

A SHORT PRESENTATION OF ŚĀNTIDEVA'S *BODHICARYĀVATĀRA*

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Abstract:

The Bodhicaryāvatāra (BCA) is a Buddhist text dealing with the spiritual practice of the aspirant to awakening (bodhisattva). It has been composed by Śāntideva, a Buddhist philosopher and teacher who lived in India around the 8th century. As the BCA occupies a respectable position within the corpus of spiritual literature of the world, it is comparable to similar works of other religious traditions, for example, Thomas à Kempis' De imitatione Christi. Consequently, the BCA, in addition to exposing the main philosophical points of one of the most important schools of Buddhism, is also a practical guide that can serve as a basis of comparison between the major spiritual traditions of the world and even be a source of inspiration for all spiritual seekers, no matter their religious or philosophical affiliation. After having provided a summary of the life of its author and some details about the history and structure of the BCA, the present essay introduces and discusses, in a way that is accessible to non-Buddhists, the significance of the main themes and ideas of this important spiritual manual of the Buddhism.

Keywords: Śāntideva, bodhisattva (aspirant to awakening), bodhicitta (thought of awakening), pāramitā (buddhist perfections), Madhyamaka

Introduction

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra (BCA)* is a relatively short Buddhist text dealing with the spiritual practice of the Bodhisattva (aspirant to awakening) with a special emphasis on the experience of the bodhicitta (mind/thought of awakening) and the cultivation of the six fundamental pāramitā (Perfections) of Buddhism, these being: (1) giving (2) discipline (3) patience (4) endeavor (5) meditation and (6) wisdom.

It has been composed in Sanskrit by Śāntideva, a philosopher and teacher from the Madhyamaka school of the Mahāyāna tradition¹ who lived around the beginning of the 8th century in Northwest India. The *BCA* is probably one of the most accessible Buddhist texts for a Western audience as it has been translated and analyzed in many European languages for more than a hundred years. To complete these Western translations and

¹ There are two main traditions or lineages in Buddhism. The first one is called Theravāda and comprises the type of Buddhism practiced mainly in Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka) and the second is Mahāyāna which is found in Tibet, Mongolia and East Asia (China, Korea and Japan). The Madhyamaka is one of the many philosophical schools of the Mahāyāna tradition.

analyses there are many commentaries produced by old and contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers like the XIVth Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso). These commentaries are a testimony of a long and still living tradition of Tibetan spiritual teachings inspired by the *BCA*.

On account of its poetical and nevertheless practical language, the *BCA* certainly occupies a respectable position within the corpus of spiritual literature of the world. As such, it has been compared to Thomas à Kempis' *De imitatione Christi* and, judging from its knowledge of the mental dispositions of the mystical seeker, it is not without parallels with a manual of spiritual instruction like the *Philokalia*.² The *BCA* is therefore not only a summary of the main philosophical points of a specific school of Buddhism, but also a practical guide that can serve as a basis for comparisons between the major spiritual traditions of the world, not to mention that it can be a source of inspiration for all spiritual seekers. From a more secular point of view, the *BCA* also provides interesting insights into the nature of the mind, the ways it controls our behavior and how it can be harnessed to become an instrument of our personal and professional development.

The Legend of Śāntideva, the author of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra (BCA)*

Most details regarding the life of Śāntideva are legendary. Nevertheless, scholars agree on the fact that the author of the *BCA* has been a monk and a teacher at the Buddhist university of Nālandā situated in the present-day Indian state of Bihar. Based on the accounts of ancient travelers to India, it has been ascertained that Śāntideva lived around the beginning of the 8th century C.E. The legendary accounts of Śāntideva's life and literary activity were compiled by three Tibetan Buddhist historians, namely Bu-ston (1290-1364), Tāranātha (1575-1608?) and Sum-pa mkham-po (1704-88). There also exists a fourth source for reconstructing Śāntideva's legend in a Nepalese Sanskrit manuscript of the 14th century. It is said that these four accounts can be traced back to the same original source.

According to this legend, Śāntideva was born in Śrīnagara in the south of India as the son of a royal chieftain. In his past lives he served many Buddhas to obtain the merits and the skills necessary to achieve awakening, thus confirming him as a true son of the Mahāyāna lineage. Like the Buddha, Śāntideva had to choose between ruling as a king or being a wise man. Prompted by his mother to choose the latter, he embarked on a journey that led him to a master who taught him the *samādhi* (intense contemplative state) of Mañjuḥṣa.³ After twelve years of training, Śāntideva finally obtained the vision of Mañjuḥṣa. He was then ordered by his master, after having been given a wooden sword, to serve as a knight

² A collection of texts written between the 4th and 15th centuries by spiritual masters of the Christian Eastern Orthodox Church.

