



The Role of Compassion and Bodhicitta in the Path to Enlightenment: A Study of Mahayana Buddhist Teachings.

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ABSTRACT

In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion (Karuna) and Bodhicitta are central to enlightenment. They embody both the philosophical core and the practical methodology of the Bodhisattva path. This study explores the significance of these concepts and their intertwined roles in guiding practitioners toward spiritual awakening. Bodhicitta, frequently interpreted as the “mind of enlightenment,” is the goal of achieving Buddhahood for all aware creatures. It represents a profound shift from a self-centred perspective to one that is deeply concerned with the welfare of others. Compassion, the emotional foundation of Bodhicitta, is the empathetic response to the suffering of others and serves as the motivating force behind the Bodhisattva’s vow to alleviate this suffering. This research examines the importance of cultivating Bodhicitta and compassion as essential practices in Mahayana Buddhism, drawing on key texts such as Shantideva’s Bodhisattvacharyavatara (Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life) and the teachings of the Lojong (mind training) tradition. The study emphasizes the Six Paramitas (Perfections)—generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom—as the framework through which these virtues are developed and expressed. Integrating these qualities not only aids in the personal spiritual growth of the practitioner but also serves as a model for compassionate engagement with the world. Moreover, this study examines the profound impact of



Bodhicitta and compassion in breaking down the misconception of an individual self, ultimately leading to a firsthand understanding of interconnectedness and emptiness (Sunyata). The research highlights how, in Mahayana Buddhism, the journey to enlightenment is closely tied to fostering altruism. This approach offers a comprehensive and distinct path to spiritual growth that is personally rewarding and universally advantageous. The proposed study will elaborate on these points in the full research paper.

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Introduction

Mahayana Buddhism is one of the major branches of Buddhist thought, known for emphasizing the Bodhisattva ideal. A Bodhisattva is a spiritual aspirant who seeks enlightenment not only for personal liberation but also for the benefit of all sentient beings. Compassion (Karuna) and Bodhicitta are central concepts in this path, guiding the ethical and spiritual conduct of practitioners and encapsulating the ultimate goals of the Mahayana tradition.

In Buddhism, sympathy is the compassionate want to reduce the enduring of others, going past unimportant sensitivity to a profound commitment to activity. This compassionate reaction emerges from the acknowledgement of the interconnecting of all beings. In Mahayana Buddhism, this recognition is a profound realization of the fundamental nature of reality itself, where the boundaries between self and others are understood as illusory. Compassion becomes a spontaneous expression of wisdom (Prajna), which perceives the emptiness (Sunyata) and interdependence (Pratityasamutpada) of all phenomena.

.Bodhicitta, often translated as the "mind of enlightenment," refers to the altruistic intention of achieving Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. It signifies a significant shift from self-centered concerns to a more universal perspective. Bodhicitta is nurtured through various practices and meditations aimed at developing both relative and ultimate Bodhicitta—the former being the aspiration and commitment to assist others, and the latter being the direct realization of the nature of reality. In the Mahayana tradition, Bodhicitta is regarded as the cornerstone of the Bodhisattva path and the driving force behind the Mahayana practitioner's journey toward enlightenment. It is believed that without



Bodhicitta, enlightenment cannot be attained, as it serves as the motivating factor that moves one beyond the narrow confines of personal liberation to the broader goal of universal salvation.

This research study explores the complex relationship between compassion and Bodhicitta within Mahayana Buddhism. It will analyze how these concepts are developed and demonstrated, using key Mahayana texts such as Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* (Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life) and the Lojong (mind training) teachings. The study aims to show how compassion and Bodhicitta form the philosophical foundation and practical guide for the Bodhisattva's path.

This research will also focus on the teachings of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, and how these figures have inspired others on the path to enlightenment through their teachings and actions. Additionally, we will discuss existing literature of Mahayana Buddhism such as the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*, and others that are useful for the path to enlightenment.

Background of Mahayana Buddhist Teachings

Mahayana Buddhism, also known as the "Great Vehicle," originated as a distinct school within Buddhism around the first century CE. It developed in response to the individualistic emphasis of early Buddhism, also known as Theravada or Hinayana (the "Lesser Vehicle"). While Theravada focuses on personal liberation through the arhat's path—an individual who attains nirvana and leaves the cycle of samsara (rebirth)—Mahayana promotes a broader and more inclusive spiritual ideal embodied in the figure of the Bodhisattva.

