

FRANCIS BRASSARD



The Concept
of Bodhicitta
in Śāntideva's
Bodhicaryāvatāra

This page intentionally left blank.

**The Concept of Bodhicitta in
Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra***

McGill Studies in the History of Religions,
A Series Devoted to International Scholarship

Katherine K. Young, editor

**The Concept of Bodhicitta in
Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra***

Francis Brassard

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2000 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address the State University of New York Press
State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246

Production by Ruth Fisher
Marketing by Patrick Durocher

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brassard, Francis, 1961—

The concept of Bodhicitta in Santideva's Bodhicaryavatara /
Francis Brassard.

p. cm. — (McGill studies in the history of religions)

ISBN 0-7914-4575-5 (hc. : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-7914-4576-3 (pbk.
: alk. paper)

1. Bodhicitta (Buddhism). 2. Spiritual life—Buddhism. I. Title.
II. Series.

BQ4398.5.B65 2000

294.3'422—dc21

99-41324

CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

za Rinu

asamprajanyacittasya śrutacintitabhāvitam,
sacchidrakumbhajalavat na smṛtāvavatiṣṭhate.

(A person who lacks alertness cannot retain what has been heard, thought
about, or contemplated just as a jar with a hole that leaks water.)

Bodhicaryāvatāra

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter one: <i>Bodhicitta</i> and the spiritual path of the Bodhisattva	7
1. Methodological considerations, 7	
2. Śāntideva's <i>Bodhicaryāvatāra</i> , 10	
i. The text, 11	
ii. Śāntideva, 15	
iii. Prajñākaramati, 17	
3. Review of literature, 18	
i. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, 18	
ii. Sangharakshita, 22	
Chapter two: <i>Bodhicitta</i> as a desire for enlightenment	29
1. The idea of desire, 30	
2. Criticism of <i>bodhicitta</i> as an act of will, 34	
i. <i>Citta</i> (mind), 34	
ii. <i>Citta-utpāda</i> (arising of the mind), 39	
iii. The two types of <i>bodhicitta</i> , 41	
iv. The ethical aspect of <i>bodhicitta</i> , 46	
3. Conclusion, 50	

Chapter three: <i>Bodhicitta</i> as an object of concentration	53
1. Arguments in favor of <i>bodhicitta</i> as an object of concentration, 55	
i. Derivatives of the Sanskrit verbal roots $\sqrt{\text{grah}}$ (to take) and $\sqrt{\text{dhṛ}}$ (to hold), 55	
ii. The practice of meditation, 58	
iii. Implications related to the idea of <i>bodhicitta</i> as an object of concentration, 63	
2. Criticism of <i>bodhicitta</i> as an object of concentration, 64	
Chapter four: <i>Bodhicitta</i> as cultivation of awareness	71
1. The nature of religious language, 73	
i. The functional aspect of religious language, 73	
ii. The metaphysical aspect of religious language, 77	
iii. The ethical aspect of religious language, 80	
2. The cultivation of awareness, 87	
i. Examples of the cultivation of awareness, 90	
ii. The feeling of detachment, 93	
iii. The breaking up of distinctions, 97	
3. The practice of devotion, 98	
i. <i>Saddhā/śraddhā</i> , 99	
4. Conclusion, 102	
Chapter five: The aspect of renunciation	105
i. The <i>kleśas</i> (mental afflictions) and the cultivation of awareness, 109	
ii. <i>Kṣāntipāramitā</i> (the Perfection of patience), 111	
iii. The workings of the mind, 113	
Chapter six: The aspect of conversion	119
i. <i>Vīryapāramitā</i> (the Perfection of endeavor), 123	
Chapter seven: The aspect of contemplation	133
Conclusion	147
<i>Notes</i>	151
<i>Bibliography</i>	177
<i>Index</i>	187