³ One of the eight great *bodhisattvas* who were the closest disciples of the Buddha.

for the king of Magadha.⁴ Attracting resentment and jealousy from his peers on account of his successes at court, he was forced to show his wooden sword to the king who, after seeing it, had his eye fall out of his socket. After restoring the king's eye and freeing him from his suffering, Śāntideva decided to join the great monastery of Nālandā. By this event, Śāntideva experienced firsthand the prediction of his mother who told him that the mundane life, even as a king, will only result in causing suffering to others and thereby condemned him to a miserable life in hell after death.

It is at Nālandā that Śāntideva, who was called Acalasena during his time at the court, received the name by which he is known today. The name Śāntideva, which means "lord of peace," was bestowed upon him on account of his peacefulness. It is said that Śāntideva was constantly meditating especially when he was eating, sleeping and doing other mundane activities. Again, he caused resentment among his monastic brothers who thought that he was doing nothing spiritually valuable and, similar to what happened when he was serving the king of Magadha, he was asked to prove himself by showing what he had learned. Having refused to comply with his brothers' request, he was nevertheless tricked into a situation where he had no choice but to speak in front of the entire assembly. But Śāntideva, instead of reciting what he had learned from his predecessors, decided to recite something new, namely the *BCA*. After having recited verse 34 of the ninth chapter in which it is said that the mind attains perfect peace when it no longer entertains both the notions of existence and non-existence, he had a vision of Mañjuśrī and ascended into the sky to disappear from the sight of the audience. We will later see that this event, which is admittedly quite extraordinary, does reveal a key for one's understanding of the intimate relationship between Buddhist doctrines and spiritual experience.

The History and Structure of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*BCA*)

The Sanskrit edition of the *BCA* may trace its origin to two different sources. The first one, entitled *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, is composed of nine chapters or 702.5 verses and is only available in the Tibetan manuscripts of Tun-huang. The second version, which is entitled *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, comprises ten chapters or 913 verses. This later version is now the standard edition on which modern translations are based.

There were a few Sanskrit commentaries of the *BCA*, but the one called *Pañjikā* and written by Prajñākaramati, a Buddhist monk who lived at the monastic university of Vikramaśīla around the 10th century, is the most complete and best known of these commentaries. The other Sanskrit commentaries are no longer extant and can be found only in Tibetan and Chinese translations. The *BCA* has also been translated into traditional Buddhist languages, namely Tibetan, Chinese and Mongolian. Finally, as a witness to the

⁴ One of the ancient sixteen ancient kingdoms of India.

philosophical depth of the *BCA* and the debates it generated within Buddhism itself, especially Tibetan Buddhism, there is a rich tradition of commentaries produced by ancient masters like Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), the founder of one of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism known as Geluk-pa, a school famous for its philosophical debates. This tradition confirms the fact that the *BCA* is more than just a religious and devotional poem and that it qualifies, like the works of other great Buddhist masters, as a philosophical treatise. Despite its important philosophical content, especially in its ninth chapter, the *BCA* remains nevertheless a text “distinguished by a poetic sensitivity and fervour which makes it one of the gems of Buddhist and world spiritual literature” (Williams, 1989, p. 58).

Its title can be translated as “Entry (avatāra) into the spiritual practice (caryā) [leading] to [the experience of] awakening (bodhi)”. It is as such a description of the Bodhisattva’s path to Buddhahood. This path, which here focuses on the development of the Buddhist pāramitā, starts with the production or arising of the bodhicitta. As this arising of the bodhicitta refers to the attainment of a certain mental state, it is thus fair to say, when comparing it with other Buddhist spiritual traditions, that this expression is a description of a mystical experience comparable to that of sotāpanna (Entering the stream), that is, the first stage in the spiritual life of the Arhant (the Theravāda ideal of spiritual accomplishment) or the entering the Path of Vision, also an intermediary and inevitable stage in one of the many Tibetan Buddhist paths to spiritual transformation.

The ten chapters of the standard version of the *BCA* are as follows: (1) Praising of the thought of awakening (bodhicittānuśaṃsa) [36 verses] (2) Confession of sins (pāpadeśanā) [66 verses] (3) Acceptance of the thought of awakening (bodhicittaparigrahaḥ) [33 verses] (4) Perseverance in the thought of awakening (bodhicittāpramādaḥ) [48 verses] (5) Guarding alertness (saṃprajanyakṣaṇam) [109 verses] (6) Perfection of patience (kṣāntipāramitā) [134 verses] (7) Perfection of endeavor (vīryapāramitā) [75 verses], (8) Perfection of meditation (dhyānapāramitā) [186 verses] (9) Perfection of wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) [168 verses] and (10) Dedication (pariṇamanā) [58 verses].

