

Cultivating Bodhicitta through the Seven Points of Cause and Effect
– Part 4 of 4: Great Compassion, Great Determination and the Altruistic Intention
(lightly edited transcript)
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5) Great Compassion

Tonight I want to explain the rest of the seven points of cause and effect. The last time we met, we talked about love being the wish for others to have happiness and its causes, and compassion being the wish that they are free of the three kinds of undesirable experiences and their causes.

Compassion is a really essential part of the path. You'll see this in many of the texts. In one of the great texts by Chandrakirti (in which most of the text is spent talking about emptiness) the prostration verse, which is the first verse in the whole text, is "Homage to Great Compassion." These texts, then, really emphasize compassion; you'll find this again and again in the scriptures about how important great compassion is.

Great Compassion at the beginning of the path

Chandrakirti was saying that at the beginning of our Dharma practice, great compassion is very important because it's like a seed. When we have the great compassion, it becomes like the seed of enlightenment. It becomes the seed that will eventually turn us into Buddhas. Therefore, that seed is very important, because without the seed, you can never get the result. The great compassion, then, ensures that we enter the Mahayana path; that from the very beginning, we approach our spiritual practice with the idea of becoming Buddhas for the benefit of others rather than doing our spiritual practice basically for our own welfare. So right at the beginning, the great compassion is important to steer us towards this grander scope, this more noble motivation.

Great Compassion in the middle of the path

In the middle of our practice, the great compassion is very important because it's what keeps us going. It becomes the water and the fertilizer that enable things to grow. When we're practicing Dharma, we need a lot of energy. Our mind needs to get fertilized in many ways. When we have great compassion, it gives us that far-reaching attitude, it gives us the strength of mind to confront the various difficulties that arise in our practice.

Great compassion is important, also, because practice isn't easy. (Well actually, they say it's quite easy. It's just our mind won't let it be easy.) We need a certain strength of mind and a certain willingness to go through ups and downs continuously. We need that long range attitude - some kind of really deep motivation, a strong motivation to keep us going - because trying to subdue the attachment and the ignorance doesn't always come easily, as we see so readily in our daily life. We think we're really getting somewhere and then we lost our temper. It's compassion that keeps us going long term, that gives us the energy. Because you see, if we are working basically for our own benefit, then when things start going wrong in our practice, we just lose our energy, and we say, "This isn't doing any good. I'm

not getting anywhere. What's the use? This is a drag. My knees hurt. My head hurts. It's boring. Let's go to the ice-cream parlor." We just want to drop everything and split.

It's compassion, then, that keeps us hanging in there, instead of letting our mind get overwhelmed by discouragement. With compassion, we have a much bigger scope. We recognize we're not doing this just for ourselves alone; it involves the happiness of many, many other beings. Because many beings' happiness is involved, we get some extra energy to do something.

You see how this works just in very ordinary circumstances. When you really care about somebody, you have extra added energy to do something. When you don't care, you don't have that energy. Normally you wouldn't get up at two in the morning to do something for somebody. But if your child is crying, you get up at two in the morning, and it's okay. So the compassion gives you an ability to do things that normally you may not do if you are doing it for just yourself.

You've heard of these extraordinary stories of somebody who has been pinned down under a rock or under a car, and somebody comes and lifts the rock or the car so the other person can get out? This kind of extraordinary thing can be done through the power of compassion.

I met one woman who's very, very heavily into drugs. When she got pregnant, she stopped taking drugs. It was really interesting. For her own benefit, she wouldn't stop. When she got pregnant, all of a sudden, because somebody else is involved, she had the strength of mind to stop. So compassion can be very strong in keeping us going whenever there are difficulties. It really becomes the water and the fertilizer of our practice.

In another way, great compassion enriches our practice in that when we act out of compassion, we accumulate very strong positive potential that nourishes and enriches our mind and makes gaining the realizations easier. The great compassion acts as that kind of fertilizer so that all of our constructive actions become much more intense. Karmically, they're much stronger. That speeds us along in the practice as well.

