

THE BIG IDEAS

What Is Bodhichitta?

An awakened mind.

Let's Grasp It Firmly

That's what it's all about.

Don't Just Mouth Syllables

Live it.

I'll Train Myself!

That's a good idea.

Gather Merit

Life is short. Rock it.

Diligence =

Joy in virtuous ways.

Joyfulness

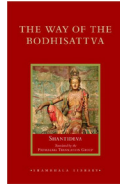
That never knows satiety.

Get It Back

If you lose it.

Put On Your Shoes

And perfect yourself.



The Way of the Bodhisattva

Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group

BY SHANTIDEVA · SHAMBHALA © 2006 · 361 PAGES

"The Way of the Bodhisattva is one of the great classics of the Mahāyāna, the Buddhism of the great vehicle. Presented in the form of a personal meditation, but offered in friendship to whoever might be interested, it is an exposition of the path of the Bodhisattvas—those beings who, turning aside from the futility and sufferings of samsāra, nevertheless renounce the peace of an individual salvation and vow to work for the deliverance of all beings and to attain the supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood for their sake. As such, Shāntideva's work embodies a definition of compassion raised to its highest power and minutely lays out the methods by which this is to be achieved. It is an overwhelming demonstration of how concern for others, in a love that wholly transcends desire and concern for self, lies at the core of all true spiritual endeavor and is the very heart of enlightened wisdom."

~ from the Introduction to *The Way of the Bodhisattva*

[The Way of the Bodhisattva.](#)

This is one of the most treasured gems of Buddhism.

In the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *"If I have any understanding of compassion and the practice of the bodhisattva path, it is entirely on the basis of this text that I possess it."*

In this Note we're going to take a quick look at some of my favorite Big Ideas and see how we can apply them to our 21st century lives.

Let's jump in!

WHAT IS BODHICHITTA?

*"Therefore I will aspire and
tend to virtue,
And steep myself in it with
great devotion."*

~ Shantideva

*"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."*

Bodhichitta.

Developing our bodhichitta is the central theme of *The Way of the Bodhisattva.*

But what, exactly, is bodhichitta?

The editors at the Padmakara Translation Group tell us in the introduction: *"What is bodhichitta? The word has many nuances and is easier to understand, perhaps, than to translate. For this reason we have used the Sanskrit term, in the hope that by dint of careful definition it may be incorporated into, and allowed to enrich our language. Chitta means "mind," "thought," "attitude." Bodhi means "enlightenment," "awakening," and is cognate with the term buddha itself. This gives us "mind of enlightenment," "awakened mind"—the*

attitude of mind that tends toward Buddhahood, the enlightened state. It should be noted that bodhicitta is not a synonym for compassion; it is a broader term in which compassion is implied."

Beautiful.

So, bodhicitta is, essentially, an awakened mind.

And, as Shantideva tells us:

*"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 bodhicitta. Let us grasp it firmly!"*

I love the image of the alchemist.

How 'bout a quick tangent?

Did you know the mythical alchemist wasn't actually interested in turning lead into gold in a literal sense. Nopers. He was interested in turning hatred/sadness/challenging experiences into love/joy/courage.

How'd he do it? He used a Philosopher's Stone.

In other words, he cultivated an awakened mind. Or, as Shantideva would put it: He was rockin' his bodhicitta.

LET US GRASP IT FIRMLY!

*"This shall be my all-
consuming passion.
Filled with rancor I will
wage my war!"*
~ Shantideva

"His basic rule of thumb is that ground gained must be retained at all cost and never yielded. Once attention has been caught, and interest kindled, the task is one of consolidation: the original impulse and fervor must be safeguarded and never allowed to disappear.

... it is one of the most alarming aspects of spiritual and moral life that insights, left unattended and without support, will invariably fade. Realizations evaporate and enthusiasm drains away into the sands of inadvertence and old habits."

Two things about bodhicitta: 1) It's essential that we cultivate it; and, 2) We've gotta be super diligent about cultivating it because it's so easy to lose it and slip back into our old habits!

The key here is we need to KNOW that it's going to be a LOT of work. We need to commit for the long term.

A couple pieces of wisdom from two leading meditation teachers comes to mind.

