



OPEN EYE

Meditation Group

See for Yourself

Nurturing the Intelligent Heart | Part One

-Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel

Bodhicitta is the jewel of Mahayana Buddhism. While the term is usually translated as “awakened mind,” my teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, has often referred to bodhicitta as “intelligent heart” in that both wisdom and compassion are equally necessary for spiritual growth to occur.

It is important to understand that bodhicitta is not some “thing” you either have or don’t have, or something that you need to acquire. It is a way of relating with mind and the world that is based on seeing the nature of things in an unconfused way. Its purpose is a test of what we can become—the greatest unfolding of our human potential.

Those who actively practice bodhicitta are bodhisattvas. I sometimes use the phrase “burning with love in a world we can’t fix” to remind myself of what being a bodhisattva actually means. Bodhicitta is often misunderstood to mean compassionate activity alone, but it is much more than that. Bodhicitta contains an aspect of wisdom through which we can address questions concerning the human condition, such as: What if I want to burn with love but my heart feels like a dry seed? What do I do when I feel overwhelmed by the suffering I see in the world? How can I make a difference in a world that doesn’t lend itself to being fixed in a determinate way?

Such questions can be explored through the traditional presentation of three interconnected parts that provide the infrastructure for awakening:

1. aspirational bodhicitta
2. engaged bodhicitta
3. absolute bodhicitta.

ASPIRATIONAL BODHICITTA

On the path of bodhicitta one holds an aspiration: “Beings are limitless, I vow to free them all.” This is a challenging statement. From the outset you are presented with a task that seems impossible to achieve. In addition, you may wonder what it means to “liberate” someone—doesn’t it sound a bit

presumptuous? Furthermore, isn’t freedom something one must discover for oneself?

But if you sit with this aspiration for a while, you may discover that the vow to free limitless beings from their suffering asks you to do something unexpected, remarkable, and within your reach. It invites you to move outside the barriers of ordinary logic and enter into a unique way of seeing things.

In his famous text *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva explains that just as your limbs extend outward from the trunk of your own body, you can include all conscious creatures as extensions of your ever-expanding self. In other words, serving others doesn’t mean you have to give up self-care. In fact, you don’t have to get rid of your ego at all. All you have to do is make it big enough to include all beings in the realm of your care, and make them the recipient of the love and protection you usually reserve only for yourself.

In this spirit, try to frame the vow in this way: “Yes, beings are limitless and their suffering is limitless. I will therefore have to expand the realm of my care limitlessly in order to include them all.” A mind set on this aspiration transforms the vow to serve all beings into a living practice.

That practice, however, will take some training. After all, as much as it sounds meaningful and liberating to burn with love, your heart may often feel barren or indifferent. The path of aspirational bodhicitta provides the infrastructure that, when put into practice, creates the causes and conditions for natural compassion to release from within your being. I have found that this path comes alive in me when I make the significant shift away from the thought “I am suffering” to the recognition that “there is suffering.” This shift often takes place when I am able to bear witness—without judgment but with deep acceptance and humility—to how I contract into a puny, self-focused existence. Such witnessing can feel painful or harsh, but the transformation caused by recognizing the universal nature of suffering expands my mind and heart to include others and evokes tenderness, purpose, and warmth.

When such feelings break through the indifference, pain, and despair of a contracted heart, the transformation is immediate. In valuing the potency and sanity of such an experience, you may wonder: “Why not make that the focal point of my life?” You might decide to pursue the practice of aspirational bodhicitta by committing yourself to reciting the vow formally every day on the cushion. When that is not enough for you, you might also decide to structure your day in order to pause and remember the vow, even just for moments at a time. As the warmth of your aspiration continues to sustain you, your devotion to this way of being will naturally grow, bleeding into your ordinary life and changing the way you move about the world. It may be that one day, like the great bodhisattvas of the past and present, you will burn with this aspiration in such a way that it drives your every thought and deed.

ENGAGED BODHICITTA

As you begin to explore the bodhicitta vow, the longing to reach out to others will arise sometimes with the spirit of playfulness and sometimes with a sense of urgency, but always with a deep sense of care. This kind of responsiveness is not a matter of principle; it is a matter of the heart. You could call this feeling love, but love as an idea is already a bit formed. Responsiveness describes the step before ideas; it is natural, unconditional, and raw.

Engaged bodhicitta refers to this responsiveness as it manifests in the ways in which you navigate life and relationships. In the formal teachings on engaged bodhicitta, you find the six transcendent activities, or paramitas: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, concentration, and wisdom. The first five paramitas are a list of suggested means to channel your aspirational bodhicitta into direct action. In engaging these paramitas you are presented with the creative aspect of bodhicitta—how you bring your actions together with your intentions to awaken through service. Such actions are predicated on the experiential insight that your own liberation is inextricably linked to others, and are driven by the question: “How can I serve?”

intelligent heart bodhicitta bodhisattva

Illustration by Irene Rinaldi

As you begin to feel increasingly touched by your own longing to respond to others, service can gradually become the sole lens through which you focus your life, and you will begin to see opportunities to serve all around you.

Responsiveness doesn't have to be grand. You might ask if someone wants to “jump into” your lane during a busy time at the pool, or offer your seat to someone on the subway. People often feel stunned at the most simple gesture of care, and it can sustain them (and you) for the entire day. As you extend tenderness to others, you may also begin to recognize how it brings out tenderness in them. Life begins to look more like a mother gazing at her infant child with deep adoration. The child smiles back, which makes her heart even brighter, and the child responds with laughter. All of a sudden the world begins to look very different. You find that you no longer have to ask the question: “How can I bring dharma into my daily life?” Engaged bodhicitta is not about fixing the world. In fact, if we take a realistic look at the nature of life, we find that the world is not a resolvable place. I don't mean to say that the world is broken, but that both the mind and the world are too lively and rambunctious for the likes of our ideals. And so we will never be able to bring the world to our notion of a static state of perfect equilibrium. This may challenge your ordinary sense of what it means to evolve. You may see evolution as things getting better in a linear way, but that's not a realistic look at how things actually work. Yes, we may accomplish many extraordinary things in life: someone might invent a new vaccine or rocket off to the moon, or you might find an opportunity to help someone out of a sticky or dangerous situation—some real victories, in fact. But in the end we will all succumb to old age, sickness, and death, and the world itself will continue to express itself in ways that push against your preferences. This brings us to bodhicitta's wisdom aspect.

Next week we look at: **ABSOLUTE BODHICITTA**