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VENERABLE GESHE KELSANG  
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# Foreword

by Vajradhara Trijang Rinpoche

The excellent expounder, the great Spiritual Master Kelsang Gyatso, studied myriad Buddhist scriptures at the famous Je College of the great monastic university of Sera, Tegchen Ling, practised the meaning of the teachings he received, and became a wise, serious and realized Teacher. From the rain of profound and extensive Dharma that he has bestowed upon his fortunate disciples, he has recently given comprehensive instruction on the great *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* (*Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*). This commentary has now been made available in English with the title *Meaningful to Behold*, known in Tibetan as 'tong pa don den'.

This text is the heart essence of all the Sugatas of the three times and is the unsurpassed practice of the great Sons of the Conquerors. It explains clearly the mind of bodhichitta developed through equalizing and exchanging self with others – the foundation of the Bodhisattva's way of life. It also explains the benefits of this Mahayana mind, the way we should guard this mind, and how we should practise the great waves of the six perfections once bodhichitta has been cultivated. As a great gathering of the paths of the Mahayana tradition, it is therefore worthy to receive many flowers of praise bestowed with appreciation.

I pray and dedicate that all sentient beings may practise sincerely the meaning of the instructions explained in this text and may thereby accomplish effortlessly the purposes of both themselves and others. May they all swiftly reach the enlightened state of the four bodies [of a Buddha] by accomplishing all the stages of the spiritual grounds and paths.



*Vajradhara Trijang Rinpoche*

## *Acknowledgements*

The teachings contained in this book were originally delivered as a series of lectures to students at Manjushri Kadampa Meditation Centre in England, by Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso Rinpoche. For more than three months, beginning in late 1977, Venerable Geshe Kelsang gave a verse by verse oral commentary to Shantideva's eighth-century masterpiece, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, one of the most famous and important texts studied in Mahayana Buddhism.

From the depths of our hearts, we thank the author for his inconceivable kindness in composing this book. Throughout the presentation and revision of these teachings, Venerable Geshe Kelsang has demonstrated by his compassion, wisdom and inexhaustible patience that the Bodhisattva path to enlightenment is still being followed 1,200 years after Shantideva and 2,500 years after the passing away of Buddha Shakyamuni. There can be no greater proof of the immense value of the Bodhisattva's way of life than the living example of such a realized Master.

We also thank all the dedicated, senior Dharma students who assisted the author with the rendering of the English and who prepared the final manuscript for publication.

Please note that numbers in squared brackets throughout the text refer to verse numbers in Shantideva's root text, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, a full translation of which is available separately. See *Bibliography*.

Roy Tyson,  
Administrative Director  
Manjushri Kadampa Meditation Centre,  
November 1993.



*Buddha Shakyamuni*

## *Introduction*

This present text is a commentary to Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (Skt. *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*) and is divided into three parts:

- 1 The pre-eminent qualities of the author
- 2 An introduction to the text
- 3 The explanation of the actual text

### **THE PRE-EMINENT QUALITIES OF THE AUTHOR**

It is customary at the beginning of commentaries such as this to give a biography of the author, in this case the great Indian Pandit Shantideva (AD 687-763). There now follows a very brief account drawn from traditional sources.

Shantideva was born the crown prince of a royal family in Gujarat, a kingdom in western India. His father was King Kushalavarmana (Armour of Virtue) and his mother was recognized as an emanation of the Tantric Deity Vajrayogini. At his birth the prince received the name Shantivarmana (Armour of Peace).

Even as a very young boy Shantivarmana showed great ability in spiritual matters and by the age of seven was already highly skilled in the inner science of religion. His principal Teacher at that time was a Yogi who had so fully developed penetrating wisdom that it is said he achieved

unity with Manjushri, the Buddha embodying the wisdom of all enlightened beings. When Shantivarmana himself engaged in a meditation retreat, he too received a direct vision of Manjushri and many prophetic omens as well.

Shortly afterwards King Kushalavarmana died, leaving Shantivarmana to inherit the throne. The night before his intended coronation, however, Manjushri appeared to him in a dream. He told the prince that he should renounce his kingdom and become a celibate monk. Immediately upon waking, Shantivarmana fled the palace and disappeared into the forest to meditate. Once again he received a vision of Manjushri, who handed him a symbolic wooden sword. Upon taking it Shantivarmana attained eight perfect realizations. He then travelled to the great monastic university of Nalanda where he took ordination from the Abbot Jayadeva (God of Victory) and was given the ordination name of Shantideva (God of Peace).

At Nalanda Shantideva's spiritual development progressed rapidly, especially as the result of his training in the profound and demanding methods of Tantra. However, because he did all his practices secretly at night and rested during the day, it appeared to others that he performed only three activities: eating, sleeping and defecating. For this reason, the other monks sarcastically referred to him as the 'Three Realizations'. Feeling he was a very irresponsible monk and a discredit to their illustrious university, they devised a plan to get rid of him. Incorrectly believing him to be deficient in meditational ability and ignorant of doctrinal theory, they arranged for Shantideva to deliver a discourse before the entire monastery. Their idea was that he would be so humiliated by this exposure of his ignorance that he would be shamed into leaving.