Abbreviations

A	Aṅguttara-nikāya
Abhidh-k	Abhidharmakośa
BCA	Bodhicaryāvatāra
BHS	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary
D	Dīgha-nikāya
G. S	The Books of the Gradual Sayings
G. Vy	Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra
M	Majjhima-nikāya
MA	Madhyamakāvatārasūtra
M. L. S	The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings
MMK	Mūlamadhyamakakārikā
Paṭis	Paṭisaṃbhidāmagga
PED	Pali-English Dictionary
Pra.vi.si	Prajñopāyaviniścayasiddhi
S	Saṃyutta-nikāya
Śāl	Śālistambasūtra
SED	The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary
Śs	Śikṣāsamuccaya
Sn	Sutta-nipāta
Vibh-a	Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā
Vism	Visuddhimagga
Vv	Vigrahavyāvartanī
Ys	Yoga sūtra

This page intentionally left blank.

Introduction

The present study is an attempt to understand the meaning of the concept of *bodhicitta* by analyzing the features of the spiritual path suggested in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, a text from the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition known to have been composed in Sanskrit by the Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva (eighth century C.E.).

The expression *bodhicitta* has usually been translated as the “thought of enlightenment” or the “desire of enlightenment.” Sometimes *enlightenment* is substituted by *awakening*. When one considers the traditional Buddhist sources that discuss *bodhicitta*, it is, however, somehow difficult to get a precise picture of that concept. It appears that *bodhicitta*, although a technical term within Buddhism, has acquired various meanings due to the diversity of situations in which it is employed. In the Tantric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, this concept has obvious metaphysical connotations, whereas, in some Sanskrit texts of the Mahāyāna tradition, it has been argued that it assumes a more functional character since it involves a commitment to attain realization. In other texts, *bodhicitta* also seems to have ethical implications when it stresses the altruistic motive of the Bodhisattva (the Mahāyāna spiritual aspirant) in contrast to the “selfish” desire for emancipation of the Arhat (the saint of the “Hīnayāna” Buddhist tradition).

Scholars who attempted to define *bodhicitta* have mainly done so on the basis of a linguistic analysis of the Sanskrit term *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* often occurred within expressions such as “the arising of *bodhicitta*,” “the production of *bodhicitta*,” or “the cultivation of *bodhicitta*.” These expressions are used within the Mahāyāna literary tradition to refer to specific events in the course of the Bodhisattva’s spiritual practice. Even today, they often occur in Buddhist inspirational literature to describe what the practi-

tioner has to do in order to engage in, and to progress on, the spiritual path. Thus, given the close link that exists between *bodhicitta* and spiritual practice, to see the full significance of this concept, one should determine its spiritual function, that is, how it contributes to the spiritual development of the Bodhisattva.

There are scholars, however, who have suggested, based on more than mere linguistic analysis, such a spiritual model to evaluate the relevance of *bodhicitta*. These scholars, who were often inspired by Buddhist traditions, have, probably for the first time, given us an explicit picture of the underlying structure of, or the basic assumptions related to, the process of spiritual development. Their contribution should therefore be the starting point of any new study of *bodhicitta*.

Together with the context, it is also important to focus one's attention on a group of relevant texts. In this respect, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva is, I believe, quite appropriate. This text deals with the Bodhisattva's path to awakening and, most important of all, the concept of *bodhicitta* is one of its central themes. It should therefore be an interesting case for understanding *bodhicitta* in relation to spiritual practice. Such a study, however, will not provide a comprehensive definition of *bodhicitta*—this objective might prove to be impossible, given the bulk of literature to assess—but it may suggest at least what Śāntideva had in mind when he used this concept in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. This study will be like trying to understand the strategy of a chess player by analyzing his or her various moves on the chessboard. What really interests me, however, are not the specific moves, but rather the strategy. This is where we can go beyond the text and venture a few ideas as to the nature of the spiritual path. Indeed, in Buddhist literature, one finds many accounts of religious and spiritual practices. Some of these practices emphasize the importance of devotion as a means of moral and spiritual improvement whereas others only advocate the practice of meditation. In some cases, it is of utmost importance to develop compassion toward all sentient beings while, in others, one should stay aloof from the world. Given this variety of practices, may this literature, dedicated to the means of spiritual progress, be considered homogeneous from the point of view of its understanding of what ought to be the basic model of spiritual practice or does it rather give evidence of a collection of spiritual approaches, each having its own structure and producing its own types of practices?