A Bodhisattva is a being who, out of compassion, chooses not to achieve final enlightenment and instead stays in the cycle of birth and death to assist all sentient beings in attaining liberation. This shift in focus from individual to collective enlightenment is one of the defining characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism. Central to this path are the teachings on compassion (Karuna) and Bodhicitta, which together form the foundation of the Bodhisattva's spiritual journey.

The Mahayana movement originated in India and quickly spread to other parts of Asia, such as China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet. It brought in a range of new scriptures, including the *Prajnaparamita* (Perfection of Wisdom) Sutras, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. These sacred texts dug into the concepts of vacancy (Sunyata), the interconnecting of all marvels (Pratityasamutpada), and the intrinsic potential for Buddhahood in all creatures, frequently alluded to as Buddha-nature.



Compassion is a central theme in these texts. It is not just viewed as a virtuous quality, but also as an essential aspect of wisdom. In Mahayana philosophy, wisdom and compassion are seen as interconnected. True understanding of the nature of reality naturally gives rise to compassion as one recognizes the interconnectedness of all life and the absence of a permanent, independent self. This inseparable combination is represented by the concept of Bodhicitta, which refers to the "awakening mind" that aims to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

The development of Bodhicitta is a crucial part of the Mahayana path. It envelops both the yearning to accomplish Buddhahood and effectively locks in exercises that advantage others. This is guided by the Six Paramitas (Perfections): generosity, ethical conduct, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom. These practices are meant to transform the practitioner's mind, reducing self-centeredness and nurturing a sense of universal responsibility.

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara (Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life) is one of the most influential Mahayana texts on cultivating Bodhicitta and compassion. This work offers detailed guidance on how to develop and sustain Bodhicitta in the face of challenges. It emphasizes the importance of equanimity and the exchange of self with others as methods to deepen compassion. Shantideva argues that Bodhicitta is the most precious of all thoughts, leading to the ultimate goal of Buddhahood and the cessation of all suffering.

The Lojong teachings, which were later developed in Tibet, offer practical techniques for cultivating compassion and Bodhicitta in everyday life. Rooted in the earlier Mahayana tradition, these teachings include practices such as tonglen (sending and receiving). Tonglen trains the practitioner to take on the suffering of others and give away their happiness, thereby breaking down the habitual patterns of self-clinging.

Mahayana Buddhism signifies a major development in Buddhist philosophy and practice, focusing on the shared aspect of enlightenment by nurturing compassion and Bodhicitta. These teachings are centered around the Bodhisattva ideal and offer a complete structure for spiritual growth that goes beyond personal liberation to encompass the welfare of all living beings.



The role of the different teachings in the Path to Enlightenment

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara (Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life) and the Lojong teachings play key roles in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, especially in cultivating compassion (Karuna) and Bodhicitta. These teachings offer practical guidance and philosophical frameworks to develop the qualities needed to achieve Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The Bodhisattvacharyavatara, composed in the 8th century by the Indian Buddhist monk Shantideva, is one of the most important texts in Mahayana Buddhism. It provides a comprehensive guide to the Bodhisattva path, emphasizing the cultivation of Bodhicitta—the altruistic intention to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. The text is structured around ten chapters, each focusing on different aspects of the Bodhisattva's practice, including the cultivation of virtues such as patience, wisdom, and diligence.

The Bodhisattvacharyavatara is a guide for practitioners on how to cultivate and maintain Bodhicitta in their lives. Shantideva emphasizes the importance of this "awakening mind" as the basis for all virtues, stating that the path to enlightenment is incomplete without Bodhicitta. He compares Bodhicitta to a wish-fulfilling gem that can eliminate suffering and lead to ultimate bliss. The text provides practical methods for developing Bodhicitta, including meditative practices such as the exchange of self and others, which helps to reduce selfish attachments and nurture profound compassion.

