

Loving Kindness is Realistic: A Teaching on Bodhicitta

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Loving Kindness is Realistic

Good evening everyone. I would like to begin by expressing great gratitude to everyone from the capitol area and beyond who have worked for many months to enable us to have this wonderful occasion and the blessings of the presence of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. (Applause)

His Holiness's blessings, teachings, and the commencement of the empowerment and initiations today—and most importantly, simply the inspiration of his presence—speak volumes of the Buddha's teachings. To add anything to that would just be words. But we live in a world of concepts built with words, and sometimes working with words may be helpful for our path of practice. So I am very honored and happy to be here this evening.

[Editor's note: *The following remarks refer to some unruliness that arose in the very large crowd, during the distribution of kusha grass and protection cords.*]

I have been asked to say something on the topic of bodhichitta. This is, of course, a very profound topic and the integral essence of Buddhadharma. At the same time, given today's events, this topic may also serve to allow us all to enjoy simply sitting down calmly and being a little more tolerant and patient with one another. (Applause)

We have all gathered to hear and to seek the blessing empowerment of His Holiness, whose message has always been altruism, kindness, and selflessness. Repeatedly, His Holiness reminds us, in many different ways, that the best legacy of our human life is the practice of *decreasing* self-absorption and a self-cherishing attitude. Hearing this again and again, it becomes very important not only to believe in it, follow it, and hold it as our view, but also to actualize it in our conduct and our attitude.

Receiving kusha grass is a very important part of the preliminaries of the empowerment; and, too, we would all like to receive blessing cords and protection cords. But the quintessence and genuine core of all blessings—particularly from the Vajrayana perspective of following the guru's command to integrate the teachings into our lives—the very pith instruction of the kusha grass and protection would be to actually *embody* the teachings.

This instruction doesn't have to fill volumes of books. It doesn't have to be said in many Sanskrit or Tibetan words, and it doesn't have to be a philosophy or religion. It is just two words: loving kindness.

Bodhichitta is loving kindness. And so a contradiction *will* come if, for example, I talk about bodhichitta but then hold kusha grass to be more important, or if I run after blessing cords at the cost of loving kindness. There is a contradiction in that, which doesn't particularly come from the Buddhist teachings.

I was teasing the volunteers—who were very sad not to be able to get kusha grass to everyone—to just bid everyone “good night” with a smile and, instead of kusha grass, wish them sweet dreams. After all, the purpose of the kusha grass is to indicate the kind of dream that would connect you to tomorrow's empowerments. If His Holiness knew that you had sweet dreams that wished everyone goodness, happiness, and peace—which

is the most essential thing to accumulate here with the Kalachakra in Washington D.C.—that will have truly brought about the fruition of the empowerments.

Awakened Heart and Mind of Enlightenment

Many of you are familiar with the term bodhichitta. For those of you for whom it is new, a very simple translation might be “awakened heart,” or literally “awakened mind of enlightenment.”

A slightly more elaborate explanation might translate bodhichitta as “courage.” By cultivating a basis of courage in your own state of mind, you are able to diminish and possibly abandon the stronghold of all those circumstance that obstruct your inner potential to be helpful, loving, and kind to others. That would be the first thing.

Second, bodhichitta is the basis upon which one is able to cultivate and strengthen *positive* ideas and circumstances. Thus—by decreasing those causes that inflict harm and suffering—we increase a state of mind that can truly bring about the causes and conditions of happiness in others’ lives.

A simple way to look at it is to ask yourself this question: As a human being, is my life increasingly directed towards building up the causes and conditions that create an environment of happiness for myself and those around me? That is how to find out if you are working with bodhichitta.

Bodhichitta is not about working with some big Sanskrit or Tibetan philosophy or project for the future. And—other than four basic conditions—it does not depend on external conditions.

Generating Bodhichitta

There are four primary conditions upon which bodhichitta can be based and generated.

Number one: bodhichitta—whether you call it good-heartedness, loving kindness, enlightened heart, or awakened heart—is able to arise from innate wakefulness. If you are someone with an innate power of reflection or thoughtfulness, gentleness, and quietness; if you are able, without depending on any external supports, to wake up to the *feeling* that bodhichitta resonates in your mind—this is one way that bodhichitta can be generated.

*Virtue is about using your senses in a way that is responsive
to the needs of others.*

Second, bodhichitta is generated through the strength of a virtuous life, which means one’s virtuous attitude and conduct. Such virtue is nothing profound. It means being mindful and consciously aware of how your actions and speech affect others. When you go to a restaurant, for example, and some wonderful person holds the door open so you can pass through, that is a simple gesture of virtue.

