



# | Bodhicitta

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



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# Acknowledgement

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By the merit of this work, may Their Holiness the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



We are always being reminded with having bodhicitta, the enlightened mind when receiving teachings or doing Dharma practices.

Why is bodhicitta so important? The goal is to practice for all sentient beings. How are sentient beings related to us?

Is receiving the bodhicitta vow necessary even if we have good motivation to benefit others?

In this teaching, His Holiness gives a comprehensive explanation about bodhicitta. May we all be inspired and always uphold this precious, supreme bodhicitta.

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## Introduction

**B**odhicitta is based on nonviolence, infinite loving-kindness, and compassion. It is the root of all the practices of the Mahāyāna path and the cause of attaining the ultimate enlightenment of buddhahood. It is very important that we understand bodhicitta and that we cultivate it in our minds and in our practice. Today, I will explain the meaning of bodhicitta, its benefits, and its precepts. There are many other profound topics related to bodhicitta, but here I wish to cover only these three.

The word *bodhi* is related to *buddha*. It is a word for the ultimate result, which is complete buddhahood. The word *citta* means ‘mind.’ *Citta* here does not mean the mind of a buddha; it means our ordinary minds. So *bodhi-citta*, or enlightenment-mind, means the mind that has the wish to attain buddhahood. This is the literal meaning of *bodhicitta*.

Normally, we make wishes and efforts to achieve happiness in this life only and not in any ultimate way. However, on reflection, it is immediately clear that the happiness that we will achieve in the state of buddhahood should be much more important to us than our mundane happiness. If you were to ask an ordinary person, “Do you want happiness for a day or for the rest of your life?” Of course, that person would answer that they want lasting happiness. No one would choose to be happy for only a short period. We should be striving to achieve our ultimate happiness, the happiness that will remain forever. We should cultivate the wish to attain complete buddhahood.

There are profound differences between mundane happiness and ultimate happiness. We can understand these differences from three points of view: cause, nature, and duration. From the point of view of their cause, mundane happiness is the result of negative actions. But ultimate happiness is the result of pure, virtuous deeds. From the point of view of their nature, mundane happiness is the suffering of change. But ultimate happiness is free from the three kinds of sufferings. It is pure and unalloyed happiness. From the point of view of their duration, mundane happiness will only last for, at most, a few decades—until the end of this lifetime, which is not very long. Ultimate happiness will remain forever. Once we attain buddhahood, we will have happiness that remains forever. Because everyone of us here



has the potential to attain buddhahood, we should put our efforts into achieving it while we can.



## Relative and Ultimate Bodhicitta

**H**ere, we are talking about bodhicitta in the Mahāyāna tradition. As I said, *bodhi* refers to complete buddhahood, and this is different from the liberation sought by śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas. Bodhicitta in the Mahāyāna has two kinds: relative and ultimate bodhicitta. When you receive the bodhicitta vow<sup>[1]</sup>, this refers to relative bodhicitta. It is an aspiration made as a vow that you can receive from a master through a proper ritual.

Ultimate bodhicitta, however, is something that you cannot receive from your guru. Ultimate bodhicitta must come from your own practice of relative bodhicitta. Gradually, through practice and meditation, you will develop ultimate bodhicitta.

### Wishing and Engaging Bodhicitta

Relative bodhicitta has two kinds: wishing bodhicitta and

engaging bodhicitta. The difference between them is like the difference between having a wish to go to a holy place such as Bodhgaya and actually embarking on the journey. Just by making the wish for it, you will not arrive at the holy place of Bodhgaya. After generating the wish, you must prepare your travel documents if you are coming from abroad, pack, buy a plane ticket, fly, and so on. Similarly, you must perform many Dharma practices if you want to fulfill your wish to attain buddhahood. This is the distinction between wishing and engaging bodhicitta within relative bodhicitta.

To go into more detail on this, if someone has the wish to attain buddhahood before receiving the bodhicitta vow, this wish is not yet considered true wishing bodhicitta. Receiving the bodhicitta vow is what makes one a Mahāyāna Buddhist; it is the entrance to the Mahāyāna path. If someone has a wish to attain buddhahood before the stage of receiving the bodhicitta vow, then this is considered to be mere wishing, but not wishing bodhicitta. Similarly, without having the bodhicitta vow, someone might engage in the practices to attain buddhahood, and this is mere engaging, rather than engaging bodhicitta.