It has been argued that the last chapter was not originally part of the *BCA* because its main Indian commentator Prajñākaramati did not comment on it and the Tibetan historian Tāranātha doubted its authenticity. However, the tenth chapter was extant in the various manuscripts used to compile the basic Sanskrit editions and is to be found in the Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese translations. No matter how the scholars of Buddhism are going to resolve this question, it remains that, from the point of view of the structure of the path to Buddhahood as envisaged by Śāntideva, the last chapter of the *BCA* is not without significance. Indeed, in the second chapter, Śāntideva is constantly praising the great Bodhisattvas and Buddhas so that they bestow on him the merits necessary for bringing about the arising of the bodhicitta. In the last chapter, the roles are inverted and it is

Śāntideva himself who aspires to be the one who bestows such merits upon others. As such, this chapter presents itself as an example of the Perfection of giving (dānapāramitā). And, if we take into consideration the fact that, in one of the manuscripts, the fifth chapter is entitled the Perfection of discipline (śīlapāramitā), we now have six chapters dealing respectively with the six basic Perfections of the path of the Bodhisattva. The *BCA* can consequently be divided into two main parts: the first four chapters focusing on the arising of the bodhicitta as a necessary condition for all genuine progression toward Buddhahood and the last six as the means to cultivate that progression.

One may wonder why the Perfection of giving comes after the Perfection of wisdom which is supposed to be the accomplishment of all the other Perfections. Perhaps the answer lies in the significance of verse 34 of the ninth chapter where Śāntideva attained complete peace of mind. In Buddhism, ideas are subsidiary to the experience of extinguishing what is likely to perturb the mind, an experience that is known as *nirvāṇa*. What remains—since something has to remain if Buddhism is to be a historical or cultural reality—is a compassionate Bodhisattva “acting” for the welfare of all sentient beings, that which is the very essence of the bodhicitta. Thus, there is an organic harmony between the parts of the *BCA*, a harmony that would be disrupted if the tenth chapter were to be excluded.

An Analysis of the Main Themes and Ideas of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*BCA*)

The present analysis of the main themes and ideas of the *BCA* is primarily focusing on the following question: What is this treatise telling us about the human psyche in general and, more specifically, about the dynamic of subjective transformation, that is, how a subject is made to see the world and interact with it in a radically new way? A second purpose of this analysis is to highlight some of the common denominators between the *BCA* and other spiritual traditions. It is hoped that this short analysis may be viewed as a contribution to the field of comparative religions and spirituality as well as to the science of cognitive psychology. The structure of this analysis follows the sequence of the ten chapters of the *BCA*.

1. Praising of the bodhicitta

Śāntideva introduces his treatise as a summary of the path of the Bodhisattva without any intention of innovating in any way whatsoever. As it is usual in such treatises, the author starts with the taking of refuge in the Three Jewels, namely, the Buddha, his teaching (Dharma) and the community of Bodhisattvas (Saṅgha). However, contrary to the usual sequence, the Saṅgha is mentioned prior to the Dharma. The inversion may be justified by the fact that the present chapter is about a crucial component of the dynamic of spiritual transformation, namely, the experience of the bodhicitta, a spiritual event that brings about a qualitative change in our state of being. Indeed, it is precisely when we have

experienced the arising of the bodhicitta that we may be called a Bodhisattva and are consequently worthy of reverence by men and gods alike. In less symbolic terms, it means that this experience tells others that we are now a serious candidate for the realization of Buddhahood. What is then this experience of the bodhicitta?

It is said the arising of the bodhicitta is caused by the power of the Buddhas and it manifests itself like a thunderbolt in the middle of a dark night. As such, it is comparable to the sudden influx of new information/energy into a given mental structure. We may draw a parallel with Abraham Maslow's peak experience, an experience that was described as "rare, exciting, oceanic, deeply moving, exhilarating, elevating experiences that generate an advanced form of perceiving reality, and are even mystic and magical in their effect upon the experimenter" (Landsman, 2001, p. 1156).

