

GIVING OUR BEST

*A Retreat with Pema Chödrön on
Practicing the Way of the Bodhisattva*

TEXTS FOR STUDY AND PRACTICE



SHAMBHALA

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Opening Prayer

May bodhichitta, precious and sublime,
Arise where it has not yet come to be;
And where it has arisen, may it never fail
But grow and flourish ever more and more.

Outline of The Way of the Bodhisattva, Chapter 1

Verses 1–3	Traditional four-part opening <ul style="list-style-type: none">i. Declaration of respect (homage) (v. 1 a and b)ii. Pledge to compose and complete the text (v. 1 c and d)iii. Casting away pride (v. 2)iv. Arousing joy and confidence (v. 3)
Verse 4	The physical basis for awakening bodhichitta
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THE WAY *of the*
BODHISATTVA

By Shāntideva

TRANSLATED FROM THE TIBETAN BY
THE PADMAKARA TRANSLATION GROUP

1

The Excellence of Bodhichitta

Homage to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

1. To those who go in bliss,¹ the dharmakāya² they possess, and all their heirs,³
To all those worthy of respect, I reverently bow.
According to the scriptures, I shall now in brief describe
The practice of the Bodhisattva discipline.
2. Here I shall say nothing that has not been said before,
And in the art of prosody I have no skill.
I therefore have no thought that this might be of benefit to others;
I wrote it only to habituate my mind.
3. My faith will thus be strengthened for a little while,
That I might grow accustomed to this virtuous way.
But others who now chance upon my words
May profit also, equal to myself in fortune.
4. So hard to find the ease and wealth⁴
Whereby the aims of beings may be gained.
If now I fail to turn it to my profit,
How could such a chance be mine again?

5. Just as on a dark night black with clouds,
The sudden lightning glares and all is clearly shown,
Likewise rarely, through the Buddhas' power,
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world.

6. Virtue, thus, is weak; and always
Evil is of great and overwhelming strength.
Except for perfect bodhichitta,
What other virtue is there that can lay it low?

7. For many aeons deeply pondering,
The mighty Sages⁵ saw its benefits,
Whereby unnumbered multitudes
Are brought with ease to supreme joy.

8. Those who wish to crush the many sorrows of existence,
Who wish to quell the pain of living beings,
Who wish to have experience of a myriad joys
Should never turn away from bodhichitta.

9. Should bodhichitta come to birth
In those who suffer, chained in prisons of saṃsāra,
In that instant they are called the children of the Blissful One,
Revered by all the world, by gods and humankind.

10. For like the supreme substance of the alchemists,
It takes our impure flesh and makes of it
The body of a Buddha, jewel beyond all price.
Such is bodhichitta. Let us grasp it firmly!

11. Since the boundless wisdom of the only guide of beings
Perfectly examined and perceived its priceless worth,
Those who wish to leave this state of wandering
Should hold well to this precious bodhichitta.

12. All other virtues, like the plantain tree,
Produce their fruit, but then their force is spent.
Alone the marvelous tree of bodhichitta
Constantly bears fruit and grows unceasingly.

13. As though they pass through perils guarded by a hero,
Even those weighed down with dreadful wickedness
Will instantly be freed through having bodhichitta.
Why do those who fear their sins not have recourse to it?

14. Just as by the fire that will destroy the world,
Great sins are surely and at once consumed by it.
Its benefits are thus unbounded
As the Wise and Loving Lord⁶ explained to Sudhana.

15. Bodhichitta, the awakened mind,
Is known in brief to have two aspects:
First, aspiring, *bodhichitta in intention*;
Then *active bodhichitta*, practical engagement.

16. As corresponding to the wish to go
And then to setting out,
The wise should understand respectively
The difference that divides these two.

17. From *bodhichitta in intention*
Great results arise for those still turning in the wheel of life;
Yet merit does not rise from it in ceaseless streams
As is the case with *active bodhichitta*.

18. For when, with irreversible intent,
The mind embraces bodhichitta,
Willing to set free the endless multitudes of beings,
In that instant, from that moment on,

19. A great and unremitting stream,
A strength of wholesome merit,
Even during sleep and inattention,
Rises equal to the vastness of the sky.
20. This the Tathāgata,⁷
In the sūtra Subāhu requested,⁸
Said with reasoned argument
For those inclined to lesser paths.
21. If with kindly generosity
One merely has the wish to soothe
The aching heads of other beings,
Such merit knows no bounds.
22. No need to speak, then, of the wish
To drive away the endless pain
Of each and every living being,
Bringing them unbounded excellence.
23. Could our father or our mother
Ever have so generous a wish?
Do the very gods, the *ṛiṣhis*,⁹ even Brahmā¹⁰
Harbor such benevolence as this?
24. For in the past they never,
Even in their dreams,
Wished something like this even for themselves.
How could they do so for another's sake?
25. This aim to work for the benefit of beings,
A benefit that others wish not even for themselves,
This noble, jewellike state of mind
Arises truly wondrous, never seen before.