### **Wishing Bodhicitta**

So then, what is the meaning of wishing bodhicitta? Wishing

bodhicitta is generating the wish to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. To know what this really entails, it is important to recognize what we mean by “all sentient beings.” It is not enough to generate the wish to attain buddhahood only for the sake of all Buddhists of the different traditions, or only for the sake of your fellow countrymen and women, or for your friends and family. “All sentient beings” means all beings existing in the six realms of saṃsāra due to their karma and negative thoughts, including bardo beings. This is every one of the seven billion human beings on the planet, all the animals in the world, whether in the ocean or on the earth, beings in the hell realms, hungry ghosts, demigods, and gods.

If we really want to develop genuine bodhicitta, it is very important to realize this. The purpose of attaining complete buddhahood is for the benefit of all sentient beings, and we must proceed by focusing on the limitless extent of beings without any discrimination or exceptions—all sentient beings, as limitless as the sky. Thinking that we need to help them without any exception, we wish to attain buddhahood because at the moment we do not have the power to bring them complete happiness and liberation from suffering.

There are good reasons for why we should serve all sentient beings in the six realms. I will explain three. First, consider that

we have been born into saṃsāra an infinite number of times. Whenever we take rebirth, we do not have the same loved ones each time. Instead, each time that we are reborn, our loved ones are different than they were before. Because we have had an infinite number of past lives and an infinite number of different loved ones, we can know that all sentient beings have been our loved ones at one time or another in the past. In the present life, our loved ones are very kind to us, so that we wish to repay their kindness; in the same way, we should also wish to repay the kindness of all the loved ones that we have known in our past lives. We should wish to serve all of them and to help all of them.

A second reason is that just as each one of us wants to be happy and to overcome suffering, so every sentient being wants the same thing for themselves: We all have the same wish. It would not be right to ignore the welfare and the well-being of the others and to focus only on our own welfare when we all have the same common wish. It would not be proper. This is the second reason we should serve all sentient beings without any exception.

A third reason is that once you have taken the bodhicitta vow, then it would not be right *not* to act in accordance with the promise that you have made. If you have invited a guest to your

house, but you do not treat them properly when they come—by offering them food or drink, for example—this would not be right. Similarly, after making a promise to serve all sentient beings, you should not break your promise. Even in our worldly lives, it is not good to break a promise. A person who breaks their promises in the world is not considered a good person. How much more, as followers of the Buddha who have made such a strong and great promise—how much more important is it that we should not break it!

At the moment, however, we do not have the power to fully liberate all sentient beings from their suffering and place them in the state of complete enlightenment. Even very powerful worldly god in *samsāra* do not have that power. Not even noble beings like the bodhisattvas who are yet on the *bhūmis* possess the ultimate power to liberate all beings and place them in the state of ultimate happiness. Only the Lord Buddha and other perfect buddhas have the full and ultimate power to do this. Therefore, we should think that for the sake of all sentient beings, we really must attain this state of perfect buddhahood. With these thoughts, we can generate a sincere and genuine wish to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. When we have such a wish together with the bodhicitta vow, then this is known as wishing bodhicitta.

## **Engaging Bodhicitta**

As I said before, bodhicitta is based on nonviolence, limitless loving-kindness, and compassion. With these as a basis, we generate wishing bodhicitta. After that, we generate engaging bodhicitta, which can be received in the same ceremony as wishing bodhicitta or in a separate ceremony.

Engaging bodhicitta means engaging in Dharma practice in order to attain buddhahood. No one can reach buddhahood without the proper causes and conditions for attaining it. It is just like wanting to become a scholar: no one can become a scholar without study and training. There are many kinds of scholars in the world in different fields. All of them studied hard and completed the educational requirements that were needed to become experts. Similarly, without practicing the Dharma, no one can attain buddhahood.