Virtue is about decency; it’s about respect. Virtue is about using your senses in a way that is responsive to the needs of others. If that kind of virtue is naturally strong in you—even if you cannot *say* the Sanskrit word—you can be sure that bodhichitta resides in your heart.

Third, bodhichitta is said to arise from the strength of meditation and contemplation. Through the power of meditating and contemplating, you may meet with the inner wisdom awareness. That very simple “clicking-in” brings the awareness that the actions of your body, speech, and mind do impact the lives of others. You cannot be careless with your attitude or actions, because this is not—as many of us believe—just your life.

Our lives *do* depend on others; in the same way, many lives do depend on us. What I say and do, my personality, mannerisms and behavior, my likes and dislikes all have an immense impact on the lives of my family and friends, the people I work with, my community, society, and the world at large. When that awareness arises as the resultant state of contemplation, meditation, or reflection that is also a point where bodhichitta can arise.

The fourth basis from which bodhichitta can arise is what you are experiencing [during the Kalachakra empowerment]: by being in the presence of an enlightened spiritual master, whose very life is an inspiration to cultivate bodhichitta. This is the fourth way one may be inspired to meet with bodhichitta. Then you don’t have to spend so much time philosophizing about one of the most simple, beautiful, and most cherished qualities of human nature: loving kindness, which is bodhichitta.

It is very helpful to explore these four: innate wakefulness, the strength of virtue, the strength of meditation, and being in the presence of great beings who exemplify great compassion and loving kindness. These are the bases from which bodhichitta can arise.

Five Things to Cultivate

What, then, are we producing or cultivating through our innate wakefulness? Through the strength of our virtue and meditation, or through being in the presence of great teachers—what are we cultivating? To summarize this very wide topic, there are five principle things we should try to cultivate.

The first thing to cultivate—by which one can confidently say one is practicing bodhichitta—is unconditional love. This is “number one” for anyone trying to practice kindness through Buddhist teachings or any other mode of contemplation or reflection.

Loving kindness is not going to suddenly drop down from the sky because we are loyal to the idea of bodhichitta. We Tibetans have lived hoping that some day thunder and lightning would strike us, and suddenly we’d be more aware of basic sanity. But in the 1200-year history of Tibetan Buddhism, it hasn’t happened. In the West, you tend to be more intelligent. You don’t believe in those accidental enlightenment stories, which is very good. You should not cultivate the bad habit of the easterners waiting with devotion for something to accidentally strike. It is not going to happen.

Loving kindness and bodhichitta depend on a love that is unconditional. Unconditional love does not begin with somebody else, and you can’t wait to develop it until everybody starts behaving. Unconditional love has to be given *at* the cost of your own agendas and ambitions.

That unconditional love, however, is not difficult to produce for human beings. As fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, as children and parents, as friends, as teachers, as doctors and lawyers—well, I don’t know about the lawyers (laughter)—we *are* familiar with generating kindness. And just as you may not be confident that your kindness is

100-percent unconditional, neither can you be totally sure that you do not know how to love.

You do know how to love. Unconditional love, however, does not happen on day one or day two or year one of being a Buddhist—unless you have absolutely wonderful potential and wisdom. Unconditional love is a process that builds on smaller amounts of love: love that is immediate, that is now, that is done today—and if not actually done, is at least thought of today.

You begin by *thinking* of cultivating loving kindness. You begin teaching yourself that this is not difficult to do. It is something you like to do. It is something that makes sense. By developing an affinity with the ideology of loving kindness, the human mind begins to understand what loving kindness is.

*That... negative habit can be transformed into a positive habit.
You can make loving your habit, you can make patience your habit.*

The one reason that so many negative ideas and concepts—anger, jealousy, arrogance, intolerance, impatience—get stuck in our minds is repetition. Repeating an action, again and again, makes it so familiar it becomes a bad habit. But that same negative habit can be transformed into a positive habit. You can make *loving* your habit. You can make patience your habit. You can repeat the thought of loving kindness in your mind to the point where loving kindness becomes such a strong concept, you must put it into practice.

This first kind of love, unconditional love, is the nature of bodhichitta. So if anyone asks, “what is bodhichitta?” the first answer is that bodhichitta is unconditional love. This is something you are familiar with. You just have to build it up to become stronger, more pure, and more evident in your everyday life.