The Bodhisattvacharyavatara makes a significant contribution by providing a detailed explanation of patience (Kshanti), a virtue that Shantideva considers essential for the Bodhisattva. Patience is important not only for enduring personal hardships but also for responding to the suffering of others with compassion instead of anger or frustration. This teaching is particularly relevant in the context of Mahayana Buddhism, where the Bodhisattva's commitment to liberate all beings requires great perseverance and resilience.

The Lojong (mind training) teachings are practices developed in Tibet that are deeply rooted in the Mahayana tradition, particularly influenced by Atisha, an Indian Buddhist master who travelled to Tibet in the 11th century. The Lojong teachings are designed to transform the mind by cultivating compassion and Bodhicitta through practical exercises and contemplations.

Tonglen is a central practice in the Lojong tradition. It involves "sending and receiving." During this meditation, practitioners visualise taking in the suffering of others as they breathe in and then sending



out love, compassion, and happiness as they breathe out. This practice is a powerful tool for developing Bodhicitta as it directly confronts self-centeredness and encourages a deep sense of empathy and interconnectedness with all beings.

The Lojong teachings are summarized in the "Seven-Point Mind Training," which consists of aphorisms or slogans to guide practitioners in their daily lives. These teachings highlight the significance of seeing all experiences, particularly challenging ones, as opportunities for spiritual growth. By training the mind to respond to difficulties with compassion and wisdom, the practitioner gradually cultivates the qualities needed for the Bodhisattva path.

The Lojong teachings emphasize that wisdom and compassion are interconnected. Just like Shantideva's text integrates these two aspects, Lojong practices promote the development of wisdom that recognizes the emptiness of all phenomena, while also nurturing compassion that aims to reduce the suffering of others. This simultaneous focus on wisdom and compassion is considered crucial for attaining the ultimate goal of enlightenment in the Mahayana tradition.

The Bodhisattvacharyavatara by Shantideva and the Lojong teachings are both important in the Mahayana Buddhist path to enlightenment. They provide practical methods for cultivating compassion and Bodhicitta. Shantideva's text guides practitioners on the philosophical and ethical dimensions of the Bodhisattva path, while the Lojong teachings offer concrete practices for integrating these teachings into daily life. Together, they form a coherent framework for spiritual development, helping practitioners realize their potential for Buddhahood and the liberation of all beings.

The Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh emphasize the importance of compassion, mindfulness, and the cultivation of Bodhicitta in achieving enlightenment. According to the Dalai Lama, wisdom and compassion go hand in hand, and Bodhicitta is the driving force behind reaching Buddhahood. Thich Nhat Hanh promotes mindfulness in daily life, seeing enlightenment as an ongoing practice of awareness, peace, and compassionate action. Both leaders emphasized that true enlightenment involves easing the suffering of others and demonstrating compassion in thoughts, words, and deeds.

The Path to Enlightenment According to the different Sutra.

The Lankavatara Sutra presents a profound path to enlightenment based on understanding the concept of mind-only (Cittamatra), realizing emptiness (Shunyata), and nurturing Bodhicitta. According to the



sutra, all phenomena are products of the mind, stressing that the external world is an illusion formed by consciousness. Enlightenment involves altering consciousness (Vijnana-paravrtti), especially cleansing the storehouse consciousness (Alaya-vijnana), crucial for transcending karmic afflictions.

The text discusses the concept of Tathagatagarbha or Buddha-nature, which suggests that every being has the potential for enlightenment. Realizing this innate Buddha nature requires the practitioner to overcome ignorance and dualistic thinking through meditation, and practising the six perfections (paramitas). Compassion (Karuna) and the development of Bodhicitta—the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings—are vital aspects of this path. The Lankavatara Sutra emphasizes that true enlightenment is marked by the integration of wisdom and compassion, leading to the ultimate realization of Buddhahood, where one fully understands the non-duality of self and others.

The Lankavatara Sutra presents a profound and intricate path to enlightenment that revolves around realising the mind's true nature, transforming consciousness, and cultivating compassion and Bodhicitta. By recognizing the illusory nature of phenomena and purifying the mind, practitioners can overcome ignorance and achieve Buddhahood, characterized by wisdom and the commitment to the welfare of all beings. The sutra's teachings are a cornerstone of Mahayana thought, influencing countless practitioners on their journey toward enlightenment.