To practice Dharma in a pure way, you must begin with the right motivation. This means, first, developing the thought of renunciation towards the whole of saṃsāra; second, developing limitless loving-kindness and compassion; and third, generating bodhicitta. With these in mind, you can proceed with the main

Dharma practice. In the main practice, you should cultivate the right visualization, focus, and attention. In the conclusion to your practice, you should make the dedication in the proper way. If your practice includes all these parts done properly, then the action is a complete positive action. Such complete positive actions are the remedy for overcoming suffering, negative thoughts, and negative actions<sup>[2]</sup>. This is the right method for achieving both temporary and ultimate happiness.

We can elaborate on the significance of the bodhicitta vow even further. According to the teachings, receiving the vow transforms your very name: before the vow, you are just an ordinary human being. But after receiving the vow, you become a bodhisattva—that is to say, a member of Mahāyāna Buddhist family, because *bodhisattva* means a being who has bodhicitta. With the bodhicitta vow, you are of the race of a buddha, or the child of a buddha.

Receiving the bodhicitta vow, becoming a bodhisattva, and entering into the Mahāyāna path: all of these are the same thing, and they occur at the same time: the moment that you receive the bodhicitta vow. It is similar to the way that you can be naturalized in India in a ceremony and from that moment you are an Indian: The bodhicitta vow makes one a bodhisattva.



After receiving the vow, you will be worthy of prostrations and veneration from other human beings and from the gods. At the same time, however, you must not have any arrogance or pride. These negative thoughts can spoil your bodhicitta, your precious enlightenment mind. Being careful not to have arrogance or pride, we should develop bodhicitta and gain the limitless benefits that it brings.

## Benefits of the Bodhicitta Vow

**M**aybe you have already received the vow, and maybe you plan to receive it in the future. In any case, once the bodhicitta vow has been taken through a proper ritual from a genuine master, and if it is kept properly, then it brings limitless and inconceivable benefits. It has been said that if these benefits had physical form, the whole universe would be too small to contain them.

These benefits are both temporary and ultimate. Putting into practice the sincere wish to help and serve all sentient beings, becoming the helper of all beings—such positive actions please all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. When I say putting into practice the wish to serve or help all sentient beings, this means that mentally we should have the wish to help or serve limitless sentient beings without exception or discrimination. Mentally, we can extend our sincere wish this way, but in practice, it is not possible for us to actually help limitless sentient beings because

of our limited body and speech. Practically then, we should try to help as many of them as possible, while holding in mind the wish to help them all. Doing this is the most excellent offering that you can make to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. We cannot please them by offering material gifts, things that they do not need. What they wish from us is that we should follow the bodhisattva's way of life and act in accordance with bodhicitta. This is the most excellent offering that anyone can make to the buddhas and the noble bodhisattvas, and by doing this, we will not only make others happy, we will please the buddhas and the noble bodhisattvas, and we will accumulate great merit.

When we have strong bodhicitta, we will overcome all the obstacles of this life and have all favorable conditions not only in this life, but in future lives. Furthermore, through performing strong actions based on bodhicitta, we will be able to control negative thoughts and negative actions—things that are the causes of suffering. Strong Dharma practice and strong virtuous or meritorious deeds really can defeat negative thoughts and our nonvirtuous actions.

If we believe that we need to keep bodhicitta, then we should not have hatred or anger in our minds. Trying to defeat external enemies out of anger is the complete opposite of bodhicitta. Anger and hatred are things that can destroy our precious

bodhicitta, our precious enlightenment mind. We must strive to protect it and keep it intact at all times. By keeping our bodhicitta as pure as possible, we can experience happiness and bring the same to others. We can accomplish peace and harmony. Bodhicitta, not conflict or hatred, creates peace. If we want world peace, then all of us should cultivate loving-kindness and compassion. Then, among those of us who are Mahāyāna followers, we should also generate bodhicitta.

The ultimate benefit of developing bodhicitta is that we will attain complete buddhahood. Bodhicitta is the cause of complete buddhahood, the state of liberation free from all types of sufferings and obscurations, and possessing all the highest qualities, such as ultimate knowledge, ultimate wisdom, ultimate power, ultimate compassion, and so on. These infinite qualities will remain forever. Having become buddhas, we will never fall from that state. If we learn about and contemplate these benefits, it will motivate us to develop and practice bodhicitta, to preserve and protect our precious bodhicitta.