The second thing to cultivate is a strong sense of awareness that cherishes loving kindness and wishes happiness for all sentient beings. You may *say* you want to develop bodhichitta and the mahayana teachings, the prajnaparamita teachings, of the Buddha, upon which are based the bodhichitta practices of the bodhisattvas. But the practice of bodhichitta must be based on a mind that truly cherishes the wellbeing of others. So you are teaching yourself to think in such a way that all others have happiness.

To actually like happiness, to want happiness and the encountering of the causes of happiness for all sentient beings—that is the second point.

Third, to cultivate bodhichitta is to have a strong, undiminishing aspiration that all sentient beings never meet with suffering or the causes of suffering. Knowing that all beings would enjoy moments without suffering, you must cultivate a strong wish—just as strong as you wish for everyone to meet with happiness—that they not encounter suffering. And when you do see suffering, learn from that suffering to make even more of an aspiration that other beings do not encounter such unfortunate circumstances.

In that way, make suffering bring a greater understanding of suffering and a greater wish that suffering not befall all other sentient beings. That is the third point to cultivate.

May I become enlightened in order to exhaust every iota of

self-cherishing. In this way, may I serve the purpose of others.

Fourth, the bodhichitta nature is based on cultivating a strong wish for enlightenment. Not the kind of enlightenment so misunderstood in today's world of spiritual materialism, rather enlightenment that allows you to overcome absolutely all traces of self-cherishing.

“May I become enlightened in order to exhaust every iota of self-cherishing. And in this way, may I serve the purpose of others.” *That* is enlightenment—and that is the fourth aspect of the bodhichitta nature.

Simply put: by cultivating diligence in building mindfulness, mindfulness will free you from becoming a cause of suffering to others.

The fifth aspect of bodhichitta is the cultivation of diligence and exertion. The increase of diligence and exertion brings the decrease of all obstructing circumstances that create within you the possibility of bringing harm or hurt to another sentient being. Simply put: by cultivating diligence in building mindfulness, mindfulness will free you from becoming a cause of suffering to others.

These five aspects of the bodhichitta nature are summarized as “cultivating bodhichitta.” Looking at loving kindness from these five perspectives, we are actually looking at engaging bodhichitta in action.

Bodhichitta in Aspiration and Action

Now, loving kindness is a very popular topic. We have numerous books on loving kindness, and we like to meditate on loving kindness. But I often tease our Buddhist friends that it's very nice to *like* the idea of cultivating bodhichitta and loving kindness. You all like the idea of breathing out kindness and light, and breathing in the suffering of sentient beings in the form of black light. But I would love to see the day when the spread of loving kindness is not restricted to the breath. If I were on the receiving end, I'd like to get something other than hot air. (Laughter and applause)

Sometimes it's important to go out of the beautiful box of spirituality to actually see what you are trying to do. It is very important—especially if you've begun to see yourself as a Mahayana Buddhist trying to practice bodhichitta—to go outside the community of Buddhist practitioners and actually engage with the world. People there are more grounded and more able to give you honest feedback than you might get in an environment like this.

The real feedback happens outside the door. Sitting inside in an air-conditioned stadium, it is fairly easy to send out the good air of loving kindness to others. But this is just a prelude to actually generating bodhichitta.

The actual generation of bodhichitta must be strengthened by mindfulness: a mindfulness strong enough to watch every deception that your body, speech, and mind come up with, to secretly and constantly give you the message of self-cherishing self-absorption.

The message of cultivating loving kindness is a very simple message that has nothing much to do with Buddhist teachings. Loving kindness is a natural affinity, a natural emotion or feeling, which we can actually understand in the most simple way. But that

simplicity is often drowned in the slyness of our self-cherishing attitude, which has become a very strong habit in our personalities.

It is through the kindness of the many great teachers—beginning with the Buddha himself, to the many teachers especially in the Mahayana tradition—that we are able to cultivate these teachings. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it is from Asanga and Nagarjuna, two great exponents of these teachings, that we have two prevalent traditions of cultivating the bodhisattva vow and developing bodhichitta.

Everyone wants happiness and no one wants suffering.

Of course, all the diverse lineages have certain subtle distinctions, but I would like to talk here about their similarities. All the traditions give this same instruction: because we are so used to living lives dominated by self-cherishing, it is essential to quiet the mind and cultivate a practice that encourages us to get in touch with what is actually a natural emotion and inherent nature of all human beings.