26. The pain-dispelling draft,
This cause of joy for those who wander through the world,¹¹
This precious attitude, this jewel of mind—
How shall we calculate its merit?
27. If the simple thought to be of help to others
Exceeds in worth the worship of the Buddhas,
What need is there to speak of actual deeds
That bring about the weal and benefit of beings?
28. 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 their foe.
29. But those who fill with bliss
All beings destitute of joy,
Who cut all pain and suffering away
From those weighed down with misery,
30. Who drive away the darkness of their ignorance—
What virtue could be matched with theirs?
What friend could be compared to them?
What merit is there similar to this?
31. If someone who returns a favor
Is deserving of some praise,
Why need we speak of Bodhisattvas,
Those who do good even unsolicited?
32. People praise as virtuous donors
Those who with contempt support
A few with plain and ordinary food:
A moment's gift that feeds for only half a day.

33. What need is there to speak of those
 Who long bestow on countless multitudes
 The peerless joy of blissful Buddhahood,
 The ultimate fulfillment of their hopes?
34. All those who harbor evil in their minds
 Against such lords of generosity, the Buddha's heirs,
 Will stay in hell, the mighty Sage has said,
 For ages equal to the moments of their malice.
35. But joyous and devoted thoughts
 Will yield abundant fruits in greater strength.
 Even in great trouble, Bodhisattvas
 Never bring forth wrong; their virtues naturally increase.
36. To them in whom this precious jewel of mind
 Is born—to them I bow!
 I go for refuge to those springs of happiness
 Who bring their very enemies to perfect bliss.

NOTES

1. “Those who go in bliss” (Tib. *bde gshegs*, Skt. *sugata*): a title of the Buddhas.
2. The word *dharmakāya* (Tib. *chos sku*, Skt. *dharmakāya*) means “dharma body.” According to the commentarial tradition, two interpretations are possible. The term may be taken to mean simply “the body of the Dharma of realization and transmission” (which is the interpretation of Kunzang Pelden and other authorities), with the result that the first line of the poem is a salutation to the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. On the other hand, it may be understood as referring to the *dharmakāya* or “truth body,” the ultimate aspect of a Buddha, as contrasted with the *rūpakāya* or “form body” (further subdivided into the *sambhogakāya* and *nirmānakāya*).

3. The “heirs” of the Buddhas are the Bodhisattvas. We have preferred this translation, which is gender-inclusive and corresponds more closely to Shāntideva’s obvious intention than the literal rendering of “sons” (Tib. *sras*) as this is likely to be understood by a modern Western readership. This interpretation is in fact supported by one of the earliest known Tibetan commentaries on the *Bodhicharyāvatāra* (composed by Sonam Tsemo, 1142–1182), where *sras* is glossed as *gdung ’tshob* (inheritor, successor). In the present context, reference is actually being made to “noble” Bodhisattvas, so-called because their realization corresponds to the Mahāyāna path of seeing and beyond, in other words, who are abiding on the Bodhisattva *bhūmis* or grounds, and who are therefore sublime objects of refuge.
4. In order to progress toward enlightenment, it is necessary to possess eight forms of ease or freedom, and ten forms of wealth or endowment. The former are the freedoms of not being born (1) in one of the hells; (2) as a *preta* or hungry ghost; (3) as an animal; (4) in the realms of the gods; (5) among barbarians who are ignorant of the teachings and practices of the Buddhadharmā; (6) as one with wrong views concerning karma and so forth; (7) in a time and place where a Buddha has not appeared; and (8) as mentally or physically handicapped.

The ten forms of wealth or endowment are subdivided into five considered intrinsic and five considered extrinsic to the personality. The five intrinsic endowments are (1) to be born a human being; (2) to inhabit a “central land,” i.e., where the Dharma is proclaimed; (3) to be in possession of normal faculties; (4) to be one who is not karmically inclined to great negativity; and (5) to have faith in the Dharma. The five extrinsic endowments are the facts that (1) a Buddha has appeared in the universe in which one is living, and at an accessible time; (2) that he has expounded the Doctrine; (3) that his Doctrine still persists; (4) that it is practiced; and (5) that one has been accepted as a disciple by a spiritual master.

5. The Tibetan consistently uses the expression *thub pa* or *thub dbang* (able one, powerful one) to translate the Sanskrit *muni* (sage,

- ascetic). The translation “mighty Sages,” as a synonym of “Buddhas,” is an amalgam of these two ideas.
6. The reference is to Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, as recounted in the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*.
 7. Tathāgata (Tib. *de bzhin gshegs pa*): literally, “one thus gone”; a synonym for Buddha.
 8. A reference to the *Subāhu-paripṛicchā-sūtra*, the *Sūtra of the Questions of Subāhu*. Lost in the original Sanskrit, this sūtra is preserved in Chinese translation.
 9. According to ancient Indian tradition, the ṛiṣhis were sages who perceived the sound of the Vedas and transmitted them to the world. They form a class by themselves between gods and humans.
 10. Brahmā, the creator of the universe according to the Vedas.
 11. “Those who wander through the world” is a translation of the Tibetan *’gro ba* (lit. one who moves), a common epithet for sentient beings who migrate helplessly from one saṃsāric state to another.

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Closing Prayer

And now as long as space endures,
And as long as there are beings to be found,
May I continue likewise to remain
To drive away the sorrows of the world.