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Two Dimensions of a Bodhisattva

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This paper presents two dimensions of a bodhisattva, the ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism. One dimension involves contemplative practices that disclose a pure nature that is always already present; this reality is unveiled after the obscurations that cloud it are removed. I refer to this as a “top-down” approach because it is based on qualities of awakening that are already there, yet lie beyond an ordinary being’s comprehension. The second dimension, which I refer to as a “bottom-up” approach, involves directed training and discipline. Unlike the top-down approach, this is not about “going with the flow” or simply letting the innate qualities of mind express themselves. In contrast, the bottom-up approach is better described as “breaking the cycle” of suffering. That is to say, this orientation toward a bodhisattva’s practice involves restraint and discipline to train the mind by turning it away from habitual, destructive patterns to shape it into spontaneous and skillful responses and expressions. This paper will discuss both of these orientations and will show how they are complementary aspects of a bodhisattva’s practice.

Keywords: *bodhisattva, Śāntideva, Tibet, Buddhism, Mahāmudrā, mind-training, bodhicitta, buddha-nature, meditation, Gampopa*

A bodhisattva is someone with the “spirit of awakening” (*bodhicitta*). The Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, for which the bodhisattva ideal is paramount, comes to distinguish two types of *bodhicitta*: “ultimate *bodhicitta*” and “relative *bodhicitta*.” Ultimate *bodhicitta* is knowing the nature of things, while relative *bodhicitta* is the means by which this comes to be. This twofold distinction indicates two directions in which a bodhisattva’s practice takes shape: from the “top-down” and from the “bottom-up,” as well as two features of the goal of awakening toward which the bodhisattva path is oriented.

Ultimate *bodhicitta* is realizing the unconditioned, unborn nature of reality. A bodhisattva taps into this by relying upon meditative practices that disclose a pure nature that is always already present; this reality is unveiled after the obscurations that cloud it are removed. I refer to this as a “top-down” approach because it is based on qualities of awakening that are already there, yet lie beyond an ordinary being’s comprehension. The “bottom-up” approach involves directed training and discipline. Unlike the top-down approach, this is not about

“going with the flow” or simply letting the innate qualities of mind express themselves. In contrast, the bottom-up approach is better described as “breaking the cycle” of suffering. That is to say, this orientation toward a bodhisattva’s practice involves restraint and discipline to train the mind by turning it away from habitual, destructive patterns to shape it into spontaneous and skillful responses and expressions. This paper will discuss both of these orientations and will show how they are complementary aspects of a bodhisattva’s practice.

Gampopa, a twelfth-century Tibetan scholar and yogi, was instrumental in bringing these two traditions together. He brought the yogic tradition of Mahāmudrā, “the great seal,” a meditative tradition that draws from the innate qualities of mind, together with the analytic contemplative tradition of the Kadampa, “the tradition of oral instruction,” that drew from Śāntideva’s eighth-century text, the *Way of the Bodhisattva (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*. While the former draws from yogic experience to combat the self-illusion, the latter draws from monastic traditions of scholarship and analytic exercises to extricate a selfish orientation. The blend of these two dimensions

of practice became influential in the Kagyü tradition institutionalized by Gampopa and in a lineage of the Geluk tradition inspired by Tsongkhapa (Jackson, 2019). This synthesis also shaped the renaissance in Tibetan Buddhist practice in the nineteenth century and remains influential in Tibetan communities today (Duckworth, 2019; Dunne, 2011).

Bodhicitta: The Spirit of Awakening

A bodhisattva aspires to become a buddha for the benefit of all beings. This aspiration is *bodhicitta*, the “spirit of awakening,” which defines a bodhisattva; a bodhisattva is a being with *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* is said to involve a binocular attitude: on the one hand, the aspirant “looks up” to become a buddha; on the other, the aspirant “looks down,” or rather sideways, at all sentient beings. This binocular attitude captures the two dimensions of the Mahāyāna Buddhist path: wisdom on one hand and compassion, or means, on the other. The first, wisdom, is likened to the eyes, the vision of truth and reality. The second aspect, that of means, is likened to legs that walk. Without means and wisdom, eyes and legs, it is difficult if not impossible to travel the path to awakening.