Without the bodhicitta, the power of vices could never be overcome and the immeasurable multitudes of beings could not be rescued. It has therefore been recognized by all previous masters to be of great value. It is also comparable to an elixir that transforms anything impure into something pure, it is perpetually bearing fruits and producing, the moment it arises, an uninterrupted stream of merits. It is so essential to the practice of the Bodhisattva that Śāntideva wonders why people are not taking refuge in it.

Śāntideva's praising of the bodhicitta rests on an emerging awareness among the Buddhists that says that the path toward spiritual emancipation does not only consist in a point of departure, for example, a state of suffering or ignorance, and a point of arrival which could be a state of bliss and omniscience, but that there is an intermediary stage between these two points. That intermediary stage redefines the nature and quality of our efforts so that what is now required is not a sheer motivation to push against a negative force generated by our tendencies or desires—a model that describes the practices of extreme asceticism—but to hold on tightly to something that is pulling us toward the goal like a raft being carried by the current of a river.

From this perspective, the fundamental flaw of man, which consists in constantly nurturing an attachment to the objects of the world, is transmuted into an attachment to an encompassing reality that appears to have a will of its own, a will that has been defined in the context of the bodhicitta as the desire to save all sentient beings. To some extent, Śāntideva is affirming that the mind enjoys some degree of autonomy with regards to the person that embodies it. Moreover, if it is usually assumed that the will ought to subjugate the mind to reach emancipation or any goal whatsoever, it is rather by inverting this relation of submission that one truly succeeds in achieving that "desired" emancipation. The arising of the bodhicitta as an intermediary spiritual experience would be the experience of that inversion.

2. Confession of sins

The second chapter of the *BCA* is divided into three parts, namely: (1) offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (2) the taking of refuge in the Buddha and (3) the confession of sins. The purpose of this highly devotional section of Śāntideva's treatise is to prepare us to take firmly hold of the bodhicitta. More precisely, we should now acquire a stable and strong mind that renders us capable of fixing our attention on a transforming vision of reality. This is a mental state that allows us to become a channel by which the qualities of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are flowing down toward the people who are in need of liberation from suffering. Śāntideva also enjoins us to adopt an attitude of deference to maximize this outflow of qualities.

The symbolism used in this second chapter to incite us to take such mental actions, like offering things to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and going for refuge, does make sense if we accept, as mentioned before, the idea that states of mind can be autonomous structures capable of controlling individual behavior. In this context, our freedom is limited to choosing the type of state of mind we should surrender ourselves to.

In addition to the three types of mental actions described by Śāntideva to lead us to experience the arising of the bodhicitta, the second chapter does devote some reflexions on the inevitability of death. As such, the *BCA* draws on a universal theme used by most important mystical traditions of the world. Here also, the function of those reflexions or meditations is to reaffirm the futility of this world generated by our desires and to strengthen our resolution to generate the bodhicitta.

A closer analysis of the structure of the present chapter reveals another universal principle that may exceed the scope of religious discourses. Indeed, the mechanism by which a mind is made stronger to maintain a state of attention rests on a kind of oscillation. If we are incapable of fixing our attention on an object of the mind like the presence of the Buddha or the realities of his teachings, we are invited to mentally wander in finding all possible objects to be offered to the Buddha, in imagining all kinds of reasons for taking refuge in Him and, finally, in bringing to light all sins, committed or likely to be committed, in order to confess them. In other words, if, on account of its immaturity, its weaknesses, etc. the mind is unable to rest, it is nevertheless allowed to roam, but only under two conditions: (1) the roaming has to be done within a determined mental space and (2) the mind is required after its roaming to touch base at a specific point like the all-encompassing presence of the Buddha. The ability to stay alert is thus cultivated by recuperating the dissipative forces of the mind instead of relying on the sheer force of the will to maintain a fixed position.

This insight into the dynamics of spiritual transformation, which incidentally may have radically changed the way we conceive the nature of our endeavor toward emancipation,

reasserts the crucial role of memory. Whether it is understood as the receptacle of a Buddhist truth like that of emptiness or as the creation of an environment to feed a type of mind or to starve another, the act of remembering is what supports the evolution of our mental states. From this perspective, there is, in principle, no essential difference between imagining to help someone and actually helping him or between sitting in the confines of a remote monastery and mixing in a crowd. As long as what is meant to be achieved is the transformation of our state of mind, the objective world is just a means to trigger the subjective act of remembering which is the unavoidable starting point for our drifting toward the other shore of spiritual emancipation.