The Saddharma Pundarika Sutra, also known as the Lotus Sutra, is a revered text in Mahayana Buddhism. It is celebrated for its profound teachings on the universal potential for enlightenment. The sutra is unique in its emphasis on the idea that all beings, regardless of their circumstances or previous actions, can attain Buddhahood.

The Saddharma Pundarika Sutra outlines a universal path to enlightenment, emphasizing the concept of Ekayana or "One Vehicle." This concept teaches that all paths ultimately lead to Buddhahood. The sutra advocates the bodhisattva path, where practitioners strive for enlightenment not just for themselves but for the benefit of all beings, driven by compassion and Bodhicitta. It introduces the idea of the eternal Buddha, highlighting the timeless and ever-present nature of enlightenment. The sutra's use of parables illustrates the Buddha's skilful means in guiding beings, emphasizing faith and devotion as key elements in attaining Buddhahood.



The Avatamsaka Sutra, also known as the Flower Garland Sutra, presents a profound and intricate vision of the path to enlightenment. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the vast, infinite nature of reality. Central to the sutra is the bodhisattva path, in which practitioners cultivate wisdom and compassion through the ten stages (bhumi), progressively purifying their minds and actions. The sutra emphasizes the importance of practising the six perfections (paramitas), which lead to the realization of the Dharmakaya, the ultimate reality. The text portrays enlightenment as the harmonious integration of all phenomena, where the enlightened being perceives the unity and interdependence of all existence.

Role of Asanga and Nagarjuna in the Path to Enlightenment: Focus on Compassion and Bodhicitta

Asanga and Nagarjuna are highly influential figures in Mahayana Buddhism. Both played key roles in shaping the Mahayana path, particularly the concepts of compassion (Karuna) and Bodhicitta, which are essential to the journey toward enlightenment. Nagarjuna, a foundational figure in Mahayana Buddhism, merged the concept of Shunyata (emptiness) with Bodhicitta. He argued that realizing emptiness naturally leads to compassion by dispelling the delusion of self and others. Asanga further developed these ideas through the Yogacara school, focusing on the transformation of consciousness and the cultivation of Bodhicitta as essential to the bodhisattva path.

Conclusion

In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion (Karuna) and Bodhicitta serve as the twin pillars supporting the Bodhisattva path, guiding practitioners toward the ultimate goal of enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. These concepts are not just ethical guidelines, but profound spiritual practices that transform the practitioner's mind and heart, leading to a deep realization of the interconnectedness of all life and the emptiness of inherent existence (Sunyata).

Compassion in the Mahayana tradition is rooted in recognising the suffering of others and the desire to alleviate it. This is not just an emotional response, but a fundamental aspect of wisdom (Prajna), which sees beyond the illusion of a separate self. Motivated by compassion, the Bodhisattva makes the extraordinary vow to remain in samsara until all beings are liberated. This vow reflects the Bodhisattva's deep understanding that personal enlightenment is incomplete without the liberation of others.



Bodhicitta, also known as the "mind of enlightenment," is the driving force behind the Bodhisattva's journey. It represents the intention to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings and is cultivated through practices that develop both relative and ultimate Bodhicitta. Relative Bodhicitta involves aspiring to help others and actively engaging in doing so, while ultimate Bodhicitta is the direct realization of the true nature of reality. Together, these two aspects form a comprehensive approach to spiritual practice that balances compassion with wisdom.

In both Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* and the Lojong teachings, an important point is that compassion and wisdom go hand in hand. In Mahayana Buddhism, it is emphasized that developing Bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, must be accompanied by the cultivation of wisdom that recognizes the emptiness of all things. Both aspects are necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhahood, where one not only finds personal liberation but also becomes a guiding light for others.

In conclusion, the Mahayana lessons on kindness and Bodhicitta offer a comprehensive approach to otherworldly improvement that goes past the interest of person illumination. By incorporating these principles into their practice, Mahayana Buddhists strive to create a more compassionate and wise world. Their goal is to alleviate the suffering of all beings and help everyone realize their potential for enlightenment.

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