I think this type of study may allow us to better understand the development of the various spiritual practices of the Mahāyāna tradition and possibly of Buddhism as a whole. Indeed, with such an understanding we

might be in a better position to analyze the process of assimilation or integration of the various social and cultural factors that marked the history of this tradition. Moreover, I believe its results might serve as a good starting point for a more in-depth discussion of the field of comparative religions and philosophies.

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* as an object of study is appropriate for another reason. It exists in the Tibetan and Chinese versions, and it has at least nine commentaries. This text is very popular among the Tibetan Buddhists who still use it today as a source text of their tradition. Judging from the number of translations in European languages, it also has a certain appeal in the West, probably because of its apparent similarities with the well-known Christian spiritual text *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas a Kempis. Its popularity and especially its availability makes it an easy source of reference, and, by the same token, it allows the nonspecialists of Buddhist studies (those who do not have the philological background that would enable them to read original Buddhist scriptures) to participate in the discussion that may result from my study of *bodhicitta*.

This study puts forth two claims with regard to Buddhist religious or philosophical concepts such as *bodhicitta*. First, contrary to what has been argued by Michael Pye in his discussion of the doctrine of *upāya* (skillful means),¹ some Buddhist ideas and doctrines are more than just provisional means skillfully designed by the Buddha or the Bodhisattvas for the benefit of the unenlightened beings. To recall Pye's idea, "the 'answers' which Buddhism apparently offers, such as the teaching of cessation or *nirvāṇa*, are devised entirely in terms of the problem and they are not intended to have any particular meaning beyond the attainment of the solution."² And he further explains, "This is because every form of religious language, when conceived in terms of skillful means, is first allusive and then disposable."³ This is supposed to "apply not merely to the preliminary suggestions of the religious system, but above all to its fundamental assumptions and final terms."⁴

This interpretation seems to overlook the fact that some Buddhist concepts did exist for a long time and, as it appears to be the case with *bodhicitta*, instead of being disposed of, were raised to a status of utmost importance within the Mahāyāna tradition. Of course, it could be argued that these concepts are maintained for the sake of the unenlightened and that they are discarded only at the moment of enlightenment. The difficulty with this argument is that it cannot be contradicted unless one has experienced enlightenment. I believe that it is nonetheless questionable because, while assuming (as Pye did) that there is some kind of consistency and unity at

the level of the experience of enlightenment—and this should be true for all the paths and to a lesser extent to all the various means to enlightenment—it has been difficult to find a general consensus. Instead, what is more current in the various spiritual traditions is a consistency between the means to achieve their respective spiritual experiences and the ways in which to describe them. One does not see, in terms of the conceptual discourse, a marked difference between the descriptions of reality before and after the experience. For the followers of the Madhyamaka tradition, for example, the concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is certainly an antidote to a person's mental and emotional attachment to the phenomenal world, but it is also their privileged way to describe reality as they ultimately view it. Therefore, I assume that religious language may be more than just a skillful means; it is also a standard or a measure of the authenticity of the religious experience. In other words, religious concepts are not quite without referents. Part of the goal of the present study is therefore to elucidate the definition of these concepts.

Secondly, the path to realization consists precisely in cultivating an awareness of these religious concepts. Not all religious concepts may serve as a basis for this cultivation: only those that are meant to encompass all aspects of one's dualistic experience of the world may do so. The idea that "All is Suffering (*sabbam dukkham*)," which is the First Noble Truth taught by the historical Buddha, is such a concept, because it is meant to cover every moment of existence. Realization of this truth means that one acquires a direct or intuitive knowledge of the three characteristics of reality as perceived, that is, causing suffering (*duḥkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and being devoid of substance (*anātman*). This is usually brought about by cultivating or developing an awareness of these three characteristics. With this realization, in the context of the spiritual path of the Theravāda tradition, one knows that "the process of rebirth is exhausted, the religious life has been fulfilled, done is what had to be done, there is nothing more for the present state of becoming."⁵ In other words, it is the final deliverance from suffering.