3. Acceptance of the bodhicitta

The third chapter is a description of what it means to undergo the experience of the bodhicitta. Firstly, there is a sense of joy accompanied by a wish to share the newly acquired happiness with those who still suffer. That experience of joy is further reinforced by the knowledge that other sentient beings have already been liberated from suffering and that the bodhicitta, as embodied by other Bodhisattvas, is active in this world for the delight and benefit of all sentient beings. Secondly, the experience of the bodhicitta finds expression in requests and supplications so that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas remain in this world. Finally, by inverting the perspective, it is now we who, endowed with the bodhicitta, views ourselves as both a source of the material and spiritual benefits that are going to alleviate the suffering of other sentient beings and the cause that generates the bodhicitta in others.

If traditional understanding of the dynamics of mystical transformation considered merits as a kind of spiritual money that ought to be accumulated so that we move up in the stages of spiritual progress, Śāntideva is telling us in the present chapter that this storage of merits is not sufficient. Indeed, if merits are to be received from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, they have to be redistributed to those who are still suffering. As alluded before, the state of mind defined by the activity of the bodhicitta is a kind of intermediary channel that facilitates the flow of merits and benefits from a reality that is mysterious for most people to a reality that is well-known to everyone on account of the suffering it generates. Consequently, our spiritual status no longer rests on our reservoir of merits, but rather on our ability to make the merits flow from one reality to another or from one state of mind to another.

4. Perseverance in the bodhicitta

Once we have boarded the raft of the bodhicitta, our first thought is to make sure that we are up to the task, that we will not let all sentient beings down or that we are capable of living to the expectations of what it means to be a Bodhisattva. Because the experience of the bodhicitta is like the very rare occurrence of a human birth—it is less likely to happen

than the probability that a blind turtle sticks its neck into the hole of a board floating on a very agitated vast ocean—our main worry is to avoid falling back from that precious state of mind. We now find ourselves in the same situation as that of Odysseus who had to pass by the island of Sirenum scopuli in which sirens resided. One remembers that Odysseus' trial consisted in not leaving his ship on account of the temptations caused by the enchanting songs of the sirens.

In the *BCA*'s case, the sirens' songs are the mental afflictions. These afflictions are the enemies to destroy. If Odysseus decided to resist against the sirens by being tied to the mast of his ship, we will have to use as mast our ability to stay alert. We will thus have to cultivate an awareness of every movement of our mind by giving it a name or by categorizing it, that is, by rendering explicit what is usually implicit. In short, by objectifying our emotions like craving and hatred, we distance ourselves from what is likely to snatch us away from the state of the bodhicitta.

This cultivation of awareness appears to rest on a contradiction. Assuming that we cannot simultaneously have two states of mind, how can a mind defeat itself? Śāntideva tells us that this war against mental afflictions is to be waged by using other mental afflictions. But how can we distinguish between good and bad mental afflictions? Contrary to a moralistic approach which consists in providing objective guidelines to deal with that question, Śāntideva bypasses that very question by assuming that a deficient mind is capable of entertaining a vision of the truth and that it is this vision that conquers all mental afflictions. If this vision is not intuitively realized—such realization being one of the fruits of experiencing the bodhicitta—parts of it can still be remembered in a way we remember a place we have been to, by looking at a picture of it. And even if we still are, by recalling to our mind truths like that of the universality of suffering or that of emptiness, acting according to the presuppositions of the mundane world, that is, by relying on the sheer force of our imagination, we are nevertheless in possession of a means by which our thoughts and behavior can be regulated.

More specifically, Śāntideva is bypassing the moral dilemma about deciding which mental affliction is good and which is bad, by introducing, through the acceptance of a truth, a duality of a second order: the dialogue between the *I* and the *Me*. In the case of the moralistic approach, the *I* always remains implicit in the effort to distinguish between good and bad whereas in Śāntideva's case, it is when we lose track of the *I*—most probably when we let ourselves carried away by the wandering of the *Me*—that we know that the bad mental afflictions are taking over our mind. Inversely, mental afflictions are good when they maintain us in the awareness of the *I*. Thus, the moral dilemma is resolved not from an ontological point of view but from an existential one. It is indeed on account of this existential means of validation that all truths, even that of emptiness which is crucial to the path of the *BCA*, are to be viewed as subsidiary to the experience of awakening.