A bodhisattva’s actions are informed by wisdom, and the wisdom that sees the lack of intrinsic nature in phenomena. A bodhisattva’s actions are performed with insight into the illusory nature of things, and for this reason, they are not based in reification. Despite this insight into the empty and dependent nature of all things—or rather, because of it—bodhisattvas do not fall to the extreme of nihilism, either, because emptiness does not bring an end to moral action; it enables and justifies it (Sönam, 2019, pp. 16–18). For this reason, bodhisattvas are always compassionately engaged in the world, a world known to be illusion-like.

Bodhicitta, the “spirit of awakening,” can be seen as not only the path but the goal of a bodhisattva. *Bodhicitta* is the primary subject matter of Śāntideva’s influential eighth-century work of philosophical poetry, the *Way of the Bodhisattva*, a guide to a bodhisattva’s practice. The first three chapters of this text have been described as showing how to generate *bodhicitta*; the middle three chapters show how to protect it; and the next three

chapters show how to develop this spirit (Sönam, 2019, pp. 2–3).

The aspiration to become a buddha for the benefit of others described in the first chapter of Śāntideva’s text came to be known as “relative *bodhicitta*” as opposed to “ultimate *bodhicitta*,” the direct realization of the nature of things (where there is no self and no other). Relative *bodhicitta* is further classified into the “aspirational spirit” (like a wish to go to India) and the “engaged spirit” (like actually travelling there). The aspirational spirit necessarily precedes the engaged spirit. Carrying out this engaged *bodhicitta* is often described in terms of the bodhisattva practices of the six “perfections” (*pāramitā*): generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Wisdom, the knowledge of emptiness and the nature of reality, defines the vision of a bodhisattva.

In the development of the *relative bodhicitta* in the eighth chapter of the *Way of the Bodhisattva*, Śāntideva recommended equalizing oneself and others, and then exchanging oneself and others. He put forward a number of arguments, in verse, to redirect the narrative center of gravity away from the self in order to see others as equal, for all beings want to be happy and do not want to suffer. With poetic arguments, he demonstrated the porous nature of identity by creatively imagining oneself to be another, and then taking one’s (former) self as an object of jealousy, rivalry, and scorn, respectively, in order to demonstrate the senselessness of these attitudes (cf., Gyatso, 2019, pp. 99–113). The exercises in this chapter came to form the basis of a number of contemplative practices, including *tonglen*, “giving and taking” (Chödrön, 2001) and *chöd*, “cutting” (Edou, 2011), which have also inspired modern iterations, such as Tsultrim Allione’s (2008) “feeding your demons.”

The ninth chapter of the *Way of the Bodhisattva* is said to represent the cultivation of *ultimate bodhicitta*. *Ultimate bodhicitta* is the direct realization of the nature of reality, emptiness:

When neither entities nor nonentities remain before the mind,

There is no other form. Without referent object, there is complete peace. (Śāntideva, IX.34)

The first verse of this chapter shows how all the other aspects of the practice are taught for the sake of this wisdom:

All these aspects were taught by the Sage for the purpose of wisdom.

So those who wish to alleviate suffering should cultivate wisdom. (IX.1)

These lines show that the goal of the bodhisattva is not just a meditative state. Rather, meditative states are instrumental; they are tools for wisdom. The foundation of meditation is moral discipline, as moral discipline is a precondition for the mind to be single-pointed and concentrated in meditation. This triad—moral discipline, meditation, wisdom—is known as the “three trainings.” Using the tool of meditative concentration rooted in moral discipline, the vision of wisdom—emptiness—can be seen clearly; this is liberating insight that puts an end to suffering. A bodhisattva’s insight into emptiness is infused with compassion for those who lack this vision and suffer as a result. Thus, a bodhisattva’s enlightened activity is guided by this vision of emptiness.