Human beings are the *only* ones who can desire happiness and actually do something to bring it about. This is an immense power and ability that human beings are endowed with. The great teachers beginning with the Buddha himself began teaching the Dharma by tapping into this inherent ability and wisdom, which is the nature of all human beings.

As the teachings always say: Everyone wants happiness and no one wants suffering. This simple line is the basis of compassion and altruism. It directs our attention to the fact that what human beings are trying to cultivate is a potential that we actually have. We all have the freedom to want happiness, as do all other beings; but we can actually do something to bring happiness about. No other beings are fully capable of generating or producing this quality. To tap into this natural potential, we have the different methods of Buddhist meditation that have to do with cultivating bodhichitta.

The similar emphasis of *all* the lineages, particularly those of Nagarjuna and Asanga, lies in cultivating two kinds of bodhichitta: aspiration bodhichitta and engagement bodhichitta. Aspiration bodhichitta simply means cultivating bodhichitta in one's thinking; engagement bodhichitta means cultivating bodhichitta in one's actions.

The problem is that we all want to immediately launch into compassionate action. When I first started coming to the west, it seemed the topic I was most often asked to speak on was compassion in action. It's a nice topic—but if you launch into it without really working with your own aspiration, a problem arises where the action and the drive for the action both become diminished.

I always like to use the example of the nuns I live with. Now, Tibetan nuns are very good people, very innocent and naïve. And when they hear teachings that happen to be on building generosity and compassion, they become highly inspired to become generous bodhisattvas. So for the first day or two we have the nuns giving everything away. But the pattern we observed was that it only took a week or two, until all the younger nuns were going around trying to take their things back. We then had to make a rule in the nunnery: after attending a teaching on generosity and compassion, nobody is allowed to give anything away until they are really sure they won't take it back. (Laughter)

This is just a simple example of what can actually happen if you do not first cultivate aspiration bodhichitta in your own mind.

Four Immeasurable Qualities

To cultivate aspiration bodhichitta, you must work to cultivate what are known as the “four immeasurable qualities.”

First, aspiration bodhichitta is about thoroughly generating in your mind a sincere wish for the happiness of all sentient beings. This is called cultivating the quality of loving kindness. You can begin by bringing to mind someone to whom you can really express your love and kindness. Practice with them first—because in order to develop the great compassion of bodhichitta, one has to begin with a kind and loving mind.

I remember one day—after many years of being with students and speaking about various dharma topics—going back to my teacher, who asked me a simple question: “Do you really like the people you talk to about Buddhist teachings?” When I thought about this, I found that I didn’t necessarily dislike them, but I didn’t *like* them, either. That was a moment in my life when I realized how extremely important it is—prior to any ambitious hope of compassion for all sentient beings—to be willing to let go the self-cherishing attitude that one lives with one’s whole life.

You have to start by liking others. You will have to learn to see another person and train your mind to say that you have no problem with how they look; no problem with what they’re saying; and no problem with the fact that they’re sitting in front of you and you can’t see a thing. You must be able to like these fellow human beings you live with. This is the kind of loving kindness you must cultivate.

The second quality is an attitude of compassion—which will never arise without understanding the magnitude and heaviness of suffering. I come from India, and I really believe this is one country where you can really practice well. Because one of the greatest things you find in the East, especially in India, is that everything is there to be seen. Of course, like every other country, there are layers and layers of good hiding. But it is nothing compared to what I find in the west, where you have an absolutely beautiful way of packaging things.

In this modern world, we have built up our societies in such a way that we’ve all become very adept at covering things up. Nothing looks ugly or sad, nothing looks inefficient, nothing looks like it’s actually on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Everyone looks very good—but this kind of cover-up doesn’t allow us to address the issue of suffering.

Many have come to a point of trying to understand suffering through books. Of course, some will say: Yes, I *do* understand what suffering is. I’m suffering from a disease—or divorce, or I’ve lost my job, my money, my home. *That* is suffering.

Yes, indeed, that is suffering. On the other hand, it does not open our mind to the pain and hurt that millions of sentient beings are actually experiencing in this world. And that builds up a bubble: a beautiful bubble that we keep chasing—and in that chase, we forget how to live with and be tolerant of one another.

In order to make your heart moist with compassion, you will have to become brave enough to look straight into the eyes of the pain and suffering of others. You will have to look into the needs of people's minds and see their hunger, anxiety, apprehensions, and insecurities. You will have to be able to read beneath the make-up and polite words—and through that develop a sympathetic attitude.