5. Guarding alertness

No matter how scary the world is, with its tigers, lions, enemies and guardians of hells, if the mind is fixed on the bodhicitta, all these dangers will vanish. In order to achieve this, two instruments are here offered by Śāntideva: mindfulness and alertness. More specifically, mindfulness refers to the ability to keep in mind the thoughts of Dharma, the great pillar by which the mad elephant which is our untamed mind will be tied. Guided by these thoughts, we remember over and over again the experiences that made our mind unshakable and those that made us lose focus and alertness. In this context, the second instrument, that is, alertness is to be viewed as introspection, a mental activity that generates knowledge of the movements and tendencies of the mind to be tamed. This knowledge should help us not to directly control that untamed mind, but rather to cultivate the ability to maintain a firm distance with respect it, no matter what it does or, as Śāntideva puts it, the ability to remain still like a piece of wood.

In other words, our meditation consists, at this point, only in exploring all the situations that are likely to challenge our ability to remember the thoughts of Dharma and, once these situations are clearly imagined, we have to cultivate the ability of staying aloof. It is only in this stable state of mind that the impulses and energy that perturb our mind burn themselves up. As such, the mind is like a movie screen on which our realities are projected and no matter what is being shown, we quietly remain seated in our seat and watch without reactions.

What has occurred so far at the level of the mind only will also be transferred to our concrete actions or behavior. Indeed, one particularity of the present chapter is to offer practical guidelines to us, who somehow cannot constantly live separated from society. These guidelines, which could be understood as rules of discipline, rests on the assumption that the body, that which is often despised and rejected among many mystical traditions, is a valuable instrument for the guarding of alertness. From this point of view, control of the body in social situations is tantamount to control of the mind. There may even be an advantage in leaving once a while the mediation cushion for an active life. As actions are, by their very nature, going to disrupt our memory of an encompassing vision of reality, the efforts to stay alert while engaged in any form of physical activity are more demanding and are therefore likely to be more productive.

6. The Perfection of patience

If being active in this world is an important factor of spiritual development, it is certainly because the world is a source of both physical and psychological suffering. Consequently, to be able to persist in an activity conducive to the Perfection of discipline, it is necessary to have patience. To some extent, the cultivation of the Perfection of patience, although complementary, is more fundamental than the Perfection of discipline as it directly deals

with the movements of the mind that precede one's actions. In the context of the Perfection of patience, it would, however, be more appropriate to talk about reactions. Indeed, here the control of the mind does not lie in doing specific actions, but rather in preventing unintentional actions or reactions to occur, reactions that are most of the time resulting from anger. What triggers our anger are the objects of hatred that were created out of our feeling of discontentment. Thus, this trilogy, consisting of an existential experience of discontentment, being anchored in the belief in the existence of an object of hatred and manifesting itself in actions/reactions of anger, is what may constitute an “anti-bodhicitta” mind that ought to be destroyed if we sincerely want to reduce suffering in this world.

Once again, we may be misled by thinking that our ability to be patient, to control anger, etc. rests exclusively on willpower. The approach suggested by Śāntideva presupposes that a mind, especially when confronted with the forces of discontent and hatred, is rather weak to resist anger. Nevertheless, this weak mind, when anchored in the truths of Buddhism, may act as a scalpel capable of softly but precisely severing the connexions between the alert *I* and the deluded *Me*. More precisely, we are using our skill of introspection to literally starve whatever is likely to feed this “anti-bodhicitta” mind. This may be done by challenging the validity of all the reasons we may be advocating for being angry, by negating the responsibility of those who are causing our suffering, etc. All this internal dialogue can be reduced to one simple principle: the more experiences of awareness are injected into the mechanism by which the “anti-bodhicitta” mind is active, the more its activity is inhibited. Therefore, the bulk of our effort consists in bringing to a standstill, through our power of memory and our ability to stay alert, a mind which, left to itself, is only causing havoc in this world. This situation of inhibition of action is therefore the point where the cultivation of patience leads us.

If, on the one hand, physiological suffering caused by cold and heat and on the other, psychological suffering resulting from insults, desecration of images and derision of the Dharma are going to test our patience, this is nothing compared to the violence exerted by such ideas as the impermanence of all things. We who are mature enough to accept these highly disturbing ideas have to harness all our strength to maintain a stable mind. In fact, the difficulty is not so much as to keep it steady, but to avoid taking refuge in false views like the belief in the existence of a permanent Self. To some extent, the philosophical discussion that is initiated in the present chapter and which will be completed in the one dealing with the Perfection of wisdom is not so much about defending some kind of doctrinal orthodoxy, but about curtailing all escape routes for a frightened mind confronted to truths like that of emptiness.

This third challenge to the Perfection of patience, however, introduces a new contradiction. Indeed, how is it possible that the ideas helping us to calm our mind in the face of adversities are themselves responsible for producing in us a deep feeling of

anxiety? In order to bring our patience to a state of true perfection, something will have to occur to the way we grasp, cognitively speaking, these destructive truths, something comparable to the transformation of an organism into an oxygen-breathing entity at a time when oxygen is still a corrosive substance for all living beings.