First, [Eknath Easwaran](#) who tells us this in his brilliant [Conquest of Mind](#) (see Notes): *"In Sanskrit we have a word which means "heroes at the beginning": people who take up a job with a fanfare of trumpets but soon find that their enthusiasm has tiptoed down the back stair. Those who go far in meditation are the ones who keep on plugging. They may not be very spectacular; they may never hear a trumpet. But they keep on trying day in and day out, giving their best in every situation and relationship, never giving up. Such people are bound to reach their goal."*

And, [Matthieu Ricard](#) who gives us this wisdom in his great book [Why Meditate](#) (see Notes): *"Excessive effort can also result from impatience or exaltation, two states that lead nowhere. If you begin climbing a high mountain at a run, your lungs will soon force you to stop. In the same way, if you draw a bow too far, it will break, or if you try to cook on too high a flame, you will end up burning your food.*

Demanding immediate results is an aspect of unsteadiness of mind or laziness. His Holiness

*"Children can't help crying
when
Their sand castles come
crumbling down.
My mind is so like them
When praise and reputation
start to fail."*

~ Shantideva

the Dalai Lama joked: "In the West, people would like enlightenment to be fast, easy, and if possible, cheap!" In the same way that it takes patience to grow a crop, steadiness is indispensable for the practice of meditation. It does no good to pull your plants to make them grow faster!"

Bottom line: We've gotta commit OVER THE LONG RUN.

You committed?

DON'T JUST MOUTH SYLLABLES

"But all this must be acted out in truth,
For what is to be gained by mouthing syllables?
What invalid was ever helped
By merely reading the doctor's treatises?"

Love that.

Reminds me of one of our most dominant recurring themes in these Notes: The fact that LIVING these truths is what it's all about. Theory is rudimentary spirituality. Practice is the advanced stuff.

I love the way [Vernon Howard](#) puts it in his great book [The Power of Your Supermind](#) (see Notes): "You see, knowing the words is not the same thing as living the meaning. Suppose I memorize the printed instructions on a first-aid kit. Does that mean I can give first aid? No. The full meaning comes when I admit I know nothing and then try, practice, succeed."

While we're on the medical theme, how about [Anthony de Mello's](#) brilliant comments from [Awareness](#) (see Notes)? He tells us: "Imagine a patient who goes to a doctor and tells him what he is suffering from. The doctor says, 'Very well, I've understood your symptoms. Do you know what I will do? I will prescribe a medicine for your neighbor!' The patient replies, 'Thank you very much, Doctor, that makes me feel much better.' Isn't that absurd? But that's what we all do. The person who is asleep always thinks he'll feel better if somebody else changes. You're suffering because you are asleep, but you're thinking, 'How wonderful life would be if somebody else would change. How wonderful life would be if my neighbor changed, my wife changed, my boss changed.'"

Hah.

Here's to moving beyond mouthing syllables and actually LIVING our wisdom! :)

P.S. The [Buddha](#) says this about it (see Notes on [The Dhammapada](#)): "Like a lovely flower full of color but lacking in fragrance, are the words of those who do not practice what they teach."

REMEDIES AND ROCKIN' IT

"If there's a remedy where trouble strikes,
What reason is there for dejection?
And if there's no help for it,
What use is there in being glum?"

Genius.

We talk about this all the time as well.

If there's a remedy when something challenging happens, DO SOMETHING about it!

If you can't do anything about it, all your worry/anxiety/etc. isn't going to help. So, ACCEPT it. And change your attitude about it. Period.

*" For I blind myself with
promises
But fail to carry out my
words in deed,
Then every being will have
been betrayed.
What destiny must lie in
store for me?"*

~ Shantideva

The Serenity Prayer pretty much tells us the same thing: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

I'LL TRAIN MYSELF!

"There's nothing that does not grow light
Through habit and familiarity.
Putting up with little cares
I'll train myself to bear with great adversity!"

Love that as well.

Reminds me of [Eknath Easwaran](#)'s mojo from [Conquest of Mind](#) where he tells us: "Meditation is warm-up exercise for the mind, so that you can jog through the rest of the day without getting agitated or spraining your patience."

Meditation is warm up for our day-to-day lives and practicing gracefully dealing with little problems gets us strong so we can deal with the bigger stuff.

I love to approach each little challenge as an opportunity to see if I can step in between the normal stimulus—>response pattern and choose the most empowered response. I find that as I practice this with the little stuff, I'm able to much more consistently gracefully handle the bigger stuff.

As Buddha says: "Little by little a person become evil, as a water pot is filled by drops of water... Little by little a person becomes good, as a water pot is filled by drops of water."

Here's to getting better little by little...

GATHER MERIT

"Death will swoop on you so swiftly
Gather merit till that moment comes!
For even if you then throw off your indolence,
What will you do when there is no more time?"