This work is divided into three parts. The first (chap. 1) is a brief survey of the modern and traditional views of *bodhicitta*. It starts with a discussion of the methodology I adopted along with a more detailed presentation of the text to be analyzed, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. A few biographical data on its author, Śāntideva, and on its main Sanskrit commentator, Prajñākaramati, are also provided.

The second part (chaps. 2 to 4) discusses the spiritual function of *bodhicitta*. It could be viewed, for example, as an exclusive commitment to

a religious goal or simply as an object of concentration. I will argue that these two views are inappropriate. When *bodhicitta* is accepted as one's intrinsic nature to help all beings, it becomes the basis for the practice of the cultivation of awareness. Many examples in the Buddhist tradition speak in favor of this awareness as a valid model for the understanding of the path to realization, and indeed, this model appears to be the most adequate to explain the meaning and function of *bodhicitta* and of its relationship to the spiritual path described in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

The third part (chaps. 5 to 7) is a discussion of the cultivation of awareness as such and of how *bodhicitta* serves as its basis in the context of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. This awareness has three aspects that I have identified as renunciation, conversion, and contemplation. Contemplation is defined as the maintenance of the awareness of the reality described by the concept of *bodhicitta*; renunciation is the acknowledgment of and the efforts to avoid the obstacles that are likely to disrupt that specific awareness; and finally, conversion is the act of turning one's mind toward it.

By writing the present work, I wish to contribute to our understanding of the nature and function of *bodhicitta* and of its relationship to the spiritual path suggested by Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. I think our present understanding of *bodhicitta* may reflect inappropriate assumptions regarding its spiritual context. I do not intend to provide a complete translation of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, but only of the passages relevant to my argumentation. To clarify particularly difficult passages, I referred to Prajñākaramati's extensive commentary as well as to some of its translations in European languages.

This page intentionally left blank.

1

***Bodhicitta* and the spiritual path of the Bodhisattva**

1. Methodological considerations

B*odhicitta* is a common technical term in Buddhist Sanskrit literature. Within the Mahāyāna tradition, it is closely related to the spiritual practice of the Buddhist aspirant to enlightenment (Bodhisattva). *Bodhicitta* is a Sanskrit compound composed of the words *bodhi* and *citta*. The feminine verbal noun *bodhi* usually means, in the Buddhist context, the state of being *buddha*, or the quality in virtue of which one is *buddha*, that is, awakened. In general, this term means: “perception,” “comprehension,” “knowledge,” or “wisdom.”¹ To modern translators it means either “enlightenment” or “awakening.”² As for the Sanskrit term *citta*, the situation is a little bit more complex. This term has a long history dating back to the Vedic literature. It is also extensively employed in the Upaniṣads and in Buddhist canonical literature. *Citta* has consequently acquired various technical meanings in the course of the development of Indian philosophy and psychology. For the purpose of the present study, let us just mention its most basic and common meanings. These are: “mind,” “thought,” “attention,” and also “desire,” “intention,” or “aim.”³ Similar to the English word *mind*, as in the expressions “to keep in mind” and “she changed her mind,” *citta* has therefore either a cognitive or a conative connotation. Consequently, Buddhist scholars, depending on their interpretation of *bodhi* and *citta*, have suggested, among others, the following translations: “Thought of enlightenment,”⁴ “Mind of enlightenment,”⁵ “Desire for enlightenment,”⁶ “Will of enlightenment,”⁷ “Mind turned to Enlightenment,”⁸ “Awakening mind,”⁹ or “Desire for awakening.”¹⁰

At this stage, it may be pointless to decide which translation is the most appropriate, because, no matter how accurate the linguistic analysis, I believe

that one has to consider the context in which it is used in order to understand its meaning. In Chinese Buddhism, for example, *bodhicitta* has been rendered by *fa-hsin* or *ch'i-hsin*, or "arousing the mind." *Bodhicitta* has then been interpreted as "initiating the aspiration and determination to become awakened."¹¹ This interpretation seems to suggest a meaning that is not explicitly given by simply a literal translation of *bodhicitta*. Something has been added to it and to find out what it is, one would have to look at how and why Buddhist Chinese used the concept of *bodhicitta*. One may, for example, investigate whether *bodhicitta* is a means to enlightenment, a simple act of will, or a description of a mental state.