7. *The Perfection of endeavor*

The reference to the notion of “anti-bodhicitta” in the previous discussion may give the impression that our path toward awakening is a kind of struggle between two incompatible minds. A more modern way to describe this situation would be to say that there is only one mind that is now polarized on account of having accepted a new information. The entire process of spiritual transformation may thus be compared to the process of fecundation where the bodhicitta as embryo is going to be fed from the “anti-bodhicitta” matrix. As this matrix does not easily sacrifice itself as nourishment for the bodhicitta, the *I*, supported by this acquired information, that is, the Buddhist truths, will have to act as a catalyst by regulating the movements of the *Me*. This regulation can only take two forms: inhibition of the flow of bad food that feeds a mind to become anything but the bodhicitta and stimulation of the flow of good food that nourishes only the bodhicitta. If the first form is a kind of renunciation that is primarily cultivated by the Perfection of patience, it is the Perfection of endeavor that will take care of the second form. Because we usually stop the flow of water before we redirect it along a new path, it makes sense to say, as Śāntideva did, that the Perfection of patience is a prerequisite to that of endeavor although it may be argued that these two Perfections are two aspects of the activity of the bodhicitta.

If the Perfection of patience induces in us a state of inhibition of action, it is exactly such state that the Perfection of endeavor is meant to defeat. This contradictory statement can be elucidated by understanding that the first type of inhibition of action has been deliberately induced by an informed mind whereas the second type is the result of events that a foolish and ignorant mind was unable to predict. The causes of its foolishness and ignorance are usually attributed to a lack of awareness of the urgency of the situation in which we find ourselves, to an attachment to the pleasures of the senses, to a reluctance to act or to engage ourselves on account of a fear of suffering and, most importantly, to a lack of self-confidence.

The fact that the state of inhibition of action is ambiguous will also reflect itself in the means by which we develop our forces and determination to proceed toward the goal. For example, our dedication to fulfill our vow to save all sentient beings may be viewed as a fanatical obsession. Similarly, our delight resulting from an experience of detachment may be a subtle form of sensory pleasures or a way to enhance our sense of pride or feeling of superiority as such an experience usually transports us above the crowd. Finally, what can be an antidote to our lack of confidence may easily be confused with arrogance. Thus,

these means are essentially neither good nor bad: it is the purpose for which they are cultivated and the context in which they are manifested that determine their nature. Although Śāntideva does not elaborate on this point, this understanding of the means used to progress on the path is consistent with the Buddhist doctrine of Skillful Means, a doctrine that justifies the validity of an idea or an action on the basis of its ability to accomplish a spiritual goal.

8. *The Perfection of meditation*

The path toward awakening as described by Śāntideva in the *BCA* rests on a fundamental assumption regarding the process of spiritual transformation: any mind will naturally transform itself if it is brought to a standstill. In other words, a mind is naturally moving toward its transformation when all its internal movements have been inhibited. The internal movements of the mind are consequently leading nowhere if not toward an aggravation of its state of deficiency by generating more movements. At the existential level, the natural movement or drifting of the mind toward its emancipation is experienced as a deepening of one's contemplative or meditative state. This is where all mental actions of renunciation and endeavor are supposed to lead us.

At this point, it should be obvious that the obligated passages or points of transition toward a deeper state of meditative contemplation are the willfully induced states of inhibition of actions. Perhaps some of us will prefer to move slowly by tackling one by one their various mental afflictions, the causes of their distractions, etc. Others, however, will probably prefer to go right away at the ultimate source of what prevents the mind to proceed toward the state of perfect meditation. In order to take this shortcut, they will have to engage themselves into the ultimate experience of inhibition of action, namely the practice of exchanging ourselves for others. Indeed, by projecting an inverted image of the world usually created by the belief in a desiring and acting subject, we inhibit all the forces responsible for the movements of our mind. For every reason to act there is a counter-reason not to act, what we would like to be done to us, we should do to others, what we do not like to experience, other people certainly would not like it, etc. Thus, by mentally applying what could be seen as the universal Golden Rule or Law of reciprocity, the *I*, which has been regulating the movements of the mind up to this moment, is getting ready to leave the stage by acknowledging the existence of another *I*.