When the day of the scheduled public humiliation arrived, Shantideva mounted the teaching throne and, much to the amazement of those assembled, delivered a discourse which, when written down, became known as *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, still considered the best set of instructions ever written for becoming a Bodhisattva – a being bound for full enlightenment. As he was expounding the ninth chapter dealing with the wisdom apprehending the true nature of reality he uttered the words, 'Everything is like space.' At this point he began to rise into the sky, flying higher and higher until he could no longer be seen although his voice could still be clearly heard. It was in this miraculous manner that the remainder of the ninth chapter and the entirety of the tenth were delivered.

Having no desire to return to Nalanda, Shantideva left for South India. Needless to say, the monks he left behind were profoundly impressed and somewhat bewildered by Shantideva's teachings and his display of miracle powers. Shortly thereafter a dispute arose about these teachings. The Kashmiri Pandits claimed that Shantideva taught only nine chapters, while some of the scholars from Magadha, who possessed great powers of memorization, argued that he had in fact taught ten. It was decided that the only way to resolve this disagreement would be to hear the teachings once again, so several monks left Nalanda in search of the one they had once despised and requested him to repeat his discourse. This he did, and he also gave them the text of his *Compendium of Trainings* (Skt. *Shikshasamuchchaya*), which also explains the practices of a Bodhisattva. From that time onwards the study and practice of Shantideva's works flourished widely throughout India and other Mahayana Buddhist lands.

As Shantideva's fame spread farther and farther, many non-Buddhists became jealous. One of their greatest Teachers, Shankadeva, challenged Shantideva to a debate on the condition that the loser forsake his own doctrine for that of the winner. By the use of miracle powers and impeccable logic, Shantideva emerged victorious, thereby bringing Shankadeva and all of his disciples into the Buddhist fold.

On another occasion, when there was great famine in South India, Shantideva announced that he would perform an act of generosity. The next day many people gathered to see what he would do. Shantideva then proceeded to satisfy the hunger of the entire mass of people with a single bowl of rice! Because of this the local people all developed great faith in Shantideva and adopted the Buddhist way of life as their own.

This has been only a brief biography of the great Bodhisattva Shantideva, who throughout his entire life performed countless deeds for the sake of spreading Buddha's teachings, the Dharma, and helping sentient beings. Even today those who are fortunate enough to read, study and meditate on his outstanding texts can find them a source of great insight and benefit.

### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

How is Shantideva's *Guide* put together and what does it contain? It is composed of ten chapters and we should try very hard to understand the meaning contained in each one of them. Otherwise we are like the foolish person who was sent to a shop by members of his household to see what was sold there. When he returned home they asked him what

was available, and he had to reply, 'I don't know; I have forgotten.' His journey to the shop was a complete waste of time. Similarly, if upon completion of this text we are unable to recall what is contained within each of its chapters, we should be ashamed of ourself. If our study of this text is to be worthwhile and not a complete waste of time, we should not only read the words but also try hard to learn their meaning.

There now follows a brief description of the contents of each of the ten chapters of the root text.

### *Chapter One*

The ultimate goal of Buddhist spiritual practice is the attainment of the fully awakened state of mind. This completely perfected state – variously known as enlightenment, Buddhahood or the highest nirvana – can be achieved by anyone who removes the gross and subtle obstructions clouding his or her mind and develops positive mental qualities to their fullest potential. However, we will not be able to attain this fully awakened state if we do not first develop bodhichitta, the mind of enlightenment. What is bodhichitta? It is the continual and spontaneous state of mind that constantly strives to attain this perfect enlightenment solely for the benefit of all living beings. As will be explained later in this commentary, bodhichitta is developed by training the mind in either of two ways: practising the sevenfold cause and effect meditation (built around the remembrance of motherly love) or exchanging self with others.

In order to generate this precious bodhichitta we must think deeply about its many benefits. A businessman will put a lot of effort into a particular transaction if he understands beforehand that there is much profit to be gained.

In the same way, if we see the many benefits of bodhichitta we will strive continuously to develop it. For this reason the first chapter consists of a detailed explanation of these benefits.

### *Chapter Two*

If we are to develop bodhichitta we must destroy all obstacles hindering its growth as well as accumulate the necessary prerequisites for its cultivation. The main obstacle to developing bodhichitta is evil, defined as that which has the potential power to produce suffering. Because we have a large accumulation of such misery-producing tendencies from the non-virtuous actions we have done in the past, we find it extremely difficult to give birth to the precious and virtuous thought of bodhichitta.

Where poisonous plants grow together in profusion it is virtually impossible for a medicinal seed to sprout. Similarly, the virtuous thought of enlightenment will not arise in a mind choked by the weeds of non-virtue. Therefore, in Chapter Two of his *Guide* Shantideva explains how to prepare the mind for the cultivation of the supremely altruistic attitude by uprooting and weeding out all that is potentially harmful to its growth. This purification of evil is accomplished by exposing our accumulated non-virtue, and then eradicating it by means of the four opponent powers explained in this chapter.