Going with the Flow

In this section I describe practices to bring about *bodhicitta* that appeal to a natural or innate way things are, and in the next section contrast them with “bottom-up” practices that aim to “break the cycle.” A common set of contemplations is the four “immeasurables”: love, compassion, joy, and impartiality. The four immeasurables are cultivated attitudes of love (wishing others happiness), compassion (wishing others to be free from suffering), joy (rejoicing in others’ well-being), and impartiality (recognizing equality through dissolving differences between enemies, friends, and strangers). Sometimes the cultivation of these attitudes starts with love for someone close (like your mother or father, sibling, or child), and at other times love is first self-directed before it is extended to others (since you cannot really love others until you can love yourself). In both styles of practice, the natural tendency toward love for yourself and for your close family members is then extended to a wider circle of others, eventually including

everyone—strangers and enemies. Alternatively, the contemplation of the four immeasurables begins with impartiality in order to overcome the tendency of attachment to loved ones, so that all beings can be loved genuinely (without attachment), without any rigid partition between friends and enemies (Patrul, 1994, p. 195). In any case, cultivating the four immeasurables prepares the ground for the cultivation of *bodhicitta*.

Another method for cultivating *bodhicitta* was put forward by Atiśa, an eleventh-century Indian scholar who travelled to Tibet and was influential in the transmission of Buddhism there. He is famous for expounding a seven-step instruction to bring about *bodhicitta*. The first step is to recognize all beings as one’s own mother. This step is based on the presumption that all beings have been one another’s mother at some point in the beginningless cycle of existence. The second step is to recognize the kindness that one’s own present mother has shown one, and by extension the kindness shown to one by all beings who have been one’s mother in the past. The third step is to develop a wish to repay this kindness. The fourth step is to develop love, which is the wish that they be happy. The fifth step is to develop compassion, which is the wish that they be free from suffering. The sixth and penultimate step is the superior intention to awaken for their benefit. Then, as a result of this process, the final step is *bodhicitta*, the spirit of awakening (Tsong-kha-pa, 2014, pp. 35–49; Tsering, 2008, 33–50).

The first three steps of Atiśa’s seven steps tap into a natural tendency of mind. That is, these practices are initiated by acknowledging a natural relation of kinship with others, dependence upon the kindness of others, and a wish to reciprocate this kindness. By drawing upon the natural expression of a mother’s love in particular, and by engendering gratitude with an acknowledgement of our dependence on this love, this contemplative exercise taps into the resources of our innate social connectedness (Condon & Makransky, 2020; Dunne, 2019). That is, the fact that we are social beings who live and flourish through love is harnessed for the purpose of awakening and liberation.

We can see how Atiśa’s seven-steps, and the four immeasurables, are practices that draw

upon the natural qualities of the mind to cultivate *bodhicitta*. Love (at least self-love) is a natural response to the world, and is necessary for survival (and love for others is arguably necessary, too, given that a mother's love—or at least a minimal level of another's care—is a basic requirement for human infant survival and mature development). Since humans cannot survive for long in this world in the absence of love, arguably, we are naturally attuned to it. By appreciating this dependence upon others as a relation of love, the contemplative practice aims to dissolve the false sense of independence and isolation from others and the world. Drawing upon the love received from others, then cultivating it ourselves, the process moves forward toward *bodhicitta*, the spirit of awakening, on a natural basis.

Here we can see how *relative bodhicitta* in particular—the compassionate intention and endeavor to become a buddha for the welfare of others—draws from what is natural. Also, *ultimate bodhicitta* can be cultivated by an appeal to the natural state, too—the nature of mind. That is, the nature of mind is said to be “luminous and clear,” which is also said to be the nature of the buddha. Allowing this nature to express itself—unfiltered and uninflected by bad habits of self-centeredness, and the desires and hatred that this selfishness spawns—is a way to allow the natural qualities of compassion and wisdom to shine forth. Thus, these innate qualities of mind can shine when we “get out of the way,” so to speak, and remove the defilements and stains that obscure the light of wisdom and love, in the way that the sun comes out when the clouds disperse (Duckworth, 2008, pp. 18–19, 102–104). In addition to an appeal to the innate qualities of mind disclosed when the natural state of mind is left in its innate, uncontrived state, another important element in the tradition of Mahāmudrā for bringing about the qualities of awakening is devotion. Devotion is a mindset oriented toward something bigger than oneself; it is a stance of openness and reverence toward something that lies beyond the limits of our current understanding. The open stance of devotion or faith is an essential means of accessing higher states of reality in Mahāmudrā, perhaps because this reverential attitude enables a

receptivity to the ultimate spirit of awakening. In any case, to evoke and acknowledge being part of something beyond what one currently understands is a posture of “going with the flow”; it is not to deliberately contrive anything oneself (by one's own power), but is rather letting go (into an “Other” power).

