur some fault without

even realizing it. Our minds cannot stay still even for a moment; they are always thinking of all sorts of things—positive, negative and neutral. So unless we are extremely careful, even if we are not doing anything negative with our body or speech, we might still do something negative with our minds. That is why we need to exercise mindfulness and vigilance, as explained in the chapter on vigilance.

At all times, therefore, we must be careful about what we do, and we must keep guard over our minds.

We never want to suffer, but still we experience suffering. Whenever we suffer, we find it difficult to bear. We face all kinds of harm from hostile forces in the outer world and from other beings. We are harmed by sentient beings, and we are harmed by illness and harmful influences, and secret obstacles and so on. So what do we do when we face these harms and difficulties? We could get upset or respond with anger. In these situations, we can reflect, and by doing so we will see the need to cultivate the patience of putting things in the right perspective. If we can't put this kind of patience into practice—the patience of making light of what causes us harm by putting it into perspective—then we are going to face lots of disturbances, and lots of obstacles. In order to avoid being harmed by such obstacles, we need to don the armour of patience. If we do this, we will be able to remain completely unperturbed.

Whenever we are harmed by others, by enemies or illness or harmful influences, we can recognize that this is simply the result of our own past actions. We might not think that something is our fault, and we might not even be to blame in the immediate situation, but if we consider all the lives we have had in samsara throughout beginningless time, then we can see that at some time or another we have definitely harmed those who are harming us now. This means that the harms we face now are part of our karmic debt.

We can also consider that without enemies we would not be able to practise patience, because there would be no objects to cultivate patience towards. So the person harming me is actually helping me! If we think like this again and again, we will no longer feel any anger towards our enemies or those who harm us. After a while, we won't feel any aversion towards enemies or attachment towards our friends, and we will start to develop equanimity. Finally, we will recognize the kindness of those who harm us, and by remembering their kindness, we will feel a sense of joy and compassion. When this happens, our patience will grow stronger and stronger and we will no longer be harmed at all. What might have harmed us in the past will no longer have any effect on us at all. Our patience will be like impenetrable armour. When there is no longer anything that can harm us and our minds are completely unperturbed, as immovable as Mount Meru, we feel tremendous courage.

When we have developed this courage, then whenever we face negative situations



we won't respond with anger, because we will have some form of the pāramitā of patience. Nevertheless, whenever we meet attractive objects (pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes or textures) or attractive people, we might become distracted, and this would become an obstacle to our attaining enlightenment.

Sometimes we might also experience laziness. We might think, "The Dharma is so difficult. I will never be able to practise it." This is the laziness of self-discouragement. Then again, sometimes we might start all kinds of meaningless projects, thinking they are important, and put our energy into them. This might look like diligence, but it is really a form of laziness, the laziness of being attracted to negative behaviour. For example, while we are supposed to be studying, reflecting and meditating, we might get distracted and think that we should devote our time to learning something else, like painting, or writing, or something like that. When this happens, we are no longer diligent in reciting prayers or practising meditation.

The laziness of self-discouragement occurs when, for example, we think, "Oh, these bodhisattva activities are only for special beings. I am just an ordinary person. How could I ever manage to do such things!" With this, we only discourage ourselves. Then there is also the laziness of inactivity, which is to think, "I won't do this today. I'll take a break today and do this tomorrow." Then when the next day comes, we think, "I won't do this today after all. But I will definitely do it tomorrow." This constant procrastination is also a form of laziness. The antidote to these different kinds of laziness is diligence, which is defined as 'taking delight in what is wholesome'. It is a heartfelt delight or enthusiasm for all the virtues of body, speech and mind, with which we think, "I must practise this!"

If we have this kind of diligence then it spurs us on and encourages us, and we are able to accomplish any task, no matter what it might be.

Even when we have this diligence, we might still find that our minds are not always stable, calm and still. In particular, whenever we come into contact with attractive objects, our attention might be swept away by them. This is what we call 'distraction'. The antidote to this is meditative concentration. This means not being distracted by outer objects, and our attention being concentrated within and held, with one-pointed focus, on a particular object. In order to perfect this kind of meditative concentration, we must first train in śamatha. In order to practise virtue we need a mind that is really workable and pliable, but at first the mind is not really like this, so in order to make the mind more workable we practise focusing one-pointedly on a particular object. Then, whether we are practising śamatha with an object or śamatha without an object, the mind will not be distracted by outer objects. But it is not enough simply to avoid being distracted by outer phenomena; we also need to ensure that our meditation is free from the faults of dullness, agitation and lethargy. For this, we need to employ the techniques of the six powers and four mental engagements, in order to go through the nine ways of resting the mind. Then

we will be able to practise śamatha well.

When we accomplish śamatha to some degree, so that our minds are workable, and we can direct them and focus them as we wish, then we can practise the union of śamatha and vipaśyanā, or alternate between śamatha and vipaśyanā. We can focus on the wisdom that realizes selflessness, and practise by alternating resting (or ‘settling’) meditation and analytical meditation. At first we establish selflessness by means of analysis, then when we arrive at some certainty about it, we gain the wisdom of vipaśyanā, and when we settle and focus the mind upon the basis of this wisdom of vipaśyanā, that is settling meditation. By practising these two, one after another, we can arrive at the union of śamatha and vipaśyanā. Through this, it is said, we will progress step by step and reach the various paths and stages.

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