Great Compassion at the end of the path

At the end of the path, the great compassion becomes like the harvest, the crop that you reap at the end, in the sense that the great compassion is what fuels all of the Buddha's activities. In other words, if the Buddha didn't have great compassion (which is impossible, because then he wouldn't be a Buddha, and that's the whole point), there wouldn't be a Buddha. The great compassion is what keeps a Buddha's deeds for the benefit of sentient beings ever flowing and continuous. It's what makes a Buddha's deeds spontaneous. A Buddha doesn't need to sit there and scratch their heads wondering, "Well, how do I benefit this person? Do I feel like it today? I'm a bit tired." The Buddhas don't have all of the afflictions that we have. Their beneficial actions are just spontaneous, as spontaneously as we experience anger, or even more spontaneously than that.

We can see in this way that the great compassion is important at the beginning of our practice to get us going towards Buddhahood; in the middle of our practice to keep us going and giving us that strength of mind and ability to create a lot of positive potential; and at the end of the practice to make a Buddha's deeds spontaneous and continuously flowing for others. That's why Chandrakirti, at the beginning of his text, pays homage to the great compassion, really showing how important it is.

If you start to look at all the different bodhisattvas' deeds, the Buddha's deeds, and all that the Buddhas do for sentient beings; if you think of a Buddha being able to manifest in millions of forms spontaneously all at the same time, to be able to benefit others; when you think of a Buddha's courageous mind that's completely joyful undergoing difficulties; and if you think of the Buddha's joyousness in doing meditation - all these different kinds of qualities of a Buddha, all those abilities and skills that are really the source of sentient beings' well being, all come from the great compassion.

All happiness in this world stems from Great Compassion (the Buddha)

It's interesting, because in the texts, they trace even the liberation of the arhats as coming from a Buddha. All the virtue, all the liberation, all the good qualities in the world come from the Buddha. Why? Because it's the Buddha that gave the teachings that enables sentient beings to follow the path, to purify their minds and gain these realizations, and to therefore gain the spiritual realizations.

It's also due to the Buddha's teachings that sentient beings know what to practice and what to abandon; therefore, they can then take some responsibility to abandon negative actions and create positive actions.

One way of looking at it, then, is that all the happiness that exists in the world, all the happiness of all spiritual realizations, they all have their root in the Buddha, because the Buddha is the one that explained to people how to do this. The Buddha came from being a bodhisattva, because anybody who is a Buddha was initially a bodhisattva. The bodhisattva came from bodhicitta, this altruistic intention to become a Buddha for the benefit of others, and the bodhicitta arose due to great compassion.

Great compassion, therefore, becomes the source of ultimately the bodhicitta, the bodhisattva, the Buddha, the arhats, also all the temporal pleasures of sentient beings that they gain in creating good karma, and the ultimate realizations. So that all come via this root, from the great compassion. Is that clear?

That's why, when you think about it, great compassion is so important. If we think about it, we can also see how much we, personally, have benefited from the great compassion of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Whatever benefit we've received from the Dharma teachings – when you just look at your own life, whatever benefit you've received from the Dharma teachings – again it's all due to the Buddha having given those teachings. The Buddha having given the teachings depends on the Buddha having cultivated the great compassion on the path. We can just see in that way how much we personally have benefited. In this very lifetime, so much of our own confusion and spiritual malaise has been pacified, and that pain alleviated due to the existence of great compassion.

So great compassion becomes something that's really quite admirable, something that's very special; and in that way, if we have that appreciation for what great compassion does, then our heart opens. We really want to develop it inside, because if we look at the world, then it seems that of all the things we can do in this world, there's nothing else as valuable as generating great compassion.

Great Compassion is necessary to achieve Buddhahood quickly

The stronger our great compassion is, then the stronger is the bodhicitta. The stronger the bodhicitta, then the quicker we attain Buddhahood. So if we want to attain Buddhahood quickly, the root is through developing very, very strong great compassion.

It's also through the great compassion that people then attain enlightenment in that very lifetime. Because to attain enlightenment in this body, in this lifetime, necessitates entering into the Vajrayana vehicle, and the foundation for entering the Vajrayana is the great compassion. Again, we come back to the great compassion as being the source of quickly attaining enlightenment, of making quick progress along the path, of entering the Vajrayana vehicle. So it becomes really important all the way around.

Also, think of all the happiness in the world, and how all happiness comes about due to good karma, which comes because the Buddha instructed sentient beings what to abandon and what to practice. This happens because the Buddha was very selfless, and this came from the bodhicitta, from great compassion. It's like our whole lives are wrapped up, somehow interconnected with the great compassion of those beings who have the integrity and the strength to train their minds in that way. When we see how we have benefited and we really have some appreciation for that noble quality, then something in our heart changes. Something flips over and great compassion becomes the most important thing in our life, the most worthwhile thing in our life.