In this kind of “top-down” approach to awakening, it may no longer be correct to say that “deluded individuals have buddha-nature” or that “individuals become buddhas;” rather, it might be more accurate to say that buddhas just *appear* to be deluded individuals and that all living beings are simply buddhas in the process of waking up from this delusion. That is, rather than saying that buddha-nature is within sentient beings, we can more properly say that *sentient beings are within buddha-nature*, in the sense that it is buddhas who appear as and for sentient beings. In the same vein, it no longer holds that ordinary beings become buddhas, but rather, that *buddhas become buddhas*. To accept this higher reality of the buddha with faith, to relate to this reality and its embodiments with devotion, and to foster an uncontrived nature of mind to attune to this are thus ways of cultivating ultimate *bodhicitta* by “going with the flow.”

Breaking the Cycle

In addition to “top-down” approaches that draw upon ways of attunement to a higher dimension of mind, there is also a “bottom-up” approach that uses reason and analysis to deconstruct bad habits and to develop compassion. While the positive dimension of mind, buddha-nature, may be nurtured by getting out of the way and letting its innate qualities, like love and wisdom, shine forth, another apparently innate tendency (or at least an instinctive one), however, is that of self-preservation. This tendency does not express itself as love, but as ego-centeredness—seeing oneself as the center of the universe. While this drive for self-preservation may be necessary for survival at some stage of growth or development (across a lifetime, or in the evolutionary history of a species), this disposition becomes a problem for awakening and actualizing buddha-nature (Wright, 2017). For this reason, in contrast to a contemplative practice of “open presence”—simply

getting out of the way to let natural qualities shine forth—there is another bodhisattva practice, that of disciplining the mind. Through discipline, the mind can be steered away from the reactive patterns of selfishness (ignorance), and thus “break the cycle” of attachment (to “me” and “mine”) and aggression (toward “it” and “them”).

Contemplative techniques that utilize analysis in exercises to train the mind function as a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy. These techniques of “mind-training” (*blo sbyong*) involve not simply a process of *deconditioning* the mind away from the reactive patterns that are learned, but a process of *reconditioning* the mind to learn ways of seeing and being that foster human (and nonhuman) flourishing, care, and compassionate responsiveness (Jinpa, 2019). In contrast to appealing to a natural, intuitive way, another approach, that of “breaking the cycle,” is utilized in the tradition of “mind-training” that draws upon Śāntideva’s work. Śāntideva employed these techniques in his *Way of the Bodhisattva* as he pointed out a lot of bad mental habits humans have acquired over the course of beginningless time. After all, aiming to “go with the flow” without proper context and training can simply result in acting out adolescent urges and infantile tantrums; these reactive habits need to be trained and disciplined first. Śāntideva put forward a number of arguments and analytic-style meditations to overcome these reactive habits. In particular, his arguments target anger, which he said is the worst kind of evil (VI.2). The afflictive emotion of anger is said to be worse than that of attachment; attachment at least brings people together, while anger, or hatred, is antithetical to a bodhisattva’s aim.