I assume that Buddhism is primarily a system of ideas and practices whose goal is to bring about a liberation from conditions recognized as unsatisfactory. Its doctrines are not speculative but rather soteriological. I use the word *soteriological* by way of extension from its usual meaning in Christian theology. It is the idea of being free from one's limited and unsatisfactory conditions that is emphasized and not the idea of salvation brought about by a savior. One can then speak of a soteriological system when referring to Buddhism by asking three basic questions. The first question deals with the description of the human situation, a situation that is deemed unsatisfactory. This question often reveals the most basic nature of human existence and of its destiny. It may also tell us about the intrinsic negative quality of this world. The second question relates to the means to overcome, to change, or to be free from an unsatisfactory condition. Finally, the third question, always implicit in the other two, has to do with a portrayal of the state to which the application of the means to solve the human problem leads. In other words, the soteriological context refers to the character, the structure, and the assumptions of any system whose main purpose is to effect a radical change of conditions of living or being.

The relevance of this context was pointed out to me by Charles J. Adams, a scholar of the Islamic tradition, who attempted to identify the fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity in an article entitled "Islam and Christianity: The Opposition of Similarities." The reason for using such an approach was that, since Christianity and Islam share many symbols such as the idea of sin or the role of prophecy, one may be misled by these similarities when trying to understand their exact significance. Besides, without an awareness of the differences between their spiritual and cultural contexts, there is always the possibility of interpreting the symbols of one tradition in terms of another soteriological system. The most important implication of this is the idea that, the words or the symbols

being similar, they do not necessarily refer to the same thing. To give an example, to determine the meaning of the word *rendez-vous*, one has to know whether it is used in English or in French.

In Buddhism, we face the same situation. Some of its concepts have persisted over many stages of its historical and doctrinal development. The concept of *upāya* (skillful means) is perhaps such a concept. As it is presented in the simile of the Burning House of the Lotus Sūtra,¹² it advocates the idea that all Buddhist doctrines and practices are just provisional means skillfully designed by the Buddha or by the Bodhisattvas to help all unenlightened beings to attain enlightenment in ways that fit their own mental dispositions. From a certain point of view, one may argue, as Pye did, that “‘Buddhism,’ as a specific religion identifiable in human history, is a skillful means.”¹³ This affirmation is true as long as one makes no distinctions between the various means possible to achieve enlightenment. By overlooking these distinctions, one also downplays the importance of the identity or the characteristics of the various Buddhist traditions or schools that have indeed insisted on these distinctions by developing their own approaches to enlightenment. When one considers these various approaches, one may notice that the significance of *upāya* is likely to vary according to context. Thus, *upāya* has a different meaning whether one views enlightenment as a gradual process or as a sudden one. In the context of gradual approach, all means to enlightenment are skillful means; here the emphasis is on the word *means*, and the term *skillful* is to be understood as efficacious with respect to the goal to be achieved (*upeya*). In the sudden enlightenment approach, *upāya* refers to preliminary teachings that are in effect less important compared to the means that bring about enlightenment. In this case, the emphasis is on the word *skillful* that is interpreted as clever, ingenious, and even deceptive.¹⁴

In fact, the discussion concerning gradual versus sudden enlightenment involves many more issues than just the means to enlightenment. It affects all aspects of the soteriological context: does the experience of enlightenment, for example, admit degrees or is it indivisible? Is the human problem fundamentally an error in perception or is it woven throughout the whole fabric of the personality? All the possible answers to these questions will again depend on the structure and characteristics of the soteriological context in which ideas such as *upāya* are articulated.¹⁵ Indeed, as it has been pointed out by Tao-sheng, a Chinese Buddhist monk (ca. 360–434 C.E.),¹⁶ that *upāya*, being identified as an element of the gradual approach, can only lead to a state where the ties with this world are subdued and never eradicated.