Compassion depends on a sympathetic attitude that is able to hear and see others—and not just live in a cocoon or bubble of one's own expectations of a beautiful painless world. Compassion is the second immeasurable quality.

The third quality is the cultivation of joyfulness. You will never be able to understand genuine kindness and compassion if you are not joyful. The problem is that people think that to be kind, patient, and free of anger means to be a doormat. It means people will take advantage of you—and then what will happen to *me*? And that makes you go back to the natural habit of self-cherishing, where there is no happiness or joy.

The joyfulness we're talking about is not a “ha, ha” kind of a happiness. It is not about building superficial happiness out of one's endeavor to cultivate loving kindness and genuine compassion. Joyfulness comes from something very simple: the ability to look at another person and find something *good* about them, rather than habitually seeing what's “wrong.”

When I was growing up in a Catholic convent school, a bishop and some priests would come to teach us. I remember they would have us look at a glass of water and ask, “Is this glass of water half empty or half full?” And they would talk about developing a positive attitude, and how you shouldn't see the glass as half empty, but as half full. I take great inspiration from this simple example.

Now examine how your own mind works. For example, you are one of 11,000 people in the Verizon Center in the presence of His Holiness. You are sitting on a chair, and someone keeps walking in front of you during a session of meditation. How does your mind work? Does it say, “What a nice walk that man is having around the center”—or does it say, “Why can't he just sit down?” (Laughter)
You have to hear your mind and the ideas it builds up when it looks at the environment, or sees another person, or is just able to wake up and say, “What a good day.”

Joyfulness is the ability to see something good: something good in the day, something good in the society and community, something good in your home, something good in yourself and those around you. A positive attitude makes you feel closer to others—but it's a tremendously difficult practice to do. You may find it easier to have sympathy, easier to love and cherish others. Just remember that it is extremely difficult to develop positive ideas in relation to another person.

So joyfulness also comes from what we call “seeing the accomplishment of others.” This means finding your happiness in the happiness of others—and giving up the idea that your own happiness can only come when *you* are the compassionate one. You will have to learn to be compassionate by not only being the giver but also the receiver, and by finding your happiness just as much in receiving goodness from others as giving to them. This is finding happiness in the happiness of others.

This makes you more open to accepting the world as it is, rather than cultivating compassion with conditions: “I’ll give you loving kindness, but you’ll all have to behave and respond to my conditions.” Therefore this is said to be one of the most important qualities to cultivate.

The fourth quality to cultivate is equanimity. The building up of aspiration bodhichitta begins with an unbiased attitude. Bias, here, means directing your loving kindness only towards those people you get along with, but not reaching out to the people you don’t like. It is very important that loving kindness does not become biased.

Gradually, too, make sure that your loving kindness doesn’t become aggressive—which means pushing your kindness down the throat of someone who is saying, “No, I don’t want your loving kindness.” Loving kindness has to be free from any such aggressive or ambitious projects you may have.

The antidote to partiality, deception, aggressiveness, and ambition is compassion. For your loving kindness to be genuine, reflect more and more on the pervasive suffering and pain that others are going through. You will find this decreases any aggressiveness or bias that may develop in loving kindness.

When this unbiased attitude of equanimity, free from every partiality, is brought into the previous three qualities, these then are the “four immeasurable qualities.”

Being Realistic

In the end, virtue is nothing other than good actions of body, good actions of speech, and good actions of mind in the form of positive thoughts.

When we talk about bodhichitta in the context of the Buddhist teachings, we always talk about “*all* sentient beings”: relieving all sentient beings from suffering, and liberating all sentient beings. This is a very good focus to have—if you can do it, very good. But let’s be a bit realistic. Let’s try to start at home. Start with the person sitting next to you. Start with the person who didn’t get their kusha grass or protection cord.

Many of you have had the good fortune to learn meditation. But you have to know that meditation has to be channeled; it has to be directed towards cultivating bodhichitta. As His Holiness said this afternoon, just as you cannot satisfy a hungry person by meditating on food, simply meditating on bodhichitta will not be that helpful. Simply visualizing or believing in bodhichitta will not cultivate kindness.

Kindness depends on virtue. And in the end, virtue is nothing other than good actions of body, good actions of speech, and the good actions of mind in the form of positive thoughts. So let’s start by trying to leave here tonight more decently resembling people who have heard His Holiness’s teachings on shunyata, and spent an evening reflecting on the topic of bodhichitta.



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