At one course I was teaching, I asked people to imagine that they were dying and to look at their life: what were the things that they regretted doing in their life and what were the things that they felt very good about. We did that and we talked about it afterwards. There was incredible consensus in the group that the thing that people felt good about having done in their life, considering that they were going to die, was all the things that they shared with other people, was the love and compassion shared with other people. Universally, all the things people felt lousy about in their lives, were the things that occurred when self-centeredness had taken control of their mind.

You can see, then, that great compassion benefits others, and it's something that very directly benefits us too. If we have great compassion, then when we die, there's no regret. There's no self-hatred. There's no disappointment. So great compassion is very, very important.

Great Compassion as an antidote to low self-esteem

I have mentioned that at the conference with the Dalai Lama the Western teachers brought up this issue of low self-esteem, and how surprised he was about it. Then later on, after that conference, I heard His Holiness give some public talks, and it was so interesting, because from time to time, he would bring up low self-esteem. Before, he never used that term. Then after that conference, he started using it. He always recommended compassion as an antidote to low self-esteem. I thought, "Compassion. Why compassion?" When you're thinking about compassion, the object in your mind is other sentient beings. How does that help you develop self-confidence, because you need self-confidence to get over your low self-esteem. How does that work?"

So I thought about it. "Why did His Holiness say this? Is it just because he always tells people to meditate on great compassion whenever something is wrong? What was the sense of it?" My own personal thinking after I thought about it, is that when we're involved with low self-esteem, we're really spiraling around the "I". There's a very solid, concrete "I", and we're completely spiraling around it as if we were attached to it with elephant glue. There's no space in the mind. The mind is very tight. When there's great compassion, the mind is so open and spacious. When there's compassion in the mind, there's just space. I think when there's space, then there's automatically some sense of well-being and some sense of self-confidence.

I wonder if we really need to meditate on self-confidence specially. I don't know. I'm not sure. Maybe just meditating on the great compassion will do it. Because when we think about great compassion, and when we think about the benefits that we received from other people's great compassion, then our mind gets uplifted, it gets joyful. When we think about our relationship with other beings and how wonderful it would be if we have the great compassion and give to others some of the things that we have received so kindly, then somehow, the mind, the heart, everything just opens.

Maybe we should do an experiment. We can have everybody do a personality test, and then half the room meditate on great compassion, half of the room not meditate on great compassion for a period of time, and then everybody take the test again. I wonder what would happen? It might be a good experiment to try. Just try it for a week, everyday consecutively meditating on great compassion and see what kind of change comes in your mind. We could see if by meditating on great compassion, inadvertently our feelings about ourselves also change.

Also, your feeling of refuge would probably change through meditating on great compassion, because when we meditate on great compassion, we appreciate the qualities of the Triple Gem even more. We also realize, when we meditate on great compassion, how much we need the guidance of the Triple Gem, and this understanding really increases our refuge too, because we really feel that close bond with them and appreciation for them.

6 & 7) Great Determination and the Altruistic Intention

The thing with great compassion is that great compassion is for *all* sentient beings. Sometimes they split fine hairs, and they talk about the difference between an arhat and a bodhisattva: that arhats have compassion and love, but bodhisattvas have much greater compassion and love. (This is just for those of you who like to split hairs.) The idea is that the arhats have compassion for "limitless" sentient beings, but not for "all" sentient beings; and the difference being that when you go to the beach, the beach has "limitless" grains of sand, but not "all" grains of sand.

Another way that they differentiate the compassion of an arhat and the compassion of a bodhisattva, is that an arhat wants sentient beings to be free from suffering, but a bodhisattva wants to save them from the suffering him or herself. So there's more involvement on the part of the bodhisattvas.

Other people describe the difference as that the arhats would have love and compassion, but they wouldn't have this sixth step, which is the great determination. The great determination is this willingness to involve oneself in the actual process of liberating others. This point isn't splitting hairs. It isn't like the difference between "limitless" and "all," although there is a big difference between "limitless" and "all," isn't there?

They say that the difference between having compassion and having this next step - the sixth step, the great determination - is that with compassion, you *wish* others to be free of suffering and its causes, but with the great determination, you are going to *act* upon it. You are going to do something about it. It's the difference between standing at the edge of the swimming pool, saying, "Somebody's drowning! Somebody's drowning! Jump in and save him!" and jumping in yourself. So there's a big difference there, a real big difference.