Reminds me of [Rumi](#)'s wisdom (see Notes): "Travelers, it is late. Life's sun is going to set. During these brief days that you have strength, be quick and spare no effort of your wings."

The Buddha echoes this as well telling us: "Don't waste a moment, for wasted moments send you on the downward course."

Aristotle taught the same thing: "We live in deeds, not years; In thoughts not breaths; In feelings, not in figures on a dial. We should count time by heart throbs."

And so did Benjamin Franklin: "Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time; for that's the stuff life is made of."

And, for that matter, so did [Brian Tracy](#) (see Notes on [Focal Point](#)): "Time management is really life management, personal management, management of yourself. People who value themselves highly allocate their time carefully. They give their time usage a lot of thought. When you love your life, you love every minute of it. You are very careful about misusing or wasting any of the precious minutes and hours of each day."

How about you?

Are you gathering merit and sparing no effort of your wings?! :)

"Thus, having found this
moment of reprieve,
If I now fail to train
myself in virtue,
What greater folly could
there ever be?
How more could I betray
myself?
~ Shantideva

DILIGENCE = JOY IN VIRTUOUS WAYS

"Diligence means joy in virtuous ways.
Its contraries have been defined as laziness,
An inclination for unwholesomeness,
Defeatism and self-contempt."

Diligence means "joy in virtuous ways."

LOVE. THAT.

You have joy in virtuous ways?

Sweet! :)

JOYFULNESS THAT NEVER KNOWS SATIETY

"Like those who take great pleasure in their games,
Whatever task the Bodhisattvas do,
Let them devote themselves without reserve,
With joyfulness that never knows satiety."

Reminds me of the [Buddha](#), [Seneca](#), Walter Russell and Kahlil Gibran.

First, the Buddha tells us the same thing: "If anything is worth doing, do it with all your heart."

While Seneca (see Notes on [Letters from a Stoic](#)): "There is nothing the wise man does reluctantly."

While Walter Russell (see Notes on [The Man Who Tapped the Secrets of the Universe](#)) echoes the wisdom as well: "He also believes that every man should be master of anything he does and should do it in a masterly manner, with love, no matter what it is, whether physical work, menial or boring work, or inspirational work."

And Kahlil Gibran puts it beautifully in *The Prophet*: "Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy. For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake bitter bread that feeds but half a man's hunger. And if you grudge the crushing of grapes, your grudge distils a poison in the wine. And if you sing though as angels, and love not the singing, you muffle man's ears to the voices of the day and the voices of the night."

In short: If you're gonna do it, love it. Put your whole heart into it! Approach it, as Shantideva encourages us to, with a joyfulness that never knows satiety!! :)

GET IT BACK!

"If, in the fray, the soldier drops his sword,
In fright, he swiftly takes it up again.
So, likewise, if the arm of mindfulness is lost,
In fear of hell, I'll quickly get it back!"

Shantideva's not messing around.

[Marcus Aurelius](#) (see Notes on [Meditations](#)) had a similar approach: "When force of circumstance upsets your equanimity, lose no time in recovering your self-control, and do not remain out of tune longer than you can help. Habitual recurrence to the harmony will increase your mastery of it."

Make it a game. When you feel yourself off-balance and you're losing your equanimity/

mindfulness, see just how fast you can get it back.

As we practice this, it becomes a LOT easier.

So, let's rock it! :)

PUT ON YOUR SHOES

“To cover all the earth with sheets of leather—
Where could such amounts of skin be found?
But with the leather soles of just my shoes
It is as though I cover all the earth!”

Love that.

Derivations of this story are told in different cultures.

The essential question is: Do we try to carpet the entire world to avoid stepping on something funky? Or, do we put on a pair of shoes and comfortably walk around wherever we want?

The moral of the story is clear. Don't try to change everyone and everything around you. Change yourself. :)

Here's to developing bodhichitta as we embrace the ideals of the bodhisattva: love, compassion, generosity, and patience.

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The Dhammapada](#)

[The Bhagavad Gita](#)

[Conquest of Mind](#)

[Why Meditate?](#)

[Wherever You Go, There
You Are](#)

About the Author of “The Way of the Bodhisattva”

SHANTIDEVA



Shantideva was a scholar in the eight century from the monastic university Nalanda, one of the most celebrated centers of learning in ancient India.

According to legend, Shantideva was greatly inspired by the celestial bodhisattva Manjushri, from whom he received teachings and great insights. (from the book)

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.