# Precepts for Preserving the Bodhicitta Vow

**T**o protect our bodhicitta, we should avoid the fourteen root downfalls. This language sounds like the Vajrayāna. When you receive an anuttarayoga empowerment, there are fourteen root downfalls that are explained. However, the downfalls are different in the texts explaining bodhicitta.<sup>[3]</sup>

The first is using for oneself the offerings or wealth of the Triple Gem. If someone offers a beautiful cloak to a buddha statue, for example, and we snatch it from the statue to make something to wear, then this is not right. Using wealth offered to the Triple Gem for personal enjoyment is the first downfall. If someone makes a donation to publish a Dharma book, or someone offers fine cloth to wrap a Dharma book, it is not right to use this money or material for any other purpose. If someone makes offerings to a monastery, to its monks and nuns, and if we were to use this money for our own family members, then this, too, would not be right. All of these are examples of the first root downfall.

The second is abandoning the holy Dharma, the right path to attain buddhahood, or causing another to abandon it.

The third is this: if someone tries to defrock a monk or a nun, perhaps because they are not keeping pure moral conduct, or for any other reason, this is a downfall. It is wrong for another person to try to force this, even if the person is not keeping pure moral conduct. Those who cannot maintain pure moral conduct must decide for themselves what to do, and it is wrong—a downfall—to seek to punish them.

The fourth is having the wrong view. This means not believing in the law of karma, not believing in the Triple Gem, or harboring doubts and hesitations about whether these things are true. I do not mean that we should have blind faith in the law of karma and in the Triple Gem. We must use logical reasoning, study, and contemplation to acquire a sound understanding and to develop firm confidence in the right view.

The fifth root downfall is committing one of the five heinous crimes: killing one's father or mother, killing an arhat, shedding the blood of a buddha motivated by one's negative thoughts, and causing division in the saṅgha during the time of a buddha. Causing division in any saṅgha community at any time is not right, but it is not considered one of the five heinous crimes

unless it is done during the time of a buddha.

A sixth downfall is to destroy a village, town, or district.

There is another group of eight downfalls that can destroy the bodhicitta vow. The first of them is to explain the ultimate view to someone who has not developed bodhicitta or accumulated great merit. The second is to discourage those who are following the bodhisattva's way of life, the Mahāyāna path. If someone discourages another, saying that the bodhisattva path is difficult, or that they should change to the Śrāvakayāna or the Pratyekabuddhayāna, this is a root downfall.

Disparaging the prātimokṣa or vinaya vow, encouraging others to abandon that vow and path and instead to follow the Mahāyāna—this is the third of this group of eight. Actually, there are different kinds of vinaya paths, and not all of them are non-Mahāyāna. With bodhicitta, one can keep vinaya vows like the bhikṣu vows. Such vinaya vows are proper to keep according to the Mahāyāna tradition—it will not violate or go against the bodhicitta vow. However, if one says otherwise, encouraging others to give up the vinaya vows to follow the Mahāyāna path, this is a root downfall. The vinaya vows can still be kept on the basis on the motivation of the Mahāyāna, which is developing infinite loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta. The fourth

is disparaging the śrāvaka path; for example, by saying that it obstructs one from attaining enlightenment or from eradicating the afflictions.

The fifth of this group of eight is having a strong attachment to receiving praise and respect from others. With such a motivation and selfish intention, if one talks about one's own qualities and criticizes others, then it is not right.

The sixth is to advertise that one has the right view, has attained such-and-such results, and then to take others as followers, telling them that if they wish to attain buddhahood they should follow you. Done to gain fame, respect, and wealth, this is a root downfall.

The seventh is creating divisive speech between kings or ministers, causing them to fight or otherwise to be in disharmony. For example, if you report to a minister, "That person is criticizing you and saying bad things about you," and if this speech causes the minister to hate that person, then there will more disharmony and more fighting. Similarly, if we cause disharmony within our Dharma circles, this is also not right.

