

The Awakening Mind

The wonderful awakening mind, called *bodhichitta* in Sanskrit, is the mind wishing to attain enlightenment for the sake of all living beings.

There is a long tradition of teachings on *bodhichitta* and many, many generations of great masters have understood this, beginning with the Buddha himself.

All of the Mahayana traditions say that to achieve full enlightenment both the *wisdom* and the *method* sides of the practice are needed.

Wisdom refers to the profound heart-level understanding of subjects such as selflessness, impermanence, and lack of inherent existence.

Method refers to the development of the emotional, intuitive side of the mind – kindness, love, ethics, and so on. Paramount to the method side is the cultivation of *bodhichitta*.

Without a mind utterly and continually bent on others' welfare, all our activities are sullied with self-interest. But the awakening mind is more than just compassion for others – it is the mind completely given to the aspiration of gaining full enlightenment as the only truly satisfactory means of benefiting all others in the utmost possible way. It is a huge mind. It is *the* most vast mind. With such a mind, every action of body, speech, and mind is pure and leads us inexorably toward enlightenment.

Attaining *bodhichitta* is something rare these days. If we have the courage, the route is mapped out for us. And it is a set route. Most masters agree that although there are different methods for developing this mind, there are definite steps that must be taken. These have been formalized over the centuries by Indian and Tibetan Buddhist masters into two main methods, with a third that is an amalgamation of both. They lead us to a mind that is imbued with a strong sense of love and compassion for all other living beings, a feeling of dearness and closeness to all. From that mind there arises the natural wish to help all beings in the most profound way possible.

Mahayana Buddhism's prime foci are *compassion* – the wish that others be freed from suffering – and *understanding reality* so we can help make that happen. Therefore, the study of the awakening mind of enlightenment is a wonderful jewel of an opportunity.

Compassion and understanding, the two aspects of Buddhism that give it great strength and beauty, come together in the awakening mind.

We each have different propensities, and are attracted to different ways of thinking, but within the term *bodhichitta* – the awakening mind of enlightenment – we are ambushed into embracing a mind so vast it breaks down our mental barriers.

Those of us with a logical disposition can see how compassion is the only choice and thus learn to develop the intuitive, loving side of our natures; those of us whose minds naturally go toward love and compassion learn to see that the simple wish for people to be happy is pretty woolly unless reinforced with a deep understanding of why they are not, and so learn to develop the rational, understanding side of our natures. It's all here, and if we can even start to get a taste for this incredible mind, it can be the motivation to spur us into exploring all the other aspects of Buddhism, or any other great philosophy for that matter.

In sum, *bodhichitta* – compassion taken to its ultimate – is the essence of the Buddha's teachings. *Bodhichitta*, in other words, is the essence of all Buddhist practice. The word *bodhichitta* itself explains so much: *bodhi* is Sanskrit for "awake" or "awakening", and *chitta* for "mind". As enlightenment is the state of being fully awakened, this precious mind of *bodhichitta* is the mind that is starting to become completely awakened in order to benefit all other beings. There are two aspects to this mind: the aspiration to benefit others, and the wish to attain complete enlightenment in order to do that most skillfully.

In the Mahayana tradition, teachings of the Buddha are divided into three groups, or three "turnings of the wheel of the Dharma". The teachings on the awakening mind come from the second turning of the wheel of the Dharma, from the huge group of sutras called the *Prajnaparamita* or *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras. Although the explicit subject of these sutras is the nature of emptiness, or *shunyata* in Sanskrit, their strong implicit focus is on *bodhichitta*, or how to cultivate it initially, how to keep it, and how to strengthen it once it is cultivated.

To understand the implicit meaning of the *Prajnaparamita* sutras, Maitreya wrote a commentary entitled *The Ornament of Clear Realizations* (*Abhisamayalamkara*). Other commentaries on Maitreya's work soon followed, including Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* (*Ratnavala*) and Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (*Bodhisattvacharyavata*). These commentaries further show us how crucial it is to develop the mind of enlightenment and enhance it by engaging in the bodhisattva's deeds.

Everything the Buddha taught is for the sake of developing this inestimable mind. *Bodhichitta* is the very essence of Dharma practice. Whatever practice we do on the Buddhist path, if we channel it toward achieving *bodhichitta*, then we are endeavoring to achieve the essence of all of the Buddha's teachings.

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