With the great determination, then, there's this real willingness to bear all the difficulties that come from getting involved with sentient beings. And as we all know, sentient beings can be very difficult. But with the great determination, there's so much love and compassion before it, that the mind is happy to get involved. There's a complete sense of engagement. "I'm going to do something. I'm going to act." There's a difference, then, between this great determination and the wish to repay the kindness of sentient beings (the third step, wanting to repay the kindness of our mothers), because wanting to repay the kindness is *wanting* to repay the kindness. Great determination is, "I'm *going* to repay the kindness."

Somebody made the analogy that it's the difference between shopping around and thinking of what to buy, and closing a deal. When you want to repay the kindness of mother sentient beings, it's like you're shopping around. With the great determination, you're closing the deal. There's a decision. There's an action. The energy is going in one direction. It becomes very powerful.

Great Compassion/Determination inspires us to learn and to change in order to benefit others

Then from there, because of that great determination, it's like when you care so much for somebody that you want to free them from suffering, then you're going to do everything you possibly can to free them. When somebody else's pain is so close to your own heart, you're going to search for every possible method to stop that other person's pain. You might start to learn more things, do more things that you would not normally do, because you recognize you have to gain the skills in order to help that person that you care so deeply about. That's the analogy in this particular case.

When you have the great love and great compassion for all sentient beings, and you want to free them from their suffering and give them happiness, both temporal and ultimate, then you start to look around. "How can I do this? I'm just little old me. I can't even control my own mind. How can I liberate all sentient beings from samsara? I can't even liberate myself. I can't even keep my own mind peaceful for one day. I can't even keep my own mind peaceful for one hour! One minute! If I really care about sentient beings, I'm going to have to get off my butt and do something here."

We look at the situation and say, "In my present situation, how can I benefit sentient beings? If my own mind is a mess, and I try and benefit somebody else, my own mess is just going to be contagious. I'll make messes in their life." So here we start looking at who has their trip together? Who's together? Who doesn't make messes in other people's life? Who has the strength of mind to go through with all these things of helping others? Who has the wisdom to know how to help others? Who has the skill in knowing the right thing to do at the right time? Who has the consistency to keep doing it, to helping sentient beings?

Only the Buddha can teach us how to benefit living beings

When we look around for who it is who has that ability to keep benefiting sentient beings long term with skill, compassion and wisdom, we see it's only the Buddha. Only the Buddha has that ability. Mother Teresa is completely incredible. She can liberate sentient beings from dying on the street, from starvation and from loneliness, but can she liberate them and lead them to enlightenment? I mean, maybe Mother Teresa is a Buddha, I don't know, but I'm just talking about ordinary appearance.

We really have to see that benefiting sentient beings isn't just a case of putting band-aids on bad situations, and fixing bad situations. We have to see that to really benefit sentient beings is to give them the tools, so that first of all, they can abandon negative karma and create positive karma, and in that way keep themselves out of the lower realms; so that they can themselves generate love and compassion and realize emptiness; so that they can protect themselves from samsara and from getting stuck in any way.

We really come to see that enlightenment or Buddhahood is the state of mind that has the complete ability to benefit others without any hindrance from one's own side. There is still going to be hindrance from other people's side, but at least from our side, if we try and help, there won't be hindrance.

It is the same with the Buddhas now. From the Buddha's side, there's no hindrance in helping us. From our side, there's lots of hindrance. It's like the Buddha is calling us on the phone, but we don't pick up the phone.

So what we are doing here is, due to the force of the love, the compassion and the determination, we generate the bodhicitta or the altruistic intention to become a Buddha so that we can be most effective in benefiting others. That's where the bodhicitta comes from.

Entering the Mahayana Path

They say when you generate the bodhicitta, you enter the path of accumulation of the Mahayana path, where you really start on the direct path to enlightenment. That's when you start the three countless great eons. They say that Shakyamuni Buddha accumulated merit for three countless great eons. Don't ask me how many years that is. But you start the process of the three countless great eons when you first generate the full bodhicitta. When we have a conscious thought to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others, that's like tasting the bark of sugarcane. It's like holding the frozen yogurt package.