Śāntideva’s sixth chapter of the *Way of the Bodhisattva*, on patience, raises questions: why do we get mad at the person who hit us with the stick when it was the stick that directly caused us injury? We might respond that a person hit us intentionally, while the stick did not, so that is why we get angry at the person and not the stick. Yet he argued that aggressors are not acting with complete freedom, but are impelled by negative emotions, like anger. That is, they are out of control, as if intoxicated by afflictive emotions, so why not get angry at anger, the cause of that person’s actions? He said:

I do not get angry with things like bile,
Which are a great source of suffering,
So why do I get angry with sentient beings?
They, too, are all spurned by conditions.
For example, a sickness ensues
Even while unwanted.
In the same way, afflictions ensue forcibly
Even while unwanted.
Without the intent, “I will get angry,”
Beings become angry impulsively.
Anger arises in this way without the intention,
“I will produce anger.” (VI.22–24)

He emphasized that what we experience in the world is a product of conditions, and to the extent that we are driven by karma and afflictions, we are not in control. He drove home this point by saying that no one wants to suffer; if beings had autonomous agency, no one ever would (VI.34). Śāntideva also argued that our past actions, our karma, is to blame for the painful experiences we encounter. He illustrated this by saying that we “grasp” (identify with) a body and an assailant grasps a weapon, and both of these are necessary for our pain to occur. So, we cannot rightly single out the assailant as the sole cause of our pain (VI.43–46). He also framed suffering as an opportunity to grow, for without aggressors, we would not be able to cultivate the virtue of patience (VI.99–107). In these ways, by subjecting our heated reactive emotional habits to sober analysis, he redirects us away from the irrational bases of our self-centered habits to train our minds to act more reasonably and more compassionately.

In the eighth chapter on meditative concentration, Śāntideva further probed the irrational presuppositions upon which our self-centeredness rest. Challenging the unquestioned assumption of self-preservation at all costs, he asked: if things that are different do not need to show concern for what is other, why does the hand move to dispel the pain in the foot (VIII.91)? He extended this argument to show that the boundaries between self and other are arbitrary, and that suffering should be dispelled because it is suffering, no matter where it occurs (VIII.94, 102). Simply because one does not feel the suffering of another now does not mean that it

is unrelated to one: after all, one does not feel the suffering of a future toothache, so why brush the teeth now (VIII.97; cf., Siderits, 2007, 81)?

When both myself and others
Equally want happiness,
What is exceptional about me,
Such that I strive for my happiness alone?
When both myself and others
Equally do not want to suffer,
What is exceptional about me,
Such that I protect myself but not others?
(VIII.95–96)

By appealing to the fact that all beings equally want to be happy and to avoid suffering, he built a case for both wisdom and compassion. He deconstructed the notion of self to show the arbitrariness of a self-centered perspective, while shifting the burden of proof to the egoist to expose that there is no reasonable justification for self-centeredness. In this way, he made a case for *bodhicitta*, the bodhisattva path.

Back Where We Started

We have seen two dimensions at play within a bodhisattva's practice: a "bottom-up" orientation to "break the cycle" with deconstructive and reasoned analysis, and a "top-down" orientation to "go with the flow" in an appeal to a higher reality and natural way. These two orientations can be located in a threefold structure that represents the relation between a deluded sentient being and an awakened buddha: *ground*, *path*, and *fruition*. The *ground* is how things are, the natural state; the *path* is the means by which development takes place; and the *fruition* is the actualization of awakening—buddhahood.

At the starting point of the ground, or nature, we see that on one hand, there is buddha-nature, the fundamental quality or potential of buddhahood to be actualized. On the other hand, however, the base-line state is one of confusion, where the default mode is being obscured by afflictions, like attachment and hatred, that stem from a false sense of self. This defiled nature needs to be overcome, not actualized.

In addition to the ground where we start from, on the path we have seen two approaches to

practice: "bottom-up" analytic approaches, which seek to *recondition* the mind, and "top-down" approaches, which seek to *decondition* the mind and reveal its true nature. These can respectively be seen in "analytic meditation" (*dpyad sgom*) practices that we saw above and in "resting meditation" (*'jog sgom*) practices, which stabilize attention. These two styles of meditation also parallel the insight (*vipaśyanā*) and calm-abiding (*śamatha*) techniques so important for Buddhist contemplative practices. Indeed, the dynamic balance between these two approaches plays an important part in sustaining the vitality of Buddhist meditative traditions.