The eighth of these downfalls is to criticize a meditator or teacher who has attracted many followers, thinking that it



will cause problems for you if you lose your own followers or sponsors to them.

In short, there are fourteen root downfalls. I have only explained them in a rough way here, and so I encourage you to learn about them and to avoid them. It will help you keep and protect your bodhicitta in a pure way. Avoiding the root downfalls will enhance your bodhicitta so that you can make steady progress and eventually attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings without any exception.

There are other general precepts that we should follow. These include remembering the shortcomings of saṃsāra and the faults of gaining nirvāṇa for one's own sake alone. We should think that all sentient beings are our dear ones and our beloved parents. We should understand the law of karma as much as possible, so that we will know what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned. We should try to follow these rules properly without making any mistakes.

There are also specific rules to follow after developing wishing bodhicitta. Foremost, we should strive to prevent any decrease in our precious bodhicitta or any damage to it. The way to do this is never to allow any discouragements. We must avoid thoughts like, "I cannot attain buddhahood," because such

thoughts will damage our bodhicitta. To counter them, think that even tiny insects can attain buddhahood, if only they develop bodhicitta. It is said in the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* by the great Nālandā master Śāntideva, “Even tiny insects can attain buddhahood if only they generate bodhicitta. So why cannot I?”

At the moment, we are here in this precious human rebirth, so difficult to obtain from many different points of view. We have met qualified gurus and the genuine buddhadharma. We have met with all the favorable conditions to practice the Dharma, so there is no reason for us not to attain buddhahood; there is no reason for us to have discouraging thoughts. We should overcome such thoughts and protect our precious bodhicitta, avoiding all unfavorable conditions that might damage bodhicitta. We should follow the methods for increasing bodhicitta, such as meeting qualified masters and receiving teachings from them; reflecting on the inconceivable, ultimate qualities of the buddhas; and generating sincere and unshakable faith. Try to remember the benefit of bodhicitta. Try to practice infinite loving-kindness and compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings.

“For the sake of all sentient beings, I wish to attain

buddhahood.” We should keep this wish in mind at all times, without any break. As for engaging bodhicitta, we should abandon any causes that could damage it, such as deceiving a guru, qualified master, holy being, or sincere practitioner—even if it is intended as a joke. We should never belittle or speak harshly to others when they do good things, even in jest. We should not criticize or speak harsh words to bodhisattvas, even in jest. We should not deceive others, even in jest. These things can damage engaging bodhicitta, and we should abandon them and try to follow instead the methods that can enhance and increase our bodhicitta. If we make any of these errors and do not have regret afterwards, then this also is not right.

We should never intentionally tell any harmful lies. We should always be without any deceptive thoughts in the presence of all sentient beings, and we should strive to help all of them, as much as possible, both mentally and in practice. We should show high respect to all bodhisattvas and praise them to everyone.

Try to lead others on the right path. Try to help others develop bodhicitta, to help them practice bodhicitta, and to help them follow the bodhisattva’s way of life. These things will really enhance your engaging bodhicitta.

With this, I conclude my short talk on bodhicitta. I sincerely wish that all of you will truly understand and follow the bodhisattva's way of life and keep your bodhicitta protected at all times. All of you can obtain temporary and ultimate happiness, which is buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. I sincerely wish that the blessings of our root guru and the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha will be with you now and always.

Notes:

[1] Also called the *bodhisattva* vow.

[2] *Karma* means "action" in Sanskrit.

[3] The tradition of the bodhisattva vow and its downfalls taught here is the Mādhyamaka one, associated with Nāgārjuna and Śāntideva and passed down to the great Lama Sakyapa. The downfalls are derived from the Ākāśagarbha Sūtra, which names five downfalls of kings, five of ministers, and eight of ordinary people. That adds up to eighteen downfalls. However, four of the downfalls of kings are also downfalls of ministers. When the overlap is eliminated, the eighteen downfalls become fourteen. Note that when something is said to be a downfall of kings, this does not mean that it only applies to kings. All of the downfalls apply to all who take the bodhisattva vow. However, some of them are more likely to be committed by kings or ministers than by ordinary people.





■ His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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