It's said that when you spontaneously generate the bodhicitta, it has such a powerful impact on the mind. It's not just this conscious wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others, but when you spontaneously generate that wish every time you see somebody - every time you see the cat or the dog, or all these little gnats flying around nowadays, or whenever you see your boss - spontaneously in your mind comes the thought, "I want to attain enlightenment in order to liberate these beings." So that spontaneous thing, they say it's so powerful on the mind. It's such a transformative thing.

It's sometimes interesting to sit and think about it: What would it be like to be a bodhisattva? I mean, this is a good thing just to kind of visualize and fantasize about and use your imagination. What would it actually feel like to wake up in the morning and feel really happy about life and think, "Wow, my life is so meaningful because I can use it today to benefit sentient beings." And what would it be like to get up in the morning, and the cat leapt on your leg and grabbed onto you, and your thought was, "I want to lead him out of suffering into enlightenment." And what would it be like when you went out of the house and there're all these gnats flying in your face? Or when you're driving on the highway and somebody cuts you off? Or you get into the office and your boss dumps on you?

So just to have this spontaneous wish, "I want to attain enlightenment for the benefit of these sentient beings. These people are so precious. I really want to benefit them." Just think, what would it be like to have that kind of approach to life? I think we'll probably be a whole lot happier than we are now! And yet it's so funny, isn't it? That even though we have the wish to benefit others, we ourselves will be so much happier than we are now; that in spite of that, what do we do? We just keep thinking about ourselves and how to make ourselves happy. We spend all this time just thinking about how to make ourselves happy, and we never get happy. We just keep going around in circles. "I want this and I can't have it. I want that and I can't have it. I don't want ... Why don't these people do something? How come these people treat me this way? Nobody appreciates me..." We try so hard to make ourselves happy. We never succeed. And yet we'd be so much happier ourselves if we just have this open-hearted loving compassion for others.

But you can begin to see that with just a slight shift in the mind, from cherishing self to cherishing others, your whole life experience goes completely upside down. Everything just looks totally different.

Pitfalls in Dharma practice

[Audience: inaudible]

You just brought up two very important pitfalls. I think it's good if I explain these. One of the pitfalls is this view of "Everything is perfect." This is the New Age pitfall. "Everything is perfect as it is." You hear this in Buddhism too, but we misinterpret it. When Buddhism says "Everything is perfect as it is," it doesn't mean "OK, therefore I just sit back and be lazy. Violence on the street is perfect, is okay." It doesn't mean that. This is the New Age pitfall of misinterpreting and thinking that 'everything is perfect' means letting everything be and not having some feeling of universal responsibility for the benefit of others. Having a sense of universal responsibility is very, very important, not only for our spiritual practice, but basically, to live peacefully on this planet. Feeling inter-related with each other.

The other pitfall you brought up was the over-achiever pitfall. “I’m going to attain enlightenment.” This real strong “I”. “I have to do everything perfect and this big ‘I’ is going to become a big Buddha because this big ‘I’ wants big glory and big recognition.” So making the “I” real solid there. That actually isn’t real bodhicitta. If you want to become a Buddha so that you can be better and stronger and have everybody call you ‘the child of the Buddha’ and make offerings to you, then that isn’t the bodhicitta because the bodhicitta is a real un-self-centered motivation. If you grab on to the self as this really strong, inherently existent thing, and you’re doing it for your own fame and reputation and pride, then it never really becomes the bodhicitta. I guess it’s the difference between buying a real ‘members only’ jacket and some old rag. There’s a real big difference.

There’s also another pitfall which is called “Mickey Mouse bodhisattva”. I remember once when I lived in France, we had this tradition that every time Lama Zopa came, the members of the institute would put together a skit, a Dharma skit, and present it. So one year they did “Mickey Mouse bodhisattva”. It was so funny. “Mickey Mouse bodhisattva” worked in the Dharma center and somebody came and said, “I want to go to the retreat and I can’t afford it. Please can you help?” So “Mickey Mouse bodhisattva” opens the Dharma center’s coffers and says, “Here, have some money. It’s okay.” Completely became this Pollyanna, goody-goody, totally irresponsible.

So that’s another pitfall – ‘Mickey Mouse bodhisattva’ – being really irresponsible about how we help others. Bodhicitta isn’t, “I have such great compassion for this alcoholic who is having DT, so I’m going to give him a bottle of booze and calm him down.” Bodhicitta isn’t giving everybody everything they want. It isn’t giving your kid their fifth set of Lego’s, or three ice cream bars in a row. It isn’t just giving everything people want. It has a certain wisdom to it.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>