The goal or fruition of the bodhisattva path—wisdom and compassion united—is also twofold. To help understand a difference in the goal, exemplified by buddhas and bodhisattvas, respectively, we can consider how a bodhisattva's activity in the world contrasts with that of a buddha in an analogy of three desert travelers: one is on his first desert trip, another is an experienced guide, and the third is wearing polarized glasses (Garfield, 2011, pp. 29–30). When they encounter what appears to be water in the distance, the first-time traveler to the desert sees the mirage and thinks it to be water; the experienced guide sees it as a mirage, while the one with polarized glasses does not see any mirage. This example reflects, respectively, the vision of the world in the perspective of an ordinary being, a bodhisattva, and a buddha. An ordinary being sees the world and believes it to be real. The buddha (at least according to some interpretations) does not see the illusion of the world because a buddha is free from the causes of deluded perception (ignorance). A bodhisattva, however, sees the world as illusion, and acts within that illusory world. It may be that the buddha is the highest realization for a Buddhist, but the bodhisattva's actions in the world have a distinctive significance and efficacy (in contrast not only with a buddha understood as someone who has completely passed into a "nirvana without remainder," but also with the notion of a Mahāyāna buddha as a kind of cosmic, transcendent being).

In other words, the bodhisattva represents an ideal that appeals not (only) to transcendent realization, but to a being who has one foot firmly in the world, too. By drawing attention to this unique

place of the bodhisattva, we can see how the ideal of a buddha is someone who has awakened *from* an illusion while the ideal of the bodhisattva is someone who awakens *into* an illusion (Jenkins, 2011, p. 100). Seen in this light, two dimensions of the bodhisattva with respect to the fruition—transcendence and immanence, or wisdom and compassion—can be brought into a clear focus. That is to say, the realization of emptiness, and the compassionate response to others—*bodhicitta* or “the spirit of awakening”—is the goal as well as the path. This is because the buddhas are those who are said to have realized the nature of reality and teach others out of compassion, yet bodhisattvas are engaged in this activity, too. They bring this realization into being and thus enact the ideal that the buddha represents. In this way, both buddhas and bodhisattva partake of *bodhicitta*. Despite the fact that the buddhas represent the culmination of maximal greatness while bodhisattvas are still on the way, iconographically (and ritually as well), little substantially distinguishes *bodhisattvas* like Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī (bodhisattvas of compassion and wisdom, respectively) from *buddhas* like Amitabhā and Akṣobhya. This reflects the shared roles they play, and the shared ideals they embody, in the Mahāyāna universe.

Conclusion

In this paper we have seen two dimensions of a bodhisattva that reflect the two aspects of relative and ultimate *bodhicitta*: compassion and wisdom. These two dimensions can be traced to different starting points: on the ground, beings are born with a nature that is obscured and yet are born with/in buddha-nature. Also, these two dimensions relate to how the path is cultivated: the “bottom-up” analytic and “top-down” meditative practices to become a buddha. Finally, these two dimensions reflect the goal: transcendent wisdom (that wakes up from illusion) along with immanent compassion (that wakes into illusion).

As we saw above, neither moral discipline, meditation, nor wisdom alone can be said to be the goal of a bodhisattva; rather, the goal is what happens with wisdom. In other words, the bodhisattva’s activity—action infused with

meditative wisdom built on moral discipline and expressing this realization—is the “goal” of the path. To the extent that the path has a “goal,” arguably, this is it—although it might be better to say that the goal is still the state of the buddha, of complete awakening. Yet the buddha’s awakening may simply function as a normative ideal, or represent the trajectory of an exponential function—a path without end along a constant ascent that is the ongoing process of awakening. In either case, of a path with and without a final end, the bodhisattva, like the buddha, embraces both transcendence (liberation) and immanence (compassion).

To conclude, a bodhisattva is someone who aims to become a buddha for the benefit of all beings. A bodhisattva’s orientation toward awakening involves a dynamic tension that not only defies any simple or final representation of a fruition (what nirvana is), but also defies any simple and singular notion of the ground where it begins and the path that is followed. Even while a bodhisattva embodies this dynamic tension in a complex constellation of characteristics and dimensions, the orientation toward awakening, *bodhicitta*, is the bodhisattva’s defining feature.

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