### *Chapter Three*

However, purifying negativity is not, by itself, sufficient for our purposes. We must also accumulate a great deal of merit,

or positive potential energy, and this comes from the practice of virtue. In the same way that it would be unsuitable for a beggar to receive a king in shabby, unkempt surroundings, so too it is impossible for a mind bereft of merit to entertain the precious bodhichitta, the king of all thoughts. Those who wish to invite this honoured guest into their minds must first acquire a great wealth of positive mental energy. After this is done it is then possible to seize and maintain this precious mind of enlightenment. Therefore, in Chapter Three Shantideva explains how to acquire and hold on to bodhichitta.

#### *Chapter Four*

Once we have taken hold of the precious bodhichitta, we must prevent it from decreasing. This is done by conscientiously attending to the virtuous actions of our body, speech and mind. This conscientiousness is the subject of Shantideva's fourth chapter.

#### *Chapter Five*

Having developed and then stabilized bodhichitta by means of conscientiousness, we must strive to bring this mind to its complete fruition: perfect enlightenment. This is done by taking the Bodhisattva vows and practising the six perfections. Generally the first perfection to be explained is giving. In this text, however, Shantideva discusses giving in his tenth and final chapter together with his dedication. His reason for doing so is that giving, or generosity, is part of the general dedication to all living beings of the good and beautiful things in the universe. Therefore Shantideva begins

his discussion with what is generally presented as the second of the perfections – the practice of moral discipline – in a chapter entitled ‘Guarding Alertness’.

### *Chapters Six to Ten*

Each remaining chapter is devoted to one of the perfections. Chapters six to eight discuss patience, effort and concentration while chapter nine is devoted to an extensive explanation of wisdom. As stated before, the tenth chapter deals with giving and the dedication of merit.

The development of bodhichitta takes place in three stages. The ten chapters of Shantideva’s book cover this threefold development, which is outlined concisely in the following often-recited dedication prayer:

May the precious, supreme bodhichitta  
Grow where it has not yet grown;  
Where it has grown may it not decrease  
But flourish for evermore.

In the first two lines we pray that those sentient beings, including ourself, who have not yet given birth to bodhichitta may do so. Next we pray that those who have already given birth to this altruistic mind may be able to maintain it without letting it decrease. In the final line, we pray that those who have cultivated and stabilized bodhichitta may be able to bring it to its full completion. In the same order, the method of giving birth to bodhichitta is explained in the first three chapters of this text, the way to stabilize it is the subject of the fourth chapter, while chapters five to ten describe the methods whereby the stabilized bodhichitta may be continually increased until full enlightenment is achieved.

If we practise in accordance with the instructions set forth in the ten chapters of *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, it will not be too difficult to attain the exalted state of mind known as enlightenment, or full and complete Buddhahood. In this state all our human potentialities will be fully developed and we will be able to benefit others to the greatest possible extent.

### THE EXPLANATION OF THE ACTUAL TEXT

This has four parts:

- 1 The meaning of the title
- 2 The homage of the translators
- 3 The explanation of the meaning of the text
- 4 The meaning of the conclusion

### THE MEANING OF THE TITLE

The original Sanskrit title of this text is *Bodhisattoacharyavatara*, the Tibetan translation of which is *Jang chub sem pai cho pa la jug pa*. In English this can be rendered as *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*.

It is the custom for all works translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan that the original title be presented first. Why is this necessary? There are two reasons for this practice. First of all, Sanskrit is considered the most sublime of all languages, as well as being the one in which Buddha himself taught. Therefore, having the title in Sanskrit helps plant imprints of this holy language on the mind-streams of those reading the text. Secondly, the title is given in the original language to help us recall the great kindness of those who translated

the text from Sanskrit into Tibetan. It is only through the compassion and diligent effort of these translators that the Tibetan people, and subsequently the western world, have had the opportunity to study, meditate on and practise the profound methods contained within this holy scripture.

### THE HOMAGE OF THE TRANSLATORS

Before starting their work on this text, the original Tibetan translators paid homage and made prostration to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in order to remove hindrances and ensure completion of their work.

Such homage is in accordance with the tradition laid down by the great Dharma kings of Tibet. This tradition stipulated that the translator's homage should indicate to which set or 'basket' (Skt. pitaka) of Buddha's teachings the original Sanskrit text belongs. Thus if a particular text belongs to the set of Vinaya – dealing mainly with the training in higher moral discipline – then the homage should be to the Omniscient One. If it belongs to the Sutra Pitaka – dealing mainly with the training in higher concentration – then homage should be paid to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Finally if it is contained within the third set, the Abhidharma Pitaka – dealing mainly with the training in higher wisdom – then homage is paid to youthful Manjughosha, the embodiment of enlightened wisdom. Thus, by reading the homage we can easily tell into which of the three scriptural categories a particular text falls. In this case homage is made to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; thus it is clear that *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* belongs to the Sutra Pitaka, the set of discourses mainly concerned with meditative concentration.

## *End of preview*

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