9. *The Perfection of wisdom*

The ninth chapter of the *BCA* may be viewed as an autonomous text on account of its philosophical and doctrinal content. However, if, as mentioned above, the overcoming of the fear of the truth is an essential part of our practice, this chapter ought to be considered as fully integrated with the other parts of Śāntideva's treatise. More precisely, wisdom, which here refers to the unconditional acceptance of the notion of emptiness and its

implications, is what supports the cultivation of all the other Perfections presented so far by regulating the movements of the mind. In this regard, the purpose of the Perfection of wisdom is twofold. Firstly, to train us to use the notion of emptiness as a yardstick by which all wrong views are analyzed and eventually eradicated. The second purpose, which is in fact an outcome of the first, is to develop in us an intimate knowledge of emptiness to a point where even the notion itself, as an object of the mind, recedes to thereby allow a perfect pacification of the mind to occur. To some extent, one may say that the Perfection of wisdom is achieved only when we have abandoned the very wisdom that carried us all the way to fulfill our ultimate aspiration.

Some people compare this process of dissolving the instrument by which we achieve a spiritual transformation to the burning of a stick caused by the kindling of a fire. The problem with this analogy is that it leaves us as accomplished aspirants to awakening with no instrument to act on the world of suffering. In other words, the analogy is valid in so far as it applies to awakened beings who completely disconnected themselves from their fellows' worldly realities. Consequently, to explain how it is possible for a Buddha or a Bodhisattva to be active in relieving the world from suffering, it would be preferable to say that the notion of emptiness does not really fade away, but that it has acquired a new status.

Using Michael Polanyi cognitive model, we could argue that the notion of emptiness is no longer grasped by a focal awareness. It thus becomes subsidiary or tacit in our ways of experiencing reality, that is, with a fully pacified mind (Polanyi, Prosch, 1975). To put it simply, the notion of emptiness itself has become transparent in a way similar to the words (you are seeing just now) are when you are attending to the meaning they convey. It is only when this pacified mind is disturbed that the awareness of the notion of emptiness, as an object of the mind, reemerges or becomes visible like an unknown word in a *vākhya*. And simultaneously with the re-emergence of the notion emptiness reappears the *I* as an instrument whose sole purpose is to pacify the *Me*. Or, in another context, to say: "What does this word mean?" and do an action like looking for its meaning in a dictionary.

This explanation may solve in part the ethical dilemma raised by a scholar of Buddhism in which it was claimed that the idea of a subjectless pain is meaningless and that, consequently, there can be no Bodhisattva path based on the vow to save all sentient beings from suffering (Williams, 1998). Indeed, as the *I* is emerging when the *Me* is in a state of disequilibrium or off-centered, to follow the Sanskrit translation of the word "suffering" (*duḥ-kha*), a temporary connexion between a suffering *Me* (any sentient being yet to be awakened) and a compassionate *I/Me* (a Bodhisattva "acting" on the impetus of the bodhicitta) can be established. As such, the difference between effecting our own spiritual transformation and that of other people is just a question of range. If an awakened mind decided to remain isolated, it will not be very active. In contrast, such a

mind inserted in the world of off-centered minds will remain active as long as these minds have not been pacified.

10. Dedication

As mentioned above, the last chapter of the *BCA* may be viewed as the Perfection of giving when we have become a source of merits and virtues to be received by the sentient beings still caught in the world of suffering. As such, another cycle has been completed, namely the one initiated by our vow to save all beings and completed by our actual transformation into a channel through which the transforming power of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas circulates. In other words, if we have been cumulating merits throughout our progression toward the experience of being fully established in or submitted to the bodhicitta, it is now our turn to invert the process by becoming a distributor of such merits, that is, by causing other cycles of transformation to occur. In this concluding chapter, Śāntideva wishes for more of these distributors to emerge so that a critical mass may be attained for an irreversible transformation of the entire world.

Conclusion

The narration of the *BCA* may appear repetitive at times. This is because we are dealing with variations of a single theme or, to use a Buddhist analogy, the six Perfections are to be compared to the action of washing our hands: the left hand is rubbing the right one and vice versa. In the context of this analogy, the bodhicitta would be both the activity of washing and the state of being washed. Thus, the bodhicitta is the way as well as the goal that we ought to follow/achieve in order to become awakened. As such, the bodhicitta is like a raft that allows us to navigate on a river whose current is already carrying us to what our true destiny should be. To some extent, the bodhicitta appears to be very similar to the state of *flow* as described by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly—a state of complete absorption with what we are doing and in which motivation is intrinsic (Csikszentmihaly, 2008). Perhaps there is, for us, something of a *adhyāpakacitta* (teacher's mind) to be generated? If so, what would it take to cultivate it?

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